

# Notes on Revelation

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## Introduction

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The opening verses of the book state that "John" wrote it (1:1, 4, 9; cf. 22:8). From the first century to the present day, almost all orthodox scholars have concluded that this means the Apostle John.<sup>1</sup> Two noteworthy exceptions were Luther and Zwingli. Today, many scholars who accept the divine inspiration of the book believe the Apostle John wrote it. Others, of course, believe some other "John" wrote the book.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the early church fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Irenaeus, and Victorinus) wrote that the Apostle John experienced exile on the island of Patmos during Domitian's reign (1:9).<sup>3</sup> They wrote that the government allowed John to return to Ephesus after Emperor Domitian's death in A.D. 96. Consequently, many conservative interpreters date the writing of this book near A.D. 95 or 96.<sup>4</sup> There is good evidence that this

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<sup>1</sup>See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7: An Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 2-19; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, pp. 11-14; or Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 700-7, for further discussion of authorship.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., David E. Aune, *Revelation 1—5*, p. lvi; William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 1:15; James Moffatt, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:320-27.

<sup>3</sup>See the map near my comments on 1:10-11. For a summary of this tradition, see Isbon T. Beckwith *The Apocalypse of John*, pp. 366-93; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 8; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 1:lxviii-xcii.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Carson and Moo, pp. 707-12; Barclay, 1:17; Moffatt, 5:327; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:274, 343; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 1531; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Annotated Bible*, 4:2:192; Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation*, p. 5; John F. Walvoord, "Revelation," in *The Bible Knowledge*

was the last of John's inspired writings.<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Gentry argued that John wrote Revelation in the late 60s.<sup>2</sup> Several writers have refuted this preterist view.<sup>3</sup>

"Perhaps more than any other book in the NT, the Apocalypse enjoyed wide distribution and early recognition."<sup>4</sup>

Where did John get "the revelation" that he wrote down in this book? He said that he received it from Jesus Christ through angelic mediation (1:1). Most of the details of this revelation were undoubtedly new to John. However, there are remarkable parallels between this revelation and the Lord Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25; Mark 13; Luke 21). The Book of Revelation clearly builds on that foundation and expounds it.<sup>5</sup> The apocalyptic sections of certain books of the Old Testament—particularly Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Psalms—contain former revelation that God gave His prophets about the end times.

"An apocalypse was the word for a crisis, and for a crisis which bordered on the end."<sup>6</sup>

John also alluded often to Exodus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, and Zechariah. One scholar claimed that 278 of the 404 verses in Revelation contain references to the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> William Barclay claimed that John quoted or alluded to the Old Testament 245 times, citing about 20 Old Testament books—his favorites being: Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Psalms, Exodus,

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*Commentary: New Testament*, p 925; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospels to Glory*, p. 484. See also Aune, p. lxi.

<sup>1</sup>See Lenski, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*. For arguments favoring a preterist-idealist interpretation, see John Noe, "An Exegetical Basis for a Preterist-Idealist Understanding of the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49:4 (December 2006):767-96.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, pp. 451-71; and Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary), 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup>See Alan Johnson, "Revelation," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 402; Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, pp. 31-32; Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, pp. cli-clii; Beckwith, pp. 139-40; and Louis A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse*.

<sup>6</sup>Moffatt, 5:295. See Hanna, pp. 485-88, for a discussion of the apocalyptic character of Revelation.

<sup>7</sup>Swete, p. cxxxv.

Jeremiah, and Zechariah.<sup>1</sup> The United Bible Society's Greek New Testament lists over 500 Old Testament passages.<sup>2</sup> Despite all these allusions, however, there are no formal quotations from the Old Testament. The revelation that Jesus gave in the Olivet Discourse and later to John on Patmos supplements that earlier revelation.

"Jesus in His [Olivet] discourse was clearly anticipating what He was to show John in much greater detail more than six decades later here on the island of Patmos."<sup>3</sup>

### INTERPRETATIONS

There have been four basic interpretations of Revelation throughout church history.<sup>4</sup> Of course, there are additional variations within these four.

"The basic hermeneutical problem in Revelation is determining what is symbolic and what is literal."<sup>5</sup>

The *idealist*, or allegorical, interpretation sees the book as an allegory, teaching the ideal of the triumph of good over evil. Antichrist, in this view, is not a real person, but the personification of evil. In an allegory, there is no historical basis for the story; it is fiction (cf. *Pilgrim's Progress*). This view has appealed to few interpreters who have a high view of inspiration. Most of its advocates are quite liberal in their theology, and are mainly postmillennial or amillennial in their eschatology.<sup>6</sup>

The *preterist* interpretation, after the Latin word *preater*, meaning "past," views the book as dealing only with events in the early history of the

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:14.

<sup>2</sup>Second edition, pp. 897-920. See Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, for many allusions to the Old Testament, and Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, p. 104, for charts of the distribution of these in the Old Testament.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>4</sup>See Wilbur M. Smith, "Revelation," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp. 1497-1500, for an excellent, slightly longer explanation of these views; or Tenney, pp. 135-46; or Hanna, pp. 488-90. See Thomas Ice, "Back to the Future: Keeping the Future in the Future," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 13-16, for the historical development of these four positions.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Vacendak, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:1250.

<sup>6</sup>See Tenney, pp. 147-67; or Hanna, pp. 490-92, for discussions of millennial views.

church, specifically: its conflicts with Judaism and paganism in John's day. Advocates often identify "Antichrist" as a past Roman emperor, but there is much difference of opinion about which one. The advocates of this view are mainly postmillennialists and amillennialists. The main problem with this view is the inability of its advocates to unite on the identifications of the various people and symbols that appear in the book. Also, 1:19 says the book points *ahead* as well as *back*, and not just to the present (early church era).

The *historicist* view understands Revelation to be dealing with events in the total history of the church, not just the church until John's day. Many advocates identify "Antichrist" with one of the medieval popes, but they do not agree on which one. Advocates are mainly postmillennialists and amillennialists, though some premillennial commentators also held this view.<sup>1</sup> The main weakness of this view is the interpreters' inability to identify everything predicted in the book with past events and people.

The *futurist* view sees the book describing mainly events in the eschatological future, specifically: the things described in chapters 4–22. "Antichrist," according to this view, is a person who will appear in the *future* from our present perspective in history. Advocates of this view are mainly premillennialists. The main problem with this view is its "improbability," at least from the viewpoint of its critics. Another problem is that it requires more literal interpretation, and belief in the supernatural, which some interpreters are uncomfortable with. This view makes the most sense of the book to me. By the way, I am a premillennialist, not because I am a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, but because premillennial interpretations of various New Testament passages make the most sense to me. In other words, *exegesis*, rather than theology, is the basis for my Premillennialism.<sup>2</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter claimed to be a futurist interpreter for the same reason:

"I believe the Futurist interpretation to be true because it interprets the disclosures of John's revelation in parallel correspondence with *the whole scheme of Biblical prediction*."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Jamieson, et. al., p. 1547. See John F. Walvoord, *Prophecy*, p. 12, for concise definitions of these three views.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix 1 at the end of these notes for a chart of these views and a list of some expositors and commentators who hold each one.

<sup>3</sup>J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:338.

I have listed these views in order according to the literalness of the advocates' interpretation of the book, beginning with the least literal. When I was studying Hebrew with Dr. Merrill Unger in seminary, someone asked him in class what he would say to the Lord if, when he got to heaven, he discovered that Amillennialism was true and Premillennialism was false. Dr. Unger, who was a premillennialist, facetiously answered that he would say, "I'm sorry, Lord. I just took You at Your word." Many amillennialists admit that if you interpret the references to Israel in the New Testament as references to the physical descendants of Jacob, you will come out a premillennialist. That is the normal meaning of "Israel." They reject this approach, however, because they believe prophecy requires a special (spiritual, really mystical) hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup>

Still another view deserves brief mention. We might label it the *Jewish* interpretation. This view, advocated primarily by E. W. Bullinger, proposed that nothing in Revelation has been fulfilled yet. The seven churches of Asia (chs. 2—3) have yet to come into existence, and there is nothing but revelation concerning the Jewish people in the entire book. This view has not found many supporters.

Some scholars, mainly amillennial, have argued very hard for a different hermeneutic when we come to interpreting Revelation—even all prophetic Scripture. They say literal interpretation yields unbelievable and fantastical results when used on prophecy. "Wooden literalism" does (e.g., a great dragon trying to devour a woman's child as soon as it is born, then chasing the woman into a wilderness). But normal interpretation yields a possible scenario, though it stretches the faith of many. Opponents of a special hermeneutic for prophecy say fulfilled prophecy has been fulfilled literally (e.g., Jesus' virgin birth in Bethlehem). But for God to be faithful to His Word, there *must* be: a Tribulation, a return of Christ to the earth to reign, a Millennium, and a new heavens and earth in the future. By the way, most messianic prophecy deals with Jesus' "second advent" (i.e., the entire period of events from the Rapture through the Second Coming), not His first.

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<sup>1</sup>For further discussion of the hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) of prophecy, see Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 34-47; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, pp. 139-45, 519-26; Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, pp. 16-54; and Paul L. Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*.

We could compare these four schools of interpretation to four schools of painting. The *allegorical* school of interpretation is similar to the modernist school of painting. Its advocates believe that the images that God allowed John to see have little correspondence to reality, but serve the purpose of creating only a general impression in the reader. The *preterist* school of interpretation is similar to the abstract school of painting. There is somewhat more correspondence to reality, but not much. I would compare the *historicist* school of interpretation to the impressionist school of painting, because the intent of the artist was to convey a mood as well as a representation of reality, with the mood being dominant.

The *futurist* or "literalist" school of interpretation is like the realistic school of painting. These interpreters believe that the writer's intent was to portray his subject as close to reality as possible—almost like a photograph of what he saw. What kind of a picture did John paint for us? Since the book makes sense if viewed as a piece of *realism*, that is essentially how I believe John wrote it. It does contain many symbols, but the book itself, and other books of the Bible, help us to interpret the symbols. So perhaps we should view Revelation as a literal picture with some concessions to impressionism.

Why is there so much symbolism in this book? David Jeremiah offered three reasons: Symbolism is not weakened by time. Symbols impart values and arouse emotions. And symbols can be used as a secret code.<sup>1</sup>

One reason people have neglected and avoided Revelation is because there have been so many different interpretations of it. Most people probably avoid it out of frustration.

"He [Martin Luther] mistrusted Revelation because of its obscurity. 'A revelation' said he, 'should be revealing.'"<sup>2</sup>

Some people avoid the book because it has divided Christians. However, by applying the same hermeneutical principles that we use to study the other Bible books, the *futurist* interpretation makes good sense. Futurist interpreters are remarkably united on what the book reveals, though they differ in interpreting some of the details. The symbolism is drawn from

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<sup>1</sup>David Jeremiah, *Escape the Coming Night*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 261.

many previous Bible books. Revelation is similar to an airport, or a railway terminal, where materials from many other sources come together.

## GENRE

The Book of Revelation contains three types of literature mainly: apocalyptic (cf. Ezek. 1:1-14), prophetic (cf. Isa. 53:1-6), and epistolary (cf. 1 Cor.).<sup>1</sup> I think we should view the book as mainly prophetic (cf. 1:3), with some apocalyptic descriptions, and I believe it was written in the form of a letter.<sup>2</sup> The book claims to be *a revelation*. A "revelation" is designed to reveal, so we should expect it to be comprehensible—and not completely obscure—although there are things in it that are difficult to understand. The book makes good sense if interpreted using the same canons of interpretation that we apply to the rest of the Bible.

## OUTLINE

- I. The preparation of the prophet ch. 1
  - A. The prologue of the book 1:1-8
    - 1. The preface 1:1-3
    - 2. The address and doxology 1:4-6
    - 3. The theme 1:7-8
  - B. The commission of the prophet 1:9-20
    - 1. The first commission to write 1:9-11
    - 2. The source of the commission 1:12-16
    - 3. The amplification of the commission 1:17-20
- II. The letters to the seven churches chs. 2—3
  - A. The letter to the church in Ephesus 2:1-7

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<sup>1</sup>See Aune, pp. lxxii-xc.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Robert L. Thomas, "The *New* Interpretation of Bible Prophecy," in *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 27-54, who argued for a totally prophetic genre.

1. Destination and description of Christ 2:1
  2. Commendation 2:2-3
  3. Rebuke 2:4
  4. Exhortation 2:5-6
  5. Promise 2:7
- B. The letter to the church in Smyrna 2:8-11
1. Destination and description of Christ 2:8
  2. Commendation 2:9
  3. Exhortation 2:10a
  4. Promise 2:10b-11
- C. The letter to the church in Pergamum 2:12-17
1. Destination and description of Christ 2:12
  2. Commendation 2:13
  3. Rebuke 2:14-15
  4. Exhortation 2:16
  5. Promise 2:17
- D. The letter to the church in Thyatira 2:18-29
1. Destination and description of Christ 2:18
  2. Commendation 2:19
  3. Rebuke 2:20-23
  4. Exhortation 2:24-25
  5. Promise 2:26-29
- E. The letter to the church in Sardis 3:1-6
1. Destination and description of Christ 3:1a-b
  2. Commendation and rebuke 3:1c, 2b
  3. Exhortation 3:2a, 3
  4. Promise 3:4-6
- F. The letter to the church in Philadelphia 3:7-13
1. Destination and description of Christ 3:7
  2. Commendation 3:8
  3. Promise 3:9-11a, 12
  4. Exhortation 3:11b, 13



- G. The letter to the church in Laodicea 3:14-22
  - 1. Destination and description of Christ 3:14
  - 2. Rebuke 3:15-17
  - 3. Exhortation 3:18-19
  - 4. Promise 3:20-22
- III. The revelation of the future 4:1—22:5
  - A. Introduction to the judgments of the Tribulation chs. 4—5
    - 1. The throne in heaven ch. 4
    - 2. The Lamb on the throne ch. 5
  - B. The first six seal judgments ch. 6
    - 1. The first seal 6:1-2
    - 2. The second seal 6:3-4
    - 3. The third seal 6:5-6
    - 4. The fourth seal 6:7-8
    - 5. The fifth seal 6:9-11
    - 6. The sixth seal 6:12-17
  - C. Supplementary revelation of salvation in the Great Tribulation ch. 7
    - 1. The sealing of 144,000 Israelites 7:1-8
    - 2. The salvation of the great multitude 7:9-17
  - D. The first six trumpet judgments chs. 8—9
    - 1. The first four trumpet judgments ch. 8
    - 2. The fifth and sixth trumpet judgments ch. 9
  - E. Supplementary revelation of John's preparation for recording the remaining judgments in the Great Tribulation ch. 10
    - 1. The appearance of the mighty angel 10:1-4
    - 2. The announcement of the mighty angel 10:5-7
    - 3. The instruction of the mighty angel 10:8-11
  - F. Supplementary revelation of the two witnesses in the Great Tribulation 11:1-14

1. The temple in Jerusalem 11:1-2
  2. The ministry of the two witnesses 11:3-6
  3. The death of the two witnesses 11:7-10
  4. The resurrection of the two witnesses 11:11-13
  5. The end of the second woe 11:14
- G. The seventh trumpet judgment 11:15-19
- H. Supplementary revelation of Satan's activity in the Great Tribulation chs. 12—13
1. The activity of Satan himself ch. 12
  2. The activity of Satan's agents ch. 13
- I. Supplementary revelation of preparations for the final judgments in the Great Tribulation chs. 14—15
1. Judgment at the end of the Great Tribulation ch. 14
  2. Preparation for the bowl judgments ch. 15
- J. The seven bowl judgments ch. 16
1. The commencement of the bowl judgments 16:1
  2. The first bowl 16:2
  3. The second bowl 16:3
  4. The third bowl 16:4
  5. Ascriptions of angelic and martyr praise 16:5-7
  6. The fourth bowl 16:8-9
  7. The fifth bowl 16:10-11
  8. The sixth bowl 16:12-16
  9. The seventh bowl 16:17-21
- K. Supplementary revelation of the judgment of ungodly systems in the Great Tribulation chs. 17—18
1. Religion in the Great Tribulation ch. 17
  2. Commerce in the Great Tribulation ch. 18
- L. The Second Coming of Christ ch. 19
1. The praise of God in heaven 19:1-10
  2. The return of Christ to earth 19:11-16
  3. The destruction of the wicked on earth 19:17-21

- M. The millennial reign of Christ ch. 20
  - 1. The binding of Satan 20:1-3
  - 2. The resurrection of tribulation martyrs 20:4-6
  - 3. The final judgment of Satan 20:7-10
  - 4. The judgment of the wicked 20:11-15
- N. The eternal state 21:1—22:5
  - 1. The vision of the new heaven and earth 21:1
  - 2. John's first vision of the New Jerusalem 21:2-8
  - 3. John's second vision of the New Jerusalem 21:9—22:5
- IV. The epilogue to the book 22:6-21
  - A. The testimony of the angel 22:6-7
  - B. The testimony of John 22:8-11
  - C. The testimony of Jesus and John's response 22:12-20
  - D. The final benediction 22:21

### **MESSAGE**

The Book of Revelation is one of the most encouraging books in the Bible, because in it we see our Savior vindicated before the world. Revelation is really a very simple book. It boils down to this: Jesus wins!

"In recording the revelation of Jesus Christ, John wanted to reassure his readers that Jesus Christ controls the course and climax of history."<sup>1</sup>

The subject of the Book of Revelation is Jesus Christ (1:1). It is an unveiling ("revelation") of Him. What does this book reveal about Christ? The Book of Revelation is the unveiling of the person of Jesus Christ, the power of Jesus Christ, and the program of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

First, it is a revelation of the *person* of Jesus Christ. It unveils who He is and what He is. This book is the climax of Scriptural Christology.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2161.

<sup>2</sup> See Tenney, pp. 117-34, for a study of the Christology of Revelation.

Notice first what the Book reveals about *who* Jesus Christ is. Three emphases in the book clarify His essential being. First, He is the *same* "human Jesus" who was born on earth at His first coming. He is the same "Jesus" on whose chest John reclined (1:1, 2, 5). He is a "son of man," possessing a full human nature (1:13). Moreover, He will always be fully human (22:20). Second, He is also fully divine: one in essence with the Father (1:12-18; 3:14). He reveals God fully (19:13). He will share the throne of the universe with the Father eventually (22:1, 3). Third, He is the eternal God (1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

Notice next what the book of Revelation reveals about *what* Jesus Christ is. Nine titles give us a fuller appreciation of His place in history. In the past, He proved to be the "Root of David," "the Lion of the tribe of Judah," and the promised "Messiah" (3:7; 5:5; 22:16). This became clear at His baptism (Matt. 3:17). In the past, also at His first advent, He proved to be "the Lamb of God" who takes away the sins of the world (5:6, 12-13; 6:1). This became clear at His death. In the past, He proved to be "the firstborn from the dead, the victor over death and Hades" (1:5-6, 18; 2:8; 3:21). This became clear at His resurrection. In the present, He is "the Lord of the churches" who reigns over the church (2:1; 3:1; cf. 22:20).

In the future, Jesus Christ will prove to be "the Judge of all humankind" (2:12, 18; 3:14; 6:1; et al.). This is His primary role during the Great Tribulation. In the future, He will prove to be "King of kings and Lord of lords" (1:5; 17:14; 19:16). This is His primary role during the Millennium. In the future, He will prove to be "the Morning Star" (22:16; cf. 2:28). His Second Coming will signal the dawning of a new day in history. This will find its clearest revelation in the new heavens and new earth. The Millennium will only be a foretaste of that eternal day.

This book is also a revelation of the *power* of Jesus Christ. Individuals have various kinds of power. Jesus Christ has *all kinds* of power, and *all* (total) power of all kinds.

First, He has all *personal* power. He has *inherent* power, power within Himself. We see this in His control of all other beings and forces (e.g., believers, unbelievers, Satan, the beasts, human armies, etc.). He wields the power Himself. He also has *acquired* power, power that has been given to Him by another. His Father has given Him *even more* power and authority (5:1, 6-7; cf. Matt. 28:18). He exercises all the power of the Godhead.

Second, He has all *instrumental* power. That is, He has "authority" over all things as He executes His power. All things are His instruments or tools. He has power over all *material* objects and forces. He controls the physical universe. We can see this in His using individuals, storms, earthquakes, and even the heavenly bodies to accomplish His will in this book. He also has power over all *spiritual* entities and authorities. He controls the angels, the demons, and Satan. Every power in the universe is under His authority and control (e.g., 13:15).

Third, He has all *effectual* power. That is, He has power to accomplish anything. He can effect any changes that He desires. He has all *destructive* power. He can destroy anything that exists: individuals, systems (e.g., Babylonianism), objects, even the very heavens and earth. He also has all *constructive* power. He can create new human bodies (by resurrection), new systems (new religious and economic orders), and new cities (the new Jerusalem). He will even create "new heavens" and a "new earth."

The Book of Revelation also reveals the *program* of Jesus Christ (1:19). It gives us much detail about God's program and how it will unfold in the future. However, here I will point out God's "purposes" that this program unveils.

Christ's *immediate* purpose is to defeat and destroy Satan and sin. We see Him doing this in the Church Age, in Revelation, as He deals with believers in the seven churches (chs. 2—3). His purpose then will be to purify to Himself a people who will be "a kingdom and priests to God" (1:6). We also see Him doing this in the Tribulation period in Revelation. We see it in His judgment of those who have not believed on Him (chs. 4—18). His purpose is to pour out God's wrath on His enemies for their refusal to receive His grace (16:1). Why does there have to be a Tribulation? God has promised a "time of trouble" that will be the worst that the world has seen (Jer. 30:7; Dan. 11:36-45). If God is faithful to His promises (and He is), there has to be a special time of tribulation yet future.

Christ's *ultimate* purpose is to dwell among His people and experience intimate fellowship with them. We see Him doing this in the Millennium to an extent never before attained in history (20:6). We see Him doing this—perfectly and eternally—in the new earth (22:3-5). This has always been God's ultimate purpose (e.g., Adam, Noah, the patriarchs, Israel, the church, the Millennium). He will achieve it completely in the new earth.

The Book of Revelation, then, is *an unveiling of Jesus Christ*—His person, His power, and His program—for the rest of history. This is the message statement. We must never forget that *He* is the subject of this book, as we seek to understand what He has revealed here.<sup>1</sup>

"This is pre-eminently a book for a troubled age, for an age in which the darkness deepens, fear spreads over all mankind, and monstrous powers, godless and evil, appear on the stage of history (as they appear in this book)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:211-26.

<sup>2</sup>Smith, p. 1492.

## Exposition

### I. THE PREPARATION OF THE PROPHET CH. 1

The first chapter contains a prologue to the book that is similar to the one in John 1:1-18, the prologue to John's Gospel (cf. 1 John 1:1-4). It also relates a vision that God gave John that prepared him for what follows. This presentation has the effect of showing that Jesus Christ is the culminating Figure in human history (cf. Heb. 1), and it prepares the reader for the *revelation* of His future acts, that constitutes the bulk of this book.

#### A. THE PROLOGUE OF THE BOOK 1:1-8

John's prologue contains a preface, an address and doxology, and a statement of the book's theme.

##### 1. The preface 1:1-3

The Apostle John wrote these opening verses in order to introduce the book's main subject and John's purpose for writing it. In similar fashion, John explained his purposes in writing 1 John and his Gospel (1 John 1:3-4; John 20:30-31).

1:1 "The revelation of Jesus Christ" is the subject of this book. "Revelation" (from the Latin *revelatio*) means "unveiling" or "disclosure," and is a translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, the transliteration of which is an alternative title for the book (i.e., "The Apocalypse"; cf. Dan. 2:28-30, 45-47). The Greek word occurs only here in the book. Jesus Christ was the giver of this revelation (cf. Matt. 11:27; John 1:18; 5:19-23; 12:49; 17:8),<sup>1</sup> and He is its main subject.<sup>2</sup> That Jesus could be both the Giver of the revelation (subjective), and the main subject of the revelation (objective), is consistent with the genitive in the Greek text, which is probably both objective and subjective here.

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:544.

<sup>2</sup>Morgan, 2:2:215.

"Communicated" (Gr. *esemanen*) simply means "indicated" (cf. John 12:33; Acts 11:28); it does not mean "signified" in the sense that everything that follows is symbolic, though much of what Jesus communicated is symbolic.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the Gospels reveal Jesus in His humiliation, The Revelation reveals Him in His glory.

"It will be vain to become occupied with 'sevens,' 'hundred-forty-four-thousands,' 'six-sixty-sixes,' the restoration of the Roman Empire, the person of the antichrist, the two wild beasts, the 'millennium,' or even the new Jerusalem; unless, along with God the Father, who has subjected all things unto *Him*, *Christ* is ever before our eyes!"<sup>2</sup>

God wanted "the (His) bond-servants" of Jesus Christ (cf. 22:6; Acts 2:18) to have this *revelation* of "the things" that will ("must") happen "soon."

"If we are having difficulty with this blessed closing book of God's holy Word, let us surrender ourselves to Jesus Christ as His servants. *The book was written to bondservants.*"<sup>3</sup>

The idea behind the Greek words translated "shortly" (*en tachei*) is probably that the events to be revealed will appear "soon" rather than speedily (cf. 22:16).

"The phrase translated 'shortly' (Greek: *en tachei*) means 'without delay,' indicating that the judgments of which the book speaks may begin at any time."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Tenney, pp. 187-89, for lists of symbols explained, symbols paralleled by Old Testament imagery, and symbols unexplained. See also Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 347-68; Tan, pp. 152-66; and Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, pp. 184-93, on the interpretation of symbols.

<sup>2</sup>William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Tenney, pp. 29-30.



"... the view that sees *en tachei* meaning 'soon' and thereby focuses on the imminence of the predicted events is impressive. A major thrust of Revelation is its emphasis upon the shortness of time before the fulfillment. In the midst of persecution God's people do not have long to wait for relief to come. To say that the relief will come 'suddenly' offers no encouragement, but to say that it will come 'soon' does. ...

"The presence of *en tachei* in 1:1 shows that for the first time the events predicted by Daniel and foreseen by Christ stood in readiness to be fulfilled [cf. Dan. 2:28-29, 45]. Therefore, John could speak of them as imminent, but earlier prophets could not."<sup>1</sup>

There are many similarities between how John wrote The Revelation and how Daniel wrote the book that bears his name. Both prophecies deal with God's sovereign rule over world history.

"Jesus Christ" first communicated this revelation to "an (His) angel" (Gabriel? cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:21-22; Luke 1:26-31), who then passed it on to the Apostle John. This is the first of some 67 references to angels (messengers) in Revelation. A characteristic feature of apocalyptic literature is the presence of a supernatural mediator (cf. Ezek. 40—48; Dan. 7—12; Zech. 1—6).<sup>2</sup> John used the traditional title of "bond-servant" (slave) to describe his relationship to Jesus Christ, as did all the other apostles (cf. Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1). The chain of communication was from God the Father, to Jesus, to an angel, to John, to Christians.

1:2      Forty-four times in this book, John wrote "I saw" (1:12-13; 4:1, 4; 5:1, 2, 6, 11; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 9; 8:2, 13;

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 55, 56. Cf. 22:6; Deut. 9:3; Ezek. 29:5 (LXX); Luke 18:8; Rom. 16:20. See Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of 'Soon' and 'Near' in Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:652 (October-December 2006):467-78.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 15.

9:1, 17; 10:1; 13:1, 3, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2, 5; 16:13; 17:3; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 8). He saw *many* things, and passed this revelation ("all that he saw") on to the church. By the time the original recipients of this book had read it, the visions that he had seen, which the book describes, were finished. John regarded ("testified to") the book as an inspired "word" from God, specifically from and about "Jesus Christ" (cf. v. 1).

"No other book in the Bible is so strongly supported as to its divine inspiration."<sup>1</sup>

The "word of God" may refer to God the Father's word to Jesus Christ. "The testimony of Jesus" probably refers to the Lord Jesus' faithful communication of God's word (message) to John (mainly through angels, messengers), who passed it on to his readers.

Verses 1 and 2 summarize the contents of the Book of Revelation, and present them as "the testimony" that Jesus Christ bore ("of Jesus Christ").

"The book contains the word of God as well as the testimony of (or *about*) Jesus Christ in His role as Judge of the churches (chaps. 2—3), of the inhabitants of planet earth (chaps. 6—19), and of the lost of all the ages (chap. 20). In the subsequent chapters (21—22), the effects of His judgments are seen in the new heavens and new earth."<sup>2</sup>

1:3 Those who "read," "hear," and "obey (heed)" this "prophecy" will receive a special blessing from God. Thus John identified what follows as "prophecy."

"It [this verse] does not say that a blessing is for him who understands and knows everything which is in this Book. If such were the condition the writer and the reader would have no claim on this

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Vacendak, 2:1253. Bold text omitted.

promised blessing. The Bible-teacher, or any other man, who says he knows and understands everything found in this great finale of God's Word is very much mistaken. We cannot be sure about everything in some of these visions and the full meaning of some may not be understood till the world sees the fulfillment. The blessing is promised to all His people who give attention to the revelation of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

In antiquity, ancient texts were also always read aloud.<sup>2</sup> John put himself on a par with the Old Testament prophets (cf. 10:8-11),<sup>3</sup> and he distinguished this book from Jewish apocalyptic literature.<sup>4</sup>

This is the first of *seven blessings* that John mentioned in Revelation (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14; cf. Luke 11:28). John used the number "seven," which commonly signified divine origin and authority, 54 times.<sup>5</sup> The Greek word translated "time" (*kairos*) describes a *period* of time, rather than a point in time. The time when God will fulfill these prophecies was "near" (close in proximity to) when John wrote this book (cf. 22:10). "Near" is the translation of the Greek word *eggus* meaning at hand, imminent. The fulfillment could begin at any time.<sup>6</sup>

"... the Apocalyptist claims for his book that it shall take rank with the prophetic books of the O.T..."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, 4:2:204.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>See Hall W. Harris, "A Theology of John's Writings," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 174; and David Hill, "Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John," *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971-72):401-18.

<sup>5</sup>Aune, pp. xciii-xciv, 29.

<sup>6</sup>Mounce, p. 65; Johnson, pp. 416-17; Ladd, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Swete, p. 3.

"A 'revelation' of the end of history is given not for the satisfaction of curiosity, but to inspire living in accordance with the reality unveiled."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The address and doxology 1:4-6

As is true of New Testament epistles generally, the address of Revelation contains three elements: the writer, the addressees, and the greeting.

Robert Thomas argued that the *genre* of Revelation is prophecy written in epistolary style.<sup>2</sup> Henry Swete saw it as a prophetic vision and a letter (from 1:4 on).<sup>3</sup> Gregory Beale viewed it as an epistle that contains apocalyptic and prophetic material.<sup>4</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, and Donald Carson and Douglas Moo, also advocated a combination of apocalyptic, prophecy, and epistle.<sup>5</sup> Most scholars have classed it as apocalyptic.<sup>6</sup> I prefer to think of it as an epistle containing prophecy, much of which is apocalyptic.

1:4 "John" sent this letter (the whole book) "to the seven churches" mentioned in chapters 2 and 3, which were in the Roman province of "Asia," and within about 100 miles from Ephesus.

"John actually wrote to seven Churches, but the very completeness of the number seven indicates that his message is to the *whole Church*, and is still meant for us today."<sup>7</sup>

The Apostle Paul also wrote letters to churches in seven places: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica. The province of Asia lay in the geographic region of Asia Minor (modern western Turkey).

Since this book deals mainly with future events, John described the divine Author as God ("Him," the Father) "who is and who

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<sup>1</sup>G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 28 and 59. Cf. Aune, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, pp. 3, 4.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 1156.

<sup>5</sup>Beasley-Murray, pp. 12-29; Carson and Moo, p. 716.

<sup>6</sup>See Mounce, pp. 18-25, for a helpful discussion of apocalyptic.

<sup>7</sup>Barclay, 1:36. See also Jamieson, et al., p. 1527.

was and who is to come." This title occurs nowhere else in the Bible besides Revelation (v. 8; 4:8; cf. 11:17; 16:5; Exod. 3:14-15). This description stresses the continuity of God's sovereign dealings with humankind.

The phrase "seven Spirits" may refer to the seven angels of the seven churches (chs. 2—3) or to seven principal angelic messengers (cf. v. 20; 8:2, 6; 15:1; 1 Kings 22:19-21; Heb. 1:14).<sup>1</sup> The apocryphal books of 1 Enoch (20:2-8) and Tobit (12:15) named seven angels who supposedly stand before God: Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqael (Sariel), Gabriel, and Remiel.<sup>2</sup> Another possible view is that the phrase refers to the Holy Spirit in His fullness (cf. 5:6; Isa. 11:2-3; Zech. 4:2-7).<sup>3</sup> If so, this title fills out a reference to the Trinity in this sentence (cf. 3:1, 4:5; and 5:6).

God's "throne" represents His majesty, dominion and power.

1:5 John described Jesus Christ as the "faithful witness" (cf. 3:14; Ps. 89:37; Isa. 43:10-13). This is the third and last time in the book that the double name "Jesus Christ" appears.

"Jesus Christ is of the seed of David and will sit on the Davidic throne that will endure forever as the sun (Ps. 89:36)."<sup>4</sup>

"Faithful witness" probably refers to Jesus Christ's present (first-century prophetic) ministry of revealing what follows (cf. v. 2; 22:20). Another view is that it refers to Jesus' witness during His earthly ministry (cf. John 18:37). John also called Jesus the "firstborn from (of) the dead" (cf. Ps. 89:27; Acts 2:29-32; 4:2; 26:23; Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:23). This title looks at the culmination of His past earthly ministry, at the point

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Smith, pp. 314-19; Mounce, p. 70; Aune, p. 34; et al.

<sup>2</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1970; Alford, 4:549; J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, p. 27; Lenski, p. 40; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 48; Robertson, 6:286; Newell, pp. 10-11; Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 928; Johnson, pp. 420-21; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 67, 68; Harris, p. 202; Beasley-Murray, p. 56; Ladd, p. 24; and Beale, p. 189.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 69.

when God raised Him to new life at His resurrection and set Him at His right hand in heaven.

"The Resurrection carried with it a potential lordship over all humanity (Rom. xiv. 9), not only over the Church (Col. *l.c.* [i.e., 1:18])."<sup>1</sup>

John also referred to Jesus as the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Ps. 89:27; cf. Rev. 17:14; 19:16). That is His future ministry following the Second Coming (Matt. 2:6). Wilbur Smith considered this the key title of Jesus Christ for the Book of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament speaks much of believers entering into their rights as first-born sons of God, and ruling with Jesus Christ in His millennial kingdom. This will be the privilege of faithful, obedient Christians (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

"... the origination of all three expressions from Psalm 89 reflects a major authorial intent to direct attention to the fulfillment of the promises made to David regarding an eternal kingdom in 2 Samuel 7."<sup>3</sup>

"The last book of the Bible is pre-eminently *the Book of the Kingdom of God* in conflict with, and victory over, the kingdoms of this world. With this general viewpoint most commentators would agree, regardless of differences over principles and details of interpretation."<sup>4</sup>

John ascribed eternal glory (v. 6) and dominion (v. 5) to Jesus Christ, who is the subject and object of this revelation. He described Him as the One "who [*always*] loves us," and who "loosed us from [the bondage of] our sins by His death (blood)." Some ancient Greek manuscripts read: "He washed us from the stain of our sins."

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1502.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup>McClain, p. 442.

In these notes, I will use the term "Christian" in its strict technical sense, to refer only to believers who have come to faith between Pentecost and the Rapture. There will also be believers saved during the Tribulation, but these will be Tribulation saints, not "Christians," as I am using the term.

- 1:6 Jesus Christ also has made us "a kingdom" (corporately) and "priests" (individually; cf. 5:10; 20:6; Exod. 19:6; Isa. 61:6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9) "to His God and Father," another evidence of His present love for us.

"What Israel was to be Christ made us to be."<sup>1</sup>

John never spoke of God as the Father *of believers* in Revelation, but only as the Father *of Jesus* (cf. 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1). We Church-Age believers are "a kingdom and priests" (two blessings) now, but in the future: faithful Christians, His bond-servants, will also *reign with Jesus Christ* on the earth (cf. 5:10). The next verse (v. 7) refers to the Second Coming of Christ, so the "kingdom" in view in this verse may be an allusion to the Messianic Kingdom, which will begin when Jesus returns to the earth.

"Amen" means "So be it!" Here it signifies the writer's assent to the truthfulness of these affirmations about Jesus Christ (cf. 1:7; 5:14; 7:12 [twice]; 19:4; 22:20). This is the first of 16 doxologies in Revelation (1:6; 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:17; 15:3-4; 16:5-6, 7; 19:1-2, 3, 4, 6).<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting that John, the "apostle of love," would emphasize *God's love* in this first doxology as the dominating divine emotion (cf. Deut. 4:37). In view of the following revelation of much judgment to come on humanity, it is comforting to remember that God does everything because He loves His people.

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>See Tom Davis, "Revelation," in *Surveying Hebrews through Revelation*, p. 135, for a table showing who gives and who receives the praise in each case.

### 3. The theme 1:7-8

These verses contain the first prophetic oracle of the book. The only other one in which God speaks is in 21:5-8.

1:7 "Behold" (Gr. *idou*) indicates special divine intervention and occurs 26 times in Revelation. "Behold" validates the statement it introduces, and it draws attention to what follows.<sup>1</sup> This verse summarizes the main features of the revelation to follow. It is in this sense the key verse, "the motto and the text,"<sup>2</sup> of Revelation.

"The theme of the book is the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all enemies and the establishment of His earthly kingdom."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ will return *physically* to earth, just as He ascended *physically* into heaven (1:4, 8; 2:5, 16; 3:11; 4:8; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20 [twice]); Acts 1:9-11). "Every eye" of those alive at the Second Coming "will see Him" (Matt. 24:30; cf. Num. 11:25; Ps. 104:3; Isa. 19:1; Dan. 7:13; Zech. 12:10-14). "Those who pierced Him" evidently refers to Jews particularly (Zech. 12:10, 12, 14; cf. John 19:37).<sup>4</sup> Another possibility is that these people stand for Jesus' enemies.<sup>5</sup> Representatives from "all the tribes on (of the) earth then will mourn (wail)," because at that time the earth will be in rebellion against Him (cf. Matt. 24:30). These "tribes" represent all human beings, not just Jews.<sup>6</sup>

This great text announces the climactic event in Revelation, namely, the return of Jesus Christ to the earth at His Second

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:45.

<sup>3</sup>Harris, p. 175. See also Ladd, p. 14; and Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:568.

<sup>4</sup>See Kenneth G. C. Newport, "Semitic Influence in Revelation: Some Further Evidence," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25:3 (Autumn 1987):249-56.

<sup>5</sup>Ladd, p. 28. See also Alford, 4:551.

<sup>6</sup>See J. B. Smith, p. 44; and Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 78-79.



Coming (19:11-16).<sup>1</sup> All that intervenes between this verse and 19:11-16 leads up to that event. This verse does not refer to the Rapture, as is clear from what John said will happen when Christ's return *to earth* takes place. The Second Coming will be a public, *gradual* manifestation, but the Rapture will be a secret, *instantaneous* calling (1 Cor. 15:52).

"The promise combines Daniel 7:13 with Zechariah 12:10 ... Daniel 7 provides a key focus for John throughout the whole book (there are no fewer than thirty-one allusions to it)."<sup>2</sup>

"Even so, amen," provides firm assurance that the coming of Christ will happen as prophesied in this verse.

1:8 God confirmed the preceding forecast with a solemn affirmation of His eternity and omnipotence. *Alpha* and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and signify here, God's comprehensive control over all things—including time (cf. 21:6; 22:13). This is probably a *merism*, a figure of speech in which two extremes represent the whole. John strengthened this point further with present, past, and future references (cf. 4:8; 11:17; Heb. 13:8). God is the originator and terminator of all things. He is not only "Lord of the future" (knowing and controlling future events); He is also powerful enough to bring what John just predicted to pass (to perfectly fulfill His prophetic words about the future). He is the "Almighty."

"A weighing of evidence, especially in light of the OT 'flavor' of the expression and a recollection that the Father in the OT refers to Himself as 'I am' (i.e., the Tetragrammaton, Ex. 3:14; cf. Isa. 48:12), tips the balance ever so slightly to the side of concluding that God the Father speaks in v. 8. ...

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<sup>1</sup>See Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of Revelation and the Jewish War," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:653 (January-March 2007):89-100, for a rebuttal of the preterist interpretation of this verse.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 422.

"God's declaration in v. 8 thus ends with a note of authority. The omnipotent one will surely implement what His prophet has predicted by way of future judgment."<sup>1</sup>

John frequently used "Almighty" as a key name for God in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). Only in this verse, and in 21:5-6, is God (the Father) presented as the speaker in Revelation. This is the first of five "I am" sayings in Revelation (cf. v. 17; 2:23; 21:6; 22:16).

"'The Alpha and the Omega' uses the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet, from which fact it is proper to conclude that the language used in the visions was Greek, even as John wrote the record of them in Greek; he did not translate from the Aramaic."<sup>2</sup>

This whole introduction points to the main event of the following revelation: the return of Jesus Christ at His Second Coming (19:11-16). It also presents the *triune* God, "who is and who was and who is to come," as Lord of *time* (past, present, and future), faithful to His promises, and powerful enough to bring these events to pass.<sup>3</sup> In Genesis, Moses also emphasized God's power and faithfulness more than any other of His attributes. The last Bible book stresses these qualities of God as does the first Bible book.

Merrill Tenney compared this section of Revelation to the title page of a modern book. It contains the title of the book (v. 1), the commendation (v. 3), the author and destination (vv. 4-5), the greeting (6), the dedication (vv. 5-6), the motto (v. 7), and the publisher's imprint (v. 8).<sup>4</sup>

## **B. THE COMMISSION OF THE PROPHET 1:9-20**

John next explained a vision of the glorified Christ that God had given him (cf. Isa. 6; Ezek. 1). First, he related the circumstances of his first

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 80, 81. Cf. Harris, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>See also David R. Seal, "A Performance-Critical Analysis of Revelation 1:5b-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 175:698 (April-June 2018):215-27.

<sup>4</sup>Tenney, pp. 42-49.

commission to write (vv. 9-11). Second, he provided a detailed description of the source of that commission (vv. 12-16). Third, he explained more about his commission and the One who gave it (vv. 17-20).

### 1. The first commission to write 1:9-11

1:9 "I, John" is a phrase that introduces a change of speaker (cf. 22:8); it does not emphasize John's authority.<sup>1</sup> John now addressed directly the seven churches to which he sent this epistolary prophecy. He described himself to his readers as their "brother" in Christ, and as a "partaker" with them in three things: These were, first, the religious persecution ("tribulation") they were presently experiencing as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ. This "tribulation" is a reference to the general tribulations that all Christians experience (cf. Matt. 20:22-23; John 16:33; Acts 12:2; 14:22; Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12; 3:12), not to *the* Tribulation yet future (cf. 2:22; 7:14).

"It is the man who has gone through it who can help others who are going through it."<sup>2</sup>

Second, they shared in the present and future "kingdom" of Jesus Christ (cf. v. 6; 5:10; ch. 20; Luke 12:32; 22:29; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; James 2:5). Third, their "perseverance" as they remained steadfast in the midst of affliction.

"This illustrates the broad spectrum of other areas, besides afflictions, that are shared by believers, but fellowship in suffering is one of the most frequent, if not the most frequent, among the stock of primitive Christian ideas. This is an indispensable element of Christian discipleship and following the example of Jesus (1 Thess. 1:6; 1

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:49.

Pet. 2:21; 4:13; cf. also 2 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 5:1)."<sup>1</sup>

John was on "the island called Patmos" as a result of his witness ("because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus"), as an exile, not primarily to receive this revelation from God (cf. 6:9).<sup>2</sup> According to the writings of several early church fathers (i.e., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and Victorinus), the Romans sent John as a prisoner from Ephesus, where he pastored, to the island of Patmos in A.D. 95.<sup>3</sup> There he worked in the mines (quarries), though there is no evidence that Patmos was ever a Roman *penal* colony.<sup>4</sup> Patmos stood in the Aegean Sea, just southwest of Ephesus. It was 10 miles long and six miles wide at its widest (northern side). John remained there until shortly after the Emperor Domitian died in A.D. 96. Domitian's successor, Nerva, allowed John to return to Ephesus.<sup>5</sup>

1:10 The Holy "Spirit" apparently caught John up (took ahold of John), and projected him *in his spirit* to a future time in a vision (cf. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10; Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5).<sup>6</sup> The phrase "I was in the Spirit" occurs four times in Revelation (1:10; 4:2; 17:3 21:10) and has been regarded by some as marking off a major section of the revelation that John received.<sup>7</sup>

"To say that this presents John as writing in 'excitement' because he was 'in spirit,' and that

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 85. For a biblical theology of suffering in Revelation, see Thomas L. Constable, "Suffering in the Book of Revelation," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, pp. 207-14.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:553.

<sup>3</sup>See Beckwith, pp. 434-35; Barclay, 1:51-53; J. B. Smith, p. 49; Walvoord, *The Revelation* ..., p. 41; et al.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup>Johnson, p. 424. See Appendix 2, "Roman Emperors in New Testament Times," at the end of these notes.

<sup>6</sup>See F. J. A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 15. See Michael Kuykendall, "The Twelve Visions of John: Another Attempt at Structuring the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 60:3 (September 2017):533-55.

<sup>7</sup>See Tenney, pp. 32-34.

thus oddities crept into his language, is to misconceive what the phrase 'in spirit' means."<sup>1</sup>

The "Lord's day" probably refers to Sunday.<sup>2</sup> But it could refer to the future "day of the Lord" referred to frequently elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> The New Testament writers never called Sunday "the Lord's day" elsewhere in Scripture. This term became common after the apostolic age.<sup>4</sup>

1:11 A "loud trumpet[-like] voice" instructed John to "write" down what he saw, and "send it to the seven churches" in Asia Minor. The "trumpet" reference probably implies that submission to its command was necessary. The voice belonged to Jesus Christ (vv. 12, 17-18).

This is the first of twelve times that John wrote that he received instruction to "write" what he saw (cf. v. 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). "Write ... and send" is equivalent to the Old Testament command "go and tell" (cf. Isa. 6:1-11; Jer. 1:1-10; Ezek. 1:1—3:27). The "book" in view was a roll of papyrus made from a plant that grew in Egypt. Normally papyrus scrolls were about 15 feet long.<sup>5</sup>

The cities where these churches met formed a wedge on the map pointing northwest. A messenger carrying John's revelation would have traveled north from Ephesus, to Smyrna, and on to Pergamum. He would then have turned southeast to reach Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The whole Book of Revelation was to go to these churches, not just the special letter to each one contained in chapters 2 and 3.

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:554; Swete, p. 13; Morris, p. 51; Newell, p. 24; Johnson, pp. 424-25; Mounce, p. 76; Beasley-Murray, p. 65; Aune, p. 84; Ladd, p. 31; Beale, pp. 203-4; Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfred Stott, *This is The Day: The Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath in its Jewish and Early Christian Setting*.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, p. 18; E. W. Bullinger, *The Apocalypse or "The Day of the Lord,"* p. 152; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 42; J. B. Smith, p. 324; Jeremiah, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup>Frederic G. Kenyon, *Handbook to Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p. 30.



Why did God select these churches in these particular towns? Obviously He did not do so because of their superior spirituality. Their popularity was not the criterion, either, since we only read about Ephesus, Thyatira, and Laodicea elsewhere in Scripture. John knew of the specific conditions in each of these churches, and God led him to communicate individual messages to them. Probably they were representative congregations from which this book could circulate easily.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The source of the commission 1:12-16

John turned to see the person who had given him his commission. These verses describe what he saw.

1:12      When John "turned to see" the person ("the voice") who spoke to him, he "saw" a majestic Figure, clothed in a long robe, standing among "seven golden lampstands" (not seven

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 93-94.

lamps on one lampstand; cf. Exod. 25:31-40; 1 Kings 7:49; Zech. 4:2, 10; Matt. 18:20). This description of a person in such a setting resembled a priest, in Israel, ministering in the tabernacle or temple. The "seven golden lampstands" represent seven churches (v. 20; cf. Zech. 4:2-6).<sup>1</sup>

1:13 The man *looked like* "a son of man." This expression refers to the divine Messiah in Daniel 7:13-14 (cf. Dan. 3:25; 10:5-6, 18; Acts 7:56). "Son of Man" was Jesus' favorite title for Himself, according to the writers of the Gospels (cf. Mark 13:26).

"Using this combination of imagery, which originally referred to *two* figures in Dan 7:9-14, one 'like a son of man' (Dan. 7:13) and the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9), the author has virtually equated the two figures."<sup>2</sup>

Seeing Christ in His role as Judge is a key element in understanding Revelation."<sup>3</sup>

The Person John saw *looked like* a human man. His clothing was similar to that of a priest: a long "robe," with a "golden sash" around it ("girded across His chest"; cf. Exod. 28:4; Lev. 16:4).<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ's present office is that of our High Priest (Heb. 4:14). However, this long "robe reaching to the feet" (Gr. *poderes*) and its high girding were also signs of rank or dignity in those who wore it (cf. 1 Sam. 18:2-4; 24:5, 12; Ezek. 9:2; 26:16; Dan. 10:5).<sup>5</sup> Messengers also wore such garments (Dan. 10:5). Some interpreters have seen in this description an allusion to Jesus' ministry as Priest, King, and Prophet.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix 3, "Symbols Used in the Book of Revelation That the Book Itself Interprets," at the end of these notes.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup>Vacendak, 2:1257.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3:7:2.

<sup>5</sup>Swete, pp. 15-16; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 1:26-27; Robertson, 6:292.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Barclay, 1:58.

"... when in Rev. i. 13, the Saviour is seen 'in the midst of the candlesticks,' 'girt about the paps with a golden girdle,' we are to understand by it that our heavenly High-Priest is there engaged in actual ministry for us. Similarly, the girdle is described as 'about the paps,' or (as in Rev. xv. 6) about the 'breasts,' as both the girdle of the ordinary priest and that on the ephod which the high-priest wore were girded there, and not round the loins. Lastly, the expression 'golden girdle' may bear reference to the circumstance that the dress peculiar of the high-priest was called his 'golden vestments,' in contradistinction to the 'linen vestments,' which he wore on the Day of Atonement."<sup>1</sup>

"The titles of Jesus Christ found in the introductions to six of the seven messages in chapters 2 and 3 are drawn largely from this vision of 1:12-20 and its descriptive phrases. Only the message to Laodicea (3:14-22) is devoid of one of these. One of the titles is used in two messages (cf. 2:1 and 3:1) ... It is apparent that the appearance of Christ in this vision is designed to emphasize the aspects of His nature that are most relevant to the needs and circumstances of the seven churches who are the primary recipients of this book."<sup>2</sup>

1:14 "His head," even (specifically) "His hair," was extremely "white" ("like white wool, like snow"), as Daniel described the "Ancient of Days" in Daniel 7:9 (i.e., God the Father). John sometimes first stated a general term, and then followed it up with a more specific one, as here (i.e., head and hair).<sup>3</sup> White hair often represents *wisdom*, *purity*, and the *dignity of age* in Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup>Beckwith, pp. 241-42, 438.



"... Revelation borrows components of complex OT figures, not the figures themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Thus we should not import everything that Old Testament figures teach—in their contexts—into Revelation. In Daniel 7:9, for example, the person with the white hair is God the Father, but the white hair symbolizes wisdom. It may be improper to conclude that God meant John to understand that the person with the white hair in Revelation 1:14 is also God the Father. He definitely meant him to understand that the person with the white hair was wise.

John referred the *images* of God the Father in the Old Testament to Jesus Christ, thus granting to Jesus the attributes and titles previously reserved for the Father (cf. v. 18; 2:8; 5:12; 22:13).<sup>2</sup> This is one way of stressing the equality of Jesus with the Father, here specifically His eternal pre-existence and sinlessness.

"His eyes" were similar to "blazing (a flame of) fire," evidently an allusion to His piercing judgment and omniscient understanding (cf. 2:18, 19:12; Dan. 10:6; Mark 3:5, 34; 10:21, 23; 11:11; Luke 22:61).

1:15 "His feet" looked like "bronze" as the metal is being heated and "made to glow" in a "furnace" fire (cf. Dan. 10:6; Ezek. 43:2). This is probably an allusion to His *purity* as He moves among the churches (cf. Luke 1:79; Acts 5:9; Rom. 3:15; 10:15; Heb. 12:13).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it also implies His *purity* as proved during His earthly walk, that made Him a sympathetic High Priest (Heb. 4:15; cf. 2:18). The figure of heated, glowing bronze feet also connotes strength and stability (cf. Dan. 2:33, 41).

"The brass itself stands for *strength*, for the immovable steadfastness of God; and the shining,

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas E. McComiskey, "Alteration of OT Imagery in the Book of Revelation: Its Hermeneutical and Theological Significance," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36:3 (September 1993):310.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 101-2.

glittering rays stand for *speed*, for the swiftness of the feet of God to help His own or to punish sin."<sup>1</sup>

"His voice" sounded like a rushing river ("the sound of many waters"), such as the Niagara River sounds at its Falls, namely, impressively authoritative, powerful, and irresistible (cf. 14:2; 19:6; Ps. 93:4; Isa. 17:13; Ezek. 43:2).

"Perhaps two ideas are suggested here: (1) Christ gathers together all the 'streams of revelation' and is the Father's 'last Word' to man (Heb. 1:1-3); (2) He speaks with power and authority and must be heard."<sup>2</sup>

John, while he lived on Patmos, would have hardly ever been far away from the sound of ocean waves roaring, beating on the shore.

1:16 "In His right hand," the symbol of official honor and sovereign control, "He held seven stars" protectively (cf. 9:1; 12:3; Job 38:7, 31; John 10:28), which symbolized the angels or messengers of the seven churches (v. 20; cf. 2:1; 3:1). These appear to be literal angels or messengers, since "it would be unlikely to interpret one symbol by using another."<sup>3</sup> Another view is that these stars represent true believers who shine in the night.<sup>4</sup> Some regard these stars as representing the ministers of these churches.<sup>5</sup>

"The hand of Christ is strong enough to uphold the heavens and gentle enough to wipe away our tears."<sup>6</sup>

A "sharp two-edged sword" (Gr. *hromphaia*), the type the Romans used to kill with (2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21), proceeded

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:62.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:569.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2166.

<sup>4</sup>Gaebelein, 4:2:213.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Seiss, pp. 41, 52.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 1:63.

from "His mouth." His word (and Word)—both spoken and written—will judge His enemies (Isa. 11:4; 49:2; Eph. 6:17; 2 Thess. 2:8; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 19:13-15). This sword was tongue-shaped.<sup>1</sup> It may be a metaphor for the tongue.<sup>2</sup>

"His face" shone like the unclouded "sun shining in its strength," a picture of pure holiness and righteousness (Judg. 5:4, 31; Matt. 13:43). John had seen Jesus at the Transfiguration with such a "shining ... face" (Matt. 17:2).

"... Christ was presenting Himself to John in a character that would prepare the apostle for various aspects of the vision to follow."<sup>3</sup>

"This first vision of John, then, included an indication of Jesus' Messianic office with its associated functions: judgment of the unrighteous and comfort of the suffering righteous, His high rank that fits Him as an agent of imposing divine wrath, His activity in imposing that wrath, His preexistence along with God the Father, His penetrating intelligence that enables Him to perform righteous judgment, His movement among the churches to enforce standards of moral purity, His identification with the Father in the power of His utterance, His authority over the seven messengers and the churches they represent, His power to overcome His enemies and pronounce judgment upon them, and His return to earth to implement judgment upon mankind."<sup>4</sup>

It is primarily as *Judge* that Jesus Christ appears in Revelation (cf. Matt. 3:11): He judges the churches (chs. 2—3), the whole earth (chs. 4—16), Babylonianism (chs. 17—18), world rulers at Armageddon (19:19-21), and Satan (20:1-3, 10). He also judges the earth during the Millennium (20:4-6), the rebellious earth at the end of the Millennium (20:7-9), and all the

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<sup>1</sup>See the *A Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Sword," by W. Emery Barnes, 4:634, for a picture of one.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "The Glorified Christ on Patmos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122:487 (July-September 1965):246.

<sup>4</sup>Idem, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 105.

unsaved dead (20:11-15). The first 20 chapters of the book deal with *judgment*, and the last two with the *new creation*.

### 3. The amplification of the commission 1:17-20

John's response to this revelation was similar to Daniel's response to the vision God gave him (cf. Dan. 10:7-9). Jesus then proceeded to give John more information about what He wanted him to do.

1:17      This revelation of Jesus Christ in His unveiled glory took all the strength out of John. He could not stand in the presence of such a One ("I fell at His feet like a dead man"). Paul had a similar experience on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:4; cf. Job 42:5-6; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 43:3; Dan. 8:17; 10:5-20; Luke 5:1-11). However, the glorified Christ laid His comforting, powerful "right hand" on John, and encouraged him to stop fearing (cf. Jesus' action following the Transfiguration, Matt. 17:7).

Jesus introduced Himself as the self-existent, eternal One ("I am the first and the last"). "I am" recalls Jesus' claims in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20; 8:58), and connects Him with Yahweh (Exod. 3:14; Isa. 48:12). The title "the first and the last" (cf. Isa. 44:6; 48:12) is essentially the same as "the Alpha and the Omega" (v. 8), or "the beginning and the end" (22:13). All three titles stress the eternal sovereignty of God. The consoling words, "Do not be afraid," were spoken by a *sovereign being*—the Son of God (cf. Matt. 14:27; 17:7; Mark 6:50).<sup>1</sup>

1:18      Jesus also presented Himself as the "living" and resurrected One ("I was dead ... I am alive"), and the One with authority over the state of death and the place of the dead ("I have the keys of death and of Hades"; cf. Josh. 3:10; Ps. 9:13; 42:2; 107:13; Isa. 38:10; Hos. 1:10; Matt. 16:18; John 5:28).

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, pp. 80-81.

"That he has **the keys of death and of Hades** certainly implies that the destiny of human souls is entirely under the jurisdiction of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

John saw his beloved Teacher of Galilee, on whose chest he had laid his head, in an entirely different light now than he had seen Him before, except in the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:2; cf. Rev. 4:10; 10:6).

1:19 Jesus Christ repeated His instruction to John to "write" down "the things" that God (through the angel) was revealing to him (v. 11). The repetition of 'write,' from verse 11, indicates that the 'therefore' is resuming the earlier command where it had left off.<sup>2</sup> Now Jesus gave John more specific instructions.

This verse provides an inspired outline of the Book of Revelation, though God may not have intended it as such.<sup>3</sup> Some of what John was to record he had already "seen," namely, the Man standing among the seven golden lampstands with the seven stars in His hand (vv. 12-16). Some had to do with present conditions in the churches ("things which are"), as exemplified by the seven churches (chs. 2—3). Some had to do with revelations about the times ("things which will take place") "after" the conditions represented by the seven churches ("these things") ended (chs. 4—22).<sup>4</sup> Beale, who described himself as an "eclectic idealist," held that each of the three clauses refers to the entire book.<sup>5</sup>

1:20 Jesus Christ then interpreted the meaning of some of the symbolic things John had seen. They were *mysteries*, "revelations previously unclear" until the Lord interpreted them for John. The "seven stars" represented the "messengers (angels) of the seven churches." These may have

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<sup>1</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1502.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Aune, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>See idem, "John's Apocalyptic Outline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:492 (October-December 1966):334-41.

<sup>5</sup>Beale, pp. 48, 168.

been their angelic guardians.<sup>1</sup> Some interpreters have taken these "angels" as meaning the expressions of *the prevailing spirit* that characterized each church.<sup>2</sup> Others take them as the *ideal* of each church.<sup>3</sup> Still others the churches themselves.<sup>4</sup> Ramsay believed each angel represented "the Divine presence and the Divine power in the Church; he is the Divine guarantee of the vitality and effectiveness of the Church."<sup>5</sup> Others view them as the human representatives, the *leading elders* (pastors or ministers) of these churches, although "angel" is a strange term to describe an elder.<sup>6</sup>

These "angels" were probably men such as Epaphroditus, Tychicus, and Onesimus, who went to Rome to visit Paul in prison, and carried messages from him to the churches (Phil. 4:18; Col. 4:7-9). Such representatives may have come to Patmos to visit John, and could have carried the Revelation scrolls back with them to their respective congregations.<sup>7</sup> The Greek word *angeloi* ("angels") frequently refers to human messengers (e.g., Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:24; 9:52; 2 Cor. 8:23; James 2:25).

The "lampstands" (representing the "churches") figuratively supported the *corporate witness* of the Christians in each church ("you are the light of the world"), as they lived in a dark world, shining a bright flame of testimony for all to see (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15).

God interpreted many of the symbols He used in Revelation elsewhere in Scripture. The correct interpretation of this book, therefore, depends on knowledge of the rest of God's previously given revelation. This is also true of all the other books of the Bible, but to a lesser degree. Harry Ironside

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 22; J. B. Smith, pp. 57-58; Ladd, p. 35; Beale, p. 217; Aune, p. 131; Vacendak, 2:1258.

<sup>2</sup>E.g. Morris, p. 57; Mounce, p. 82, 85.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Barclay, 1:68.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:560.

<sup>5</sup>William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Robertson, 6:295-96; Jamieson, et al., p. 1531; Lenski, pp. 62, 82; Tenney, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 116-19. See my comments on 2:1.

claimed that "... every figure, every symbol, found in this book is explained somewhere else in the Bible."<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES CHS. 2—3

"The part of Revelation on which there has been the greatest amount of agreement among expositors both with regard to the points of division and with regard to the interpretation is the section containing the letters to the seven churches of Asia."<sup>2</sup>

Before analyzing each of the seven letters that follow, we should note some of their features as a group. They are similar in that they are all brief, and each contains a unique description of the Lord Jesus, drawn from 1:12-20, that is appropriate to that church. Moreover, each contains a word of commendation (except the letter to Laodicea), and each carries some rebuke for the congregation (except those to Smyrna and Philadelphia). Furthermore, each letter exhorts its readers to specific action, and each one holds out a promise as an incentive for faithful obedience.

"These promises are often the most metaphorical and symbolic portions of the letters and thus in some cases present interpretative difficulties. Each is eschatological and is correlated with the last two chapters of the book (21—22). ... Furthermore, the promises are echoes of Genesis 2—3: what was lost originally by Adam in Eden is more than regained in Christ."<sup>3</sup>

"Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger; churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4, and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad."<sup>4</sup>

These were letters to historical churches in the first century, similar to so many of Paul's epistles, for example. A notable difference between Paul's letters and these, however, is that in his epistles, normally doctrine

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<sup>1</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Revelation*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Tenney, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, p. 432.

<sup>4</sup>Morris, p. 58.

precedes practical exhortation, but in Revelation, practical exhortation precedes teaching about future events.

"The letters are not structured in strict epistolary form; they are special messages addressed to the seven churches. The book as a whole is in the form of a letter."<sup>1</sup>

The messages of these seven letters are applicable both to today's individual local churches and the Christians who are in them.

"In the ancient church, *seven* churches addressed by John were widely regarded as a symbol of the universal church."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, there have been and are remarkable parallels between the conditions in these seven local churches and the conditions in the western church, as history has unfolded from the first century to the twenty-first. Their order has proven to be prophetic, although there is no statement in the text that God intended them to be prophetic. Nevertheless, the situations these churches faced represent characteristic situations the church throughout history has faced—at any given time—in various geographical locations. Each letter is applicable to the church today, to the extent that local churches find themselves in similar circumstances. Discussion of the three major views of the interpretation of chapters 2—3 will follow the exposition of these chapters.

"The pointed message of Christ to each of these churches is the capstone to New Testament Epistles dealing with the practical life of those committed to the Christian faith."<sup>3</sup>

"... they are more like prophetic oracles than formal epistles. The likeness extends to form and content."<sup>4</sup>

#### **A. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS 2:1-7**

Jesus Christ instructed John to write the letter to the church in Ephesus: to commend the Ephesian Christians for their labors and perseverance in

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," 927.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 72. Cf. Amos 1—2.



God's truth. He also wanted to exhort them to rekindle their former love for the Savior.

### 1. Destination and description of Christ 2:1

Ephesus was a leading seaport and the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Paul had evangelized it, and then used it as a base of operations for at least three years (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 1 Cor. 16:8). Timothy had labored there (1 Tim. 1:3), as had the Apostle John.<sup>1</sup> It was the largest city in Asia Minor, and was "the Vanity Fair of the Ancient World."<sup>2</sup> Ephesus was definitely the first recipient of four New Testament books (Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Revelation), and possibly four more (John's Gospel and his three epistles). Paul also wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus. It was a very important city in the early history of the church.

The "angel" who was the primary recipient of this letter was probably the human representative of the Ephesian church who carried this letter, along with the rest of Revelation, to the church at Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the first century, there were probably many house-churches that comprised the "body of Christ" in Ephesus (i.e., "the church in Ephesus"). The messenger would have made the letter known to the congregation when he read it publicly.<sup>4</sup> Another view is that the "angel" was the "pastor" of the church.<sup>5</sup>

"The ministers of the gospel are in his hand. He supports them, or else they would soon be falling stars; and all the good they do is done by his hand with them."<sup>6</sup>

John described Jesus Christ figuratively, as "the One" in authority over the churches' leaders ("who holds the seven stars"), and One who knew their situations ("who walks among the ... lampstands"). He was walking tirelessly among them and was watching over them (cf. 1:13, 16).

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<sup>1</sup>See my comments on 1:9.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:71.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup>For other views of the identity of this "angel," see my comments on 1:20 above.

<sup>5</sup>Robert P. Lightner, *Angels, Satan, and Demons*, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup>Henry, p. 1971.

"When *kratein*, [the Greek word translated "holds"] does take a direct accusative after it [as it does here], it means that the whole object is gripped and grasped within the hand. ... And that means that Christ clasps the whole of the seven stars in His hand; and that means that Christ clasps the *whole of the Church* [as opposed to just a few churches] in His hand."

"Ephesus, as in practical importance the leading city of the Province Asia, might be said in a sense to be the centre, to be in the midst of the Seven Churches; and the Divine figure that addresses her appropriately holds in His hand the Seven Stars, which 'are the Seven Churches'."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Commendation 2:2-3 (cf. v. 6)

The Greek word *oida*, translated "know" (v. 2), reflects full and exact knowledge retained from absolute clearness of vision, and is always the word used to describe Christ's knowledge in Revelation.<sup>2</sup> The other Greek word for knowledge, *ginosko*, speaks of "progress of knowledge" in Revelation.

This church in Ephesus had remained faithful to Jesus Christ for over 40 years. He approved of the good works ("deeds") of these believers—their "toil" (*kopos*, labor to the point of exhaustion) in His service, patient endurance ("perseverance") of circumstances (Gr. *hypomone*) under affliction, and discipline of ("cannot tolerate ... put to the test") "evil men" and "false" teachers (cf. Acts 20:28-30). The false teachers probably claimed to be *functional* "apostles" ("emissaries"; cf. 2 Cor. 11:13), rather than official apostles (Acts 1:15-26).

"The false teachers claimed to be *apostoloi* [apostles] in the wider sense, itinerant teachers with a mission which placed them on a higher level than the local elders (I Cor. Xii. 28, Eph. iv. 11 ...)"<sup>3</sup>

"As to whether the authoritative function of apostles continued after the first century, the apostolic fathers are

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<sup>1</sup>Ramsay, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Swete., p. 24

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

instructive. In no case do the many references to apostles in the writings of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas relate to any recognized apostles other than those associated with the NT. The Fathers apparently understood the special apostolic function to have ceased with the end of the apostolic era."<sup>1</sup>

Particularly commendable was the faithful "perseverance" of this church (v. 3).

### 3. Rebuke 2:4

The Ephesians, however, were serving Jesus Christ and maintaining orthodoxy as a habit, rather than out of fervent "love" for their Savior (cf. Eph. 1:15-16). Many commentators, however, took the "first love" as a reference to the Ephesians' love *for one another* (cf. Acts 20:35; Eph. 1:15).<sup>2</sup> Yet the emphasis in all these letters on the congregations' allegiance to Jesus Christ, seems to favor the view that love *for Him* is in view here. The "first" love may be either first in time or first in importance, though the latter alternative seems more likely to me. Genuine believers are being addressed.<sup>3</sup> They did what was correct, but for the wrong reason. Service and orthodoxy are important, but Jesus Christ wants our love, too.

"It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love; it may well be that the eagerness to root out all mistaken men had ended in a sour and rigid orthodoxy. It may be that orthodoxy had been achieved, but at the price of fellowship."<sup>4</sup>

"It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully."<sup>5</sup>

Ramsay wrote that of all the seven cities mentioned, Ephesus had experienced the most change during its history.<sup>6</sup> Leaving the first love reflects that characteristic.

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 434.

<sup>2</sup>See John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, pp. 86-87.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:77.

<sup>5</sup>Wiersbe, 2:572.

<sup>6</sup>Ramsay, pp. 210, 244.

It is interesting that Paul mentioned love for the Lord in his benediction in his letter to the Ephesians: "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible" (Eph. 6:24). Unfortunately, the love of the Ephesians had become corrupted since Paul wrote that letter. They had "left" (quit, forsaken) their first love.

#### 4. Exhortation 2:5-6

The corrective for a cold heart that the Lord prescribed was a three-step process: They needed to: (1) "remember" how they used to feel about Him (first love), (2) "repent" (change their attitude), and (3) *return* to the love that formerly motivated them ("do the deeds you did at first"). A generation earlier, Paul commended this church for its love (Eph. 1:15-16), though he also commanded the Ephesians to grow in love (Eph. 4:2, 15-16). The "deeds" they used to do ("did at first") probably refer to the *activities* that fanned the flame of their love (e.g., the Lord's Supper perhaps), as well as their *service* for Him (v. 2). To rekindle "first love" there needs to be a return to "first works," because there is an intimate relationship between love and good works (1 John 5:2).

"Memory can be a powerful force in effecting a return to a more satisfying relationship (cf. the prodigal son in Lk 15:17-18)."<sup>1</sup>

Eventually the Ephesian church passed out of existence, but that did not occur until the eleventh century.<sup>2</sup> The recipients of this letter apparently responded positively to this exhortation. The site of the ancient city has been virtually without inhabitants since the fourteenth century. The present city of Ephesus is farther west.

"The church that loses its love will soon lose its light, no matter how doctrinally sound it may be."<sup>3</sup>

We know little of the "Nicolaitans," who were evidently followers of someone named "Nicolas," perhaps the proselyte from Antioch who was one of "the Seven" (cf. Acts 6:5). Irenaeus, who lived in the late second century, wrote that they were without restraint in their indulgence of the

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:572.

flesh, and practiced fornication and the eating of foods sacrificed to idols.<sup>1</sup> The word "Nicolaitans" is a transliteration of two Greek words that mean "to conquer" and "people." Consequently, Nicolaitanism has come down through history as typifying any system that seeks to dominate rather than serve people.

"The teaching of the Nicolaitans was an exaggeration of the doctrine of Christian liberty which attempted an ethical compromise with heathenism."<sup>2</sup>

"Though they [the Ephesians] had left their first love, they had not left their former hatred for evil."<sup>3</sup>

### 5. Promise 2:7

An invitation preceded the promise, as in all the letters to follow (cf. 1:3). Jesus was the only person to issue this invitation in Scripture. The Gospels also record Him doing so seven times (Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35). This invitation always occurs where Jesus appealed to His hearers to make a significant change. Christ may be speaking to the churches through His Spirit, or the identity of the Spirit with Christ may be implied.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the implied promise of the whole church's continuance if obedient (v. 5), Jesus Christ gave a promise to the individuals in the church. "Him who overcomes" probably refers to all Christians (cf. vv. 2-3, 10c, 13, 19, 25; 3:3, 8, 10; 1 John 5:4-5).<sup>5</sup> The promises given to overcomers, in all seven letters and in 21:7, bear this interpretation out. Some

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:352. See also Moffatt, 5:351.

<sup>2</sup>Tenney, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup>L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:306; W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John*, pp. 173-83; R. E. Manahan, "'Overcomes the World'—1 John 5:4" (M.Div. Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1970), pp. 38-39; Ironside, p. 210; William Newell, pp. 42, 52, 339; James E. Rosscup, "The Overcomer of the Apocalypse," *Grace Theological Journal* 3:2 (Fall 1982:261-86; Ryrie, *Revelation*, pp. 22-23; J. B. Smith, p. 65; Stott, pp. 97-98, 118-25; Lehman Strauss, *The Book of the Revelation*, pp. 108; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 59, 98-99; Ladd, pp. 41, 69; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 151-53; and Beale, pp. 234, 269-72.

interpreters, who hold this view and wish to support it, appeal to 1 John 2:13; 4:4; and 5:4-5, where John referred to his readers as overcomers.

However, in 1 John 2:13 and 4:4, John said *his readers* had overcome the world, not that *all* Christians are overcomers. In 1 John 5:4-5 he wrote that only believers in Christ *can* overcome the world, not that every believer in Christ *does* overcome the world. Therefore, I believe that these verses in 1 John, while in harmony with the ones cited in Revelation, are not sufficient proof that all believers are overcomers. Nevertheless, all believers *are* overcomers in the sense that they have overcome the world by their saving faith in Christ.

Some students of Revelation have concluded that the overcomers are not all Christians but only *faithful* Christians.<sup>1</sup> The Lord held out a reminder of what would inevitably be the Ephesians' reward in the future, in order to motivate them to follow Him faithfully in the present. Similarly, other New Testament writers wrote of our blessings as believers in Christ in order to motivate us to live in harmony with our calling.

A third view is that overcomers are faithful Christians, and the unfaithful will lose their salvation. Promises that God will complete the salvation that He began in every one of His elect make this option unlikely (e.g., Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 1:6; et al.).

"... the promises to the conquerors are fundamentally assurances to the faithful of the benefits of Christ's redemption, expressed in the language of apocalyptic. In the nature of the case the promises afford inspiration for faith and

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Donald G. Barnhouse, *Messages to the Seven Churches*, pp. 38, 43-44, 47, 56-57, 74-75, 84, 94-95; J. Sidlow Baxter, *Awake My Heart*, p. 323; R. R. Benedict, "The Use of *Nikao* in the Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation" (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1966), p. 13; Harlan D. Betz, "The Nature of Rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ" (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1974), pp. 36-45; Zane C. Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, pp. 107-111; Ralph D. Richardson, "The Johannine Doctrine of Victory" (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1955), pp.20-29; William R. Ross Jr., "An Analysis of the Rewards and Judgments in Revelation 2 and 3" (Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 20; Mounce, pp. 90, 106, 256; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, pp. 37, 470, 474; Arlen L. Chitwood, *Judgment Seat of Christ*, p. 48; and J. William Fuller, "'I Will Not Erase His Name from the Book of Life' (Revelation 3:5)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983):299; *The Nelson ...*, p. 2167; Vacendak, 2:1260.

fortitude in all who may be called to lay down their lives for Christ, and they are intended to do so."<sup>1</sup>

John prefaced the promise with a special exhortation to give attention ("he who has an ear, let him hear").

"These promises pertain to Christians alone, and their realization awaits the future Messianic Era. The time when Christians will enter into these promises *must* follow the time set forth in chapter one—Christ appearing as Judge in the midst of the seven Churches. The Church *must* first be brought into judgment, and *then* overcoming Christians will realize that which has been promised."<sup>2</sup>

The promise itself is that those who "remember," "repent," and "repeat (do) the first works" (v. 5) will partake of "the tree of life." There is a connection between the "tree of life" and man's *rule* over the earth. Adam in his *unfallen* state had access to this "tree," but when he fell, God kept him from it (Gen. 1:26-28; 3:22). In the future, believers will have access to it again (cf. 22:14). This promise suggests that overcomers will experience the fellowship with God that Adam and Eve enjoyed before the Fall.

"A number of other Jewish texts use the eating of the fruit of the tree of life as a metaphor for salvation (*1 Enoch* 25:5; *3 Enoch* 23:18; *T. Levi* 18:11; *Apoc. Mos.* 28:4; *Apoc. Elijah* 5:6), and this metaphor continues to be used by Christian authors (*T. Jacob* 7:24)... The tree of life is not simply a symbol for eternal life alone but also represents the *cosmic center of reality* where eternal life is present and available, and where God dwells...

"One tradition often used in apocalyptic literature originated in Gen 2:9; 3:23-24 and involved *eschatological access to the tree of life in the heavenly paradise*, clearly a metaphor for the enjoyment of eternal life."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Chitwood, p. 45. Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, p. 152.

"Paradise" is a Persian loan word meaning "a walling around," hence resembling a kind of walled park or garden (cf. Gen. 2:8-10 in LXX; Rev. 22:1-4, 14).

"To eat of the Tree is to enjoy all that the life of the world to come has in store for redeemed humanity."<sup>1</sup>

The "tree of life" appears four times in the Book of Proverbs, and its use there helps us understand its presence in Genesis and Revelation. Solomon referred to "wisdom" (Prov. 3:18), "righteousness" (Prov. 11:30), "satisfied hope" (Prov. 13:12), and "controlled speech" (Prov. 15:4) as trees of life. These are all the fruits that *would have* provided Adam, and *will* provide the overcomers, with what they will need to flourish in the millennial kingdom and beyond. Both the "tree of life" in Eden, and the "tree of life" in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19), are presented as literal trees.<sup>2</sup>

In church history, conditions described in this letter characterized the apostolic age especially.

## **B. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA 2:8-11**

John penned this letter to commend its recipients for their endurance of persecution and poverty for the sake of Jesus Christ. He also did so to exhort them to be fearless and faithful "even to death." Whereas the Ephesian church needed to return to past conditions, the church in Smyrna needed to persevere in what was characteristic of it in the present.

### **1. Destination and description of Christ 2:8**

Smyrna was another seaport on the Aegean Sea; it was about 40 miles north of Ephesus. Late in the first century it was a large, wealthy city with a population of about 100,000. It still thrives today—as "Izmir"—with a population of about 200,000.

Jesus Christ described Himself to this church as the eternal One ("the first and the last") who had died and then experienced resurrection. "Smyrna"

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>See Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Tree of Life in Revelation 2:7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:618 (April-June 1998):211-26.



means "bitter." The Greek word translates the Hebrew *mor*, "myrrh," a fragrant perfume used in embalming dead bodies (cf. Matt. 2:11; John 19:39). It becomes very fragrant when someone crushes it. These believers would have found encouragement, that even though the prospect of death threatened them, resurrection and eternal life with Christ were certain. Smyrna had *died* as a city on several occasions, because of invasions and earthquakes, but each time it had risen again to new life because the residents kept rebuilding it. In Smyrna, many residents worshipped a goddess named "Cybele," whom they regarded as the personification of the yearly rejuvenation of nature. Her devotees claimed that she arose from the dead every spring.

## 2. Commendation 2:9

Jesus Christ knew the afflictions ("tribulation," lit. "pressures") these Christians were experiencing as a result of their testimony for Him, including abject "poverty" (Gr. *ptocheia*). Evidently their persecutors were cutting off some of their incomes.<sup>1</sup>

"The Smyrnaean Church had had a more trying and difficult career than any other of the Asian Churches. It had been exposed to constant persecution."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of their physical poverty, the Christians in Smyrna were "rich," spiritually. Evidently some of the persecutors were ("say they are") "Jews," who both slandered the Christians (cf. Acts 18:12-17) and cursed Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 26:11). They apparently claimed to be committed to God, but were not *true* (believing) Israelites. They came from Satan's camp ("the synagogue of Satan"; cf. Acts 14:19; 17:5-8, 13). The name "Satan" (Gr. *satanas*) means "Adversary."

"At the martyrdom of Polycarp at Smyrna in 168, these Jews eagerly assisted by gathering *on the Sabbath* wood and fagots for the fire in which he was burned."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Ramsay, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup>Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 23. See also Gaebelien, 4:2:215. See Barclay, 1:93-95, for the story of Polycarp's martyrdom.

Another less probable view, I think, is that these opponents were not Jews but antagonistic, unbelieving Gentiles.

"... the imperial cult permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus Christ had no rebuke for the saints of Smyrna. Evidently, in their trials, they had remained pure in belief and behavior. In the first century, the enemies of Christians leveled six slanderous accusations against them: cannibalism, lust/immorality, breaking up homes, atheism, political disloyalty, and being incendiaries (because they taught that the world would burn up).<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Exhortation 2:10a**

These persecuted Christians did not need to "fear" their adversaries or death, since they would live forever with Jesus Christ.

"It is this triumph over death that constitutes the guiding thought of the whole letter, just as change was the guiding thought of the Ephesian letter."<sup>3</sup>

"Behold" signals an oracular declaration (cf. 2:22; 3:8, 9, 20).<sup>4</sup> "The devil" (Gr. *diabolos*, "Slanderer" or "Accuser") would incite their foes to *imprison* some of them shortly, having received permission from God to do so (cf. Job 1). This would be a trial (Gr. *peirasthete*) that Satan would use ("you will be tested") to try to entice them to depart from the Lord.

"Under the Roman legal system imprisonment was usually not a punishment in itself; rather it was used either as a means of coercion to compel obedience to an order issued by a magistrate or else as a place to temporarily restrain the prisoner before execution . ... Here it appears that

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 240. See also Moffatt, 5:307-16, for more on the imperial cult.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:98.

<sup>3</sup>Ramsay, pp. 274-75.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 167.

imprisonment, viewed as a period of testing, is primarily for the purpose of coercion."<sup>1</sup>

The "ten days" of trouble may refer to a period of relatively brief duration, specifically the "days" of persecution under 10 Roman emperors (cf. Gen. 24:55; Num. 11:19, 14:22; 1 Sam. 1:8; Neh. 5:18; Job 19:3; Jer. 42:7; Dan. 1:12; Acts 25:6). The emperors whom advocates of this view identify are usually Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Septimus Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian.<sup>2</sup> However, Ladd claimed that these were not empire-wide persecutions.<sup>3</sup>

Other interpreters view the "ten days" as symbolic. Some interpret these days as undefined short periods of trial.<sup>4</sup> Others see them as an undefined period of years.<sup>5</sup> Still others take them as some other period of time (e.g., complete tribulation).<sup>6</sup> Of these, some view the days as a longer period of time.<sup>7</sup> Others interpret them as a short, limited time.<sup>8</sup> Still others as simply a limited period of time.<sup>9</sup> However, John probably intended us to interpret this period as 10 literal 24-hour days, that lay in the near future of the original recipients of this letter.<sup>10</sup> There is nothing in this text that provides a clue that we should take this number in a figurative sense.

#### 4. Promise 2:10b-11

The citizens of Smyrna had a reputation for being "faithful" to the emperor because of their previous acts of fidelity to him.<sup>11</sup>

"The local intensity of feeling upon the Imperial cultus may be gathered from the fact that in 23 A.D. Smyrna had secured

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 169; and J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:906.

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, pp. 8-10.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 243; Aune, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup>William Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," in *The Holy Bible*, 4:481, 520, 532.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup>Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb*, p. 113; Mounce, p. 94.

<sup>8</sup>Swete, p. 32; Charles, 1:58; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 28; Aune, p. 166; Barclay, 1:96; Ladd, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 935.

<sup>10</sup>See Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup>See Barclay, 1:91; Ramsay, pp. 275, 276-77.

from Tiberius and the senate, after keen competition, the coveted distinction of possessing the second temple decreed by the province to the Imperial cultus."<sup>1</sup>

The "crown of life" is probably the *fullness* of eternal life as a *reward* (cf. 1 Cor. 9:25; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; Heb. 2:9; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 4:4). This appears to be a *victor's* crown (Gr. *stephanos*) given for enduring the trials and tests of life—even to the point of "death" without denying Christ ("be faithful until death"). It is not the gift of eternal life itself, but the fullness of that life (cf. John 10:10, et al.). The person who endures these trials will receive the "crown of life" after Jesus Christ has approved him or her. This approval will take place when the Lord evaluates that believer's works at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:13). He will award the crown at this judgment (1 Cor. 3:14).<sup>2</sup>

"In this life it may be that the Christian's loyalty will bring him also the crown of thorns, but in the life to come it will surely bring him the crown of glory."<sup>3</sup>

BELIEVERS' CROWNS		
Title	Reason	Reference
An imperishable crown	For leading a disciplined life	1 Cor. 9:25
A crown of rejoicing	For evangelism and discipleship	1 Thess. 2:19
A crown of righteousness	For living the Lord's appearing	2 Tim. 4:8
A crown of life	For enduring trials	James 1:12; Rev. 2:10
A crown of glory	For shepherding God's flock faithfully	1 Pet. 5:4

<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:354.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 167. See Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, pp. 128-29, 140-51.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:103.

The Greeks called Smyrna "the crown of Asia Minor" because of its beauty as a city. Moreover, every year a few city administrators, rulers, and priests each received a "crown of leaves" for his faithfulness to his duties.

"Smyrna knew all about crowns (verse 10), for that was the very name by which men called the buildings on her hill."<sup>1</sup>

"... it is noteworthy that Smyrna was famous for its games ... in which the prize was a garland."<sup>2</sup>

Christians will not ever (a double negative in Greek: "not in any way") suffer injury or harm (Gr. *adikethe*) by the "second death." The second death is eternal separation from God. It follows the first death, which is separation of the soul from the body.

"It is not annihilation, but conscious unending punishment."<sup>3</sup>

"By litotes this [promise] intimates a superlative triumph over the second death. But since the second death is actual banishment from the presence and life of God (Rev. 20:14-15), the litotes also intimates a splendid experience of the divine life and presence."<sup>4</sup>

"Litotes" is a figure of speech in which the writer expresses an affirmative idea through the negation of its opposite. Examples include, "I am not amused" (meaning "I am very annoyed"), "I won't forget that" (meaning "I'll remember it"), and "That test was no snap!" (meaning "That was a tough test!"). For some biblical examples, see Acts 12:18; 15:2; 17:4, 12; 19:24; and 27:20.

The point of the Lord's promise is that those who remain faithful will experience eternal life *to the utmost* in the life to come. The first death might hurt them briefly, but the second death would not hurt them at all.<sup>5</sup>

Historically the church experienced intense persecution during the post-apostolic era, until Constantine elevated Christianity to the official religion

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 1:90.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 174. Cf. Robertson, 6:303.

<sup>4</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup>See idem, "No Small Problem," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 6:3 (March 1991):4.

of the Roman Empire. As mentioned before, some interpreters have correlated the 10 days of persecution (v. 10) with 10 periods of persecution, instigated by 10 Roman emperors between A.D. 54 (Nero) and A.D. 284 (Diocletian).<sup>1</sup>

### C. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM 2:12-17

The purpose of this letter was to encourage the Christians in Pergamum for their past and present faithfulness to Christ, and to urge them to reject the false teaching in their midst.

#### 1. Destination and description of Christ 2:12

Pergamum (modern Bergama) lay about 55 miles north of Smyrna, inland a few miles from the Aegean coast. The meaning of the name "Pergamum" is "citadel." The town was noteworthy for three reasons: First, it was a center for many pagan religious cults, and emperor worship was more intense there than in any other surrounding city.<sup>2</sup> Second, it boasted a university with a large library, second only to the one in Alexandria. Third, it was the leader and center of the production of parchment, which derived its name from the city.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ described Himself as "the One" who judges with His Word ("the sharp two-edged sword"; cf. 1:16; 19:15, 21). God's Word both separates believers from the world, and sinners from God. This is perhaps its double-edged quality. Or perhaps *life* and *death* are in view. Roman officials who had the right to carry this sword (Gr. *hromphaia*, cf. 1:16; 2:16) had the power of life and death in cases of capital offenses.

"It is interesting that Pergamum was a city to which Rome had given the rare power of capital punishment (*ius gladii*), which was symbolized by the sword. The Christians in Pergamum were thus reminded that though they lived under the rule of an almost unlimited *imperium*, they were citizens of another

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., W. A. Spurgeon, *The Conquering Christ*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:110. See also idem, 1:19-24, and 2:111-15, for more about worship of the Roman emperor.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:303.

kingdom—that of him who needs no other sword than that of his mouth ..."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Commendation 2:13

The Pergamum Christians had held firmly to their commitment to Jesus Christ and their witness for Him, even though they lived in one of Satan's strongholds.

"Antipas is said to have been a dentist and a physician, but the Aesculapiades suspected that he was propagating Christianity secretly and they accused him of disloyalty to Caesar. He was condemned to death and was shut up in a brazen (or copper) bull, which was then heated until it was red-hot."<sup>2</sup>

"Satan's throne" may be an allusion to one or more of the pagan temples in the city, most likely the Aesculapium.<sup>3</sup> The Aesculapium was a complex of buildings devoted to the god of healing. This made Pergamum "the Lourdes of the Province of Asia."<sup>4</sup> Some have thought that this throne was the *altar of Zeus*, which was very prominent in the town.<sup>5</sup> Another possibility is that Satan's throne refers to *emperor worship*, which was stronger in Pergamum than elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Still another view is that this description pictures Pergamum as the most pagan of the seven cities: Satan not only controlled it by it was the site of his "throne."<sup>7</sup>

"The city was a leader in this form of worship, which was relatively new to the province of Asia ..."<sup>8</sup>

"... in 29 A.D. a temple had been erected to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma, and a special priesthood had

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 440. Cf. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick A. Tatford, *The Patmos Letters*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>For information about the temples in John's seven cities of Asia, see R. Larry Overstreet, "The Temple of God in the Book of Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:664 (October-December 2009):446-53.

<sup>4</sup>Charles, 1:60.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 281, footnote 3.

<sup>6</sup>Beale, p. 246; Barclay, 1:110-11.

<sup>7</sup>Lenski, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 184. Cf. Mounce, p. 96; and Ladd, p. 46.

been formed . ... Least of all at this cathedral centre of the Imperial cultus could dissent be tolerated."<sup>1</sup>

"... it appears that the 'throne of Satan' should be identified not with a specific architectural feature of Roman Pergamon (in part because so little is actually known about first-century Pergamon) but rather with the *Roman opposition* to early Christianity, which the author of Rev 2—3 perceived as particularly malevolent in that city."<sup>2</sup>

Swete referred it to the rampant *paganism* of Pergamum that included emperor worship.<sup>3</sup>

"The distinguishing characteristic of this letter is the oft-recurring reference to the dignity of Pergamum as the seat of Roman official authority; and we have to follow out this reference in one detail after another."<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Rebuke 2:14-15

Balaam told Balak that he could overcome the Israelites if he would involve them in Moabite religious feasts that included sacred prostitution (Num. 25). This would render them unfaithful to God and consequently subject to His discipline. The pagans in Pergamum, likewise, were evidently encouraging the Christians to join in their pagan feasts, and the sexual immorality that accompanied those feasts. By thus participating, some in the church had given tacit approval to Balaam's teaching. The "Nicolaitans" evidently regarded these sins as acceptable, under the pretense of Christian liberty (cf. v. 6). Interestingly "Balaam" in Hebrew can mean "swallow the people," so the ideological connection between the Nicolaitans ("conquer the people") and Balaam is clear.<sup>5</sup>

"The best conclusion is that there were two different but similar groups in this church, both of which had disobeyed the

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:355, 356.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, pp. 183-84.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, pp. 34-35.

<sup>4</sup>Ramsay, p. 292.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Johnson, p. 441.



decision of the Jerusalem council in regard to idolatrous practices and fornication (cf. Acts 15:20, 29)."<sup>1</sup>

"The main facet of the doctrine of Balaam which is being promulgated in Churches today is the teaching that [equal] future blessings and rewards have been set aside for every Christian solely on the basis of Christ's finished work on Calvary and the Christian's positional standing 'in Christ.' Thus, all Christians—regardless of their conduct during the present time—will receive crowns and positions of power and authority with Christ in the [millennial] kingdom. However, the teaching throughout the Word of God is to the contrary. The Israelites did not sin with immunity, and neither can Christians. Sin in the camp of Israel resulted in the Israelites being overthrown in the wilderness, short of the goal of their calling. And it will be no different for Christians."<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. Exhortation 2:16**

If the erring believers would not judge themselves and "repent," they could anticipate God's judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 11:31).

"Unwillingness to repent shows that a person is not a faithful believer."<sup>3</sup>

They would die by "the sword" proceeding from Christ's "mouth." Balaam had died, ironically, by the Israelites' sword (Num. 31:8). This judgment would be by the unyielding standard of God's revealed Word—that clearly condemns such behavior. Having taken sides with the enemy, they could expect God to oppose them in His "war" against evil.

"The fault of Pergamum is the opposite of Ephesus where the heretics were rooted out but love was missing (2:2, 4)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 193. Cf. Robertson, 6:306.

<sup>2</sup>Chitwood, p. 70. Cf. Charles H. Savelle, "Canonical and Extracanonial Portraits of Balaam," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:664 (October-December 2009):387-404.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 99.

### 5. Promise 2:17

The "hidden manna" seems to be a reference to the miraculous manna from heaven, that sustained the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness, of which a sample keepsake lay "hidden" in the holy of holies. The Christians in Pergamum did not need the food of pagan festivals, since they already had much better food. Christians feed spiritually on Jesus Christ, the "Bread of Life" (John 6:48-51), who is the *real* Manna, *hidden* from sight now.<sup>1</sup>

The "white stone" seems to allude to the *tesseron*.<sup>2</sup>

A *tesseron* was, "... given to those who were invited to partake, within the precincts of the temple [at Pergamum], of the sacred feast, which naturally consisted only of meats offered to the idol. That stone bore the secret name of the deity represented by the idol and the name was known only to the recipient."<sup>3</sup>

"... the victor's reward is the enjoyment of mature and intimate life with his God . . ."<sup>4</sup>

A *white stone* represented a vote of acquittal or a favorable vote.<sup>5</sup> Victors in contests or battles also received a white stone.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps God will elevate the overcomer to the position of *ruler* over the earth, and will give him or her a new name, as He did for Joseph (cf. Gen. 41:39-45), Abram (Gen. 17:5), and Jacob (Gen. 32:28). The "name" on that stone is "new" (Gr. *kainon*) in the sense of being *different*, not new in contrast to what is old. However, the "name" is probably that of "Christ" (cf. Phil. 2:9).<sup>7</sup> Another view is that the name is that of its possessor, perhaps "son of God."<sup>8</sup> This name is "unknown" to others ("which no one knows but he who receives it"), in the sense that others who are not overcomers do not possess it.

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<sup>1</sup>See Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Hidden Manna and the White Stone in Revelation 2:17," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:619 (July-September 1998):348-49.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup>Tatford, p. 82. Cf. Barclay, 1:120-21.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:359.

<sup>5</sup>Beale, p. 252; Henry, p. 1972.

<sup>6</sup>Chitwood, p. 73.

<sup>7</sup>Aune, pp. 190-91. See my comments on "name" as "reputation" at 3:5.

<sup>8</sup>Alford, 4:572.

The historical parallel to the church in Pergamum is the period following Constantine's legalization of Christianity in A.D. 313, that lasted for about 300 years. When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, paganism overwhelmed it. It became hard to distinguish *true* Christians, because people claiming to be Christians were everywhere. Many of them were "practicing pagans," who indulged in immoral festivals and all kinds of behavior inconsistent with the teachings of Christianity. Many writers have noted that "Pergamum" comes from the Greek word, *gamos*, that means "marriage." This letter pictures a church "married" *to the world* rather than to Christ.

#### D. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA 2:18-29

Jesus Christ sent this letter to *commend* some in this church for their service, orthodoxy, and fidelity; and to *warn* others in it to turn from false teaching and sinful practices.

##### 1. Destination and description of Christ 2:18

Thyatira was the smallest and least significant of the seven cities, but it was the one that received the longest letter.

"According to legend, Thyatira was first established as a shrine to the sun god Tyrinnus and named Pelopia [cf. v. 28]."<sup>1</sup>

This town stood about 45 miles to the southeast of Pergamum. It was famous for its textiles, but especially for its production of *purple dye* (cf. Acts 16:14), and its trade guilds. According to extant records, there were more trade guilds in Thyatira than in any other Asian city.<sup>2</sup> There were trade guilds for clothiers, bakers, tanners, potters, linen workers, wool merchants, slave traders, shoemakers, dyers, and copper smiths.<sup>3</sup> Thus it was a business center.

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>Ramsay, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup>D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ*, 1:48; 2:812, n. 78; Aune, p. 201.

*Flame-like "eyes"* suggest discerning and severe judgment (cf. 1:14; Dan. 10:6). "Burnished (highly reflective) bronze" feet, in this context, picture a warrior with protected feet (cf. 1:15; Dan. 10:6).

"The flaming eyes must stand for two things. They must stand for the blazing anger against sin in the eyes of the Risen Christ; and they must stand for the awful penetration of that gaze which strips the disguises away and sees into a man's inmost heart. The brazen feet must stand for the inflexible, immovable strength and power of the Risen Christ. A message which begins like that will certainly be no soothing tranquilliser [*sic*]."<sup>1</sup>

"Son of God" emphasizes Jesus Christ's deity and His right to judge. This is the only use of this title in Revelation, though it is practically equivalent to "Messiah" (cf. Ps. 2:12; Luke 4:41; John 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 20:31). The main local god in Thyatira was "Tyrimnas" who, his worshippers said, was a "son of the gods." They pictured him on the city coins: as a warrior riding a horse, and wielding a double-edged battle ax in judgment.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Commendation 2:19

In many particulars, some in this church were praiseworthy. They were strong in: good "deeds," "love" for others (not mentioned in the other letters), trust ("faith") in God, service of their Savior, and patient endurance ("perseverance") in trials. Moreover, they had become even more zealous recently ("your deeds of late are greater than at first"). "Love" shows itself in "service," and "faith" demonstrates itself in "perseverance" through persecution.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:128.

<sup>2</sup>See Ramsey, p. 318, for a facsimile of one of the coins.

<sup>3</sup>J. P. Lange, "The Revelation of John," in *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, p. 121.

### 3. Rebuke 2:20-23

"The only notable thing about Thyatira from the religious point of view is that it possessed a fortune-telling shrine, presided over by a female oracle called the Sambathe."<sup>1</sup>

Evidently a "woman," claiming to be "a prophetess" (cf. Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5), had been influencing some in this church ("My [God's] bond-servants") to join the local trade guilds, without which a tradesman could not work in Thyatira. This would involve participation in the guild feasts, that included immoral acts and the worship of idols.<sup>2</sup> The woman's name may or may not have been "Jezebel." I think it was not.<sup>3</sup> Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans all sought to lead God's people into idolatry and sexual immorality. These were practices that the apostles at the Jerusalem Council specifically prohibited (cf. Acts 15:29). This woman's behavior reflected that of wicked Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 18—21; 2 Kings 9), who led King Ahab and all Israel into immorality and idolatry by advocating Baal worship (cf. v. 14).

"With her Nicolaitan orientation the prophetess could suggest that since 'an idol has no real existence' (1 Cor 8:4), believers need not undergo the privation which would follow from unwillingness to go along with the simple requirements of the trade guild."<sup>4</sup>

"The prophetess furnishes just one more example of the great influence exerted by women in the primitive Church."<sup>5</sup>

God had not brought judgment on her previously, in order that she might "repent" (2 Pet. 3:9). Since she refused to change her ways ("she does not want to repent"), God would judge her—and her followers—"unless they [repented] of her deeds." She might experience a fatal illness ("bed of sickness"; cf. 2 Kings 1:4; 1 Cor. 11:29-30), and her followers might experience "great tribulation." This could be a reference to the seven-year Tribulation.<sup>6</sup> But it seems more likely to refer to severe divine discipline

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:126.

<sup>2</sup>See Beasley-Murray, pp. 89-90.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Newell, p. 54; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 214; and Aune, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>Ramsey, p. 337.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 219-21.

*similar* to what is coming during the Tribulation. Since she advocated lying on beds of adultery, God would cast her on a different kind of bed: a bed of sickness (v. 22). *Death* by "pestilence" (plague; epidemic); cf. 6:8; Ezek. 33:27) would also be the punishment of "her [*spiritual*] children" (v. 23), another way of describing her followers (v. 22). The other churches would recognize her punishment as coming from God, who knows all people intimately (cf. Ps. 7:9; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 11:20; 17:10; 20:12).

The allusion to Jeremiah 17:10 is significant, because, in Jeremiah, it is Yahweh who searches the hearts and minds, while here it is Christ who does so (cf. Matt. 9:4; John 2:25; 4:29, 39; 16:30; 18:4; 21:17). Prophets had insight into the hearts and minds of people—as this prophetess Jezebel probably claimed to have—but it was really the Lord who had this ability.

"The problem in Thyatira was an unhealthy tolerance. ... Here is the opposite situation from that in Ephesus."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the danger to this church was not external but internal.

#### **4. Exhortation 2:24-25**

Apparently this woman claimed that her "teaching" (that Christians can indulge the flesh with impunity) was *deeper* than the apostles' teaching; but it was, of course, the depths of Satanic doctrine ("the deep things of Satan").

"Those who knew the deep things of Satan were those who had plumbed evil to its depths deliberately in order to experience it [cf. 1 Cor. 2:10; Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:18]. This has got some kind of remote parallel in the old idea that it is necessary for a young man to sow his wild oats. Jezebel may well have been teaching that it was a duty to sin."<sup>2</sup>

*Gnosticism*, which taught that only its members could understand deep spiritual truth, was growing in popularity in this region at this time. It may have been part of "Jezebel's" teaching. Jesus Christ exhorted the faithful

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:137.

in the church to continue with ("hold fast") their present good conduct (v. 19). He would soon purge the wicked ones from their midst.

"He cast (*ballo*) Jezebel and her children into conditions of unparalleled suffering (vv. 22-23), but He does not cast (*ou ballo*) upon the faithful anything worse than to keep doing what they already are doing [cf. Acts 15:28]."<sup>1</sup>

This is the first mention in Revelation of the Lord's coming for the church, the Rapture (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

### 5. Promise 2:26-29

The prize for faithfulness was the privilege of reigning with Christ in His earthly kingdom (cf. 1:6; 12:5; 19:15; Ps. 2:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 20:4-6). The idea that the people of little Thyatira, of all the seven cities, would one day rule the nations would have been almost unbelievable to the original readers.

"Rome was the only power on earth that exercised authority over the nations, and ruled them with a rod of iron, and smashed them like potsherds ..."<sup>2</sup>

As with the promises in the other letters, this one is probably for all believers, and would have encouraged them to "overcome" the temptations that this "Jezebel" held out. The Lord intended the prospect of this promised blessing: to motivate the unfaithful in the church to return to God's will for them, and to encourage the faithful to persevere. Believers who are faithful ("he who overcomes") will receive "authority" in heaven from Jesus Christ, and will "rule" (lit. "shepherd") others during the Millennium (Luke 19:11-27; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 3:21). Some believers evidently will receive greater authority for being faithful, than others who have not been as faithful (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). While not all Christians will remain faithful to the Lord (2 Tim. 2:12), Christ evidently described believers as "faithful" (v. 19) in order to motivate them to remain faithful.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>Ramsey, p. 331.

"This is the nearest we have in the seven letters to a definition of the conqueror. He *holds fast* the traditions of faith and life delivered to the Church till the coming of Christ (v. 25), and he *keeps* Christ's works till the end (v. 26)—whether that 'end' be the Lord's parousia or his own death."<sup>1</sup>

John identified the "morning star" (v. 28) elsewhere as Jesus Christ Himself (22:16). The morning star (usually the planet Venus) appears in the night sky, just before the dawning of a new day. From Babylonian to Roman times, the ancients regarded the morning star as a symbol of sovereignty and, in Roman times, victory.<sup>2</sup> Jesus Christ will guide faithful believers in the future, as the new day of His rule dawns (cf. Titus 2:13; Dan. 12:3).

"The gift of the morning star must refer to the fact that the exalted Christ shares his messianic status with the believer who conquers."<sup>3</sup>

"To 'grant the morning-star' ... means ... to make the dawn of salvation or of life eternal shine on him after his dark afflictions."<sup>4</sup>

Commentators have pointed out that spiritual conditions during the Middle Ages in the West (A.D. 606-1520), where the church was most prominent in the world, were similar to those that existed in this church. There were faithful believers, but there was also a strong pressure, coming from those who claimed higher authority, to do things contrary to the teachings of Scripture. This came primarily from the Roman Catholic Church. Some have also compared the leadership of the Virgin Mary, as promoted by the Roman Church, to Jezebel's leadership in Thyatira.<sup>5</sup>

#### **E. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS 3:1-6**

Jesus Christ sent this letter to commend the few faithful Christians in Sardis for their good deeds, and to challenge the negligent majority to remember what they knew—and to obey Him.

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, p. 212. Cf. Isa. 11:1; Rev. 22:16.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:363.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 75.



### 1. Destination and description of Christ 3:1 a-b

Sardis (modern Sart) stood about 33 miles southeast of Thyatira, on a major highway that led all the way to Susa in Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> Sardis had formerly been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. It was famous for its military history, jewelry, dye, and textiles. Due to its situation on a steep hill, many people thought the city was impregnable. However, Cyrus the Persian captured it by following a secret path up a cliff.

"... after but fourteen days of siege, the supposedly impregnable acropolis of Sardis was scaled and Croesus [its king] made prisoner (547)."<sup>2</sup>

"This year 547 marks also the first contact between Persians and Greeks."<sup>3</sup>

Antiochus invaded the city in the same way about 218 B.C.<sup>4</sup>

"The dominant religion of the city ... appears to be that of the general Anatolian religious forms: a worship of the forces of nature, which were viewed as subject to death but also as having the power of self-reproduction."<sup>5</sup>

The Lord presented Himself to this congregation as the all-wise God. The "seven Spirits" may refer to the "seven principal angels" of God (cf. 1:4). The "seven stars" are the "angels" of the seven churches (1:20). Christ also reminded the readers of His Lordship over the churches (the "seven stars," 1:20; 2:1).

### 2. Commendation and rebuke 3:1c, 2b

The Lord gave less praise to this church than to any of the churches except Laodicea, which received none. The only good thing He said to these Christians was that they had a good reputation, evidently among the other churches. However, they were really a "dead" church, and their good works

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<sup>1</sup>See Caird, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>See Barclay, 1:142-45.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 243.

("deeds") were not as impressive as they should have been ("not completed"). Only a few of their number were faithful to the Lord (v. 4).

"The temple to Artemis (possibly Cybele) equaled in size the famous temple of Artemis in Ephesus. However, the temple at Sardis was never finished."<sup>1</sup>

This tendency of the Sardians, to *fail to finish* what they had begun, characterized the city's Christians as well.

"No city in the whole Province of Asia had a more splendid history in past ages than Sardis. No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay as Sardis. Its history was the exact opposite of the record of Smyrna. Smyrna was dead and yet lived. Sardis lived and yet was dead."<sup>2</sup>

"Death was a special preoccupation of the Sardians, as witnessed by the impressive necropolis seven miles from the city."<sup>3</sup>

"Dr. Vance Havner has frequently reminded us that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument. Sardis was at the 'monument' stage, but there was still hope!"<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Exhortation 3:2a, 3

These believers needed to "wake up" from their spiritual slumber, to examine their condition, and to realize their needs (cf. Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 26:41). Their city had fallen into enemy hands *more than once*, due to the carelessness of sentries who had relied too much on the town's natural fortifications. The Sardian Christians also needed to "strengthen" the areas of weakness in their church ("things that remain"), which was almost dead ("about to die").

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 447.

<sup>2</sup>Ramsay, p. 375.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, p. 448.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:577.

Like the Ephesians, the Sardians needed to "remember" the rich spiritual heritage of their church, and to return to the attitudes and activities their teachers had taught them ("keep" [guard and observe these teachings], and "repent"). Failure to heed these warnings would result in Jesus Christ sending severe and sudden discipline on the believers *that would surprise them* ("I will come like a thief")! It would be similar to the surprise that earth-dwellers will experience at the Second Coming (cf. Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15). These Christians were not watching expectantly for the Lord to return. Note the many allusions to Jesus' teachings in the Gospels in this Sardis letter.

#### 4. Promise 3:4-6

Jesus Christ held out blessings for the faithful "few" in the congregation, "who [had] not soiled their garments," in order to stimulate the rest to repent.

"To those who have been true the promise is that they will walk with God. ... At the Persian court the king's most trusted favourites were given the privilege of walking in the royal gardens with the king and were called 'The Companions of the Garden.' ... Enoch walked with God on earth, and continued to walk with God in the heavenly places [Gen. 5:22, 24]."<sup>1</sup>

"White garments," symbolic of one's works (19:8), are pure and free of defilement (cf. 7:9, 13; 19:14; Matt. 22:11-12). In the ancient world, white robes also connoted festivity and victory.<sup>2</sup> Sardis boasted of her trade in woolen goods and dyed stuffs.<sup>3</sup> Only the Christians who were faithful to Jesus Christ could enjoy His intimate fellowship ("walk with Me;" cf. 7:14; 22:14).

"The reference was to the day of a Roman triumph. All work ceased and the true Roman citizen donned the pure white toga. The specially privileged few—usually the civic authorities and sometimes relations or friends of the victorious general who was being honoured—had a part in the triumphal procession. Clad in white, these Sardian believers were also to

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:154.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 1:155.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Charles, 1:78.

walk in triumph with their Captain in the day of His triumph. They had remained loyal to Him and would share His honour in the day of His glory."<sup>1</sup>

God will eventually "clothe" all "overcomers" with special "white garments," that will declare their inward joy, victory, purity, and heavenly state (cf. 7:9, 13; 19:8).<sup>2</sup>

Second, He will "not ('never never'; double negative for emphasis in Greek) erase" their "name[s]" from the "book of life" (cf. Luke 10:20), another metaphor for eternal life (cf. 2:7). There appear to be several "books" (records) that God keeps in heaven (cf. 20:12). Since God is omniscient, He does not need to record things in books. People keep books for later recollection, so the figure of a "book" is an example of *contextualization*: giving revelation in terms the recipients can easily understand.

There is the "Book of the Living," namely, those who are presently alive on the earth, including the unsaved (Exod. 32:32-33; Deut. 29:20; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3). There is also a "Book of the Lost," containing the names of the lost and their deeds (Rev. 20:12). There is a "Book of the Elect," with the names of *all* the saved in it (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27). A fourth book, the "Book of the Faithful," also called the "Book of Life" in this verse, evidently contains the names of faithful followers of the Lord (Mal. 3:16; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 3:5).<sup>3</sup>

"The Book of Deeds and the Book of Life are distinguished in Rev 20:12 ... The motif of having one's name *erased* from, or *blotted out* of, the Book of Life is a metaphor for judgment (Exod 32:32-33; Ps 69:27-28; ...), based on the notion of expulsion or disenfranchisement from the record of citizenship. Originally, however, to be *blotted out* of the Book of Life meant 'to die' (Exod 32:32-33; Ps 69:27-28; Isa 4:3)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tatford, p. 115. Cf. Ramsay, pp. 386-88; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, p. 147; and J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, p. 413.

<sup>2</sup>See Swete, pp. 51-52.

<sup>3</sup>See Charles R. Smith, "The Book of Life," *Grace Theological Journal* 6:2 (Fall 1985):219-30.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 224.

"In Athens, whenever any citizen was sentenced to be executed for a crime, his name was first erased [*exaleipheta*] from the roll of citizens (Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 31.84)."<sup>1</sup>

Several reliable Bible students have believed that the Book of Life contains the names of everyone living, but that as unbelievers die, God removes their names from the book. Thus, in the end, the book contains only the names of believers.<sup>2</sup>

The term "name" (Gr. *onoma*) also has more than one meaning. Biblical writers used it of the name of a person, his reputation (as in "he has a good name"; cf. Job 30:8; Prov. 22:1; Isa. 56:4-5), a synonym for the person himself, and in prepositional combinations.<sup>3</sup> In view of the previous use of the word "name" (v. 1), where it means reputation, that is probably what it means here too (cf. 2:17; 3:12). The Christian has a "good reputation" in heaven, that results in his receiving an honorable eternal identity. Yet his "good name" associates closely with his rewards.<sup>4</sup>

"Practically every city of that day maintained a roll or civic register of its citizens, and in that record was entered the name of every child born in the city. If one of the citizens proved guilty of treachery or disloyalty or of anything bringing shame on the city, he was subjected to public dishonour by the expunging of his name from the register. (The name was, in any case normally obliterated at death.) He was deemed no longer worthy to be regarded as a citizen of the city. If, on the other hand, a citizen had performed some outstanding exploit deserving of special distinction, honour was bestowed upon him, either by the recording of the deed in the city roll or by his name being encircled in gold (or overlaid in gold) in the roll."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>2</sup>E.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 261; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 82, McGee, 5:915; and Wiersbe, 2:577-78.

<sup>3</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*onoma, et al.*," by H. Bietenhard, 5(1967):242-83.

<sup>4</sup>Fuller, p. 304. Cf. Dillow, pp. 482-86; and Robert N. Wilkin, "I Will Not Blot Out His Name," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:2 (March-April 1995):1-4.

<sup>5</sup>Tatford, pp. 116-17. Cf. Aune, p. 225.

We should not infer, from this statement in verse 5, that some believers will lose their salvation (John 5:24; 6:35-37, 39; 10:28-29). The *litotes* here ("I will never ever erase his name from the book of life"; cf. 2:11) means that the overcomer's name will be especially glorious forever.<sup>1</sup>

"The purpose of the promise is to provide certainty and assurance to those who are 'worthy' (cf. v. 4), not to indicate anything about the fate of those who do not overcome."<sup>2</sup>

Third, Jesus Christ will acknowledge all overcomers as His own ("I will confess his name before My Father"; cf. Matt. 10:32; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 12:8).

"The faithful, in the white toga of the freeborn, would walk in the triumphal procession with the Victor; they would be brought into the banquet and clad in the shining festal robe; their names would be honoured in the civic register of heaven; and finally they would be confessed before the Sovereign of the universe. Just as, in the presence of the emperor and his court, the victorious general related the deeds of the warriors who had done exploits in the battle and presented these men before the august court in acknowledgement of their worth, so the Lord Jesus Christ would recount the deeds of His followers and present them to His father."<sup>3</sup>

"Faithfulness in trial now is to be rewarded beyond measure in the life to come."<sup>4</sup>

In view of these coming realities, the Christians in Sardis would have certainly been encouraged to live in keeping with their calling (cf. Eph. 4:1).

During the period of the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant church had a reputation for being sound, but really it was quite *dead*. The reformers effected a return to the doctrines of *salvation by grace* and the *priesthood of all believers*, but they and their disciples could not agree on many other doctrines. This resulted in *denominationalism*, that has fragmented the

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<sup>1</sup>See Zane C. Hodges, "Revelation 3:15 Revisited," *The Kerugma Message* 4:1 (September 1995):2.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup>Tatford, p. 117. Cf. Matt. 10:32; Mark 8:38; Luke 12:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:12.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 114.

church ever since, destroying its unity and marring its testimony. The faithful "few" of this period were those who held to the truths of Scripture that the Reformation discovered anew, but who, at the same time, did not agree with the errors of its leaders.<sup>1</sup>

Even in the present day, there are many local churches that have a reputation for being good, perhaps because of an imposing building, much activity, or a rich history. However, they are really *almost dead* spiritually.

"Unlike Laodicea, Sardis did not boast and imagine itself rich. It simply grew careless and indifferent."<sup>2</sup>

#### **F. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA 3:7-13**

The Lord sent the letter to the church in Philadelphia, in order to praise the Christians for their faithfulness in spite of persecution, and to encourage them to persevere.

##### **1. Destination and description of Christ 3:7**

Philadelphia (lit. "brotherly love"; cf. Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; et al.) lay about 30 miles southeast of Sardis. A Pergamenian king, Attalus II (159-138 B.C.), founded it. The town received its name from his nickname, "Philadelphus" ("brother lover"). This king had a special devotion to his brother, Eumenes II. The city stood in a wine-producing area, and was the so-called "gateway" to central Asia Minor. The modern name of this town is "Alasehir."

"It was a missionary city, founded to promote a unity of spirit, customs and loyalty within the realm, the apostle of Hellenism in an Oriental land."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ presented Himself to these saints as "holy" (cf. 4:8; 6:10; Ps. 16:10; Hab. 3:3; Isa. 40:25; Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; 4:34; John 6:69; Acts 4:27, 30; 1 Pet. 1:15; 1 John 2:20), "true" (genuine), and *authoritative*

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<sup>1</sup>See E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, for an account of the continuance through the centuries of churches practicing the principles taught and exemplified in the New Testament.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>Tatford, p. 119.

(cf. 1:5; 6:10). The "key of David" apparently refers to Isaiah 22:20-23, where Hezekiah's servant, Eliakim, received authority over David's house, including access to all the king's treasures. Jesus here claimed to have God's full administrative authority: over salvation, and judgment, and to distribute or not distribute ("who opens ... and who shuts") all of God's resources according to His will.

## 2. Commendation 3:8

The Philadelphian Christians had received an "open door" of opportunity to be a spiritual blessing, perhaps the opportunity for evangelism (cf. 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). This opportunity would continue ("door which no one can shut"), because they had a "little power" (spiritual power), though they were evidently few in number. Since there is no article before "little" in the Greek text, it is possible to understand their "little strength" (NIV) as a reference to their small influence, evidently because of their small number. They had faithfully obeyed God's Word ("you ... have kept My word"), and they had maintained a faithful testimony for the Lord ("have not denied My name") in the past, presumably by word and by deed. They also enjoyed the prospect of an open door into the *messianic kingdom* because they had been faithful. This may be the primary reference in view.<sup>1</sup> In their history, Philadelphia had been the "open door" to Hellenism for the native inhabitants.

## 3. Promise 3:9-12

Jesus Christ gave no rebuke to this church, as was also true of the church in Smyrna. He gave the Philadelphian Christians six promises instead.

First, their Jewish antagonists ("synagogue of Satan") would eventually have to acknowledge that the Christians were the *true* followers of God ("I will make them ... know that I have loved you"; cf. 2:9). These foes claimed to be the true followers of God ("who say that they are Jews"), but they were not, having rejected Jesus Christ (cf. John 8:31-59). Eventually they would have to admit their error, at the judgment of unbelievers (the Great White Throne judgment), if not earlier (Isa. 45:23; 60:14; Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10-11). However, the future repentance of Israel at Messiah's Second Coming, that will result in the Jews' respectful treatment of Gentile

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<sup>1</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 277-78; and Beasley-Murray, p. 100.



believers, seems to be in view here (cf. Isa. 45:14; 49:23; Ezek. 36:23; 37:28; Zech. 8:20-23).

Second, God promised the Christians in this church that they would not go through the Tribulation period (Rev. 6—19).<sup>1</sup> He promised to "keep [them] from the hour of testing." The combination of the verb and the preposition, in the Greek text, in this verse, means that He would keep them *out of* "the hour of testing" (the Tribulation; the pretribulation position). It does not mean He would "preserve" them *through* it (the posttribulation position), or "remove" them *during* it (the midtribulation position of some).

The only other New Testament use of this Greek phrase, *tereo ek*, is in John 17:15, where it also means "to keep ... from." There it refers to being kept from "the evil one," not "the hour of testing." In John 17:15, Jesus asked that His Father preserve His followers from the evil one while they were *in* the world, rather than taking them *out of* the world. But we should *not* conclude that therefore in Revelation 3:10 Jesus promised to preserve His followers *in* the Tribulation, rather than taking them *out of* the world before the Tribulation. Revelation 3:10 needs to be understood in the light of other passages that clarify the believer's relationship to "the hour of testing which is to come upon the whole world" (i.e., the Tribulation). I believe that in John 17:15 "kept from" is by preservation *in*, whereas in Revelation 3:10 "kept from" is by removal *before*.<sup>2</sup> Posttribulationist Douglas Moo believed that the meaning is spiritual preservation in both cases.<sup>3</sup>

What if some in the church did not keep the word of Christ's perseverance? This is probably a subjective genitive, meaning the endurance that Jesus Himself displayed, rather than the endurance that He requires. Would God not keep *them* from the hour of testing? In other words, will only *faithful* or *watchful* Christians experience the Rapture (the partial rapture position)? No, *all* Christians will experience transformation at the Rapture

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1538.

<sup>2</sup>See Newell, pp. 71-72; Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 211-17; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 283-91; Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Pillar and the Throne in Revelation 3:12, 21," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:623 (July-September 1999):303. For the posttribulational interpretation, see Mounce, p. 119; Tenney, p. 65; or Ladd, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, pp. 196-98.

(1 Cor. 15:51-52). God has promised all Christians deliverance from that outpouring of His wrath (1 Thess. 1:10).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, it is not just the "testing" that God promised to deliver them from, but the "hour" of testing, the time in history during which these trials will come (cf. John 12:27). Beasley-Murray regarded the "hour of testing" as a designation of the *trial itself*, rather than as a *period* of testing (cf. Mark 14:35).<sup>2</sup> Beale believed that the "hour" probably refers to the end of the church's present experience of tribulation, just before Christ's Second Coming.<sup>3</sup> Henry Alford correctly understood the "hour of testing" to be "the great time of trouble which shall be before the Lord's second coming."<sup>4</sup> Midtribulationist Gleason Archer wrote:

"If this verse means anything at all, it guarantees that true and faithful believers will be rescued from a period of great testing and trial that is going to come upon the world as a whole."<sup>5</sup>

The Greek word translated "testing" (*peirasa*) means to test in order to *demonstrate* the quality of a thing, not to *purify* its quality. This *hour of testing* will involve the "whole world" (Gr. *oikoymenes*, "the inhabited earth"), not just a local area. Its purpose is to demonstrate the quality of those who "dwell upon the earth." This term refers to earth-dwellers as contrasted with heaven-dwellers, the unsaved as contrasted with Christians.<sup>6</sup> As with the promises given to the other churches in chapters 2 and 3, this one is applicable to all Christians, not just the original recipients of the letter.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 478-507, for further explanation of the four major premillennial views of the Rapture; and see Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, for refutation of the partial rapture, the midtribulation rapture, and the posttribulation rapture views.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:586.

<sup>5</sup>Gleason L. Archer Jr., "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position," in *Three views on the Rapture*, p. 118.

<sup>6</sup>See Thomas D. Ice, "The Meaning of 'Earth Dwellers' in Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:663 (July-September 2009):350-65.

<sup>7</sup>See Stanton, pp. 46-50, 108-37; Paul D. Feinberg, "The Case for the Pretribulation Position," in *Three Views of the Rapture*, pp. 63-72; Jeffrey Townsend, "The Rapture in Revelation 3:10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:547 (July-September 1980):252-66.

Verse 10 appears at first reading to be another inducement to remain faithful to the Lord (cf. 2:10c, 25; 3:4). The implication may appear to be that if a Christian denies Christ (v. 8), he or she will not participate in the Rapture. However, other Scriptures make it clear that God will "catch up" *all* Christians, faithful and unfaithful, at the same time (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16-17; 5:9). We must therefore look for another explanation.

Since the whole Philadelphian church was faithful (v. 8), verse 10 is probably not an inducement to remain faithful. It seems instead to refer to a *blessing* the whole church could anticipate. The verse as it is worded seems intended to *comfort* the whole church (cf. 1 Thess. 4:18), rather than to challenge unfaithful or potentially unfaithful Christians.

"The words in this verse must be looked upon as a *statement after the fact* rather than a *conditional statement*, somewhat similar to the words, 'Because thou hast obeyed my voice,' in Gen. 22:18."<sup>1</sup>

"Probably the most debated verse in the whole discussion about the time of the Church's rapture is Revelation 3:10."<sup>2</sup>

Gundry believed that God will fulfill the promise of this verse at the Rapture, but he believed the Rapture will occur at the *end* of the Tribulation (the posttribulation view). He believed that the Lord will come for His saints, meet them in the air (the Rapture), and descend with them, back to the earth, immediately afterward (the Second Coming).<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Townsend's article, just cited, refuted Gundry's interpretation of this verse. The Rapture and the Second Coming cannot occur back to back, but must be separated by the seven-year Tribulation.<sup>4</sup>

"It is exemption from the period of time that is promised. By implication, this deliverance will coincide with Christ's return mentioned in the very next verse: 'I will come soon' (3:11). Believers on earth will meet the Lord in the air and thus escape the hour of trial ... One cannot make good sense out of Rev.

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<sup>1</sup>Chitwood, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Gundry, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>4</sup>See Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 176-91.

3:10 otherwise. The statement does not refer directly to the rapture. What it guarantees is protection away from the scene of the 'hour of trial' while that hour is in progress. This effect of placing the faithful in Philadelphia (and hence, the faithful in all the churches; cf. 3:13) in a position of safety presupposes that they will have been removed to another location (i.e., heaven) at the period's beginning. ...

"Because this period of tribulation will immediately precede the coming of the Lord to earth in power and great glory (cf. Matt. 24:29, 30), and because the generation to whom John wrote these words has long since passed away, Philadelphia's representation of not just the other six churches of Asia but also of the church universal throughout the present age is evident ..."<sup>1</sup>

Other New Testament passages also teach a *pretribulation* Rapture (e.g., John 14:3; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:9).

Third, the Lord also promised to come "quickly" (Gr. *tachy*, "soon"; cf. 1:1, 7; 2:16; 22:7, 12, 20; 2 Pet. 3:8).

"This can hardly be His return to earth described in Rev. 19:11-21, because this phase of His coming will be preceded by all the events described in chapters 6-18. A return to earth could not be characterized as 'soon' by any stretch of the imagination. It is rather an imminent event that will come suddenly and unexpectedly (Walvoord). Only this nearness of the Lord's coming to reward the faithful provides an effective motive to be tenacious (Alford; Moffatt)."<sup>2</sup>

"In light of the concept of the imminent coming of Christ and the fact that the New Testament does teach His imminent coming, we can conclude that the Pretribulation Rapture view is the only view of the Rapture of the church that comfortably fits the New Testament teaching of the imminent coming of Christ. It is the only view that can honestly say that Christ could return at any moment, because it alone teaches that

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 288, 289. See also Showers, pp. 208-18.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 290.

Christ will come to rapture the church before the 70th week of Daniel 9 or the Tribulation period begins and that nothing else must happen before His return."<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, God promised that He will not simply honor overcomers by *erecting a pillar in their name* in heaven, as was the custom in Philadelphia. He will "*make* them pillars ('a pillar') (emphasis added)" in the spiritual "temple of ... God," the "[N]ew Jerusalem" (21:22; cf. Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10).<sup>2</sup>

"When Solomon built the temple following his ascension to the throne, he had a worker of brass from Tyre construct two massive pillars for the porch. Solomon named one of these pillars 'Jachin,' meaning *establish*, and he named the other pillar 'Boaz,' meaning *strength* (1 Kings 7:13-21). The overcomers in Philadelphia were promised future positions with Christ which appear to be described by the meanings of the names given to these two pillars. The promise to the overcomers that they would 'go no more out' refers to their fixed position as pillars in the temple; and with the two massive pillars in Solomon's temple in view, saying that overcoming Christians will be placed in the position of pillars in the temple is the same as saying that these Christians will occupy *sure, secure, firmly established* positions of *strength* and *power*, positions which will be realized when they rule and reign as co-heirs with Christ in the [millennial] kingdom."<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, they would be forever secure. Because Philadelphia experienced earthquakes from time to time, more of the population than normal chose to live outside the city walls. When earthquakes came, those living in the city fled to the open spaces.<sup>4</sup>

"In contrast to the fate of Eliakim [see comment on v. 7], who was like a peg that gave way, and the buildings that perished in Philadelphia's earthquakes, the victor is assured that his

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<sup>1</sup>Showers, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup>For a study of the references to the temple in Revelation from a Reformed perspective, see Simon J. Kistemaker, "The Temple in the Apocalypse," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:3 (September 2000):433-41.

<sup>3</sup>Chitwood, p. 101. Cf. Overstreet, pp. 453-55.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:159.

place in the city which comes down out of heaven is eternally secured."<sup>1</sup>

Sixth, Jesus Christ will identify with His faithful people: "I will write on him the name of My God ... and My new name." Since they have honored Him on earth, He will acknowledge them in heaven (cf. 2:17; 14:1; 19:12). Writing one's "name" on something indicated *ownership* in John's day, as it does now. In the ancient world, columns often bore the names of conquerors. In the pagan world, devotees of certain gods often *wrote the name of their god* on their forehead (cf. Exod. 28:36). Scripture does not reveal Jesus Christ's "new name" elsewhere. Perhaps this *new* name is a symbol of His character, which overcomers can only appreciate when they see Him (cf. 2:17; 3:5).<sup>2</sup>

"The threefold occurrence of *onoma* ('name') is impressive and amounts to a threefold assurance of his identity with God."<sup>3</sup>

"Permanent communion with God is further expressed in terms of the widespread ethnic belief that to be ignorant of a god's name meant inability to worship him, whereas to know that name implied the power of entering into fellowship with him. ... Since rabbinic speculation was sure that Abraham had the privilege of knowing the mysterious new name for Jerusalem in the next world, John claims this for the average and honest Christian."<sup>4</sup>

"The people of Philadelphia knew all about taking a new name. When in A.D. 17 a terrible earthquake devastated their city, Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, dealt kindly with them, remitting taxation, and making them a generous gift to rebuild their city; and in their gratitude the Philadelphians for a time called their city Neocaesarea, the New City of Caesar; and later when again Vespasian was kind to them, they called their city Flavia, for that was the family name of Vespasian."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 293.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:369.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, 1:171.

#### **4. Exhortation 3:11b, 13**

Since Jesus Christ's return is imminent, the believers should remain faithful to Him—so that their detractors would not rob them of the reward ("take your crown") that would be theirs for steadfast perseverance (cf. 2 John 8). The familiar closing charge (v. 13) reminds us, once again, that the message of each of these seven letters is applicable to *all* "the churches."

Students of church history have seen the era during which the modern foreign missionary movement flourished, especially the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as resembling the Philadelphian church. During that period of time there were several revivals of return to God's Word. These took place under the leadership of the Puritans, the Wesleys, the Plymouth Brethren, and others. Like the church at Philadelphia, these groups of believers were not flashy, but they were faithful.

#### **G. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA 3:14-22**

Jesus Christ sent this letter to shake the Laodicean Christians out of their self-sufficient complacency, and to exhort them to self-sacrifice for higher spiritual goals (cf. Col. 2:1-2; 4:16).

##### **1. Destination and description of Christ 3:14**

The last of the seven cities, Laodicea (modern Eski-hisar, "the old fortress"), lay about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia, and 90 miles east of Ephesus. Laodicea was named by Antiochus of Syria in honor of his wife: Laodice. It was "one of the wealthiest cities in the world"<sup>1</sup> that specialized in banking, producing black woolen cloth, and health care. It had suffered a severe earthquake that destroyed it, but its prosperous citizens had subsequently rebuilt it, without the aid of Rome.

Jesus Christ called Himself the "Amen" (lit. "So be it"). We should probably understand this title as a testimony to His ability to make happen what He predicts (cf. Isa. 65:16). As a "Witness," His testimony to the situation in Laodicea was trustworthy (cf. 19:11). The Laodiceans had a reputation for saying and doing whatever was necessary to preserve their own well-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 1:174.

being.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with them, Jesus spoke the truth. The "Beginning [Origin] of God's Creation" sets forth His authority to pass judgment. The Laodiceans were creative, but Jesus alone was the Creator (cf. John 1:3; Col. 1:15-16).

Michael Svigel argued that *arche* here means "Ruler (of God's Creation)."<sup>2</sup> This rendering is possible, but most translators have believed the meaning is "Origin" or "Source," which non-Trinitarians have taken as evidence that the Son is a *created being*.

"The whole tendency of the Johannine writings and of the Apocalypse in particular ... forbids the interpretation 'the first of creatures.'"<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Rebuke 3:15-17

This church received no commendation, a fact that makes this letter unique compared to the other six.

The lackadaisical deeds of the Laodicean Christians manifested their heart attitude. They were "neither cold nor hot" in their love for God, just "lukewarm." Beverages go down better either "cold" or "hot." Similarly, the Lord would rather that His people be "cold" or "hot" in their love for Him, not apathetic. The Laodiceans should have known how the Lord felt, because their city's drinking water came from a spring six miles to the south over an aqueduct, and it arrived disgustingly lukewarm.<sup>4</sup>

"Neighboring Hierapolis had hot, spring water, valuable for its medicinal effects. In its journey to Laodicea it lost some of this heat and consequently medicinal value by the time it arrived either overland or by aqueduct in Laodicea. Nearby Colosse had cool, life-giving water that was refreshing as a beverage (Hemer)."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tatford, pp. 143-44.

<sup>2</sup>Michael J. Svigel, "Christ as '*Arche*' in Revelation 3:14," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161:642 (April-June 2004):215-31.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 307. Cf. M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, "The Laodicean Lukewarmness," *Expository Times* 69 (1957-8):176-78; and Hemer, pp. 432-40.



The Lord's "spit[ting]" (lit. "vomit[ing]") His people "out of [His] mouth" (v. 16) does not mean they would lose their salvation. The Scriptures nowhere teach this possibility (cf. v. 19). This *anthropomorphism* simply indicates His intense disgust, and the Greek wording occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Jesus did not mean that He would rather that we be *spiritually cold* than that we be *spiritually lukewarm*, either. He *did* mean that He would rather we be *spiritually refreshing* or *healthful*, as cold or hot water are, rather than that we be *spiritually bland*, as lukewarm water is. This explanation seems more likely than the one that identifies the Laodiceans as unbelievers.

"There is no city whose spirit and nature are more difficult to describe than Laodicea. There are not extremes, and hardly any very strongly marked features. But in this even balance lies its peculiar character. Those were the qualities that contributed to make it essentially the successful trading city, the city of bankers and finance, which could adapt itself to the needs and wishes of others, ever pliable and accommodating, full of the spirit of compromise."<sup>1</sup>

The Laodiceans enjoyed material prosperity (v. 17) that led them to a false sense of security and independence. The expression "I am rich, and have become wealthy" is a literary device that inverts the natural sequence for emphasis (cf. v. 19; 5:2, 5; 10:4, 9; 12:10; 19:13). Here it stresses that the wealth attained came through self-exertion. Spiritually they had great needs (cf. Rom. 7:24): "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked." This self-sufficient attitude is a constant danger when Christians live lives of ease and enjoy plenty. Many people today say: "I don't need God."

"It is characteristic of a city devoted to commercial interests and the material side of life, that the Church of Laodicea is entirely self-satisfied."<sup>2</sup>

"Self-sufficiency is the fatal danger of a likewarm [*sic* lukewarm] state ..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ramsay, pp. 422-23.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1540.

### 3. Exhortation 3:18-19

Since they considered themselves to be "rich"—but were *spiritually poor*—Jesus urged them to "buy," implying self-sacrifice (as their currency), the *spiritual things* they really needed (cf. Isa. 55:1). Instead of real gold, they should buy "gold refined by fire," namely, pure *spiritual riches* (cf. Ps. 66:10; Prov. 17:3; Zech. 13:9; Luke 12:21; 1 Tim. 6:18; James 1:3-4; 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:12-13). Instead of buying the *black garments*, that were popular in Laodicea, they should buy "white garments" that symbolize righteous conduct, purity, and sacred festal occasions (19:8).<sup>1</sup> Instead of the eye salve that the Laodiceans produced and sold, they should purchase spiritual "eye salve," probably a reference to the Word of God, that enables us to see life realistically (cf. John 9:6; 1 John 2:20, 27). Whereas the church at Smyrna was a rich poor church, the church at Laodicea was a poor rich church.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord reminded His readers that the reason He said what He did was because He loved them (cf. v. 9; 1:5; Prov. 3:11-12). They should, therefore, "be zealous" (Gr. *zeleue*, cf. *zestos*, "hot," vv. 15, 16) "and repent" (i.e., repent with zeal). The only way for spiritually "cold" people to become spiritually "hot" in their love for the Lord is to "repent" (i.e., do an "about face").

Ramsay considered verses 19 through 22 as an epilogue to all seven letters, rather than as the last part of the letter to the Laodiceans.<sup>3</sup> But all the other letters conclude with a promise to the overcomers, and it would be unusual if this promise (v. 21) was lacking in the letter to the Laodiceans but appeared in an epilogue to all the letters.

### 4. Promise 3:20-22

In the context, we note that God addressed the well-known verse 20 to Christians.

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 127; Aune, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:302.

<sup>3</sup>Ramsay, pp. 431-33.

"The first thing which a person *must* get fixed in his mind when studying the message to the Church in Laodicea is the fact that the Spirit of God is addressing Christians. ...

"Too many people deal with certain acute problems which arise in the Christian life in a rather loose manner. When, for example, sin manifests itself in the life of an individual claiming to be a Christian, one of the most common ways to deal with the matter is to begin questioning the person's salvation. The thought usually centers around the premise that if a person is saved he will follow a certain course of action; and if he doesn't follow this course of action, his conduct reveals that he was never really saved in the first place. Such a thought, however, is completely contrary to any Scriptural teaching on salvation by grace through faith. It is a corruption of the pure gospel of the grace of God, for works have been introduced into a realm where works cannot exist (Cf. Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 11:6)."<sup>1</sup>

It is the *indifferent* Christian whom the Lord urged to "open" his heart's "door," and to invite Jesus Christ in for intimate fellowship.<sup>2</sup> Another, somewhat different view, is that Jesus was knocking on the *eschatological* door, through which He will enter at His Second Coming.<sup>3</sup> When He enters the heart's door (first view), He takes whatever the individual may offer to Him, and He gives to that person out of His vast riches. The fellowship in view, of dining with Christ, may anticipate participation in the "Marriage Supper of the Lamb," that will take place at the beginning of the Millennium (cf. Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:30).

This verse expresses a truth taught elsewhere in Scripture, namely, that Jesus Christ desires intimate fellowship with all people (cf. Song of Sol. 5:2-6; Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10; John 10:10; 1 Tim. 4:10). Consequently, I believe it is appropriate to use it in evangelism.<sup>4</sup> It expresses God's universal desire very graphically, by way of application, not interpretation.

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<sup>1</sup>Chitwood, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 321-23.

<sup>4</sup>See Tim Wiarda, "Revelation 3:20: Imagery and Literary Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:2 (June 1995):203-12.

The privilege of reigning with Christ will be the portion of the overcomer (cf. Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:29-30; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:12).

"[Some of] the promises made to believers in the seven epistles of chapters 2 and 3 reappear with amazing reiteration when the great struggles on earth are over, and the children of God are in the resurrection glory of the New Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup>

Church	Promise	References
Ephesus	Eat of the tree of life in the Paradise of God	2:7; 22:14
Smyrna	Deliverance from the second death	2:11; 20:6
Thyatira	Authority over the nations	2:26; 20:4
Thyatira	The morning star	2:28; 22:16
Sardis	Clothed in white garments with Christ	3:4-5; 19:14
Philadelphia	The name of God written on them	3:12; 22:4
Laodicea	Sitting with Christ on His throne	3:21; 20:4

Scholars have explained the relationship between *Christ's* "throne" and the *Father's* "throne" in two ways. Many interpreters (covenant theologians and progressive dispensationalists) believe they are the *same* throne (cf. 22:1).<sup>2</sup> However, this verse clearly distinguishes two thrones.<sup>3</sup> The Scriptures consistently present the *Father's* throne, which Christ presently shares with the Father, as in heaven, and Christ's *Davidic* throne as on earth. Here, Christ's Davidic (messianic, millennial) throne on earth, and the Father's (and Christ's) shared eternal throne in heaven seem to be in view.

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<sup>1</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1496.

<sup>2</sup>See Mounce, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 99; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 325-26; The *New Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 1355-56; et al.

"There are two thrones, not one. The former is distinctly Messianic; the latter is the throne of God alone upon which 'none may sit but God, and the God-Man Jesus Christ.'"<sup>1</sup>

This promise is the climax of all the promises held out to overcomers in chapters 2 and 3. We can choose not to live like *princes* now, because one day we will be able to live like *kings*. Again the Lord invited all to listen and respond (v. 22).

"Every letter finishes with the words: 'Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.' This saying does two things. (1) It individualizes the message of the letters. It says to every man as he listens to the words of the Risen Christ: 'This means you.' ... (2) It generalizes the message of the letters. It means that the message of these letters was not confined to the people in the seven Churches nineteen hundred years ago, but that through them the Spirit is speaking to every man in every generation."<sup>2</sup>

Many students of Revelation have compared the Laodicean church to the church as it exists in the world today, especially in the West. Christendom (all professing Christians) appears wealthy and powerful, but it lacks life and love for Jesus Christ. Sadly this is also true, to a lesser degree, in the actual Body of Christ.

"There is an interesting, often overlooked parallel between the *five warnings* in the Book of Hebrews and the *seven overcomers' promises* in the Book of Revelation. The warnings and the overcomers' promises both have the same end in view. The last warning has to do with the *birthright* (Heb. 12:14-17), and the last overcomers' promise has to do with the *throne* (Rev. 3:21). The successive thought in the warnings in the Book of Hebrews is that of Christians ultimately realizing their birthright—*sons* exercising the rights of primogeniture. The great burden of Hebrews is 'bringing many *sons* into glory' (Heb. 2:10). And the successive thought in the overcomers' promises in the Book of Revelation is that of Christians

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<sup>1</sup>McClain, p. 34. His quotation is from R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:188.

ultimately ascending the throne—co-heirs, companions, exercising power with Christ. The great burden of Revelation, chapters two and three is that of placing equipped Christians upon the throne with Christ."<sup>1</sup>

SYNOPSIS OF REVELATION 2 AND 3					
Church	Christ	Praise	Criticism	Need	Promise
Ephesus (2:1-7)	One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands	Their deeds, toil, perseverance (twice), intolerance of wicked men, testing of professing apostles, hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans	Left their first love	Remember your former position, repent, and repeat your first deeds.	Will receive permission to eat of the tree of life in God's paradise
Smyrna (2:8-11)	The first and the last, who was dead and has come to life	Endured tribulation, poverty, and blasphemy by professing Jews		Do not fear temporary suffering and tribulation, but remain faithful.	Will enjoy freedom from hurt by the second death

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<sup>1</sup>Chitwood, pp. 138-39.

Pergamum (2:12-17)	One who has the sharp two-edged sword	Held fast Christ's name, and did not deny His faith	Some held the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans	Repent or expect an attack from the sword of His mouth.	Would receive hidden manna, a white stone, and a new secret name on the stone
Thyatira (2:18-29)	The Son of God who has flaming eyes and burnished bronze feet	Their deeds, love, faith, service, perseverance and recent improvement in deeds	Their toleration of seductive, immoral, idolatrous, and impenitent Jezebel	The faithful should hold fast.	Gets authority to rule over the nations with Christ, and the morning star
Sardis (3:1-6)	He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars	Some had not soiled their garments.	They were dead, had incomplete deeds, and were asleep.	Wake up, strengthen what remains, remember what you heard and obey it, and repent.	Clothed in white garments, name retained in the book of life, and name confessed before the Father and His angels
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	He who is holy, true, has David's key, and permanently opens and shuts	Their deeds, a little power, had kept His word, had not denied His name, and had persevered		Hold fast what you have.	Made a pillar in God's temple that he will not leave; have the names of God, His city (the

					New Jerusalem) and Christ's name written on him
Laodicea (3:14-22)	The Amen, the faithful and true witness, and the source of God's creation		Lukewarm, self-sufficient, wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked	Buy from Christ refined gold, white garments, and eye salve. Repent. Open the door to Him.	Will sit down on Christ's throne with Him

Each of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 is applicable, as are all the other New Testament epistles. They apply to the local congregation that originally received each one, as well as to all local congregations and all individual Christians since then.<sup>1</sup>

"Collectively, the seven messages form an indispensable part of the Apocalypse. In them are the practical lessons to be applied in the light of coming events in God's prophetic program. ...

"These seven messages cannot be read apart from the rest of the Apocalypse, nor does the rest of the book mean anything without these seven. Chapters 2-3 explain why the rest of the

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<sup>1</sup>Especially good books on chapters 2 and 3 are by Tatford; Hemer; William Landels, *The Victor's Sevenfold Reward: Being Discourses on the Promises of Our Lord to the Seven Churches*; Marcus Leone, *They Overcame: An Exposition of Revelation 1—3*; G. Campbell Morgan, *The Letters of Our Lord or First Century Messages to Twentieth Century Believers*; Ramsay; Richard C. Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches*; and Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of the New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor*.



book was written. The overall purpose is distinctly practical (cf. 1:3)."<sup>1</sup>

However, these letters have also proved prophetic of the history of Christianity following their writing. Most Christians in the first century may not have seen this, but one can hardly deny it now. It has become increasingly obvious as church history has unfolded. Chapters 2 and 3 are therefore prophetic, as are the rest of the chapters of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> In saying this, I am expressing the "historico-prophetic" interpretation of chapters 2 and 3.<sup>3</sup> Two other views are, first, that these chapters are only "prophetic" of conditions in the future day of the Lord, or that, second, they are only "historical" and deal with first century situations exclusively. Further explanation of these views follows.

THREE VIEWS OF THE INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION 2—3 <sup>4</sup>	
The Prophetic View	
<b>Statement:</b> The seven churches addressed were not in existence in the first century but will come into being in the day of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>	
Arguments pro	Responses
Revelation 1:19 stresses the unity of the book. The whole book is a revelation of things yet future.	This verse may indicate a two or three-fold division of the contents only some of which may be prophetic. Or chapters 2 and 3 are prophetic of the Church Age.
The connection of angels with these churches indicates that what is in view is Israel in the day	God also associated angels with churches in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:10). Or these

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 327.

<sup>2</sup>See M. J. Brunk, "The Seven Churches of Revelation Two and Three," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126:503 (July-September 1969):240-46.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Smith, pp. 61-62; Lange, p. 139; and many others held this view.

<sup>4</sup>Adapted from Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological Interpretation of Revelation 2—3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:496 (October-December 1967):321-31.

<sup>5</sup>Bullinger, pp. 66-70; and Charles H. Welch, *This Prophecy*, pp. 59-61.

of the Lord rather than the church. Elsewhere in Scripture, God associated angels with Israel (e.g., Dan. 10:21).	angels may be human messengers.						
God did not call church leaders angels in the New Testament.	John used this title in Revelation to emphasize the divine origin of these seven letters.						
Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) and Epiphanius (ca. A.D. 367) wrote that churches did not exist in all the seven towns addressed when John wrote Revelation.	These writers were combating unorthodox views of the Apocalypse in their writings. They were not denying the existence of churches in these towns then.						
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Historical View</b></p> <p><b>Statement:</b> The seven churches addressed existed in the first century, and what characterized each of them has marked other local churches in various locations throughout church history.<sup>1</sup></p> <table> <tr> <th>Arguments pro</th><th>Responses</th></tr> <tr> <td>This is the way we interpret the other New Testament epistles.</td><td>God did not identify the other New Testament epistles as prophetic as He did these (1:19).</td></tr> <tr> <td>The Book of Revelation does not specifically identify the messages to the seven churches as prophetic.</td><td>That they are prophetic is clear from 1:19 and the contents of chapters 2 and 3. Moreover history has shown they were prophetic.</td></tr> </table>		Arguments pro	Responses	This is the way we interpret the other New Testament epistles.	God did not identify the other New Testament epistles as prophetic as He did these (1:19).	The Book of Revelation does not specifically identify the messages to the seven churches as prophetic.	That they are prophetic is clear from 1:19 and the contents of chapters 2 and 3. Moreover history has shown they were prophetic.
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<sup>1</sup>F. Godet, *Studies in the New Testament*, pp. 303-4; Trench, *Commentary on ...*, pp. 307-8; Robert L. Thomas, "The Chronological ...," pp. 327-31; idem, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 505-15; McClain, pp. 447-50; Morris, p. 57; et al.

### The Historico-Prophetical View

**Statement:** The seven churches addressed were in existence in the first century, and what characterized each of them has marked other local churches in various locations throughout church history. However, they also reveal the history of the church from the time John wrote to the Rapture in seven successive periods.<sup>1</sup>

#### Arguments pro

#### Responses

There is a correspondence between seven successive periods of church history and these seven letters.

The correspondence is arbitrary and contrived as is clear from the differences in the limits of each period as expounded by various advocates of this view.

God said the whole of Revelation is prophetic (1:19), and to exclude chapters 2 and 3 seems unwarranted.

Revelation 1:19 means that the things "hereafter" are prophetic, and those things begin in 4:1.

The Rapture could not be imminent if chapters 2 and 3 reveal the history of the church from the first century to the twenty-first or beyond.

Chapters 2 and 3 do not predict that the church would pass through these stages before the Rapture. It is only by looking back that we can see they were prophetic.

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<sup>1</sup>Lange, p. 139; Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Revelation*, p. 33; idem, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:200, 214-22; J. B. Smith, pp. 61-62; William Kelly, *Lectures on the Revelation*, p. 24; J. N. Darby, *Notes on the Apocalypse*, p. 11; idem, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:562, 570; Tatford, p. 106; F. W. Grant, *The Prophetic History of the Church*, Seiss, p. 64; C. I. Scofield, ed., *Scofield Reference Bible* (1917 ed.), pp.1331-32; G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, pp. 533-34; Ironside, pp. 23, 36-78; Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 3:2:26-27; Tenney, p. 50; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 52; McGee, 5:900-26; Lehman Strauss, *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed*, pp. 129-241. Strauss also believed that the seven letters correspond to the (first) seven parables in Matthew 13.

This pattern of church history rests on a selective reading of history.	The correspondence is legitimate because there is adequate historical evidence to support this view.
These prophetic parallels hold true only for western Christianity.	Western Christianity has been the major leading branch of the church throughout history.

A general scheme of the periods of western civilization that correspond to the conditions described in each of the letters to the seven churches is as follows.

THE PROPHETIC HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN REVELATION 2 AND 3			
2:1-7	Ephesus	Apostolic Era	ca. A.D. 33-64
2:8-11	Smyrna	Period of Persecution	ca. A.D. 64-313
2:12-17	Pergamum	Era of Official Patronage	ca. A.D. 313-606
2:18-29	Thyatira	Middle Ages	ca. A.D. 606-1520
3:1-6	Sardis	Protestant Reformation	ca. A.D. 1520-1750
3:7-13	Philadelphia	Missionary Era	ca. A.D. 1750-1900
3:14-22	Laodicea	Modern Period	ca. A.D. 1900-????

"It is said that the seven churches of Revelation 1—3 picture the course of the age, and therefore early Christians could not have held to the doctrine under consideration [i.e., the doctrine of Christ's imminent return]. While it is true that these churches bear a marked resemblance to the various periods of church history, and while granting that this is a legitimate application, it must not be forgotten that John was writing to seven existing, although representative, congregations. All these varying shades of Christian testimony, or of departure from, were present in John's day throughout the early church.

John saw no need for projecting the second coming into the far distant future, for he saw himself one of the chief witnesses to the soon coming of Christ, the closing words penned in the book of Revelation being 'Surely I come quickly [*tachy*, soon]. Even so, come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:20)."<sup>1</sup>

There are several reasons to believe that the Rapture can be placed between chapters 3 and 4 of Revelation, which is the Pre-Tribulation Rapture position. First, promises that we will be kept from the Tribulation (1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13-18; 5:9; 1 Cor. 15:51-58; Rev. 3:10) argue for this view. Second, since the Rapture is presented in the New Testament as imminent, it must occur before the Tribulation judgments, which were guaranteed to happen in a precise sequence of events before the Second Coming. Third, there must be sufficient time between the Rapture and the Second Coming for unbelievers left on the earth after the Rapture to be saved, since Christ will judge the "sheep" and the "goats" at His Second Coming (Matt. 25:31-46).

Fourth, differences between the biblical descriptions of the Rapture and the Second Coming support this view.<sup>2</sup> They cannot be the same event. Fifth, the absence of references to Christians and the church on earth in chapters 4—18 argues for the pretribulation Rapture. While there will be believers on the earth after the Rapture, John never called them "Christians." And there are no references to the church in this section. Sixth, the Tribulation is a distinctively Jewish time period in the Old Testament (Jer. 30:7), whereas during the Church Age, God deals with Jews and Gentiles on an equal basis.<sup>3</sup>

But if the Rapture occurs before the Tribulation judgments, why did John not mention it here, at the beginning of his revelation of those judgments? Chapters 4 through 18 lead up to the Second Coming (ch. 19), and are an exposition of Jesus' Olivet Discourse. As the church is not mentioned in the Olivet Discourse—the future of Israel being our Lord's concern—so it is absent from this section of Revelation. There are other things that God did not permit John to record besides the Rapture (cf. 10:1-4). What we have in this book is a selective, not comprehensive, revelation of things to come.

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<sup>1</sup>Stanton, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>See Feinberg, pp. 80-86.

<sup>3</sup>See also Seiss, p. 98; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 251-58.

### III. THE REVELATION OF THE FUTURE 4:1—22:5

John recorded the rest of this book to reveal those aspects of the future that God wanted His people to know (cf. 1:19). He revealed the events in chapters 4—18 to enable the readers to understand events leading up to Jesus Christ's Second Coming.

"The closest modern parallel to this mode of communication is the political cartoon, which has gained an established place in the popular press all over the world."<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have proposed many interpretations of the remaining chapters (4—22), but the ones that make most sense of the text are those that see them as predicting events yet future. This is called the "futuristic" approach.

Other approaches are the following: The *idealist* (or allegorical) approach sees these chapters as containing the story of the conflict between God and Satan in the present age, with a symbolic presentation of God's ultimate victory.

The *preterist* approach sees these chapters as a picture of conflicts that took place in the early history of the church. Some preterist interpreters see these chapters as a symbolic revelation of God's principles of dealing with humankind throughout history.

The *historical* approach interprets these chapters as a history of the church, ranging from Jesus Christ's first advent to His second advent. A major problem with the approaches just named is that their advocates do not agree with one another on the interpretation of individual passages.

Only the *futuristic* approach has resulted in consistency in the interpretation of the major interpretive problems.<sup>2</sup> This approach also has the support of 1:19, which promises a revelation of things yet future.

Whereas chapters 4—18 present events culminating in Jesus Christ's Second Coming, there are clues in the text that not everything in these chapters is in chronological order. I will point out these clues in the exposition to follow. There is also evidence in the text that, as the time of

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>See Carson and Moo, pp. 719-21.

Christ's return approaches, predicted events will occur more closely together. The revelation of these events becomes correspondingly fuller. Jesus' Second Coming is the true climax of this section of the book—and the true climax of history on planet earth.

#### A. INTRODUCTION TO THE JUDGMENTS OF THE TRIBULATION CHS. 4—5

Chapters 4 and 5 prepared John, as they also prepare the reader, for the outpouring of judgments on the earth that follow. They present the *place* from which these judgments originate, and the *Person* from whom they come. Before revealing the judgments that God will send on the earth (chs. 6—18), the Lord gave John a second vision (cf. 1:10—3:22). This vision revealed what will take place in heaven (chs. 4—5) following the Rapture and the judgment seat of Christ (1 Pet. 4:17-18). Jesus did this in order to enable the readers to view coming earthly events from a heavenly perspective. The theme of "overcoming," introduced in chapters 2 and 3, thus receives further development in chapters 4 and 5.

One writer proposed that God revealed the whole heavenly court scene, in chapters 4—5, as taking place in a *cosmic temple* similar in appearance to Israel's Old Testament temple. The court scene describes a divine council in session. In this discussion, God decides the worthiness of "the Lamb" to receive the covenant inheritance, symbolized by the seven-sealed scroll, by a process of investigative judgment.<sup>1</sup>

"Chapters 4—5 may be viewed as the fulcrum of the Revelation. In relation to what has gone before they provide a fuller understanding of him who dominates the letters to the churches. In relation to the rest of the book they serve the double purpose of initiating the series of judgments which lead to the final advent and descent of the city of God to earth, and of supplying the form for the series of messianic judgments (the seven seals) which immediately follow. In this respect these chapters constitute the pivot of the structure which holds the book together, for the rest of the visions dovetail into this main structure. Yet the vision of chapters 4—5 is also a self-contained whole, serving a highly important function regarding the message of the book. It reveals the

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<sup>1</sup>R. Dean Davis, "The Heavenly Court Scene of Revelation 4—5" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1986).

ground of assurance that God's gracious purpose for the universe will come to pass, and so it is dominated by praise and adoration."<sup>1</sup>

"The pastoral purpose is to assure suffering Christians that God and Jesus are sovereign and that the events that the Christians are facing are part of a sovereign plan that will culminate in their redemption and the vindication of their faith through the punishment of their persecutors."<sup>2</sup>

"No part of the Scripture is more calculated to evoke worship than these two chapters of John's prophecy."<sup>3</sup>

### 1. The throne in heaven ch. 4

This chapter focuses on God the Father, the Creator who hands over the seven-sealed scroll. Chapter 5 emphasizes God the Son, the Redeemer who receives and opens the scroll. However, God is never addressed as "Father" in chapters 4 through 19. In these chapters, He is acting in His role as Judge.

#### **Christ's invitation 4:1**

"These things" refers to the revelation of the messages to the seven churches (chs. 2—3; cf. 1:19). After John had received these messages, he received a *vision* of "heaven," in which Jesus Christ invited him (cf. 1:10, 12-16) to enter heaven in order to receive a revelation of future events. John had been viewing Christ in authority *on earth* over the churches and their messengers (1:10—3:22), but now he would see a throne-room *in heaven*. "After these things I looked" is a clause that, with variations, introduces a new vision each time it occurs in Revelation (cf. 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1).

What John evidently saw in this vision was "a door standing ajar (open)" (Gr. *eneogmene*) in the sky (cf. Ezek. 1:1; Mark 1:10; John 1:51). A "voice," probably the glorified Christ's (cf. 1:10; Exod. 19:20, 24-25), summoned him to enter through the door into heaven (cf. 3:8, 20). This is

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 108. See Tenney, pp. 32-41, for further information about the structure of Revelation.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 109.



not an invitation for the church to enter heaven at the Rapture, as some have interpreted it, but simply an invitation for John to enter heaven in his vision.<sup>1</sup> From that new vantage point he would receive new revelations (cf. Rom. 10:6; 2 Cor. 12:1-2).

"This invitation is designed to introduce the reader to the extended vision sequence found in 4:1—22:9 ..."<sup>2</sup>

"Must" (*dei*) indicates that the events God was about to reveal will indeed happen. The word indicates divine necessity here, as it does frequently in the Gospels, especially Luke's Gospel (Luke 2:49; 4:43; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5, 22; 22:37; 24:25-27, 44-46; cf. Acts 2:23-24).

### The glory of God 4:2-8

4:2 As soon as John heard this invitation, he entered another visionary state (cf. 1:10). His body remained on the earth, but "in the Spirit" he saw "a throne" and Someone sitting on it "in heaven" (cf. 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 47:8; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 11:1, 5).<sup>3</sup> "Throne" occurs 45 times in Revelation, but only 15 times in the rest of the New Testament. The tense of the Greek verb translated "sitting" (present participle here and in v. 3) suggests continuous sitting. The Person on the throne was undoubtedly *God the Father* (cf. v. 5; 5:5, 7; 6:16; 7:10; 19:4).

"The Father in essence is invisible, but in Scripture at times is represented as assuming a visible form."<sup>4</sup>

John apparently saw a very large room, with a throne in the center of it, and Someone ("One") "sitting on the throne" (cf. 1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron. 18:18; Ps. 11:4; 47:8; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9). In other words, John saw God in all His majesty.

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 103; Moo, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 282.

<sup>3</sup>See J. M. Vogelgesang, "The Interpretation of Ezekiel in the Book of Revelation," (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1542.

"Daniel, the prophet, saw the same glorious sight (Daniel 7): the Ancient of Days enthroned, and 'One like unto a son of man brought near before him' and given 'dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, and languages should serve him.'"<sup>1</sup>

This was probably a room in the *heavenly temple*, since later John also saw the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant there (8:3; 11:19).

"The major focus of chapter 4 upon the throne is its symbolism of God's sovereignty exercised in judgment. From this point of origination proceeds the outworking of God's wrath described in the body of the Apocalypse (cf. 6:10, 16-17; 14:7; 15:1; 16:5, 19; 18:20; 19:2, 11). Though evil reigns for a time on earth, God will ultimately prevail."<sup>2</sup>

"In this final book John sees two kingdoms, each preceded by a throne of judgment. From the first of these thrones (4:2) issue the divine judgments which finally usher in the Mediatorial Kingdom of Christ on earth for a thousand years (20:6). From the second throne of judgment (20:11-15) issue those final judgments which prepare for the Universal Kingdom in its final form where the one eternal throne is that 'of God and of the Lamb' (22:3-5)."<sup>3</sup>

Some pretribulational commentators have seen a representation of the rapture of the church in this verse. They view John's entering heaven in his vision as symbolic of Christians entering heaven at the Rapture.<sup>4</sup> This may be reading too much into the text, since it was John himself who

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 84. Dan. 7:13-14; cf. Dan. 7:9; Ezek. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 339-40.

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 445.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 80.

entered heaven, and he entered heaven only in a vision, not in reality.

The absence of a specific reference to the Rapture in Revelation has led some (posttribulational) interpreters to conclude that it will occur at the Second Coming, following the Tribulation judgments. Yet the differences between the Rapture and the Second Coming, as various Scriptures refer to these events, make this extremely improbable (cf. John 14:1-3, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, and 1 Thess. 4:13-18 with Rev. 19). The unusual absence of reference to the Rapture may be due to God's purpose in chapters 4—19, namely, to focus on the judgments coming on unbelievers, culminating in the Second Coming. There are 20 references to the church in chapters 1—3, but then none until 22:17. This strongly implies that the church is not on earth during the Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> Evidently the Rapture takes place between chapters 3 and 4.

4:3 In what sense is God like "jasper" and "sardius" ("carnelian," NIV) stones? The "jasper" gem that John saw was evidently a *diamond* (cf. 21:11), not what we identify as a jasper today.<sup>2</sup> The "sardius," named for the town of Sardis where it was discovered, is fiery red. These colored gems probably symbolize the holiness and purity, and the justice and wrath of God respectively (cf. 1:14; 10:1; Ezek. 1:4, 26-28; 8:2; Dan. 7:9). They were the first and the last of the 12 gemstones worn on the Jewish high priest's chest (Exod. 28:17-21). They were exceedingly precious and costly stones in John's day.<sup>3</sup>

"Perhaps it is better to think of this resemblance as denoting His anger as a reaction of His holy nature in view of the prevailing sinfulness of man and in consequence of which He is about to send judgment upon the earth, that 'the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.'"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Robert Gromacki, "Where is 'the Church' in Revelation 4—19?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 353-65.

<sup>2</sup>Charles, 1:114; Beasley-Murray, p. 113; Mounce, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:191.

<sup>4</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 103.

Some ancient versions of this verse omit the words "He who was sitting," thereby creating the impression that the *throne* was like a jasper and a sardius, rather than the One sitting on the throne.<sup>1</sup>

The "rainbow" around the throne was apparently only the *shape* of a rainbow, rather than the colors of one, since this one was only green "like an emerald." This bow completely encircled the throne, perhaps resembling a halo. It evidently symbolizes God's *mercy* that surrounds His rule (cf. Gen. 9:8-17; Ezek. 1:28). This rainbow may have been various shades of green, suggesting the variegated mercy and grace of God.<sup>2</sup> Another possibility is that the emerald (Gr. *smaragd*) was a *crystal* that served as a prism, and so yielded a rainbow of colors.<sup>3</sup>

"Usually, a rainbow appears *after* the storm; but here, we see it *before* the storm."<sup>4</sup>

4:4 John saw "24 thrones" surrounding the main throne, in what is obviously a subordinate relationship. The throne is a place of rule. Evidently these elders will have positions of authority under God.

The identity of the "24 elders" (Gr. *presbyteros*) is difficult to determine. There have been two basic views: either they are men or they are angels. If they are human beings, they may be representatives of Israel, the church, or both groups.<sup>5</sup> If angels, they could be angelic representatives of either of the Old Testament priestly orders (cf. 1 Chron. 24:4-5; 25:9-13), or

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<sup>1</sup>See Vacendak, 2:1272.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 68; Alford, 4:596; Bullinger, p. 217; Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:582.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, 1:194-95; J. B. Smith, p. 104; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 106-7; Alford, 4:596; Jamieson, et al., p. 1542; McClain, p. 471; Pentecost, pp. 207-9; John F. McGahey, "The Identity of the Twenty-Four Elders," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1954); Ironside, pp. 82, 88; Barclay, 1:19-25; Tenney, pp. 190; Swete, p. 69; Stanton, pp. 200-4; David J. MacLeod, "The Adoration of God the Creator: An Exposition of Revelation 4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:654 (April-June 2007):207.

angelic representatives of the faithful of all ages, or a special group or class of angels.<sup>1</sup>

I think the 24 elders are either 12 human leaders of Israel and 12 human leaders of the church,<sup>2</sup> or a special group of 24 angelic leaders who represent the 12 patriarchs of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church. Others believe they are Christians who have been raptured,<sup>3</sup> perhaps *faithful* believers.<sup>4</sup> All that John wrote about them fits angels, and some of what he wrote could fit some men (cf. 5:9). The words of their "song of praise" seem to set them apart from those purchased by Christ's blood (5:9-10). However, "elder" is a term used nowhere else in the Bible to describe angels.

Their number may relate to the *24 priestly orders* in Israel, whose priests worshipped and served the Lord in Old Testament times (1 Chron. 23:6; 24:7-18).<sup>5</sup> The 24 elders in heaven evidently serve God by executing His will in the universe, but they do so in rank under the four living beings of verse 6. Perhaps the "four living creatures" represent the *general* creation, and the "24 elders" represent the elect of God's special creation.<sup>6</sup>

"White apparel (garments)" is the characteristic dress of angels (cf. Matt. 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; Acts 1:10). These elders wore "golden crowns (Gr. *stephanous*) on their heads." This Greek word often refers to a victor's crown (2:10; 3:11), but John also used it to describe a crown that represents authority (6:2; 9:7; 12:1; 14:14).

4:5        The "lightning" and "thunder" are evidently portents of the judgment to come, and symbolize God in the act of judging

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 348; Bullinger, p. 219; Lange, p. 152; Moffatt, 5:378; Beckwith, pp. 498-99; John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation*, p. 103; Alexander Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 92; Ladd, p. 75; Beasley-Murray, p. 114; Beale, p. 322. See Aune, pp. 287-92, for a helpful summary of the views.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:224; Lenski, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 103-4; Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 974; Pentecost, pp. 255-58.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1272.

<sup>5</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1543; Ironside, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 1:200; Beale, p. 322.

(8:5; 11:19; 16:18; cf. Exod. 19:16; Job 37:4; Ps. 77:18; Ezek. 1:13). Revelation mentions thunder nine times (4:5; 6:1; 8:5; 10:3, 4; 11:19; 14:2; 16:18; 19:6).

"In Revelation the symbols of thunder and lightning are always connected with a temple scene and mark an event of unusual import."<sup>1</sup>

The *wrath of God* proceeds from this throne. The "seven ... burning ... lamps" (or "torches," Gr. *lampades*; cf. *lychniai*, "lampstands," 1:12, 20) probably picture divine preparedness for battle against wickedness (cf. Judg. 7:16, 20; Nah. 2:3-4; Isa. 4:4; Zech. 4:2-3, 6, 10; Mal. 4:1).<sup>2</sup> The "seven spirits of God" (perhaps the seven principal angels of God, cf. 1:4; 3:1) will carry out this judgment. The picture is of these "torches," ready to go from God's presence to the earth, where they will consume wickedness during the Tribulation. Or this may be another allusion to the Holy Spirit in his sevenfold operation (cf. 1:4; 3:1; 5:6).<sup>3</sup> Another view is that the "seven spirits of God" refers to "the perfection and fullness of the activities of the Third Person of the Godhead."<sup>4</sup>

4:6 The clear 'crystal'-like, or 'glass'-like "sea ... before the throne" may represent the need for cleansing before approaching God. The *laver* (called a "sea" in the Old Testament, e.g., 1 Kings 7:23, et al.) served this need for cleansing in the Israelite tabernacle and temple. This has led some interpreters to view this sea as representing the Word of God.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the "sea" was glassy may imply that it was solid, suggesting that those who can approach God's throne have attained a fixed state of holiness by God's grace.<sup>6</sup> They have no more need of cleansing.<sup>7</sup> However, the Greek word *hualine*, translated "glass," means "transparent," so the

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1543.

<sup>4</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1505.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 1:2:423; Strauss, *The Book ...*, p. 134.

<sup>7</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:224.

emphasis may be on the opaqueness of the sea rather than its solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the sea represents the forces opposed to God's will and His people. This is what the sea symbolized in the ancient Near East. John, here in his vision, saw these forces under God's sovereign control (cf. Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:22, 26).<sup>2</sup> The best explanation seems to be that this sea pictures some type of firmament that separates God—in His holiness and purity—from all of His sinful creation (cf. Gen. 1:7; Exod. 24:10-11; 1 Kings 7:23; Ps. 104:3; Ezek. 1:22, 26).<sup>3</sup>

The four living "creatures" seem to be angelic beings that reflect the attributes of God. They form an inner circle, and surround both the throne and God Himself (cf. Ezek. 1:12), so they most certainly constitute an exalted order of angelic beings. They appear similar to the *seraphim* (Isa. 6:2), and even more like the *cherubim* (Ezek. 1:4-14; 9:3; 10), though because of their differences they seem to be in a class by themselves. They appear to have a judicial function (cf. 6:1, 3, 5, 7), and to have some connection with animate creation (cf. vv. 9-11; 15:7). Their many "eyes" ("in front and behind") evidently symbolize their penetrating intelligence, that makes them immediately aware of whatever is happening that affects their judicial responsibility (cf. Ezek. 1:18; 10:12).<sup>4</sup> Richard Lenski interpreted the four creatures as representing "the countless living, earthly agencies of God's providence."<sup>5</sup>

4:7      The four creatures probably represent four classes of created beings: wild beasts, domesticated animals, human beings, and flying creatures. Together, these four creatures may picture all creation glorifying and praising God, or God's sovereign control over all aspects of His creation, or both. Lenski believed

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 463; W. M. Smith, p. 1505.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 353. See also Alford, 4:598.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 358-59.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 181.

they represent the wild places of earth, the cultivated places, the towns and cities, and the whole expanse of air and sky.<sup>1</sup>

Each creature also seems to possess different qualities that are appropriate for their service of God. John described these as the outstanding qualities of animals that everyone can identify. "Lions" are strong (cf. Ps. 103:20), "oxen (calves)" are worker-servants (cf. Heb. 1:14), "men" have intelligence (cf. Luke 15:10), and "eagles" are swift (cf. Dan. 9:21). Each animal listed is the head of its species.

"The four forms suggest whatever is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in animate nature."<sup>2</sup>

Some of the early church fathers compared these creatures to the four Gospels, but they had different opinions about which beings represented which Gospels.<sup>3</sup> Some commentators have taken this further, and have suggested that each creature represents a different aspect of Christ in each Gospel. Others take the beings as symbolizing attributes of God. Still others connect them with the four chief signs of the zodiac. Some believe they represent Israel, because there is some connection with the pictures on the standards of Israel's tribes (cf. Num. 2:2, 10, 18, 25). Others see them as representing four outstanding apostles or other glorified men.<sup>4</sup> Another view is that they represent ministers of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

4:8      These creatures seem similar to the "seraphim" (lit. "burning ones") of Isaiah 6:2-3, in that they each have "six wings." Their many ("full of") "eyes" suggest alertness, comprehensive knowledge, and constant vigilance (cf. Ezek. 10:12). "Around and within" probably means that they had eyes even on the undersides of their wings, so that they could move their wings without interrupting their vision. Their movements did not detract from their constant vigilance. They ascribe *holiness* to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>See Barclay, 1:202-4.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>Henry, p. 1975.



God "day and night," namely, constantly, though not necessarily without stopping (cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 5:17; 2 Thess. 3:8).<sup>1</sup>

"In Hebrew, the double repetition of a word adds emphasis, while the rare threefold repetition designates the superlative and calls attention to the infinite holiness of God—the quality of God felt by creatures in his presence as awesomeness or fearfulness (Ps. 111:9: 'Holy and awesome is his name.')

"<sup>2</sup>

The focus of their worship is on God's holiness, His omnipotence, and His eternity.

"This continual song from the four living beings underscores the central role of the one sitting upon the throne in the present setting. As the absolutely holy one, He is thoroughly entitled and has ample might to initiate stringent measures against His own creation in order to return it to its original holy state."<sup>3</sup>

This is the first of 14 "doxologies" and 20 "hymns" sung by various heavenly groups in the Book of Revelation.<sup>4</sup>

### The worship of God 4:9-11

4:9 Whenever it is appropriate and possible, the four "living creatures give" praise ("glory and honor and thanks") to the eternal God ("Him who lives forever and ever"). They glorify and honor Him for His perfections, and they thank Him for His great works, especially His creation (v. 11).

4:10 The "24 elders" likewise "fall down before Him" out of reverence. When the crowned elders prostrate themselves

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<sup>1</sup>See David Seal, "Shouting in the Apocalypse: The Influence of First-Century Acclamations on the Praise Utterances in Revelation 4:8 and 11," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51:2 (June 2008):339-52.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 463.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 363.

<sup>4</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1505. See Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 944, for a chart of the doxologies.

before God, and "cast their crowns" at His feet, these rulers "worship Him," humbly acknowledging His sovereignty and His right to receive worship. Casting their crowns at His feet symbolizes the willing subjection of their power to His superior authority.<sup>1</sup>

When a victorious athlete returned home from the games and participated in a final celebration, he would ceremoniously offer the wreath or crown that he had earned to his deity.<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul said he wanted to make sure he did nothing that would result in his losing his reward (1 Cor. 9:27). He also used rewards as a motivation to urge Christians to serve Jesus Christ faithfully (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; et al.), as Jesus did (Matt. 6:19-21). These factors have created problems for some believers.

Is it not selfish to want to gain a reward? Is this not an unworthy motive for living the Christian life? I believe the answer lies in this verse. Here the 24 elders "cast their crowns" at the feet of the Father ("before the throne") *in worship*. If a crown is something we will give back to the Lord in worship, the desire for a crown need not be a selfish motivation. Indeed, the desire to present one's life work of faithful service—as a *gift* to the Savior—is a very unselfish and God-honoring motive.

A *victor's* crown is symbolic of the fact that the judge has declared the athlete victorious. Anyone can go out and buy a trophy in a store, but a trophy received as a reward for victory in competition has much greater value because of what it represents. Christians will receive "crowns" for finishing *faithfully* the race set before them, not for finishing *first* (i.e., before others). We do not compete against fellow believers, but we compete to overcome our spiritual enemies, namely: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

4:11      The elders' song is similar to that of the four living beings, but it focuses more on the wonders of God's creation as the evidence of His glory and power ("by Your will they existed,

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:381.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 349.

and were created").<sup>1</sup> The song is also addressed to God directly ("Worthy are You ... You created all things").<sup>2</sup> "Worthy art thou" and "our Lord and God" were phrases that pagans used to worship the emperor in John's day.<sup>3</sup>

"During the first century A.D. two living emperors appear to have claimed to be gods, Gaius and Domitian (such a claim was thought to violate the *gravitas* and *dignitas* of a Roman emperor; i.e., it was considered tacky)."<sup>4</sup>

"Because of Thy will" directs praise to God for the ultimate cause of creation.<sup>5</sup> Probably "they existed, and were created" simply credits God for the *existence* of all things, and then stresses the fact that *He was the One* who brought them into existence.<sup>6</sup>

According to verse 8, the praise of God that John saw was unceasing day and night. But verses 9-11 present separate bursts of praise. Perhaps thinking of a fireworks display will help reconcile these seemingly contradictory descriptions. A fireworks display is one continuous demonstration of power and glory, but it is made up of many separate explosions.

The total impression that this highly symbolic vision presents seems clear, even though the interpretation of some of the symbols may not be as obvious. The angelic creatures closest to God are continuously bowing before God, and give Him the honor He so rightly deserves.<sup>7</sup> We need to see all that follows in this revelation (chs. 5—22) in the light of the character of God manifested in this vision. God is perfectly holy, just, gracious, righteous, pure, omnipotent, eternal, and sovereign. This should

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<sup>1</sup>William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, vol. 25 of *The Expositor's Bible*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible*, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 310.

<sup>5</sup>Stott, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 368.

<sup>7</sup>See Mazie Nakhro, "The Manner of Worship according to the Book of Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:630 (April-June 2001):165-80, which identifies the reasons for worship and the manner of worship in Revelation.

help us to accept the coming revelation of all that He will do, including God's judging of huge segments of humanity in the future.

## 2. The Lamb on the throne ch. 5

John next recorded the revelation of the sealed scroll and its Recipient. He did this in order to continue the revelation of what will be taking place in heaven before God pours out the judgments to follow on the earth (chs. 6—18). This chapter continues John's vision of God that began in chapter 4.

"All of chapter 4 is an introduction to the main point of chapters 4—5, that is, to introduce the scroll with its seven seals."<sup>1</sup>

### The description of the scroll 5:1

John next saw a "book" ("scroll") on (Gr. *eπi*, not *en*) God's opened "right hand"—suggesting its source, His authority, and power adequate to translate its contents into action—as He "sat on the throne." This "scroll" was the focus of John's attention in chapter 5, and it is what Jesus Christ opens (unseals) in chapter 6, resulting in the judgments that will come upon the earth. Its contents comprise almost all the revelation that will follow.<sup>2</sup> Historicist interpreters believe that this revelation concerns the future of the history of the church from John's day onward. Futurist interpreters believe that it concerns the end of the inter-advent age.

This rolled document was so full of words that John could see writing on the outside ("the back") as well as on the "inside" of the scroll (cf. Ezek. 2:9-10). Papyrus documents have been discovered that contain writing on both surfaces of the sheets, though this was unusual.<sup>3</sup>

Someone, probably God, had "sealed" the book with "seven seals," suggesting the profound nature of the revelation it contained.<sup>4</sup> Roman law required that people seal their wills "seven" times because they were very

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 945. Bold letters omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 374.

<sup>3</sup>See Deissmann, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Charles, 1:138.

important documents.<sup>1</sup> The perfect number (i.e., seven) of seals may also hint at the absolute inviolability of the scroll.<sup>2</sup>

In John's day, people used a *seal* to keep the contents of a document secret, unchangeable, and free from tampering—until some authoritative person broke the seal. In this case, after Jesus broke the first seal, the scroll unrolled until the second seal kept it from opening further. Then He had to break the second seal in order to reveal more of the contents, and so on. Probably the seals were located on the edge of the scroll. The "book" contained the prophecies that follow in Revelation 6—22. This Revelation scroll may be the same, previously unrevealed, part of the "book" of "words" (prophecies) that God instructed Daniel to "seal" *until the end times* (Dan. 12:4, 9).

### The opener of the scroll 5:2-5

5:2        The specific identity of the "strong angel" is probably unknowable. His "loud voice" indicated his authority and the importance of what he said. One with sufficient authority was necessary to "open (Gr. *anoixai*) the scroll," and, by "break[ing] its seals," to unleash the judgments on the world that it contained. Any prophet could have revealed this information, but it took Someone with adequate power to both execute the events foretold and to reveal them. The "and" (Gr. *kai*) is probably epexegetical, meaning "even."

5:3        No created being (cf. Phil. 2:10) had authority ("was able") to break the seals ("open the book"), or even to learn of God's plans contained in the scroll ("look into it")—"no one in heaven, or on earth," or in the place of departed spirits ("under the earth").

"What simpler and more sublime way of picturing God's ultimate sovereignty over all history could be found than this picture of the scroll resting in the hand of God? However strong evil becomes, however fierce be the satanic evils that assail

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<sup>1</sup>Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, pp. 182-83.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:209; Mounce, p. 142.

God's people on earth, history still rests in God's hand."<sup>1</sup>

- 5:4 John's continual weeping reflected his *great* sorrow that the revelation of God's plans and their execution would remain hidden—and indefinitely postponed—because "no one" had sufficient authority ("was found worthy") "to open" the scroll.

"He did not want to see God's vindication of His people as a part of the OT Messianic hope deferred for an undetermined period ..."<sup>2</sup>

"God cannot deliver a message to men unless there be a man fit to receive it."<sup>3</sup>

- 5:5 "One of the [24] elders" comforted John with the news that *Jesus Christ* would be able "to open the scroll (book)" (cf. Luke 7:13; 8:52). He had achieved victory over ("has overcome") all of God's enemies, and therefore had the authority "to open" the scroll and to release its contents. The "Lion ... of Judah" (Gen. 49:9) and the "Root [offspring] of David" (Isa. 11:1, 10; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Matt. 22:42-43; Rom. 15:12) are both titles of the divine Messiah, who would fulfill the Old Testament promises of salvation and rule. This is the only place in the New Testament where they occur together, however. As God's ultimate Anointed One, Jesus alone possessed the authority necessary for this task. He overcame Satan, sin, and death, so He alone could implement God's purposes for the future that this scroll revealed.<sup>4</sup>

### The worship of the Lamb 5:6-14

- 5:6 As with our dreams, John's vision contained some unusual features. John saw the Messiah as "a Lamb." The diminutive form of *amnos* ("lamb," namely, "little lamb," *arnion*) enhances even more the contrast with the lion. The "lion" is a picture of

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, pp. 82-83.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 386.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:212.

<sup>4</sup>See David J. MacLeod, "The Lion Who Is a Lamb: An Exposition of Revelation 5:1-7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:655 (July-September 2007):323-40.

strength and majesty, but this "little lamb" was meek and gentle. Christ combines both sets of characteristics. "The Lamb" is a symbol of Jesus Christ at His first advent, meek and submissive to a sacrificial death as our substitute (Isa. 53:7; John 1:36; 21:15). John is the only New Testament writer who described Jesus as the Lamb, though Peter came close in 1 Peter 1:19. John used this figure of Jesus 29 times in Revelation.<sup>1</sup> The Lion is a symbol of Him at His second advent, powerful and aggressively judging the world in righteousness (Ps. 2).

John saw the Lamb now, in the center of all the angelic creatures gathered around the throne, as the central character and most important personage in the entire heavenly scene (cf. 3:21; 4:6; 7:17). The Lamb was "standing," ready to complete His work, bearing the marks (wounds, scars) of His death ("as if slain"). His self-sacrifice led to His supreme power.

"In one brilliant stroke John portrays the central theme of NT revelation—victory through sacrifice."<sup>2</sup>

The Lamb had "seven horns," representing the fullness of His power. The "horn" is a common Old Testament symbol for power or strength, and it came to represent kingly authority (Num. 23:22; Deut. 33:17; 1 Sam. 2:1; 2 Sam. 22:3; 1 Kings 22:11; Ps. 75:4; 132:17; Dan. 7:20-21; 8:5). Thus the Lamb is the all-powerful Warrior and King. The Lamb also had "seven eyes," representing the fullness of His divine wisdom and discernment (Zech. 4:10). His "seven eyes" are the "seven Spirits of God." The "seven Spirits of God" may be the seven principal angels of God, or this description may refer to the sevenfold energy of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> That is, they communicate to Christ all that transpires. The Lamb is *omniscient* as well as *omnipotent*.

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:215; Aune, p. 352.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2173.

An alternative interpretation, which I favor, is that the clause "which are the seven Spirits" refers to both the seven horns and the seven eyes. In this case, John may have meant that the Lamb had the "seven Spirits," who are both *powerful* and *perceptive*, at His immediate disposal.

"Thrice the number seven is repeated revealing His perfection."<sup>1</sup>

5:7 Next John saw God the Father "on the throne," and the Lamb (evidently now in human form) coming and taking the scroll "out of" His "right hand." This is evidently a dramatic use of the perfect tense of the verb *eilephen* ("took").<sup>2</sup> Clearly this symbolizes a transfer of authority from the Father to the Son, who in turn would reveal the future and execute judgment (cf. 1:1). Jesus previously said, "... the Father ... has given all judgment to the Son" and "He [the Father] gave Him [the Son] authority to execute judgment" (John 5:22, 27).

"It has been frequently recognized that the vision of chapter 5 gives us a Christian prophet's version of the enthronement ceremony known to the ancient world, when its potentates ascended their thrones. Here the king is the Christ, his domain the universe, and his throne the throne of God [cf. Phil. 2:6-11]. ... The steps of the ancient enthronement are commonly described as exaltation, presentation, enthronement. If we apply these to chapter 5, the exaltation must be seen in the conquest of the Lamb referred to in 5:5, the presentation in verse 6, and the bestowal of authority in verse 7."<sup>3</sup>

5:8 This transfer triggered an outpouring of praise and worship for the Lamb, because it signaled that Christ would begin judging. While the "four living creatures" and "24 elders" prostrated themselves in worship, only the elders had "harps" (lyres) and

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<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:225.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:335.

<sup>3</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 110.



"bowls." This is clear in the Greek text from the gender of *hekastos*, translated "each one."<sup>1</sup> The elders used the "harps" to praise God in "song" ("they sang a new song," v. 9; cf. Ps. 33:2-3; 98:5). This is the only place in Scripture where *angels* praise God *with harps*, if the "elders" are in fact "angels." Revelation mentions the harp (lyre) and the trumpet as the only musical instruments used in heavenly worship, though there may be others used, of course.

John explained that the "golden bowls full of incense" contained (represent) the "prayers" of God's people ("the saints"), that are like the fragrant aroma of burning "incense" to Him (cf. Ps. 141:2; Luke 1:10). In the Old Testament, the offering of incense was a priestly prerogative (Num. 16:6-7), so these elders were functioning in a priestly capacity. The Jews believed that angels carried human prayers to God (cf. 8:3).<sup>2</sup> The "prayers" offered are probably all of those as-yet-unanswered petitions that people have prayed, asking God to judge unrighteousness, including: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (cf. 5:10; 6:10; 8:3-5; Matt. 6:10; Luke 18:7-8).<sup>3</sup>

5:9      The Lamb's receiving authority from God, to advance God's plan of the ages, led these 28 living creatures and elders to sing "a new (Gr. *kainen*, lit. 'fresh,' distinctive in quality, rather than recent) song" of praise. It may be "new" in the sense that it celebrates His death that inaugurated a *new covenant*.<sup>4</sup> However, I think it was probably "new" in the sense that it represented *new praise for a new deliverance* about to take place.

"This [i.e., "a new song"] is a well-known expression in the psalms, relating to songs sung on festal occasions and celebrating new mercies from God, especially his deliverances from distress (e.g., Ps. 40:1, 98:1). It receives a deeper

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<sup>1</sup>See Swete, pp. 79-80.

<sup>2</sup>Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 825.

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 147.

meaning in Isaiah 42:10, where the new song relates to the new and greater deliverance which the Lord is about to make in the earth."<sup>1</sup>

"In all these cases the 'new song' celebrates a saving action on the part of God ..."<sup>2</sup>

In this song the Lamb receives *honor* as being "worthy," in view of four things: The first is His death ("You were slain"). The second is the "purchase" (redemption) of a people "for God" by His death ("by Your blood"), including those yet to be saved (cf. 14:2-3; 15:2-4). People ("*men*") from "every" branch of the human family will make up this company (cf. Gen. 10:5, 20, 31). This verse does not mean that every individual will be saved, although Jesus died for everyone, of course. Only those who appropriate the benefits of Christ's death by faith will be. "Tribe[s]," "tongue[s]," "people[s]," and "nation[s]," represent divisions of humanity based on lineage, language, race, and political orientation. Taken together, these terms describe the universal nature of the redeemed people of God.

5:10 The third reason for praise is the creation of "a kingdom and priests" (a priestly kingdom) for God by the Lamb's death (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This "kingdom" (cf. 1:6, 9) is probably the future kingdom of Christ on the earth viewed proleptically; Christians will be part of Christ's kingdom when He sets it up on the earth, and we will serve as priests in it. Priesthood involves immediate access into God's presence for praise and worship, as well as the privilege of priestly service. The fourth reason for praise is the *blessing* of His people, in allowing them to "rule (reign) on the earth" (during the Millennium and thereafter).

Some translations render this song in the first person ("You have made *us* ...," 2:8, AV). Others put it in the third person ("You have made *them* ...," e.g., NASB, NIV). This variation reflects a difference in the Greek texts that underlie these translations. I prefer the text family used as a basis for the

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, pp. 126-27. Cf. Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 149:1, 9.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 360.

NASB and NIV translations. The second reading is better, and it harmonizes with the identification of all these creatures as angels. These "creatures" are offering worship to God for man's salvation.

5:11 An innumerable host of ("many") "angels" now joined the four creatures and 24 elders in ascribing worth to the Lamb (cf. Dan. 7:10; Ps. 68:17-18; Matt. 2:13). The word order "myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands" may seem anticlimactic.

"The word order is deliberate and the resultant anticlimax brings even more emphasis to the expression. When ten thousand is multiplied by itself, even this does not match the number of angels involved. The leftover still comes to a figure amounting to a thousand multiplied by itself. This is an apocalyptic symbol for countless thousands of angels who lift their voices in this great doxology."<sup>1</sup>

5:12 The Lamb deserves "to receive" all "power," "riches," "wisdom," "might," "honor," "glory," and "blessing." All seven qualities belong intrinsically to Christ.

"The angels use seven expressions (the perfect number is probably significant) to indicate the wonder of the Lamb."<sup>2</sup>

The repetition of "and" (Gr. *kaí*) between each quality brings special emphasis to each one individually. This is a literary device called *polysyndeton*. It "produces the impression of extensiveness and abundance by means of an exhaustive summary."<sup>3</sup>

"Each of the seven prerogatives is a metaphorical application to Christ of qualities that belong

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 403-4. Cf. Lenski, p. 210; and Rienecker, p. 825.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, paragraph 460 (3).

properly to God but may be bestowed on the king by God."<sup>1</sup>

5:13 In his vision, John saw "every creature (created thing)," in every part of the universe, giving praise to God the Father ("Him who sits on the throne") and "to the Lamb." The creatures in view must be *intelligent beings* capable of worship, who can fully appreciate God and the Lamb—not the stars, planets, and animals. This probably involved a forward (proleptic) look to the end of the history of planet earth, when every creature will bow the knee to Jesus Christ (cf. 5:10; Phil. 2:8-11). There is much proleptic revelation in Revelation, as will become clear. God often gave John previews of things further ahead in the future than the main future events that he was then considering (the Rapture, Tribulation, and Second Coming).

"In these two chapters [4 and 5], the sequence of hymns shows that the first two are addressed to God, the next two to the Lamb, and the last one to both. There is also a gradual enlargement in the size of the choirs. The internal movement also builds as the last hymn is sung by 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth' to 'him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb' (5:13)."<sup>2</sup>

"... that blessing and that thanksgiving are the one gift that we who have nothing can give to Him who possesses all."<sup>3</sup>

"In all three doxologies the repeated use of *kai* ["and"] heaps up the ascriptions like a great tower of praise."<sup>4</sup>

5:14 The worship culminated in John's vision with the "four living creatures" saying "Amen"—*repeatedly*—after the vast crowd

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 365.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 464.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:227.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 212.

fell silent. The "elders worshiped," also, by prostrating themselves ("fell down") before God's throne (cf. 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

These chapters (4—5) present heaven, God's dwelling place, as a *real* place. John saw God receiving great honor there, surrounded by innumerable angelic worshippers. Even though John saw a *vision*, it was a vision of something that truly exists. We will be able to see both heaven and at least some of the individuals said to be there—some day!

Baxter understood chapters 4 and 5 to connect better with chapters 1 through 3 than with chapters 6 through 20. Here is his general outline of the book:

"In the first movement, covering the first five chapters, the goal is the enthronement of Christ *in heaven*. In the central movement, covering chapters vi.—xx., the goal is the enthronement of Christ *on earth*. In the final movement the lovely climax is the enthronement of Christ *in the new creation*."<sup>2</sup>

In chapters 4—20, John described what he saw in heaven and on earth. The following chart identifies which place was in view in each of the sections that compose these chapters.

THE FOCUS OF JOHN'S VISIONS IN CHAPTERS 4—20	
In Heaven	On Earth
The heavenly throne (ch. 4)	
The Lamb on the throne (ch. 5)	
	The first four seal judgments (6:1-8)
The fifth seal judgment (6:9-11)	

<sup>1</sup>See David J. MacLeod, "The Adoration of God the Redeemer: An Exposition of Revelation 5:8-14," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:656 (October-December 2007):454-71, for another exposition of this pericope.

<sup>2</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:341.

	The sixth seal judgment (6:12-17)
	The sealing of the 144,000 witnesses (7:1-8)
The great multitude (7:9-17)	
Preparations for the trumpet judgments (8:1-5)	
	The first six trumpet judgments (8:6—9:21)
	The little book (ch. 10)
	The ministry of the two witnesses (11:1-14)
The announcement of the seventh trumpet judgment (11:15-19)	
The expulsion of Satan (12:1-12)	
	The activity of Satan (12:13-17)
	The activity of the two beasts (ch. 13)
	Judgment at the end of the Great Tribulation (ch. 14)
The announcement of the seven last judgments (ch. 15)	
	The seven bowl judgments (ch. 16)
	Religion in the Tribulation (ch. 17)

Praise for judging (19:1-10)	Commerce in the Tribulation (ch. 18)
	The second coming of Christ (19:11-21)
	The millennial reign of Christ (ch. 20)

### **B. THE FIRST SIX SEAL JUDGMENTS CH. 6**

John now received revelation concerning the judgments that would take place on earth after the Lamb opened each of the seals on the scroll (5:1). God gave him this information to help us who read it to understand what will take place in the future (1:19). A preterist interpretation is represented by the following quotation:

"The next chapters of Revelation do not necessarily describe what is to come, but rather what has already taken place ..."<sup>1</sup>

The following diagram places the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments—that begin to unfold here—in the context of the earlier revelation concerning Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:24-27).

The failure of scholars to agree on the correlation of events that have happened in church history—with these judgments—confirms that the events predicted here *are still future* (cf. 1:19; 4:1). Some posttribulational interpreters view the seals as describing conditions preparatory to the Tribulation.<sup>2</sup> Posttribulationists often understand the Tribulation to be the culminating period of the church's persecution on earth before Christ's Second Coming. They believe the church will go through the Tribulation. One posttribulational writer wrote the following:

"I believe the tribulation period is occurring now and believers are waiting for Jesus to return. When He comes for His bride, those believers who are still alive will see Him and be caught

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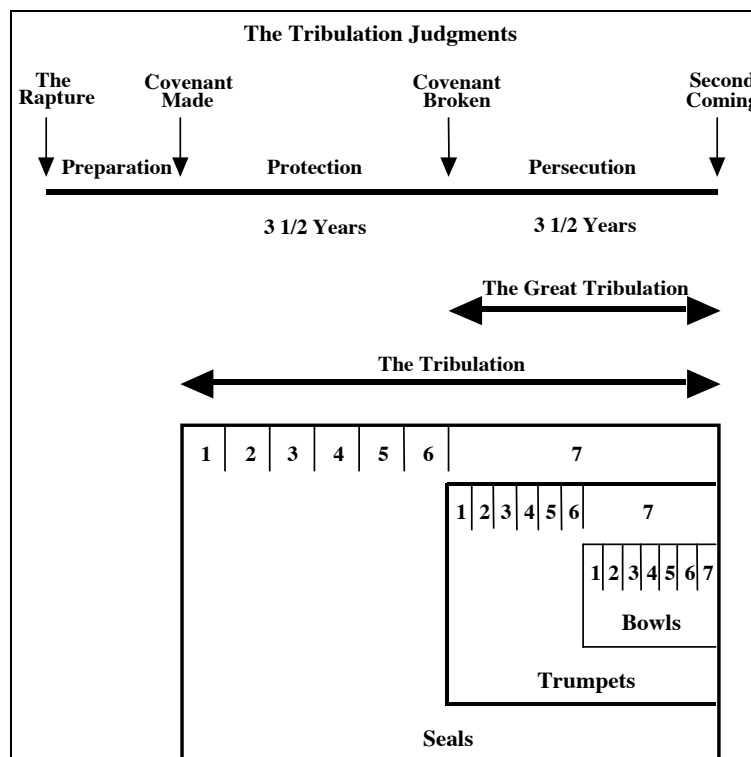
<sup>1</sup>Monty C. Wright, *Rescuing Revelation*, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ladd, pp. 95-96; and Johnson, p. 472.

up with Him (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). He will then establish His millennial reign."<sup>1</sup>

Pretribulational scholars generally believe that the church will be raptured from the earth prior to the judgments contained in the seals.<sup>2</sup> I favor the second (pretribulational) view. The seals, trumpets, and bowls judgments all seem to fit best in this last seven-year period prophesied by Daniel (i.e., the Tribulation, Dan. 9:27).

Historicist interpreters understand the seals as representing conditions that will characterize the present age before the return of Jesus Christ. For example, Alford interpreted the first seal as picturing the ultimate victory of the church, the second seal as picturing warfare, the third seal as picturing famine, and the fourth seal as picturing death—all personified in the riders on the horses. He viewed these as creation crying out for its ultimate redemption, not necessarily in chronological, but in contemporaneous progression.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup>Wright, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 122-23; Pentecost, pp. 278-79; and Harris, p. 238.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:612-18.



The order of events predicted in Revelation 6 is very similar to the order Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse. That passage is key to understanding the further revelation that God gave John about this future time. These events are the appearance of antichrists, war, famine, death, martyrdom, and earthly and heavenly phenomena. Later in the Olivet Discourse, Jesus mentioned an event that occurs at the middle of Daniel's seventieth week, namely, the "abomination of desolation" (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14). Consequently, the events that He described before the midpoint, namely, those of the first six seals, will probably occur in the first half of the Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> Jesus referred to this three and one-half year period as the "beginning of birth-pangs" (Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8). Another view is that the six seal judgments extend over the entire seven-year period.<sup>2</sup> Still others believe that the seal judgments describe the last half of the Tribulation.<sup>3</sup>

THE "BEGINNING OF BIRTH-PANGS" (MATT. 24:8; MARK 13:8)					
THE FIRST HALF OF THE TRIBULATION					
Matt. 24:4-5	Mark 13:6	Luke 21:8	Antichrists	Rev. 6:1-2	First seal
Matt. 24:6-7	Mark 13:7-8	Luke 21:9-10	War	Rev. 6:3-4	Second seal
Matt. 24:7	Mark 13:8	Luke 21:11	Famine	Rev. 6:5-6	Third seal
Matt. 24:9	Mark 13:12	Luke 21:16	Death	Rev. 6:7-8	Fourth seal
Matt. 24:9-13	Mark 13:9-13	Luke 21:12-19	Martyrdom	Rev. 6:9-11	Fifth seal

<sup>1</sup>See Ironside, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:229; Mark Bailey, "The Tribulation," in *The Road to Armageddon*, pp. 71-75.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 947. See Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 358-60, for his list of the events that will happen in first half, middle, and last half of the Tribulation.

Luke 21:11	Earthly and heavenly phenomena	Rev. 6:12- 17	Sixth seal
THE "ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION" (MATT. 24:15; MARK 13:14)			
THE MIDDLE OF THE TRIBULATION			

### 1. The first seal 6:1-2

6:1 "I saw" marks the continuation of what John had seen that chapters 4 and 5 recorded, but also the commencement of revelation concerning future events on earth. Chapters 1—5 have introduced this revelation. John was an eyewitness of this revelation that came to him like action scenes in a film, rather than as words from the pages of a book.

When the Lamb broke ("one") the first of the "seven seals" on the scroll that He had taken from God, "one of the four living creatures" loudly invited someone to "Come." This was probably an invitation to the first horseman, rather than to John or to Christ. An angel gave this command (Gr. imperative) four times (vv. 1, 3, 5, 7), and each time a horseman on a horse came forth. This is the first of several indications in Revelation that there is a hierarchical structure among the angels, in which some angels give instructions to other angels (cf. 7:2-3; 14:15, 18; Zech. 2:3-5).

6:2 John saw a "horse," which was a *war machine* in his day (cf. Job 39:19-25; Ps. 76:5-6; Prov. 21:31), and its rider (cf. Zech. 1:7-11; 6:2-3; Jer. 14:12; 24:10; 42:17). The horse was "white," symbolizing victory, righteousness, and holiness. White has these connotations in other places in Scripture. A Roman conqueror typically rode a white horse in a triumphant procession.<sup>1</sup> The horse gave an appearance of purity, but that does not necessarily mean the rider was righteous.

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:340.

"When men wage war they always pretend to be fighting for righteousness."<sup>1</sup>

The first four seal judgments involve riders riding horses of various colors. This imagery recalls Zechariah 1:8 and 6:1-8. However, the horses and horsemen in Revelation evidently represent something different from those in Zechariah, as comparison of these texts suggests.

The rider carried "a bow" (cf. Ps. 46:9; Jer. 51:56; Hos. 1:5; Zech. 9:13-14), symbolizing the threat of war. The rider *threatens* war (cf. Num. 24:8; Ps. 45:5; Zech. 9:14), but it does not occur, probably because he accomplishes victory through, at least outwardly, "peaceful" means. Someone, evidently God, gave him an imperial "crown" (Gr. *stephanos*), anticipating an authoritative career (cf. 9:1, 3, 5; 13:5, 7, 14, 15). Conquerors also wore this type of crown.<sup>2</sup> The sovereign God is the only One who can give human rulers authority to rule (cf. Rom. 13:1).

"All events in the apocalyptic section of the book are initiated from the throne described in chapter 4 ..., and must be understood in that light. Though indirect, all that transpires under the seals is in implementation of the 'book of doom' through the agency of the Lamb introduced in chapter 5."<sup>3</sup>

"A Roman army had had actually to surrender to Vologeses, the king of the Parthians. It was seldom in history that such shame and ignominy had come to the arms [*sic* armies?] of Rome. Now the Parthians rode on white horses and they were the most famous bowmen in the world. The bowmen of the Parthians were the terror of the world, and even the conquerors of unconquerable Rome."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:5.

This rider rode out "conquering" his enemies, and "to conquer," that is, bent on future conquests.

There have been many suggestions concerning who or what this rider represents. These include a Roman emperor, the Parthian invasion of the Roman Empire,<sup>1</sup> Messiah, the little horn of Daniel 7:8,<sup>2</sup> and the Antichrist.<sup>3</sup> Others have taken him to represent the Word of God,<sup>4</sup> a personification of judgment, the victorious course of the gospel, warfare in general, triumphant militarism, or the personification of ungodly movements.

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus predicted that a number of individuals will mislead many people (cf. Matt. 24:5, 24; Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8). This has led some interpreters to conclude that a *personification of ungodly activity* is what the rider represents in this verse.<sup>5</sup> The most probable view is that this is a prophecy of Antichrist, who will make a covenant with Israel, but only as a pretense for destroying the Jews (cf. Dan. 9:27; 1 Thess. 5:3).<sup>6</sup>

Daniel Wong concluded that the horseman is either Antichrist, or a trend or movement of which he is the chief example.<sup>7</sup> Several writers have argued that he is Christ.<sup>8</sup> However, the crown that this rider wears is a victor's crown (Gr. *stephanos*), whereas the crowns that Christ will wear when He comes back to earth (19:12) are royal crowns (Gr. *diadema*). Newell believed that the "rider" (singular) on all four horses, in the first through the fourth seal judgments, is Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> He viewed these judgments as an overview of the Lord Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup>See Moffatt, 5:388-89.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:226.

<sup>3</sup>Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 535.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup>Ironside, p. 103; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 422.

<sup>6</sup>See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 250.

<sup>7</sup>Daniel K. K. Wong, "The First Horseman of Revelation 6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:610 (April-June 1996):212-26.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1976; Jamieson, et al., p. 1547; Zane C. Hodges, "The First Horseman of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119:476 (October 1962):324-34; and Jack MacArthur, *Expositional Commentary on Revelation*, p. 137; Vacendak, 2:1276.

<sup>9</sup>Newell, pp. 102-6.

judgment on the world, that he believed the following chapters reveal in more detail. David Aune believed that this first rider represents warfare, and that the following three riders represent the stereotypical evils of warfare: sword, famine, and plague.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The second seal 6:3-4

6:3 When the Lamb broke the "second seal" on the scroll, John heard the "second living creature" order the second horseman forward.

Beale believed the disasters represented by the opening of each seal are simultaneous throughout the Church Age, not sequential occurrences, for either the purification of believers or for the punishment of believers' persecutors.<sup>2</sup> They began, he believed, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and they will end at His Second Coming. Conquest, both literal and spiritual, has led and will lead to civil unrest, which has led and will lead to famine, which has led and will lead to death.

6:4 The color of the "red horse" most likely symbolizes bloodshed and war. The rider of this horse "removes (takes) peace from the earth" and begins war ("granted ... that men would slay one another"). There do not seem to me to be sufficient similarities between this red horse rider, and the one in Zechariah 1:8, to identify them as the same individual. The one in Zechariah is probably the Angel of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

If we observe the Olivet Discourse parallelism, the time when peace ends is probably before the middle of the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:6-7a; Mark 13:7-8a; Luke 21:9-10). This is, therefore, not a reference to the termination of peace with Israel that Antichrist will effect, which will signal the middle of the Tribulation and the beginning of the Great Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:15).

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<sup>1</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 395.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, pp. 370-72.

<sup>3</sup>See Merrill F. Unger, *Zechariah*, p. 27.

The "large sword" (Gr. *machaira megale*) represents authority to "slay" people.<sup>1</sup> War on the earth will follow the manifestation of Antichrist. The warfare in view here seems to be part of what Ezekiel described in Ezekiel 38 and 39 as the battle of Gog and Magog.<sup>2</sup> Lenski believed that not one war but all wars are in view here.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The third seal 6:5-6

6:5 A "black horse" followed, symbolizing the ravage of war, namely, *famine*. Antichrist, the cause of this famine, again seems to be the rider (cf. Matt. 24:7b). He carries "a pair of [balance] scales," which are a symbol of commerce, indicating his control of commodity prices.

6:6 The "voice" in the "middle of the four living creatures" must belong to *God* or *the Lamb*, probably God the Father—since He is the ultimate source of all these judgments (cf. v. 11). The prices of both "wheat" (good food) and "barley" (cheap cattle food) will be very high. A quart of wheat will provide one day's ration for a person, but it will cost a whole day's wages.<sup>4</sup> In John's day, a denarius would purchase eight to 16 times as much food as what he said it will purchase in the future.<sup>5</sup>

The poor would have little money left over for oil, for fuel and health needs, and for wine to drink (cf. Ezek. 4:16-17). Wheat, barley, oil, and wine were the staple foods in Palestine and Asia Minor.<sup>6</sup> "Do not harm" means, "Do not tamper with" (cf. 7:3), reflecting the strict control over prices that ungodly rulers under Antichrist's leadership will have at this time.

The causes of the famine were not extremely severe, since they killed only the wheat and barley, but not the vines and

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Robertson, 6:341.

<sup>2</sup>See Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 352; and John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 301.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 397.

<sup>5</sup>Cicero, *In Verrem* 3.81.

<sup>6</sup>Robertson, 6:342.

olive trees (v. 6), whose roots go deeper.<sup>1</sup> As the Tribulation grows worse, the rich as well as the poor will suffer, but at this early stage, the poor will suffer more than the rich. Probably the wars that the ungodly rulers start, under Antichrist's leadership, will greatly reduce the food supply. These rulers will control it strictly, with consequent suffering for many people (cf. Luke 21:11).

#### **4. The fourth seal 6:7-8**

6:7 The Lamb broke the "fourth seal," and the "fourth living creature" called the fourth horseman out.

6:8 John next saw an "ashen (lit. 'pale green') horse," the color of a human corpse. The Greek word describes vegetation elsewhere (8:7; 9:4; Mark 6:39). Presumably Antichrist, the cause of the widespread death that follows, is the rider—since his name is "Death."<sup>2</sup> "Hades," also known as the "Place of Departed Spirits," which claims unbelieving people's immaterial part at death, followed on his heels. Death claims the material part of the person, and Hades the immaterial part. Perhaps John saw Hades following Death like a man on foot following a mounted warrior, grimly gathering in his victims, or as a hearse following a horse. Aune viewed "Death" as a person, and "Hades" as his kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

God gave Death and Hades "authority" to take one-fourth of the world's population. This evidently is the total number that will die as a result of all the catastrophes predicted so far. These catastrophes are war ("sword"), the resulting "famine," and disease ("pestilence"): traditional disasters that follow divine judgment. Attacks by "wild animals (beasts)" will also contribute to the death rate (cf. Jer. 15:2-3; 24:10; 29:17-18; Ezek. 5:12, 17; 14:21). Presently the world's population is over seven billion people.<sup>4</sup> These initial calamities would

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<sup>1</sup>Beckwith, p. 521.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 88; Lange, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 401.

<sup>4</sup>[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/xx.html); and <http://esa.un.org/wpp/Other-Information/faq.htm#q4>.

reduce this total population number by one and a half billion people. It seems that nuclear war could play some role in this devastation, since so many people will die in these judgments.

Beale believed that the four devilish forces, along with their four kinds of woe falling on a fourth of humanity, represent "all the ways that death can come and which all result in death."<sup>1</sup>

These first four seal judgments appear to be just "a preliminary phase of the more terrible judgments to follow."<sup>2</sup> Most premillennialists view them as descriptive of conditions in the Tribulation. Amillennialists often see them as describing conditions that will continue to the end of time.<sup>3</sup>

### 5. The fifth seal 6:9-11

What happened next evidently took place in heaven.

6:9 "The altar" John saw was evidently in heaven (cf. 8:3, 5; 14:18). Earlier John had seen a throne-room in heaven (chs. 4—5), but now he saw a temple. Probably the concepts of "palace" and "temple" communicate different aspects of God's central magnificent dwelling-place in heaven (cf. Ps. 11:4; 18:6; 29:9-10; Isa. 6:1; Hab. 2:20). This "altar" was evidently an *altar of sacrifice*, rather than an incense altar (cf. 5:8; 8:3-5; 14:17-18). Under this altar were the "souls" (Gr. *psyche*, "lives") of people who had died for their faith in ("because of the word of") God, and their faithfulness to ("testimony they had maintained") Him during the period just described (vv. 3-8; i.e., in the Tribulation so far).

"That is to say, the life-blood of the martyrs has been poured out as an offering and a sacrifice to God [cf. Lev. 4:7; Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6]."<sup>4</sup>

Some amillennialists believe these martyrs are all Christians who die for their faith during the entire Church Age, which,

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 382.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1506.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 236.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:13.



according to their view, are all the believers who will have died from Christ's ascension to His Second Coming.<sup>1</sup> Preterists view these people as Christians who died in the first century of the church's history.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the idea is that the lives of these martyrs were sacrifices to God (cf. Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6). The "and" (Gr. *kaí*) is again probably ascensive (cf. 1:2, 9), meaning because of the word of God, "even" (or "that is,") the testimony they maintained.

These people must be those who died after the Rapture, since all Christians living at the time of the Rapture will experience bodily resurrection, and go directly into Jesus Christ's presence at that time (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Consequently the people John described in this verse are evidently those who come to faith in Christ *after* the Rapture (cf. Matt. 24:9; Luke 21:12). They had become believers during the first half of the Tribulation, and then had suffered martyrdom for their faith. Some believe that they will be Jewish martyrs.<sup>3</sup> John did not see the resurrected bodies of these martyrs, because God had not resurrected them yet. The resurrection of Tribulation saints will not occur until the end of that seven-year period (cf. 20:4).

6:10 John saw these martyrs calling out to their heavenly "Lord" or "Master" (Gr. *despotes*) to punish their murderers (cf. Luke 18:7). Contrast the prayers of Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60), in which they asked God to be merciful to their murderers. The difference is that, for the martyrs' murderers, the time of God's longsuffering had now ended, and He had begun to pour out His wrath on sinners. "Master" implies divine might, majesty, power, and authority, and it stresses the absolute power of God.<sup>4</sup>

How much longer ("How long ...?") did they have to wait for God to "avenge" them (cf. Ps. 79:10; 94:3; Hab. 1:2)? "Holy" and "true" were attributes of Christ earlier (3:7), but here the

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:620; Lenski, p. 239; Beale, p. 396.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 111-12.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:391; Lange, 176.

Father is probably in view, since He is the ultimate source of the judgments. "Those who dwell on the earth" is almost a technical expression in Revelation, describing "unbelievers" who are hostile to God (cf. 3:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12; 17:2, 8).

"Their [the Tribulation martyrs'] prayers for revenge upon their enemies are viewed as the fifth judgment against the earth-dwellers."<sup>1</sup>

6:11 Each martyr received a long "white robe" (Gr. *stole*), symbolizing salvation and immortality.<sup>2</sup> These martyrs had been faithful and had suffered martyrdom for their fidelity to Christ (cf. 3:5; 7:9, 14). God told them to be patient ("rest a little while longer"). More people would experience martyrdom before it would be God's time ("until the number of their fellow servants ... who were to be killed ... would be completed") for Jesus Christ to return to the earth, and to judge their living adversaries.

"Spirits without any substance could not wear robes. The fact that they will be given robes supports the concept that when believers die they are given temporary bodies in heaven which are later replaced by resurrection bodies at the time of resurrection (cf. 20:4)."<sup>3</sup>

## **6. The sixth seal 6:12-17**

The scene now shifts back to earth.

"The entire passage in every clause utilizes well known prophetic anticipations of the day of the Lord, and by his use of these images John identifies the day for his readers. One may check this by consulting the chief scriptures John employs, notably Joel 2:10, 30ff., Isaiah 13:9ff., 2:10ff., 34:4,

<sup>1</sup>Robert Thomas, "The Imprecatory Prayers of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:502 (April-June 1969):127; idem, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 517-24.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 424.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 948.

Ezekiel 32:7f., Hosea 10:8. These passages depict the concomitants of the day of the Lord and supply John with all his pictures."<sup>1</sup>

The eschatological day of the Lord in prophecy includes a time of judgment (the Tribulation) followed by a time of blessing (the Millennium).

6:12-13     Next God will send a tremendous, planet-sized "earthquake" that will rock the whole world (cf. Luke 21:11). The darkening ("black as sackcloth") of "the sun" (cf. Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9; Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25), the reddening ("like blood") of "the moon" (cf. Joel 2:31; Acts 2:20), and the falling of "the stars" to earth (a meteor-like shower?) appear from the context to be consequences of this sixth seal judgment. A less likely possibility is that they will be unrelated phenomena.

That the stars do not literally fall, but only *appear* to do so, seems clear from the fact that they are still in place in 8:12. This fact suggests that we should also understand the other phenomena described here as only *appearing* to happen, how these things will look as people on earth view them.

Many commentators have taken this description as picturing a metaphorical convulsion among the nations, not a literal shaking of the earth and the heavens.<sup>2</sup> Beale, for example, saw it as a metaphor describing God's judgment of all sinners just before the last judgment, which he saw taking place at Christ's Second Coming.<sup>3</sup> We should probably take them literally, however, for at least two reasons: First, Jesus used the same language in the Olivet Discourse and gave no indication that it was symbolic (cf. Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11). Second, a shaking of the nations follows in verses 15-17.

6:14        Evidently the sky will appear to "split" and roll back "like a scroll," in two opposite directions (cf. Isa. 34:4).<sup>4</sup> The universe will seem to be coming apart. Apparently the opening of the

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 113-17.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 398. See also Alford, 4:621.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 454.

sky will give earth-dwellers a glimpse into the throne-room of heaven (v. 16). Probably the earthquake (v. 12) will cause mountains and islands to rise and fall (cf. Nah. 1:6).

- 6:15-16 The reaction of every category of humanity all over the world is amazing: "hid themselves in the caves and ... the mountains." It indicates that the unbelieving people's perception of God ("Him who sits on the throne"), and the "wrath of the Lamb," in heaven, will be far more terrifying to them than the physical consequences of this judgment. Whereas the martyrs cry, "Avenge us" (v. 10), these unbelievers cry, "Hide us."

"What sinners dread most is not death, but having to stand before a holy and righteous God."<sup>1</sup>

- 6:17 This "great day of their wrath" is the Tribulation, Daniel's seventieth week (cf. Jer. 30:7; Dan. 12:1; Joel 2:2; Matt. 24:21). These people will not turn to God in repentance, but away from Him in terror (cf. Isa. 2:19, 21; Hos. 10:8; Luke 23:30)! By the end of the sixth seal judgment, they will know that what they are experiencing is the outpouring of God's wrath. This is the first part of the judgment phase of the day of the Lord (cf. Joel 2:11, 30-31; Isa. 2:10-11, 19-21; 13:8-13; 26:17-19; 34:4, 8; 66:7-9; Jer. 30:6-8; Ezek. 32:7-8; Hos. 10:8; Mic. 4:9-10; Matt. 24:8; 1 Thess. 5:3).<sup>2</sup>

The "day of the Lord" includes: Daniel's seventieth week (seven years) of judgment, Christ's return to the earth, and His thousand-year reign on the earth. Some have sought to limit the "day of the Lord" to the Battle of Armageddon only.<sup>3</sup> But this view fails to take all the "day of the Lord" data in Scripture into account.

The Tribulation will be a distinct judgment of God, unique from all other times of distress that the earth has ever experienced (Jer. 30:7). It will be worldwide and severe. Furthermore, everyone will not only know that it is a divine judgment, but they will act like it by *seeking death in order to hide*

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 456. Cf. Swete, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 423.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Gundry, pp. 91-92.

*from God*, not just to escape from these calamities. The judgments of the sixth seal appear to be a foreshadowing of the similar, but *even greater* judgments, that will come at the end of the Tribulation—just before Jesus Christ returns to the earth (cf. 16:17-21; Matt. 24:21).

"The cosmic disturbances immediately before the beginning of the Joel 3 Day of the Lord and the Second Coming of Christ immediately after the Great Tribulation are not the same as those of the sixth seal. The cosmic disturbances immediately before the beginning of the Joel 3 Day of the Lord and the Second Coming of Christ will occur at the end of the 70th week, but those of the sixth seal will occur and end considerably before then."<sup>1</sup>

Other cosmic disturbances appear in the Great Tribulation before the one described in Joel 3 occurs, namely, those associated with the fourth and fifth trumpets and the sixth bowl (8:12; 9:1-11; 16:12-16). Joel 3 does not refer to a cosmic disturbance before the Tribulation begins.

Postmillennialists and amillennialists interpret the revelation of tribulation, in chapters 6—18, as a symbolic description of various troubles that have come—and will come—on believers before Jesus Christ's Second Coming.<sup>2</sup> They do not believe that the Tribulation will be a specific "seven-year period" of the unique outpouring of *God's wrath yet future*.

Posttribulationists believe that the church will be on earth during the Tribulation. Among premillennialists, there are pretribulationists (those who believe that the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation) and posttribulationists (those who believe that the Rapture will occur at the end of the Tribulation, immediately before or concurrent with the Second Coming). Gundry, a dispensational posttribulationist, held that the sufferings Christians experience during the Tribulation will not come as a result of God's penal judgments, but will be persecutions that arise "from

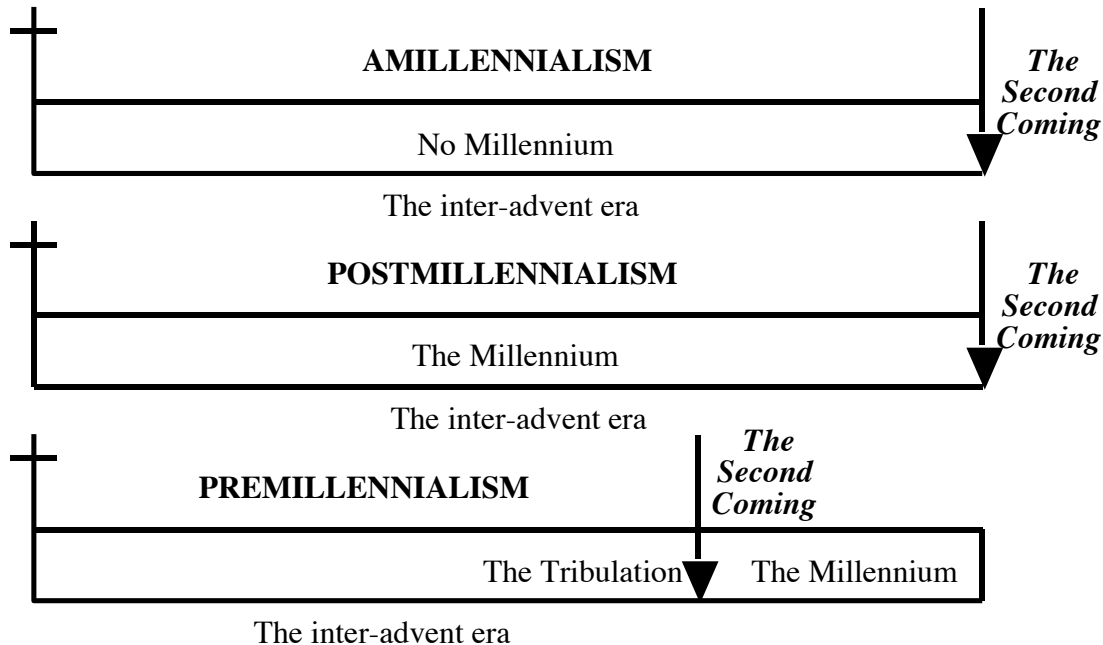
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<sup>1</sup>Showers, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>See David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion*; idem, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*; and David S. Clark, *The Message from Patmos: A Postmillennial Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, for postmillennial views. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, is one of the most carefully argued amillennial commentaries, as is Beale's. Hailey is also clear, while Herman Hoeksema's *Behold, He Cometh!* is comprehensive.

other quarters."<sup>1</sup> He viewed the martyrs of this period as Christians (believers living between the day of Pentecost and the Rapture), rather than as tribulation saints.

### Three Views of Jesus' Second Coming



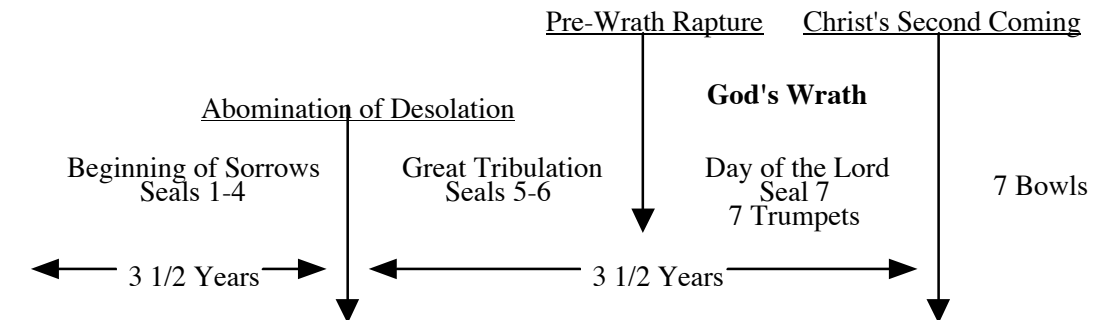
Marvin Rosenthal argued, correctly I believe, that the first four seals describe what Jesus called "the beginning of sorrows" (Matt. 24:8).<sup>2</sup> He equated this period with the first half of Daniel's seventieth week (i.e., three and one-half years, or 42 months). However, he wrote, incorrectly I believe, that the fifth and sixth seals picture "the Great Tribulation" (Matt. 24:21), which he limited to the following 21 months, not the whole second half of Daniel's seventieth week. He further argued, also incorrectly, that the seventh seal begins "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1-2), which he says will only be the final quarter of Daniel's seventieth week, namely, the remaining 21 months (see next diagram). He placed the Rapture at the beginning of *his* "day of the Lord" (just before the last quarter of the Tribulation), which he believed would be the only period of *wrath* poured

<sup>1</sup>Gundry, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*. See Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign*, for a similar view.

out. Thus since the Rapture will occur before it, according to his scheme, we can expect a "Pre-wrath Rapture."<sup>1</sup>

#### Rosenthal's Pre-Wrath Rapture Position



Baxter held a similar view. He believed that the church will go through the "Great Tribulation" but not the "Wrath of God." What he referred to as the "Great Tribulation" is the first part of the seven-year Tribulation "instigated by Satan," and what he called the "Wrath of God" ("affliction by God Himself") is the "awful end-bit" that immediately follows this Great Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:29). So he could be identified as a "pre-wrath rapturist" and a posttribulationist. In contrast to Rosenthal, however, Baxter held that the seven seals (ch. 6) and the seven personages (chs. 12—13) describe his "Great Tribulation," and that the seven trumpets (ch. 8) and the seven bowls (chs. 15—16) describe his "Wrath of God" period.<sup>2</sup>

#### C. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF SALVATION IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION CH. 7

God led John to record what he saw, between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, to explain how He would be merciful during this period of judgment. Chapter 7 answers the question "Who is able to stand?" that closed chapter 6. Warren Wiersbe divided chapters 6—7 into three parts:

<sup>1</sup>For refutations of Rosenthal's view, see Paul S. Karleen, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church—Is it Biblical?*; Gerald B. Stanton, "A Review of *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:589 (January-March 1991):90-111; John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture'," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:592 (October-December 1991):387-98; Renald E. Showers, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture View: An Examination and Critique*; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Is There a Pre-Wrath Rapture?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 381-411.

<sup>2</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:346, 348. See Walvoord, *Prophecy*, pp. 17-19, for more complete charts of the amillennial, postmillennial, and premillennial views of the future.

retribution (6:1-8), response (6:8-17), and redemption (ch. 7).<sup>1</sup> John received two new visions that corrected the possible impression that no one would survive the "beginning of birth-pangs" (6:17).

God will deliver two groups of people during the first half of the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 24:14): He will preserve 144,000 Israelites alive on the earth, and He will take to heaven a multitude of people from all nations who will die during that time. John saw both groups in chapter 7, which contrasts the security of believers in Jesus with the panic of unbelievers during the period just described (ch. 6).<sup>2</sup> It also answers the question posed in 6:17: "Who is able to stand?" Furthermore, it serves as a dramatic literary interlude, delaying briefly the disclosure of what will follow in the seventh seal in order to heighten expectation.

A typical amillennial interpretation of this chapter is as follows:

"This [first part of the chapter, verses 1-8] is *the Church Militant* viewed in its completeness. It is still on earth and sealed as God's. The end of the world is postponed until all are duly sealed. In the second section of the vision, v. 9, etc., we have *the Church Triumphant* before the throne and the Lamb, singing in glory after all the marks of tribulation have been removed."<sup>3</sup>

"The 144,000 are *all of God's people*."<sup>4</sup>

### 1. The sealing of 144,000 Israelites 7:1-8

The setting continues to be on earth.

7:1 The phrase "after this" (Gr. *meta touto*) indicates that what follows is a new vision (cf. 4:1). The general chronological progression of the visions suggests that the events John saw here in chapter 7 will happen at the end of the first half of the Tribulation. What John saw in this vision supports that conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:587.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 252. See also Alford, 4:625.



The "angels" described here were God's *agents* (cf. Heb. 1:14). They appear to be different from the four living creatures and the 24 elder-angels (if they are angels). "Four" of them received the task of keeping the "wind[s]" from blowing. God stationed them at the four "corners" (i.e., compass points) of the earth for this purpose (cf. 20:8; Isa. 11:12; Jer. 49:36; Matt. 24:31).<sup>1</sup> The "winds" represent God's judgments coming on the world (v. 3; cf. Jer. 49:36-38; Dan. 7:2; Hos. 13:15), specifically those about to follow during the remainder of the Tribulation (cf. Ezek. 9:4-8).<sup>2</sup> They probably do not represent "spirits of error."<sup>3</sup> The threefold repetition of "four" probably stresses the universal control of these angels.<sup>4</sup> We should probably understand "the sea" and "any tree" literally, in view of what follows (cf. v. 3).

7:2-3 "Another" (Gr. *allon*, "another of the same kind") angelic messenger appeared in the east ("from the rising of the sun"). In Scripture, divine salvation often comes *from the east* (cf. Gen. 2:8; Ezek. 43:2; Matt. 2:1). This angel possessed "a (The) Seal of the Living God" (caps added), the title adding solemnity and vitality to the seal.<sup>5</sup> A seal was a symbol of ownership (2 Cor. 1:22), authentication (John 6:27), and protection leading to final salvation (Eph. 1:14; 4:30; cf. Gen. 4:15; Exod. 12:7).

A *signet ring* typically made the distinctive impression (the identifying logo of the document's author) on the seal in John's day.<sup>6</sup> This seal's logo is probably the name of the Lamb and His Father (cf. 14:1; Isa. 44:5). The angel instructed the four angels to withhold their judgment on the earth until he had finished sealing God's "bond-servants ... on their foreheads" (cf. Ezek. 9:4). The servants in view are believers in Jesus Christ (cf. Phil. 1:1, et al.) who are Jews (vv. 4-8).

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<sup>1</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 450.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:21.

<sup>3</sup>Henry, p. 1976.

<sup>4</sup>Scott, p. 163; J. B. Smith, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup>Alford, 4:623.

<sup>6</sup>Mounce, p. 167.

"... they, like Saul [the apostle Paul], will be set apart to be God's messengers to the Gentiles."<sup>1</sup>

The "seal" could be visible (Ezek. 9:4) or invisible (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14; 4:30), but the mention of their "foreheads" suggests a *visible* seal (cf. 14:1). Some take the seal as a metaphor of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

"It was not uncommon for a soldier or a guild member to receive such a mark as a religious devotee. The mark was a sign of consecration to deity ... The forehead was chosen because it was the most conspicuous, the most noble, and the part by which a person is usually identified ..."<sup>3</sup>

Their sealing marks these believers as God's redeemed people, and guarantees their protection from divine judgment while they carry out their service for God, on the earth, during the Great Tribulation (14:1, 3-4; cf. 13:16-18; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30). Their seals probably do not protect them from harm that other people inflict on them (cf. 13:7, 15; 20:4), but from the divine judgments sent on unbelievers in the last half of the Tribulation (cf. 16:2). Evidently God will give these 144,000 believers special protection in the last half of the Tribulation, because its calamities will be much more severe than those in the first half. Antichrist will also mark his followers in a similar way (13:16-18; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20).

7:4 The specific references to "Israel" and the *names* of the 12 Israelite tribes (vv. 5-8), strongly suggest that the *nation of Israel* is in view, rather than the church.<sup>4</sup> Most posttribulationists and amillennialists believe the 144,000 are members of "spiritual Israel," a title of theirs for the church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 410.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 473. Cf. Lange, p. 189.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the accuracy of the number 144,000, see Christopher R. Smith, "The Tribes of Revelation 7 and the Literary Competence of John the Seer," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:2 (June 1995):213-18.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:30; Mounce, p. 168; Morris, p. 175; Beasley-Murray, p. 140; Ladd, p. 114-16; Swete, p. 99; Moffatt, 5:395; Lenski, p. 252; Beale, p. 413; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*,

Alford called them the 'first-fruits of the church.'<sup>1</sup> Gundry identified them as "'orthodox' [though unconverted] Jews who will resist the seduction of the Antichrist."<sup>2</sup> He believed God will supernaturally keep them from dying during the Tribulation. He also believed they will accept Jesus Christ when He returns at the Second Coming, and that they will populate the millennial kingdom. The problem with this view is that these witnesses appear to be believers in Jesus Christ. Many interpreters take the number 144,000 as symbolic of all God's servants in the Tribulation.<sup>3</sup>

"Though admittedly ingenious, the case for symbolism is exegetically weak. The principal reason for the view is a predisposition to make the 144,000 into a group representative of the church with which no possible numerical connection exists. No justification can be found for understanding the simple statement of fact in v. 4 as a figure of speech. It is a definite number in contrast with the indefinite number of 7:9. If it is taken symbolically, no number in the book can be taken literally."<sup>4</sup>

"As I read the Bible, when God says '*children of Israel*,' I do not understand Him to mean any but people of Jewish blood, be they Christians or not; and when He speaks of the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob, and gives the names of the tribes, it is impossible for me to believe that He means the Gentiles, in any sense or degree, whether they be believers or not."<sup>5</sup>

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p. 447. See also Alexander Stewart, "The Future of Israel, Early Christian Hermeneutics, and the Apocalypse of John," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61:3 (September 2018):563-75.

<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:684.

<sup>2</sup>Gundry, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Johnson, pp. 463 and 481; and Ladd, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 474.

<sup>5</sup>Seiss, p. 161.

7:5-8 God will deal with Israel as a nation in the future (cf. Rom. 11). Though an Israelite may not know from which tribe he or she comes, or even that he or she is an Israelite, God does. God, or His angelic agent, will select each person for sealing. This listing also confirms the fact that none of the 12 tribes were "lost" during their captivity.

There are at least 19 lists of Jacob's sons in the Old Testament (Gen. 35:22-26; 46:8-25; 49:3-27; Exod. 1:2-5; Num. 1:5-15; 2:3-31; 13:4-15; 26:4-51; 34:19-28; Deut. 27:12-13; 33:6-25; Josh. 13:7-22; Judg. 5:12-18; 1 Chron. 2:1—8:40; 12:24-37; 27:16-22; Ezek. 48:1-7, 23-28, 31-34). Not one of them is the same as the list here. Therefore, the fact that this list is unique, though consisting of 12 tribes, should not lead us to conclude that it does not describe the Israelites.

The "tribe of Judah" was usually first in such lists, as it is here (v. 5), due to the prophecies that it would lead the other tribes, and that Messiah would come from Judah (Gen. 49:10; 1 Chron. 2:3—4:43). "The lion that is from the tribe of Judah" is, paradoxically, also "the Lamb" (5:5; cf. 6:16-17; Heb. 7:13-14).

The listing of Manasseh's name (v. 6) is unusual, since his father Joseph's name also appears. Perhaps this honors Manasseh's faithfulness, in contrast to Ephraim's unfaithfulness.

The tribe of Levi (v. 7), which was often listed separately in the censuses of the Old Testament, is found on equal footing with the other tribes, perhaps "since the Levitical ceremonies have been abandoned."<sup>1</sup>

"Joseph" represents "Ephraim" (v. 8; cf. v. 6). Ephraim was also "notorious for ... fickleness and proclivity to idol worship."<sup>2</sup> Ephraim was the head of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, that apostatized under King Jeroboam I's leadership. Ephraim will also be given land in the millennial kingdom (Ezek.

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<sup>1</sup>Bengel, cited by W. M. Smith, p. 1508.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 130. Cf. Deut. 29:18-21; Hos. 4:17.

48:5). Perhaps the reason Ephraim's name does not appear in this list, though he is included in the reference to "Joseph," is to avoid the unpleasant connotations of his name.<sup>1</sup>

The tribe of *Dan* is absent in this list, perhaps because that tribe was the first to establish idolatry in Israel (Judg. 18:30; cf. 1 Kings 12:29-30). However, the Danites will receive a portion of land in the Millennium (Ezek. 48:1-2). Another view as to the reason for Dan's omission is:

"Hippolytus (*Concerning Antichrist* 14) says: 'As the Christ was born from the tribe of Judah, so will the Antichrist be born from the tribe of Dan.' That is why Dan is missed out from this list ..."<sup>2</sup>

References such as the one in this passage argue strongly for the continuance of Israel as a nation in the future, and for God's dealing with ethnic Jews again as His chosen people (cf. Rom. 11). This is a major assertion of dispensational theology. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, or any other Gentiles who claim to be part of this group today, fail to recognize that these witnesses will be the *physical descendants* of Jacob. When God seals them, they will know their tribal roots. The sealing will take place after the Rapture.

"Prophecy students have frequently said that the whole world needs to hear the gospel before Christ returns. This is true, but it is not a condition that needs to be met before the Rapture. This hearing must occur before the second coming of Christ [cf. Matt. 24:14]. If the whole world needed to hear the gospel before the Rapture, there would be no reason for the 144,000 evangelists during the Tribulation, and there would be no Tribulation saints."<sup>3</sup>

"Some people believe that the 144,000 will be evangelists in the Great Tribulation. But there is no indication that the 144,000 were preachers or prophets; their testimony was

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 481.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:30-31.

<sup>3</sup>Jeremiah, p. 122.

largely from their moral purity [14:4-5] and the fact that they were not martyred like many others."<sup>1</sup>

The sealing of the 144,000 Jewish servants of God in the Tribulation raises the question of the Holy Spirit's relationship to these believers. Will the Spirit baptize them? Evidently He will not, since the baptizing work of the Spirit joins believers to the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). The body of Christ (i.e., the church) will be in heaven during the Tribulation, not on earth. None of the references to the church in Revelation refer to its being on the earth during the Tribulation. The saints who are on the earth during the Tribulation, and the "great multitude" of Revelation 7, are not the church. This implies that the church will not be on the earth during any part of the Tribulation.<sup>2</sup>

Will the Spirit permanently indwell Tribulation saints as He does Christians? Probably He will not. In the Church Age, Spirit indwelling takes place at the same instant as Spirit baptism, namely, at the moment of salvation (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit's indwelling is probably unique to the Church Age, as is His baptizing ministry. Probably the Holy Spirit will *come upon* and *influence* Tribulation saints as He did in Old Testament times.<sup>3</sup> The "sealing" of these 144,000 witnesses, therefore, probably indicates God's special *selection* and *protection* of them during this time of unprecedented global catastrophes. Interpreters who believe that Christ's messianic "kingdom" began during His earthly ministry, believe that the Holy Spirit *will* permanently indwell believers in the Tribulation, as He does now.

## 2. The salvation of the great multitude 7:9-17

There are a number of significant contrasts between the 144,000 and this great multitude, that argue for two different groups, even though some scholars have considered the two groups as one viewed from different perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The number of the first group is not only smaller, but definite, whereas the number of the second group is larger and indefinite. People from the 12 tribes of Israel make up the first group, but people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue comprise the second. God prepares

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 964.

<sup>2</sup>See Showers, *Maranatha ...*, pp. 245-51.

<sup>3</sup>See John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 151, 230.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 424.

the first group for imminent peril on the earth, but the second group is victorious, secure, and at rest in heaven.

"This group, like the 144,000, is unhurt by the effects of God's wrath, but for a different reason. They have at this point been removed from the earthly scene of the wrath and have no need of protective sealing. Someone might ask, 'Are the 144,000 the only ones who have maintained their composure under the first six seals?' This vision responds to such a question negatively. A vast throng has turned to God during this period and have now passed into His immediate presence through death [cf. 6:8]."<sup>1</sup>

This pericope probably describes events transpiring in heaven.

"Without doubt it is one of the most exalted portrayals of the heavenly state to be found anywhere in Scripture."<sup>2</sup>

Others believe this section describes events on earth:

"... it seems to me, that we are here gazing upon an earthly, not a heavenly, company. This great multitude embraces the Gentile nations who will enter into millennial blessing. It is the great ingathering of the coming [Tribulation] dispensation, when from all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues, a vast throng from all parts of the earth will be redeemed to God by the blood of the Lamb, and will enter into the earthly kingdom of our Lord."<sup>3</sup>

7:9      John next saw another vision (cf. v. 1; 4:1). This vision seems to reveal things that were happening in heaven at the same time as what was happening on earth in verses 1-8.

John saw an innumerable "multitude" of people in heaven "standing before [God's] throne." They came from "every nation," and all "tribes," "peoples," and "tongues" on earth—Gentiles and Jews (cf. 5:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15; Gen. 17:4-6; 35:11; 48:19). In view of their very large number, they can

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 482. See also Seiss, pp. 174-76.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, pp. 128-29.

hardly represent Christians who died during the first century, as Aune pointed out.<sup>1</sup> They stood clothed in "white robes" (flowing stoles, cf. 6:11) symbolic of their righteousness and purity (v. 14).

This multitude appears to be the same as the one referred to earlier in 6:9-11 (cf. v. 14). These believers had died either natural or violent deaths during the first half of the Tribulation. They had since joined the angels in the heavenly throne-room that John saw previously (chs. 4—5; cf. v. 11). Now they held "palm branches" symbolizing their victory and joy (cf. John 12:13). They are seen here worshipping and serving God in heaven, before the Millennium. Amillennialists typically view this group as including the whole church, including the last generation of Christians, in heaven.<sup>2</sup> I do not think it is correct to equate this multitude with saved Gentiles on the earth at the beginning of the Millennium (cf. Matt. 25:31), as some have done.<sup>3</sup>

7:10 Together these Tribulation saints praise God and the Lamb for their "salvation," specifically their physical deliverance from the Tribulation scene and their consequent victory (cf. 12:10; 19:1). John never used "save" (Gr. *sozo*) to denote salvation from sin, and it is questionable whether he ever used "salvation" (*soteria*) in this sense either.<sup>4</sup> Rather, he used it of other forms of deliverance. Probably the Feast of Tabernacles is in the background of what John saw here (cf. v. 15). This multitude has entered into its rest, something that the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated (cf. Deut. 16:13-15; Neh. 8:15). The Jews also used palm branches in the celebration of this feast, which was a time of great joy.

7:11 Other "angels," besides the four living creatures and the 24 elders, gathered "around the throne." The angelic host assembled joined these Tribulation saints in prostrating

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 466-67.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Charles, 1:202; Alford, 4:628; Lenski, p. 245; Beale, pp. 426-30; Beasley-Murray, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:230-31.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 489-90.



themselves ("fell on their faces") before God *in worship* (cf. Luke 15:8-10).

- 7:12 This is one of many doxologies in Revelation. "Blessing" or "praise" (Gr. *eulogia*) is what God deserves because of what He will do for these people (cf. 5:12, 13). It is "that spontaneous act of thanks which men utter when they realize more vividly than ever before their happiness."<sup>1</sup> "Glory" (*doxa*) is the honor due Him because of His good reputation, specifically for delivering them (cf. 1:6; 4:11; 5:12, 13; 19:1).<sup>2</sup> "Wisdom" (*sophia*) is God's infinite knowledge displayed in His plan of deliverance (cf. 5:12). "Thanksgiving" (*eucharistia*) literally means "well" and "to give freely," but it denotes an expression of gratitude for a favor rendered (4:9).<sup>3</sup>

"Honor" or "esteem" (*time*) is what God deserves because He has planned and provided this salvation (4:11; 5:12, 13).<sup>4</sup> "Power" (*dynamis*) reflects God's omnipotence that enables Him to overcome all opposition (4:11; 5:12; 19:1). "Might" or "strength" (*ischys*) refers to God's inherent power that enabled Him to deliver this multitude from their enemies (5:12).<sup>5</sup> God is worthy of this worship throughout eternity. "Amen" underlines the truthfulness of this sevenfold ascription (cf. 5:13).

- 7:13 Occasionally, in prophetic visions, a dialogue takes place involving one of the characters in the vision and the person receiving it (cf. Jer. 1:11, 13; Amos 7:8; 8:2; Zech. 4:2, 5). Here one of the elders asked John a question anticipating the question that was in John's mind. This led to a clarification of the identity of the multitude in this vision (cf. 5:5; Josh. 9:8; Jon. 1:8).

- 7:14 John did not know the identity of these individuals, so the elder told him who they were. They are "those who are coming out from the great tribulation." Jesus coined the term "the Great

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<sup>1</sup>R. H. Preston and A. T. Hanson, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup>G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup>F. C. Jennings, *Studies in Revelation*, p. 230.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 491-92.

Tribulation" (Matt. 24:15, 21), and identified it as the second half of Daniel's seventieth week (Matt. 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; cf. Dan. 9:27). Positioned as this vision is just before the midpoint of the Tribulation, before the Great Tribulation begins, the elder must have meant that this multitude came out of the Great Tribulation *before* it began. The Greek preposition *ek* ("out of") permits such an interpretation.

Another possibility is that the elder meant that these saints came out *during* the Great Tribulation, which the Greek preposition allows, but which the placement of this vision between the sixth and seventh seals does not favor. A third view is that they departed *after* the Great Tribulation was complete.<sup>1</sup> This is unacceptable for two reasons. First, the Greek verb *erchomenoi* ("are coming") is a present participle indicating an ongoing departure. Second, this view makes an unwarranted distinction between the Great Tribulation and the outpouring of God's wrath. God promised to keep *Christians* completely out of the Tribulation (3:10; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; et al.), but these *Tribulation saints* will come out of the first half of it, while it is still in progress.<sup>2</sup>

*Washing* "their robes" in the Lamb's "blood" is a figure of speech for salvation (22:14; cf. Zech. 3:4-5). Another interpretation is that "washed their robes" is a figurative expression picturing that they had purified their deeds (22:14; cf. 19:8). This would make the entire passage (vv. 14-17) a description of *faithful* Tribulation saints, instead of *all* Tribulation saints. The issue hinges on whether "robe" represents the believer's garment of salvation or his good works here. Scripture uses "robe" both ways elsewhere.

Since all the redeemed will eventually go into God's presence, it seems unwarranted to limit this innumerable multitude to faithful saints. The fact that they died during the first half of the Tribulation does not necessarily mean that they were all martyrs who died for their testimony as believers. An amillennial interpretation is that this "washing of robes" is a

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<sup>1</sup>Rosenthal, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 135.

symbolic picture of all Christians who will have suffered in various ways for their faith.<sup>1</sup>

"In modern thought, making anything white by washing it in blood is paradoxical and even shocking, but it was not so with John and those with an OT background. To them such washing denoted spiritual purity. Not just any blood would accomplish the cleansing. The blood of martyrs shed for the Lamb's sake would not even do it. It had to be the blood of the Lamb's great sacrifice to produce the whiteness (Rev. 1:5; 5:9; cf. Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:20; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7) ..."<sup>2</sup>

The *en* ("in") has instrumental force here; Christ's blood is what made their robes white. Contrast 12:11 where *dia* ("because of") expresses the means of victory, namely, His blood and their faithfulness. Blood is a metaphor for violent death.

7:15 These saints will be in God's presence because they will have believed in Jesus Christ and will have died in the first half of the Tribulation. Evidently they will have intermediate bodies until their resurrections (cf. Matt. 17:1-3; Luke 16:19-25; Rev. 6:9-11). This appears to be the condition of Christians who die before the Rapture too (cf. 2 Cor. 5:2-3). These Tribulation saints will serve God continually ("day and night") in His present heavenly sanctuary.

There will be no "temple" in the New Jerusalem (21:22), so what John saw here was not a vision of the New Jerusalem. God will protect them and share fellowship with ("spread His tabernacle over") them in heaven. The elder's description of God spreading His tabernacle over them recalls Old Testament instances of God dwelling among and protecting His people (cf. Exod. 13:21-22; 40:34-38; 2 Chron. 7:1-3) and His promises

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 433. See Richard Shalom Yates, "Studies on the Tribulation Saints," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:649 (January-March 2006):79-93; 163:650 (April-June 2006):215-33; 163:651 (July-September 2006):322-34, for a thorough study of Tribulation saints.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 498.

to do so (cf. Lev. 26:11-12; Isa. 4:5-6; Ezek. 37:27; Zech. 2:10, 11; 8:3, 8; cf. Rev. 13:6; 21:3).

7:16-17 They will "no longer" experience the privations and discomforts of their earthly existence ("hunger," "thirst," "heat" [overheating, heat- or sun-stroke, or heat exhaustion]; cf. Isa. 49:10, LXX; John 4:14; 6:35; 7:37).

"The Lamb," now seen standing before "the middle (in the center) of the throne," will provide for them as a *good* "shepherd" takes care of his sheep (cf. Ps. 23:1-4; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:23; John 10:11, 14; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:2-4). The Lamb will refresh them ("lead them to springs of the water of life"), as well as protect them (cf. Exod. 15:13; Deut. 1:33; Ps. 5:11-12; 85:11; John 16:13). The Lamb will "lead" these sheep to God, who is the Fountain of Life (21:6; 22:1, 17; cf. Ps. 35:10; John 4:12, 14; 7:38-39). As a loving parent, He will wipe away the tears they shed because of their sufferings (cf. 21:4; Isa. 25:8).

"The ultimate fulfillment of these seven promises (7:15b-17) will come in the eternal state described more fully in Revelation 21-22, but John's 'snapshot' of the innumerable multitude catches them in heaven at a point just before the beginning of the last half of the seven years of Daniel's seventieth week."<sup>1</sup>

"While each of the seven rewards contains some aspect of literal fulfillment, each one also figuratively pictures God's pledge to be present with Tribulation saints to protect, shepherd, and comfort them in the eternal state (Rev. 7:15b-17). These rewards are also promised for today's believers in order to encourage them to be faithful (21:1-5)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 504.

<sup>2</sup>Yates, p. 333.

The location of this revelation in the context of John's visions is significant. It strongly argues for these two groups—the 144,000 living Jewish believers and the multitude of dead believers—existing during the Tribulation, after Christians have gone to heaven in the Rapture. God will save multitudes of people during this time (just after the Rapture through the first half of the Tribulation). It will be harder for all people to believe the gospel after the Rapture than it is now. However, it may not be impossible, for people who have rejected the gospel before the Rapture, to believe it from then on (cf. 2 Thess. 2:11-12).

THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF REVELATION 6—18			
The Seals			
FIRST SIX (ch. 6)	Supplementary Revelation (ch. 7)	SEVENTH (chs. 8—16)	
The Trumpets			
FIRST SIX (chs. 8—9)	Supplementary Revelation (10:1—11:14)	SEVENTH (11:15—16:21)	Supplementary Revelation (chs. 12—15)
The Bowls			
FIRST SIX (16:1-16)		SEVENTH (16:17-21)	Supplementary Revelation (chs. 17—18)

#### D. THE FIRST SIX TRUMPET JUDGMENTS CHS. 8—9

John now received a revelation of more judgments to take place next on earth, to prepare his readers for these events. Wiersbe believed chapters 6—9 describe what happens in the first half of the Tribulation, chapters 10—14 what happens in the middle, and chapters 15—19 what happens

in the last half.<sup>1</sup> Lenski held that the trumpets "recapitulate and repeat the respective seals with different symbols."<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The first four trumpet judgments ch. 8

Chapter 7 introduced additional information between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals. Now the chronological progression of judgments resumes. The scene John saw continues to be in heaven.

Verses 1 through 6 introduce the seven trumpets, just as 4:1—5:14 introduced the seven seals, and 15:1-8 introduces the seven bowls.

#### **The seventh seal 8:1**

"When the Lamb broke the seventh seal" of the scroll, "silence" fell on the heavenly scene. For "about half an hour" awesome silence continued, as all of those assembled around the throne waited expectantly to see what God would do next. This is probably a literal "about 30 minutes," since there are no clues in Revelation that we should interpret time references non-literally. Beale interpreted the silence as representing the final judgment, but said he did not know why it lasts for about a half hour.<sup>3</sup> Alford believed that it symbolizes the rest that the people of God will enjoy (in eternity).<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the silence, in John's vision, is apparently to prepare for what is about to happen, by heightening expectation of God's awesome judgments to follow (cf. Job 4:16; Ps. 46:10; Hab. 2:20; 3:3; Zeph. 1:7-8, 15, 17-18; Zech. 2:13).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the silence represents God listening to the prayers of the saints.<sup>6</sup> It is the lull before the storm, just as when, a few moments of calm normally precede the most devastating destruction of a tornado or hurricane. Many futurist interpreters believe that this lull marks the middle of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week and that the "birth pangs" now give way to the "Great Tribulation."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:587. See also Robert L. Dean Jr., "Chronological Issues in the Book of Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:670 (April-June 2011):217-26.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, pp. 447-54.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:630.

<sup>5</sup>Henry, p. 1977.

<sup>6</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 152. See Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 507-8, for other views.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., John McLean, "Chronology and Sequential Structure of John's Revelation," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 313-51.

**Introduction to the seven trumpet judgments 8:2-6**

8:2 John saw someone, perhaps God, hand out "seven trumpets" to a group of "seven angels" standing before the heavenly throne (cf. 1:4; 3:1; 8:6; 15:1). Exactly who these angels were is not clear. Some interpreters have identified them with seven archangels in Jewish tradition (cf. Book of Jubilees 1:27, 29; 2:1-2, 18; 15:27; 31:14; Tobit 12:15; 1 Enoch 20:2-8),<sup>1</sup> but there is no basis for this in Revelation. They are apparently simply seven other angels who have great authority. These trumpets will apparently be different from "the trumpet of God" (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16) and other trumpets mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament (Heb. 12:19; Rev. 1:10; 4:1), although the other trumpets similarly announce God's working (cf. Ezek. 33:3).

Trumpets play a major role in God's dealings with His people (cf. Exod. 19:16; 20:18; Isa. 27:13; Jer. 4:5; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:16). They were part of Israel's ceremonial processions (e.g., Josh. 6:4, 13-16; 1 Kings 1:34, 39; 1 Chron. 15:24), and they assembled the Israelites for war, journeys, and special feasts (e.g., Num. 10:9-10). They also warned of the coming day of the Lord (e.g., Joel 2:1), and they announced the new year in Israel (e.g., Num. 29:1). They often announced God's intervention in history. Here they announce divine judgment(s) in the day of the Lord (cf. Zech. 1:14-16). They declare war.

"Jericho fell at the sound of seven trumpets, and the world, as you and I know it, is going to fall at the sound of the seven trumpets of doom, blown by these angels of judgment."<sup>2</sup>

8:3 The vision at this point is very reminiscent of priestly service as it took place in Israel's tabernacle and temples. "Another angel," this one acting as a priest, came into view and "stood" before the "golden [incense] altar" in heaven (cf. 6:9). His "golden censer," appropriate in view of God's presence,

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., *ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 145.

contained coals of fire. The angel received "more (much) incense" to "add ... to the prayers of (all) the saints," that is, "all" the ones who were already there. This may indicate that the prayers of the Tribulation saints (6:10) combined with those of the rest of God's people requesting God's justice (cf. 5:8; 9:13; 14:18; Ps. 141:2). This "other angel" has been identified as Christ by some interpreters, because of his priestly activity.<sup>1</sup>

"No saint's prayer is forgotten, but has its effect in due season, in bringing in the Kingdom, that is, our Lord's return!

"It is the answer at last to 'Thy Kingdom come' which the saints of all ages have prayed. No other answer could be given, inasmuch as earth has rejected the rightful King!"<sup>2</sup>

8:4 The angel then offered this incense on top of the coals on the golden incense altar. The "smoke" of the incense "went up before God," symbolizing His receiving of the prayers of His people.<sup>3</sup> Clearly the "incense," while symbolizing *prayer* (5:8), is distinct from prayer here. However, the total impression is of "prayers" *commingling* while the angel pours more incense on the altar. The angel-priest facilitates these prayers, though Jesus Christ, of course, is the only mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). Some believe that it is His prayers of intercession for His own that are added.<sup>4</sup>

8:5 Then the angel "took coals (fire)" from "the altar," placed them in ("filled") his "censer," and "threw" them out onto "the earth." These coals of fire, symbolic of judgment, produced symbols of catastrophe: "thunder," "lightning," and "earthquake" (cf. Ezek. 10:2-7). The censer thus became a symbolic instrument of judgment in response to prayer.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 185; Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:230; Ironside, pp. 146-48.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 270.



8:6 The whole scene quite clearly symbolizes God sending judgment on the earth in response to His people's accumulated prayers (cf. Exod. 3:7-10; 19:16-19; Rev. 4:5; 11:19; 16:18). The trumpet judgments to follow are what He will send: "the seven angels ... prepared ... to sound ... the seven trumpets." The storm theophany, therefore, apparently implies the awful calamities that will come in the trumpet and bowl judgments that are ahead.<sup>1</sup>

"In the heavenly order of things the greatest honour is to be ever ready to be sent on the service of God; and that is the honour these angels possessed."<sup>2</sup>

All the trumpet judgments seem to proceed out of the seventh seal judgment.<sup>3</sup> In other words, when the Lamb broke the seventh seal, John saw not just one judgment but a whole new series of judgments. There is every reason to conclude that these will follow chronologically.<sup>4</sup> We shall see, after the first six trumpet judgments, that seven bowl judgments apparently proceed out of the seventh trumpet judgment in the same way.<sup>5</sup> Some interpreters, however, believe the trumpet judgments merely recap and restate the seal judgments.<sup>6</sup> Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's interpretation is similar to this, as the following quotation indicates:

"The seventh trumpet (11:15-19) winds up God's vast plan of providence and grace in redemption, just as the seventh seal brings it to the same consummation. So also the seventh vial, ch. 16:17. Not that the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials, though parallel, are repetitions. They each trace the course of divine action up to the grand

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<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8—22: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:50.

<sup>3</sup>For proof that the trumpet judgments telescope out from the seventh seal rather than recapitulating the seals judgments, see *ibid*, pp. 3-5, 525-43.

<sup>4</sup>See Tenney, p. 71; Ladd, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup>See the chart "The Tribulation Judgments" at the beginning of my discussion of chapter 6 for a visual representation of this relationship.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Dale Ralph Davis, "The Relationship Between the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls in the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16 (Summer 1973):149-58; and Beale, p. 472.

consummation in which they all meet, under a different aspect."<sup>1</sup>

Alford held a similar view:

"... I regard these first four trumpets as setting forth the gradual subjugation of the earth to Him whose kingdom it is in the end to become, by judgments inflicted on the ungodly, as regards the vitiating and destroying the ordinary means of subsistence, and comfort, and knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

The trumpet and bowl judgments are the ones that the angel from the east held back until the bond-servants of God were sealed on their foreheads (7:3). Therefore, they are more severe than the first six seal judgments. Their object is to lead hostile unbelievers to repentance, and to announce punitive judgments against hardened unbelievers—but few will repent (9:20-21). Lenski believe that the first four trumpet judgments describe "destructive religious delusions in the whole world."<sup>3</sup>

### **The first trumpet 8:7**

The scene shifts again, this time from heaven to earth. This first trumpet blast signaled the beginning of a judgment that involved "hail" ..., "fire" ... (lightning?), and "blood" (bloodshed? cf. Exod. 9:23-26; Ezek. 38:22).

"Blood-red rain is not unknown in nature; in the spring of 1901 the daily journals contained accounts of this phenomenon, which was then being witnessed in Italy and the South of Europe, the result, it was said, of the air being full of particles of fine red sand from the Sahara."<sup>4</sup>

This judgment resulted in the fiery destruction of "a third of the earth" (cf. Ezek. 5:2; Zech. 13:8-9).

"I must ... take these descriptions in the only really ascertainable sense of them, and insist that a mighty storm of hail and fire mingled with blood means a storm of hail and fire

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., pp. 1550-51.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:635.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 277.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 110.

mingled with blood; that earth, trees, and all green grass means earth, trees, and all green grass; and that the burning, and scorching, and destruction means burning, scorching, and destruction."<sup>1</sup>

Many less literal interpreters believe the "fire" represents judgment more generally, and that "a third of the earth" simply means a large portion of humankind. Alford held that the third indicates that God "spares more than He smites."<sup>2</sup>

This holocaust will include "a third" of earth's "trees" and "all" of its "green grass." There are two explanations of how *all* the grass is burned up here, but later in 9:4, we read that grass exists: First, the grass will have grown again, because some time elapses between these two references. Second, it may only be the "green grass" that perishes now, and what is *dormant and brown* in 8:7 will be *green* when the events of 9:4 transpire. These trumpet and bowl judgments appear to be as literal as the plagues on Egypt were. There are many parallels with the Egyptian plagues.

"The OT prophets understood that the miracles of Egypt were to be repeated in the future (e.g., Isa. 10:22-25; 11:12-16; 30:30; Jer. 16:14-15; 23:7-8; Ezek. 38:22; Mic. 7:15) ... At several points the prophet Amos uses God's miraculous work of deliverance from Egypt as a reference point for the way He will deal with His people in the future (cf. Amos 2:10; 4:10; 8:8-9; 9:5-7)."<sup>3</sup>

### The second trumpet 8:8-9

Following the blowing of the second trumpet, something "like [cf. 6:13] a great mountain" that was on ("burning with") "fire" came crashing down from heaven into the waters of one or more of the earth's seas. This resulted in "a third of the oceans (sea)," perhaps meaning a third of the oceans' *waters*, not necessarily the things they contain, becoming "blood." Whether the water became *actual* blood, or became a substance like blood, or simply looked like blood, is difficult to determine from the text (cf. Exod. 7:20-21; Ps. 78:43-44; Joel 2:31; Zeph. 1:3). The oceans' water could become *literal* blood. I understand that the only chemical difference

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:636.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 16.

between seawater and blood, is that blood contains an iron molecule that is absent in seawater. Perhaps this mountain-like mass (a meteor?) will provide such a molecule, resulting in a change in the chemical composition of these seas.

"The mountain is probably best understood as being a literal large body that fell from heaven. Since the results are literal, it is reasonable to take the judgments as literal also."<sup>1</sup>

"A third of the creatures" living "in the seas ... died," and "a third of the ships" on the seas perished ("were destroyed"). Beale took the "mountain" figuratively, to represent a kingdom, specifically the Babylon referred to in chapters 11—18.<sup>2</sup> Arno Gaebelin also believed it was a kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

"In the eruption of 1573, the sea round Thera [an island close to Patmos] was tinted for twenty miles round, and even when the submarine volcano is quiescent, 'the sea in the immediate vicinity of the cone is of a brilliant orange colour, from the action of oxide of iron'. In 1707 a large rock suddenly appeared in the [Aegean] sea, during the eruption, and owing to noxious vapours 'all fish in the harbor died'."<sup>4</sup>

"As of January 1, 1981 there were 24,867 ocean-going merchant ships registered. Imagine the shock waves that would hit the shipping industry if 8,289 valuable ships were suddenly destroyed! And what about their cargoes!"<sup>5</sup>

John was clearly describing supernatural interventions, not natural happenings.

### The third trumpet 8:10-11

Next, "a great star" (a meteor or comet, since a literal "falling" *star* would vaporize the earth) "fell from heaven" on the fresh water sources on earth. Sometimes stars represent angels (e.g., 9:1), but here something mineral seems to be in view. It too was *on fire* (vv. 7, 8), "burning like a torch."

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 951.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 476,

<sup>3</sup>Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:231.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:405. He did not clearly identify the source of his quotations.

<sup>5</sup>Wiersbe, 2:593.

The ancients sometimes used "torch" (this Greek word, *lampas*) to describe a *meteor* shooting through the sky.<sup>1</sup> It poisoned ("made bitter") "a third of the rivers and streams (springs of waters)," and "many people (men) died" from drinking the poisoned water.

"Since a single star cannot fall on a third of the rivers and springs, this description cannot be construed literally; rather it means that the burning star *affected* a third part of the rivers and springs."<sup>2</sup>

The National Geographic Society has listed 100 major rivers in the world, ranging in length from 4,000 miles (the Amazon) to 150 miles (the Rio de la Plata).<sup>3</sup> "Wormwood" means "bitter" (cf. Deut. 29:18, et al.). It was the name of a bitter herb that was not fatally poisonous, but noxious.<sup>4</sup> It was also a symbol of divine punishment (Jer. 9:15; 23:15; Lam. 3:15, 19; Amos 5:7). This judgment recalls the *bitter* water that God gave the rebellious Israelites to drink in the wilderness, which, when the tree was thrown in, turned *sweet* (Exod. 15:23-25), as well as the first Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:21).

To Gaebelien, the star represented "some person who claimed authority and who becomes an apostate, whose fall produces the awful results given here."<sup>5</sup>

### The fourth trumpet 8:12

This time, the trumpet blast announced judgment on "a third" of the heavenly bodies ("sun ... moon ... stars"). *Darkness* is a common symbol of judgment in the Old Testament, and the day of the Lord was to be a time of both figurative and literal darkness (Amos 5:18; cf. Isa. 13:10; Joel 2:2; Mark 13:24). The darkening of the heavenly bodies predicted in this verse also serves to warn of more judgment to come. Evidently God will cut back the total amount of light from the sun, moon, and stars from the earth by one-third (cf. Exod. 10:21-23).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 521.

<sup>3</sup>Cited by Wiersbe, 2:593.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:54.

<sup>5</sup>Gaebelien, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:231. See also Ironside, p. 151.

<sup>6</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 522.

The text seems to imply that God will reduce the *intensity* of light from these sources by one-third (cf. Matt. 27:45), or perhaps, the total number of daylight *hours* will be reduced ("the day would not shine for a third of it"). Perhaps a partial eclipse, or pollution of the atmosphere, is in view. Such a reduction in light or sunlight hours, and consequently a catastrophic drop in temperature, would have a devastating effect on the earth. A non-literal interpretation views the darkness as spiritual darkness.

"The symbolical meaning of this trumpet judgment is that all authority within the revived Roman empire will be smitten by the hand of one above and as a result there will be the most awful moral darkness."<sup>1</sup>

### The warning concerning the final three trumpets 8:13

"And I looked" (Gr. *kai eidon*) signals a new scene in John's vision. John next saw, on earth, an "eagle" interrupting the angels by "flying" through the sky ("in mid-heaven"), and warning those living on the earth to beware of the last "three ... trumpet" judgments. This could be a literal eagle (Gr. *aetou*, also translated "vulture," Luke 17:37). God has given animals the ability to communicate with people in the past (cf. Gen. 3:1-5; Num. 22:28-30). Eagles (or vultures) are birds of prey that fly very fast, covering great distances in a short time, and are a sign of disaster (Matt. 24:28). Thus this eagle is a fitting herald of God's judgments to come.

Another possibility is that this eagle is an *angel* that *looked* like an eagle (cf. 12:14). Some view it as a symbol of nature, which God uses to send messages and warnings to people.<sup>2</sup> Another commentator viewed the eagle as a symbol of "judgment and vengeance rushing to its prey."<sup>3</sup> Mid-heaven is the position of the sun at noon, when everyone can see this bird.<sup>4</sup> Obviously John was describing things from his vantage point. The eagle's (or angel's) "loud voice" further guarantees that everyone on the earth will hear its message. The eagle announces the last three trumpet judgments, which are also referred to as "woes" (9:12; 10:14). They are especially bad because they have people, rather than the objects of nature, as their targets. There are several examples of double-woes in Scripture (18:10,

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<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:232.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:56.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:639.

<sup>4</sup>Morris, p. 125.

16, 19; Ezek. 16:23), but a triple-woe announces an even worse calamity. The objects of these judgments are earth-dwellers, and their judgment is partially in response to the prayers of the Tribulation martyrs (cf. 6:10).

## **2. The fifth and sixth trumpet judgments ch. 9**

John continued to relay the revelation of the trumpet judgments that he had received, in order to clarify God's future plans for his readers. John was still viewing things happening on the earth.

"In this chapter there are more occurrences of the words 'as' and 'like' than in any other chapter in the Bible, which shows how difficult it was for John to describe the scene which he saw in the vision."<sup>1</sup>

### **The fifth trumpet (first woe) 9:1-11**

"Already introduced by the eagle's proclamation in 8:13, the fifth trumpet sets the tone for the last three trumpets through its specificity and independence of the two to follow. This feature marks the last three seals too. The seventh trumpet also resembles the seventh seal in the way it solemnly concludes the whole and contains the next series within its scope. As with the seals also, two episodes intervene between the sixth and seventh members. In so doing, the episodes set the stage for the seventh trumpet."<sup>2</sup>

Gaebelein believed that at this point in the text the second half of the Tribulation comes into prominence.<sup>3</sup>

### **The impact of the locusts 9:1-6**

9:1            Again John saw a "star" (cf. 6:13; 8:10), but this time the "star" was an intelligent being. If "fallen" (Gr. *peptokota*) has theological connotations, the "star" may refer to Satan<sup>4</sup> (vv. 2, 11; cf. 1:20; Job. 38:7; Luke 10:18) or some other fallen

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<sup>1</sup>Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:232.

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 952.

angel.<sup>1</sup> If, on the other hand, "fallen" simply describes his condition as having come to earth from heaven, an *unfallen* angel is probably in view (cf. 20:1). Since this angelic being simply carries out God's instructions faithfully, I tend to think he is an unfallen angel. Or he may be the apostate leader mentioned in 8:10-11, if the star there is an apostate leader.<sup>2</sup> Some take the star as personifying judgment from God.<sup>3</sup>

"To the Jewish mind the stars were divine beings, who by disobedience could become demonic and evil and hostile to God."<sup>4</sup>

The "bottomless pit" (lit. "shaft of the abyss") is the abode of Satan (v. 11; 20:1-3), some demons (cf. Luke 8:31; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), and the beast (11:7; 17:8). It is evidently a preliminary prison, not their final abode, which is the lake of fire (i.e., hell, 19:20; 20:10; cf. Matt. 25:41), from which this angel is about to release some of them temporarily. This "star"-angel received "the key" to the door of this "pit" from a greater authority, possibly God Himself.

"A fearsome cavity ... emitting poisonous exhalations once existed near Hierapolis (Pliny, *H[istory]. N[atural]*. ii. 95). Such chasms (throughout Italy, Greece and Asia) seemed, to the superstitious, local inlets into Hades and outlets for infernal air in the shape of mephitic vapours. In Phrygia itself springs of hot vapour and smoke are a feature of the Lycos valley ..., and the volcanic cone in the harbor of Thera was believed to be such an aperture of hell."<sup>5</sup>

9:2 John saw "smoke" rising from the shaft leading to an underground chamber. The smoke probably symbolizes the terribleness of the place from which the "locusts" (v. 3) emerge (cf. Eph. 2:2). In Revelation, smoke usually relates to

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:643-44.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:57.

<sup>5</sup>Moffatt, 5:406.



judgment, doom, and torment (vv. 17, 18; 18:9; 19:3), though it also has connections with holy things (8:4; 15:8). The context here obviously specifies a negative connotation (cf. Gen. 19:28; Exod. 19:18). What John saw resembled smoke billowing out of an active volcano.

9:3      What he *saw* next was probably an unknown but literal kind of locust (cf. Exod. 10:12-20).<sup>1</sup> Others have suggested that John saw modern instruments of warfare that looked like locusts.

The Old Testament attests the destructive power of locusts (cf. Deut. 28:38; 2 Chron. 7:13; Joel 2:25). They often swarmed in apparently limitless numbers (cf. Ps. 105:34; Nah. 3:15). Joel likened what would come on the earth in the day of the Lord to a locust invasion (Joel 1—2). The locust is a symbol of destruction throughout the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kings 8:37; Ps. 78:46).

Yet the "locusts" John saw had the "power" to hurt people to the degree that "scorpions" can, an ability that normal locusts are missing. They also had a leader (v. 11), which normal locusts do not have (Prov. 30:27). Probably these are *demons* who assume some of the characteristics of locusts.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, they may be demon possessed locusts.<sup>3</sup> Spirit (demonic) beings later appear as frogs (16:13). A less literal interpretation has seen these locusts as "the forces of evil which are active in the world" and "memories of the past brought home at times of Divine visitation, which hurt by recalling forgotten sins."<sup>4</sup> Another writer described them as "evil teachings."<sup>5</sup> Still others take these locusts, and the other creatures that follow in this part of the vision, to represent God's curses on the earth.<sup>6</sup>

"Should we assume the prophet saw something like a motion picture of the future in his vision and

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 129-32. Cf. Joel 1:6; 2:4-10.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:406; Mounce, p. 194; Ladd, p. 131; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 527.

<sup>3</sup>Paul L. Tan, *Jesus Is Coming*, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, pp. 116, 118.

<sup>5</sup>Ironside, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 290.

then attempted to explain it in terms of images he understood? Or did he see a picture precisely in the images he gives, images which paint reality rather than describing it? Which description of those options is 'more literal'? Is it the one that focuses on how it might look to us, so we explain what he meant in words and images very different from the prophet's terms and images? Or should one focus on how it looked to the prophet and how it appears in the ancient text? We would thus attempt to understand his words in their literary character, both by examining the image in context and the Old Testament images and background(s) it evokes."<sup>1</sup>

The writer just quoted believed John saw locusts.

9:4 God commissioned these creatures to inflict severe pain ("hurt") on the earth-dwellers "who [did] not have" God's mark ("seal") of ownership and protection "on their foreheads" (cf. 7:3-8). Normally locusts eat only vegetation, but these diabolical creatures will "only" attack and afflict human beings. They were not to harm nature but humans.

9:5 They could not ("were not permitted to") "kill" people (cf. Job 2:6), and their mission lasted only "five months," perhaps because that is the normal lifespan of locusts.<sup>2</sup> The wound they caused would be very painful, "like the torment [caused by] a scorpion when it stings a man," but not fatal.

"The scorpion belongs to the largest and most malignant of all insect tribes. Its general appearance is like a lobster, but much more hideous. Its sting located near the end of its tail is not always fatal, but can be. It ranks with the

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<sup>1</sup>Darrell L. Bock, "Interpreting the Bible—How Texts Speak to Us," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2178.

snake in its hostility toward human beings (cf. Luke 10:19; 11:12)."<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Henry believed that the hurt these locusts inflict is spiritual, rather than physical.<sup>2</sup> This seems unlikely in view of the next verse.

9:6 Because of the influence of these scorpion-like locusts, people "will seek death," but will not be able to escape their pain ("not find it"). They "will long for death (to die)" rather than repenting.

Since 4:1, John had been reporting what he saw, but now he spoke *as a prophet* predicting the future.

"For the first time the Apostle ceases to be the exponent of what he saw, and becomes the direct organ of the Spirit ..."<sup>3</sup>

This is one of the indications that Revelation is also *prophetic*, rather than just *apocalyptic* in genre.

### The characteristics of the locusts 9:7-11

9:7 John proceeded to describe the creatures he saw, from head to tail. Some interpreters view these beings as natural locusts, while others believe they represent an army of men. Still others interpret them as demons. Locusts resemble "horses" when viewed through a magnifying glass. However, John's description of these creatures seems to indicate that they were unusually grotesque and frightening (cf. Joel 2:4). Their "crowns (Gr. *stephanos*) like gold" probably symbolize their victory over the objects of their oppression. A variation of this interpretation is that the crowns imply invincibility.<sup>4</sup> Their resemblance to men ("faces ... like the faces of men")

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, p. 1978.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:641.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 532.

suggests their intelligence, but clearly they are not men (cf. vv. 3-4).

- 9:8 The antennae of normal locusts are not hair, and, while they have hair on their legs, the comparison of the demonic locusts, with the "hair of women," suggests hair *on their heads*. Perhaps the reference to hair like women's, presumably long hair, is to convey their wildness.

"An old Arab proverb is often quoted which says that the locust has a head like a horse, a breast like a lion, feet like a camel, a body like a serpent, and antennae like the hair of a maiden."<sup>1</sup>

Long hair in biblical times was a sign of glory, so perhaps they have some glory. "Lion"-like "teeth" denote voracity.

- 9:9 Their "iron ... breastplates," which covered both chest and back in John's day, gave them the appearance of invulnerability (cf. v. 17).<sup>2</sup> The "sound" of their activity ("wings") will be terrifying, "like the sound of chariots" and "many horses rushing to battle" (cf. Joel 2:4-5; 2 Kings 7:6; Jer. 47:3). Indeed their sound signifies battle with earth-dwellers.

- 9:10 Their ability and their mission to *sting* ("hurt") people, with the stings from the "stingers" in their "tails," also suggest abnormal characteristics. This verse reprises verse 5. The repetition serves to stress the awfulness of their power to hurt people.

- 9:11 Their "king" is "the (leading) angel of the abyss." This is further confirmation that the locusts represent demons. The names "Abaddon" in Hebrew, and "Apollyon" in Greek, both mean "Destroyer." Only the Apostle John supplied information *bilingually* in the New Testament (cf. John 1:38, 42; 4:25; 6:1; 9:7; 11:16; 19:13, 17, 20; 20:16; Rev. 1:7; 3:14; 12:9). The objective of these demons, like their leader's name implies, is to destroy people. God grants this lead "angel-king" creature permission, here in this judgment, to carry out his objective

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:364.

against unbelievers, as part of God's outpouring of wrath on earth-dwellers (cf. Job 2:6).

Probably we should identify this angel as one of the hierarchy of *fallen angels* that emerges from the abyss with the other demons (cf. Eph. 6:12).<sup>1</sup> The revelation of his name, Destroyer, simply expresses his objective. Identifying him as *Satan* is tempting.<sup>2</sup> But the text only calls him an "angel." The appearance of "Satan," later (12:3, 9), is much more dramatic than the introduction of this angel.

"There is no such thing as the 'lust demon' or the 'anger demon' or the demon of lies.' We may lust or lie or lose our temper, and Satan may use these traits to lead us into disaster areas, but he cannot force us to act. The devil doesn't make us do it, we choose to initiate our own thoughts and actions."<sup>3</sup>

### The announcement of past and coming woes 9:12

This verse is transitional, and clarifies that the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpet judgments are the same events as the first, second, and third woes. The third woe, then, would be the seven bowl judgments. Another view is that the third woe is the destruction of Babylon (cf. 18:10, 16, 19).<sup>4</sup> It is unclear whether the eagle (8:13) or John is the speaker, though John seems to be the more likely candidate. "After these things" indicates that the woes (not just the visions) are consecutive, not simultaneous and recapitulative.

### The sixth trumpet (second woe) 9:13-21

As will become evident, the severity of these judgments increases as the trumpets (woes) unfold.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 163; J. B. Smith, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Jeremiah, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 524.

**A deadly attack 9:13-19**

9:13 Someone near the "four horns (symbolic of power) of the golden altar" in heaven, probably the angel identified with it in 8:3, gave a command after the "sixth angel" blew the sixth trumpet (cf. 8:2, 6). Instead of seeing something (cf. v. 1), John now heard something ("a voice").

9:14 This angel instructed the angel who had blown the sixth trumpet to "Release the four angels who are bound" at the Euphrates River. These are evidently four angels that John had not seen before. They must be fallen angels, since good angels are not bound (cf. 20:1-3; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). God had a purpose for them to fulfill, and ordered their release to accomplish His will (cf. vv. 1-11). Scripture does not record when or why God bound these angels, but evidently He restricted them as punishment. Perhaps He imprisoned them when Satan rebelled against Him.<sup>1</sup>

The Euphrates River probably refers to the literal "great river" of that name.<sup>2</sup> This river system, including the whole Mesopotamian region that it drains, had been the border between Israel and its enemies to the northeast, namely, Assyria and Babylonia. It was also the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in John's day.

"In the first century people would have thought of the Parthians, the world's most dreaded cavalry, for they came from this region and filled men with foreboding."<sup>3</sup>

The Parthians were the only warriors the Romans could not and did not defeat.

9:15 The "four angels" were "prepared" by God, and are being kept ready for a specific assignment at a specific "hour (and day

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. J. B. Smith, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1509.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 133. Cf. Swete, p. 121.

and month and year)" in history (cf. 12:6; 16:12; Matt. 25:34, 41; Mark 10:40; Luke 2:31; 1 Cor. 2:9).

"One article governing all four nouns shows that duration is not in view, but that the occasion of each one of the time designations is one and the same: the appointed hour occurs on the appointed day in the appointed month and in the appointed year. ... Once again, this sounds the note of divine providence that recurs so often in this book (e.g., *dei* in 1:1, *mellei* in 1:19) ..."¹

Their task was to put "a third" of those who dwell on the earth (i.e., earth-dwellers) to death (cf. 8:13). This will result in approximately half the population of the earth, that was alive at the beginning of the Tribulation, being dead at the end of this judgment. "A fourth" of the population had died under the fourth seal judgment (6:7-8), and many more died as martyrs and for other reasons (cf. Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21-22). However, it is only the "earth-dwellers," those in rebellion against God, who will suffer death as a result of this woe (cf. 9:20).

9:16 The "horsemen" may be humans under the control of these four evil angels (cf. Dan. 11:44), or, more likely, they are demons.<sup>2</sup> The description of the horses (v. 17) argues for an angelic (demonic) army, as does its leadership, namely, four fallen angels (vv. 14-15). Most interpreters take their number as meaning *innumerable*, but their number could be literal, even if these are human warriors.

"Years ago Red China claimed to have an army of 200 million (cf. *Time*, May 21, 1965, p. 35)."<sup>3</sup>

Many interpreters take the number "200 million" as symbolic, or as representing demonic forces. The combined Allied and Axis forces, at their peak in World War II, totaled about 70

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¹Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 44.

²Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 539.

³Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 953.

million.<sup>1</sup> An angelic army of 200,000,000 demons is not hard to imagine.<sup>2</sup>

9:17 Now John saw what these horsemen looked like. Horses were swift implements of war in ancient times. Red ("fire"), blue ("hyacinth"), and yellow ("brimstone") "breastplates" covered both "horses" and riders ("those who sat on them"). This was apparently their only armor, and it is defensive armor. "Hyacinth" is a flower that is most commonly "blue," and "brimstone" is sulfur, which is "yellow."

*Lion-like* horse heads could either be very different from those of ordinary horses, or they could simply be horses' heads that appear exceptionally bold and majestic. Lions are terrifying (cf. 10:3), fierce (cf. v. 8), and destructive (cf. 13:2). Natural horses do not breath fire, smoke, and brimstone (the same colors as their breastplates). These may be metaphors describing their pronouncements of judgment (cf. 11:5-6). This verse suggests that this army is probably something other than a human army of cavalry, probably an angelic army (cf. v. 9). However, some interpreters, both premillennial and amillennial, have believed that this will be a human army.<sup>3</sup>

9:18 "Fire," "smoke," and "brimstone" are natural elements that God used to bring judgment in the past during similar conditions (cf. Gen. 19:24, 28). So He may use them again, or they may represent other agents of destruction. "Plagues" recalls the plagues in Egypt (cf. Exod. 11:1 LXX; Rev. 9:20; 11:6; 13:3, 12, 14; 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; 22:18). The repetition of the definite article "the" in the Greek text (*tou*) indicates that these are three distinct plagues. Together they will be responsible for the largest death toll in human history so far (cf. v. 15).

9:19 This added description of the horses, "power ... in their mouths and in their tails," supports the conclusion that they represent angelic instruments of divine judgment other than natural

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Almanac*, 1971, p. 355.

<sup>2</sup> Recall J. R. R. Tolkien's army of Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 167; and Hendriksen, p. 148.



horses. Some interpreters have suggested that what they represent are modern weapons that shoot both forward and backward, such as missiles. The *locusts* had the "power" to injure "like scorpions" with "their tails" (v. 10), but these *horses* have "power" to "kill" (v. 15) "like serpents" with their "mouths and ... tails," which is even worse (cf. v. 15).

### The survivors' response 9:20-21

9:20 These three severe judgments (fire, smoke, and brimstone, vv. 17-18) will not move the remaining unbelievers, as a whole, to "repent" (cf. Exod. 7:13, 23; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:20; 11:10). Perhaps, having hardened their hearts, God will make it impossible for them to repent, as He did the Pharaoh of the Exodus.<sup>1</sup>

"In all cases in the apocalyptic portion of the book, the word about repentance is negative as here."<sup>2</sup>

"*Metanoeo ek* ('I repent of') in Revelation denotes a change of mind in rejection of something that is anti-God (cf. 2:21, 22; 9:21; 16:11)."<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere in Scripture, the phrase "the works of their hands" refers to idolatry (cf. Deut. 4:28; 27:15; 31:29; 2 Kings 19:18; 22:17; 2 Chron. 32:19; 34:25; Ps. 115:4; 135:15; Isa. 2:8; 17:8; 37:19; Jer. 1:16; 10:3, 9; 25:6, 7, 14; 32:30; 44:8; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:13; Hag. 2:14; Acts 7:41). "Idolatry" is ultimately *worship of demons* (cf. Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:20), an understanding that John reflected here. Ironically, these earth-dwellers will refuse to stop worshipping *demons*, who are responsible for their misery under this sixth trumpet judgment.

In John's day, people fashioned idol images out of the materials he mentioned here: "gold," "silver," "brass," "stone," and "wood." Today, objects that people venerate, made of these same materials, can be bought in stores, and materialists

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 541.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 52. Cf. v. 21; 16:9, 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

idolize them. John reminded his readers of the helplessness of these idols (cf. Deut. 4:28; Ps. 115:5-7; 135:15-17; Isa. 44:12-20; Dan. 5:23).

9:21 These unrepentant people will also continue in their moral sins: "murders," "sorceries," "immorality," and stealing ("thefts"; cf. 21:8; 22:15). Idolatry violates the first and second commandments, and these other sins are violations of the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments. The Greek word translated "sorceries" (*pharmakon*) implies the use of drugs. The English word "pharmacy" comes from it. The Greek word can refer to poisons, amulets, charms, magic spells, witchcraft, or any other object or practice that makes someone susceptible to sin (cf. Exod. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:10-12; 1 Sam. 28:7; Acts 8:9; 13:8; 19:13-15), and thus could be included as a form of idolatry.

"Stupefying and hallucinatory drugs have been associated with sorcery and witchcraft for ages, yielding to their users strange visions and hallucinations, which they could interpret as oracles for the guidance of their clients. Also, they divested their users of the control of their own minds, making them easily available for possession and control by evil spirits."<sup>1</sup>

These trumpet judgments, as the seals, will grow more intense as they proceed. Most people living on the earth during these days will be so hard of heart that they will not turn to God in repentance. Nevertheless, some will become believers in Jesus Christ (ch. 7). Perhaps the salvation of most of these will take place in the earlier part of the Tribulation before these more severe judgments fall.

James Moffatt, who believed that the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled in the early history of the church, made the following comment, which suggests the inadequacy of his preterist understanding of the book:

"Up to the end of ch. ix., the Apocalypse is fairly regular and intelligible; thereafter, criticism enters upon an intricate

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 174.

country, of which hardly any survey has yet succeeded in rendering a satisfactory account."<sup>1</sup>

Futurist interpreters, including myself, believe that a futuristic understanding of this material yields the most plausible scenario.

**E. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF JOHN'S PREPARATION FOR RECORDING THE REMAINING JUDGMENTS IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION CH. 10**

John proceeded with his revelation, to unfold the future course of events for his readers. We have already seen that God interrupted the sequence of the seven seal judgments, with extra revelation concerning other events, happening at approximately the same time. This took place between the sixth and seventh seals (ch. 7). Now He interrupted the sequence of trumpet judgments, between the sixth and seventh trumpets, with the insertion of additional revelation (10:1-11:14).<sup>2</sup> The emphasis shifts, temporarily, from the outpouring of God's wrath on unbelievers, to the consolation and encouragement of believers.

An amillennial interpretation of this chapter follows:

"This new vision of the church extends through the entire time of the six trumpets, it continues during the whole era of the frightful delusions which are sent upon the nations that ought to be Christian but are evil and spread over the whole world of men."<sup>3</sup>

**1. The appearance of the mighty angel 10:1-4**

10:1      A few commentators have identified this "strong angel" as Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> But the evidence for his being simply "another" (Gr. *allon*, another of the same kind) *strong angel* seems more convincing (cf. vv. 5-6). Other commentators have identified

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:413.

<sup>2</sup>See the chart "The Literary Structure of Revelation 6—18" at the end of my notes on chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 311.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 224; Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:233; Ironside, p. 172; Wiersbe, 2:597; Beale, p. 522.

him as Gabriel or Michael (cf. Dan. 8:16; 12:7).<sup>1</sup> But this is only guessing. He is probably not the *same* "strong angel" John saw before (5:2), since there are many strong angels (cf. 18:21). John saw him descending from ("out of") "heaven" as a messenger of God (cf. 20:1), and robed in ("clothed with") "a cloud"—signifying his celestial origin and connection with judgment (cf. 1:7; 14:14, 15, 16; Matt. 24:30; 26:24; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27).

His crown was a "rainbow," the symbol of God's faithfulness and mercy (cf. 4:3). His countenance was radiant ("face was like the sun"), reflecting the glory and majesty of God. His "feet" (and legs) were *fiery* "pillars," reminiscent of the *pillar of fire* in the wilderness, a manifestation of God's holiness, mercy, and judgment.<sup>2</sup>

"This scene marks a significant change in John's literary method. Here his personality re-emerges as it did briefly between the sixth and seventh seals (7:13-14), but now for the first and last time in this drama, he leaves the observer's corner and occupies the very center of the stage (e.g., 10:9-11). This new role also involves a change in location from heaven to earth, as the angel descends from heaven (10:1) and stands upon the earth where John hears a voice from heaven (10:4, 8) and goes to him (10:8) ... The new style is one element among others that heightens the anticipation and accentuates the solemnity of the apocalyptic events to follow."<sup>3</sup>

10:2      The "little" scroll ("book") "in his hand" may be different from the scroll that Jesus Christ unrolled (5:1; 6:1). John used a different, and rare, Greek word to describe it (*biblaridion*, not *biblion*). The tense of the Greek verb translated "was open"

<sup>1</sup>Charles, 1:258-59; J. B. Smith, pp. 153-54; Swete, p. 177; Mounce, p. 207; Johnson, p. 496; Beasley-Murray, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 556-57, for parallels between this angel and the Colossos of Rhodes.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 59.

(perfect passive) indicates that someone had already opened it, and it was already unrolled in his hand. It probably represents a new revelation from God (cf. Ezek. 2:9—3:3; Jer. 15:15-17). The angel stood astride "the earth (land)" and "the sea," symbolizing his authority over the whole world (vv. 5, 8; 7:2; cf. Exod. 20:4, 11; Deut. 11:24; Ps. 68:22; 69:34). The implication is that his message involves the whole world. Other, less likely views, I think, are that his stance symbolizes the universality of the message,<sup>1</sup> or that he was defying the sea's instability.<sup>2</sup>

10:3 His majestic, "loud" cry produced "seven peals of thunder." Comparison with a "lion" roaring suggests that his powerful cry (a battle cry) concerns vengeance. This proves true, especially if what he cried out appears in verse 6. Thunder warns of coming storms, and therefore portends more judgments. These thunders spoke ("uttered their voices").

10:4 An authoritative voice, probably belonging to God or Christ (cf. 1:11, 19; Dan. 12:4, 9), did not permit John to record the judgments ("Seal up ... do not write them") these seven thunders revealed (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-4). This indicates that God has not revealed in Scripture all the judgments that will take place on the earth during the Great Tribulation.<sup>3</sup>

"First, in a document filled with revelations, a refusal to reveal some possibly important detail lends credibility to the whole composition. Second, since the ostensible author is forbidden by supernatural intervention to reveal something to his audience, he is therefore more knowledgeable than they are about supernatural realities; i.e., he is in a superior position."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup>Newell, p. 142.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 563.

Perhaps John used the *intervals*, between events in his visions, to write down what he had seen and heard or at least to make notes.

## 2. The announcement of the mighty angel 10:5-7

10:5 The fact that "the angel" took an oath ("lifted up his right hand to heaven"; v. 5) and "swore by" God ("Him who lives forever and ever"; v. 6) seems to confirm that he (the angel himself) is not God. Lifting the right hand toward God was and is a customary gesture when making a solemn oath (cf. Gen. 14:22; Deut. 32:40; Dan. 12:7). The little book must have been in the angel's left hand.

10:6 The oath emphasized the certainty and immediate inevitability of what he announced. What was about to happen was extremely important. He appealed to God as the eternal Creator who can cause whatever He pleases to happen. This appeal strengthens the force of the oath and the certainty of its outcome. His message was that there would be no more delay (of God's wrath; also, God would no longer give people extra time to repent).

The Greek word used here, *chronos*, commonly means "time," but that is obviously not what the angel intended here. So "delay" is the only acceptable translation that makes sense *in this context*. There would be no delay between this announcement and the blowing of the seventh trumpet (11:15).<sup>1</sup> Verse 7 explains this affirmation (cf. Dan. 12:7a). The Tribulation martyrs would no longer have to wait for vindication (cf. 6:10). In addition, it is evident that the seal and trumpet judgments will take some time to unfold, giving earth-dwellers time to repent (6:15-17; 9:20-21), but the bowl judgments will come very quickly in succession, allowing little or no time for repentance (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1-9).

10:7 In contrast to (Gr. *all'*) delay, when the seventh (trumpet) angel spoke, God would fully reveal His mystery. The "mystery

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:652; Swete, pp. 126-27; Charles, 1:263-64; Beckwith, p. 582; Robertson, 6:372.

of God" probably refers to previously unrevealed details of God's plans for humanity that He was about to make known.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it refers to what will take place to ensure that the kingdom(s) of the world become the kingdom of Christ (11:15). The mystery "is finished" (the aorist passive of *teleo*) in the sense that God would then have no more to reveal about these kingdom plans beyond what He revealed to John. God had revealed ("preached") His plans for the future kingdom "to His servants the prophets" in former times, but only partially (cf. Heb. 1:1-2). "His servants the prophets" is a common description of the Old Testament prophets in particular (Jer. 7:25; 25:4; Amos 3:7).

### 3. The instruction of the mighty angel 10:8-11

10:8 God or Christ ("the voice which I heard from heaven"; v. 4) then commanded John to "take the [little] book" from the strong angel with authority over the whole planet (cf. 5:7-8).

"... God's revelation is never forced on any man; he must take it. God's messenger must be in the end a willing messenger, not a conscript, but one who has put out his hand to the task."<sup>2</sup>

10:9 Evidently the little scroll symbolizes God's revelation that John was about to set forth.<sup>3</sup> It is the revelation that the remainder of the Book of Revelation, or at least part of it, contains. Some believe it is the same book that the Lamb took from God (5:1-7).<sup>4</sup> Eating is a universal figure for receiving knowledge (cf. Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 3:1-3). The angel told John that this revelation would taste "sweet" (like "honey") at first, but then he would find it "bitter." This order probably suggests that what was coming next was more judgment, but that John would find

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:68-69.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:654.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 227.

satisfaction in knowing these things. Some amillennialists take the content of the scroll to be the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

- 10:10 John may have literally eaten the little book.<sup>2</sup> Or he may have only devoured it metaphorically. This revelation was pleasant ("sweet") at first, because it was a revelation *from God* (cf. Ps. 19:9-10; 119:103). However, as John meditated on it and comprehended the fearful judgments that it predicted, he became distressed (the revelation turned "bitter"). The reason for reversing the order of these effects, compared with verse 9, may be to place the bitterness in closer proximity to the judgments that follow.<sup>3</sup> The little book may have contained the revelation in 11:1-13.<sup>4</sup> Or it may have contained more (perhaps chs. 11—19), or all, of what follows in Revelation.<sup>5</sup>
- 10:11 "They" may refer to God or Jesus Christ (vv. 4, 8) and the strong angel (v. 9). Many interpreters, however, believe this is a third person plural of indefinite reference, that reverently expresses the divine prompting that John experienced (cf. 12:6; 13:16; 16:15).<sup>6</sup> "They" (God and or His angels) told John that he "must" (Gr. *dei*) prophesy again, as he had been doing (cf. Jer. 1:10; Ezek. 4:7). They wanted him to communicate the new revelation contained in the little scroll that he had just consumed. The new prophecies concerned many different "peoples," "nations," language groups ("tongues"), and "kings" (cf. 5:9). The specific mention of "kings" reflects God's sovereignty, and anticipates the judgments in 16:14; 17:10; and 17:12.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 323.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74; Mounce, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup>F. F. Bruce, "The Revelation of John," in *A New Testament Commentary*, p. 649; Charles, 1:260; Lilje, p. 158; Charles R. Erdman, *The Revelation of John*, p. 99; Martin Rist, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 12:442; Mounce, p. 216.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup>Friedrich Dürstiediek, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John*, p. 305; Alford, 4:654; Lee, 4:638; Beckwith, p. 584; Ford, p. 160; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74.



This renewed commission stresses that what follows would be more burdensome than what John had prophesied so far.

**F. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF THE TWO WITNESSES IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION 11:1-14**

John recorded this inserted revelation dealing with the two witnesses to inform his readers of the ministries of these important individuals during the Great Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> This section continues the parenthetical revelation begun in 10:1. It is one of the more difficult chapters to interpret, and students of the book have proposed many different explanations. According to amillennialists, this chapter explains the fate of the church during the six trumpet judgments.<sup>2</sup> Alford regarded it as a summary of the more detailed prophecy that follows.<sup>3</sup>

**1. The temple in Jerusalem 11:1-2**

11:1 "And" (Gr. *kaí*) ties this chapter closely to the previous one. John's first prophetic assignment after receiving his fresh commission (10:8-11) was to provide the little scroll's new information.

Again John became an active participant in his vision (cf. 1:12; 5:4; 7:14; 10:8-10; 19:10; 22:8). John's "measuring rod" was probably a lightweight reed (cf. Ezek. 29:6; 40:5; 42:16-19; Mark 6:8; 3 John 13). The person giving the reed and the instructions was probably the strong angel just referred to (10:9-11). John received instruction to perform a symbolic act, as many of his prophetic forerunners had done (cf. Isa. 20:2-5; Ezek. 12:1-17; 40; Zech. 2). The act of measuring probably signifies that "the temple" is God's possession, and that He is resuming possession of it. One carefully measures what is one's own personal property (cf. 2 Sam. 8:2; Ezek. 40:3—42:20).

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<sup>1</sup>See John A. McLean, "The Chronology of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:672 (October-December 2011):460-71, for support of the view that they will minister during the second half of the Tribulation: the Great Tribulation.

<sup>2</sup>See Lenski, p. 326; Alford, 4:657.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 4:656.

Sometimes, "measuring" in Scripture anticipated *judgment* (2 Sam. 8:2; 2 Kings 21:13; Isa. 28:17; Lam. 2:8; Amos 7:7-9). A few references to measuring involve protection (Jer. 31:39; Ezek. 40:2—43:12; Zech. 1:16; 2:1-8),<sup>1</sup> but this can hardly be the connotation here, in view of the context (v. 2). However, since John received instruction not to measure profane (common or Gentile) areas (v. 2), this measuring of the temple itself, here in verse 1, is probably an indication of God's favor and approval.

"In other words, John's future prophecies will distinguish between God's favor toward the sanctuary, the altar, and their worshipers and His disapproval of all that is of Gentile orientation because of their profanation of the holy city for half of the future seventieth week. ... So the measuring is an object lesson of how entities favored by God will fare during the period of Gentile oppression that lies ahead."<sup>2</sup>

The "temple" (Gr. *naos*, inner temple) refers to both the *holy place* and the *holy of holies*, excluding the courtyards. This is evidently the temple that the Jews will build in Jerusalem either before or during the first half (three and a half years) of Daniel's seventieth week (i.e., the Tribulation; cf. v. 8; 13:14-15; Dan. 9:26-27; 12:11; Matt. 24:15-16; 2 Thess. 2:4).<sup>3</sup> The "altar" probably refers to the brazen altar of sacrifice outside the sanctuary, to which non-priests will have access. John was to measure (in the sense of quantifying) the worshippers, too. This probably means that God will *know* them, or perhaps

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:81.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>3</sup>See John F. Walvoord, "Will Israel Build a Temple in Jerusalem?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125:498 (April-June 1968):99-106; Thomas S. McCall, "How Soon the Tribulation Temple?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:512 (October-December 1971):341-51; and idem, "Problems in Rebuilding the Tribulation Temple," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129:513 (January-March 1972):75-80. See also Jamieson, et al., p. 1556; Martin Levin, "Time for a New Temple?" *Time*, 16 October 1989, pp. 64-65. For refutation of the preterist view that this is the Second Temple, which Titus destroyed in A.D. 70, see Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of the Temple in Revelation 11:1-2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:654 (April-June 2007):219-36.

*preserve* them.<sup>1</sup> These worshippers evidently represent godly Jews, who will "worship" God "in (it)" this Tribulation temple (cf. Ezek. 14:22; Rom. 11:4-5, 26). Aune believed that they will be the 144,000.<sup>2</sup> Lenski held that the sanctuary, the altar, and the worshippers together represent the whole church (all believers).<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus Christ returns at the Second Coming, He will build a new, millennial temple, that will replace this Tribulation temple (Ezek. 40).

Some interpreters who favor a more symbolic understanding of this verse take the temple as a reference to the church (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5).<sup>4</sup>

"The church will be protected in the coming disaster."<sup>5</sup>

However, if the temple is the church, then who are the worshippers, what is the altar, and why are the Gentiles segregated from it?

11:2 "Leave out" (Gr. *ekballo*, lit. "cast out") implies removal from divine favor (cf. Matt. 22:13; 25:30; 3 John 10). The "court ... outside the temple" corresponds to the Court of the Gentiles, to which Gentiles had access in the first century, and which lay outside of the court into which only Jews could come. The Tribulation temple will evidently have similar courtyards. *Not measuring* signifies exclusion from God's favor, whereas *measuring* signifies enjoying His favor (v. 1).

"The nations" are the Gentiles, specifically hostile, unbelieving Gentiles (cf. v. 18; 14:8; 19:15; 20:3). These Gentiles will *oppress* ("tread under foot") "the holy city," which is earthly Jerusalem (cf. v. 8; 21:22; Luke 21:24). Others view the

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 604.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 598.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 328.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979; Swete, p. 132; Barclay, 2:83; Johnson, pp. 499-502; and Mounce, p. 221.

<sup>5</sup>Morris, p. 147. See also Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 603.

reference to the holy city as alluding to the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup> However, if the city is *people*, then who are the people in the city? Some say they are believing Israelites.<sup>2</sup> Others believe the holy city is heavenly Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> and still others that it is the professing church.<sup>4</sup>

"What, then, is the implication, but that when this period is once reached, Jerusalem will have been largely repopulated by the children of its ancient inhabitants, its temple rebuilt, and its ancient worship resorted."<sup>5</sup>

The "42 months" are the last half of the Tribulation, since this will be the time when Gentile hostility to the Jews is most intense (cf. Dan. 9:27). The Gentiles will dominate ("tread under foot") the outer court of the temple and the rest of Jerusalem for 42 months. Anti-Semitism will peak after the Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel in the middle of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:27). This interpretation seems a more likely one, than that "42 months" refers to the first half of the Tribulation,<sup>6</sup> or the 42 encampments of Israel in the wilderness,<sup>7</sup> or that it represents a period "of measurable duration,"<sup>8</sup> or "a divinely restricted period of time,"<sup>9</sup> or "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24).<sup>10</sup> A preview of this time was Antiochus Epiphanes' desecration of the temple from June 168 B.C. to December 165 B.C.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Beckwith, p. 588; and Ladd, pp. 152-53.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 568.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:661-62.

<sup>5</sup>Seiss, p. 237.

<sup>6</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1510; J. N. D[arby], *Studies on the Book of Daniel*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>7</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1556; Beale, p. 565.

<sup>8</sup>Morris, p. 147. Beale, pp. 557-59, explained five major interpretations of verses 1 and 2.

<sup>9</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 609.

<sup>10</sup>Lenski, p. 331.

<sup>11</sup>Barclay, 2:84-85.

## 2. The ministry of the two witnesses 11:3-6

Even though believing Jews will suffer persecution at this time, God will still get His message out. Two witnesses will be especially significant at this time. Valid testimony required two witnesses under the Old Covenant (Deut. 19:15), and both Jesus and the early church sent out emissaries in pairs (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:2; Acts 13:2; 15:39-40). Some, incorrectly I think, see these witnesses, not as two individuals, but as symbolic of the "competent legal testimony" of the church.<sup>1</sup>

11:3      Who is speaking in this verse? The speaker seems to be the angel who spoke in verses 1-2, who speaks here *for God* (cf. v. 8).

God did not reveal the identity of His ("my") "two witnesses." Many commentators believe they will be "Moses" and "Elijah" restored to life, since these men were prophets and performed the kinds of miracles these witnesses will perform (v. 6).<sup>2</sup> Others believe they will be resurrected "Enoch" and "Elijah," since God took these men to heaven without dying.<sup>3</sup> Another reason some believe one of these witnesses will be Elijah is Malachi 4:5, which predicts that Elijah will return before Messiah.<sup>4</sup> Some preterist interpreters have identified them as "James" and "Peter," or two lesser known apostles, or faithful Roman Christians during the Roman invasion, or a small body of Christians who remained in Jerusalem during the invasion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., J. B. Smith, p. 169; Tenney, p. 191; Barclay, 2:86-87; John C. Whitcomb, "The Two Witnesses," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond*, pp. 359-73.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 244; René Pache, *The Return of Jesus Christ*, p. 267; Thomas W. Mackay, "Early Christian Millenarianist Interpretation of the Two Witnesses in John's Apocalypse, 11:3-13," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, pp. 252-65, 310.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Gundry, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup>See Christine J. Tan, "Preterist Views on the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:681 (January-March 2014):72-95; idem, "A Critique of Preterist Views of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:682 (April-June 2014):210-25; and idem, "A Critique of Idealist and Historicist Views of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:683 (July-September 2014):328-51; and idem, "A Futurist View of the Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:684 (October-December 2014):452-71.

Other, less literal interpreters, think the two witnesses may represent, not two individuals, but the *faithful witness* of the church throughout its persecutions,<sup>1</sup> or the witnessing Jewish remnant as a whole.<sup>2</sup> I, however, agree with those who believe that they will be individuals living at that time, rather than former prophets brought back to earth for this ministry (cf. Matt. 11:14).<sup>3</sup>

"Nor again can such allegorical interpretations as the Law and the Prophets, the Law and the Gospel, the Old Testament and the New, be maintained in view of all that follows."<sup>4</sup>

They will "prophesy," namely, communicate messages from God. Their ministry will last "1,260 days" (i.e., 42 months of 30 days per month, or three and a half years; Dan. 12:11). The fact that John sometimes described the Great Tribulation's duration in terms of *days*, at other times in *months*, or at still other times in *years*, is probably just for the sake of literary variety. These various time units used for describing the period also support the view that the time period will be three and one-half *literal* years, since all three descriptions describe a period equal in length by Jewish reckoning.

This period of the prophets' witness also apparently corresponds to "the Great Tribulation" (i.e., the last half of Daniel's seventieth week), the focus of John's vision in this chapter.<sup>5</sup> Some interpreters, including the early church fathers Victorinus, Hippolytus, and Augustine, believed that the two

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 134; Mounce, p. 223; Beasley-Murray, p. 181; Morris, p. 147; Beale, p. 573; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 631. See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 87-89, for a good summary of the arguments pro and con for these three major views.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:235; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 179; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 308; Newell, pp. 150-51; Ladd, p. 154; Kelly, p. 226; W. M. Smith, p. 1510; Beckwith, p. 595; and Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):344-54.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 131; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 182.

witnesses would minister in the first half of the Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the context strongly favors the last half of the Tribulation.

The two witnesses will wear "sackcloth," the *clothes* that in biblical times signified approaching judgment and needed repentance (cf. Isa. 22:12; Jer. 4:8; 6:26; Jon. 3:5, 6, 8; Matt. 11:21).

- 11:4 The ministry of these two witnesses—who are referred to here as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord"—resembles that of "Zerubbabel" and "Joshua," who sought to restore Israel after a previous exile (Zech. 4:2, 3, 11-14). There is only one lampstand in the Zechariah passage, but there are two here, each representing one of the two witnesses. In the Zechariah passage, it is the Holy Spirit who empowered Zerubbabel and Joshua (Zech. 4:14), and the comparison strongly suggests that these latter-day witnesses will also receive power from Him (cf. 1:4). They will be God's anointed servants who will bear, like "lampstands" in the temple, the light of His truth. They are dependent on the Spirit and speak for God, who controls the whole earth.
- 11:5 These two witnesses will be able to protect themselves by calling down "fire" from God on their enemies who try to "harm" them, as Elijah did (cf. 2 Kings 1:10-14). This is probably the actual meaning, rather than that fire will literally proceed *from their mouths*. No one will be able to kill them, until God permits this at the very end of their ministry (v. 7).
- 11:6 God will also empower them to do other miracles ("power over the waters"; "every plague") similar to what Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 17:1, 7; 18:1; Luke 4:25; James 5:17) and Moses (Exod. 7:17-21; 9:14; 11:10; 1 Sam. 4:8) did. The length of their ministry ("days of their prophesying") will be the same as the drought that God sent during Elijah's day (three and a half years). It will also be for the same purpose, namely, to punish His people for

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<sup>1</sup>T. F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John*, p. 70; Ironside, p. 191; Newell, pp. 159-60; Johnson, p. 502; Wiersbe, 2:598; McGee, 5:981; *The Nelson ...*, p. 2181; and Vacendak, 2:1288 also held this view.

their sins and to lead them to repentance. However, the two witnesses will be able to exercise their power whenever they wish ("as often as they deaire"), not like Moses who could only perform miracles at God's specific command.

This will be the fifth period in history when God will enable a few people to do unusually spectacular signs and wonders. The first four periods were: (1) the times of Moses and Joshua, (2) of Elijah and Elisha, (3) of Daniel and his three friends, and (4) the times of Jesus Christ's earthly ministry and that of His apostles.

"Here is a fundamental clue to the understanding of biblical prophecy: eschatological events are foreshadowed in historical events."<sup>1</sup>

### **3. The death of the two witnesses 11:7-10**

11:7 It is only when they have finished their ministry that God will permit "the beast" to "kill" the two witnesses. They will not die prematurely. This is the first of 36 references to "the beast" in Revelation (cf. Dan. 7:21). He is *the Antichrist*, as later passages will show. This verse describes him as having his origin in "the abyss," the abode of Satan and his demons (cf. 9:1-3, 11; Luke 8:31).

11:8 The beast will add insult to injury by allowing the corpses of the two witnesses to "lie in the street" unburied. This was the worst indignity that someone could perpetrate on a person in biblical times (cf. Ps. 79:2-3). "Mystically" (Gr. *pneumatikos*, "spiritually") indicates a comparative, rather than a literal, meaning. The city will be similar to "Sodom and Egypt," in that it will be extremely wicked, morally degraded, antagonistic toward God, and oppressive toward God's people—because of Antichrist's influence.

The place of Jesus Christ's crucifixion ("where also their Lord was crucified") identifies this city as *Jerusalem* (cf. Jer. 22:8). Other views are that it is: (1) every city that has opposed

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 156.



God's servants throughout history,<sup>1</sup> (2) Rome,<sup>2</sup> or (3) Babylon (cf. 14:8; 17:1, 5; 18:10). Since God specified a spiritual understanding of the identity of "the great city" here, it seems reasonable that He also would have specified a spiritual meaning of other entities in the book if He had wanted us to interpret them this way.

11:9 Evidently people from all over the world ("peoples and tribes and tongues and nations") will be able to view the corpses, probably by television. Alternatively, people from all these groups (cf. 5:9; 7:9) might be in Jerusalem at this time, and be able to see them.<sup>3</sup> The correspondence of the "three and a half days" to the *three and a half years* of the Great Tribulation may be only coincidental. Nonetheless, it draws attention to the fact that God's servants will only suffer a short time, whereas those under His wrath will suffer much longer.

11:10 This is the only instance of *rejoicing* during the Tribulation recorded in this book. It reflects the widespread wickedness of that time in history (cf. 1 Kings 18:17; 21:20). Earth-dwellers will "celebrate" because they no longer have to listen to messages from God. This will be the world's last great *Mardi-Gras*-type celebration.

#### **4. The resurrection of the two witnesses 11:11-13**

11:11 The "breath of life from God" will revive the witnesses' dead bodies (cf. Gen. 6:17; 7:15, 22; 2 Kings 13:20-21; Ezek. 37:5, 10). The witnesses' resurrections ([the two *dead bodies*] that "stood on their feet") will terrify the onlookers, because these gawking God-haters will be able to do no more to silence their enemies beyond killing them. The use of the prophetic present tense in the verbs in this verse pictures what is future as fact.

11:12 The witnesses, and probably those beholding them before they ascend, will hear the "loud voice from heaven." It probably belongs to Jesus Christ (cf. 4:1). "The cloud" evidently refers

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, pp. 226-27; Morris, p. 150; Kiddle, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 621.

to the *shekinah* (glory cloud) in which Jesus Christ ascended (Acts 1:9). Their glorious ascension is also similar to that of Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), and to Christians at the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:17). In the case of the two witnesses, their enemies will watch them ascend.

Two writers, who believed the witnesses stand for all Christians, wrote as follows:

"In the fullest sense this is to be fulfilled in the rapture Paul describes (1 Thes. iv. 17)."<sup>1</sup>

"But meanwhile it has been partly anticipated in the sight of the world by the tribute paid to the victims of a persecution, sometimes within a few years after their dishonour and death."<sup>2</sup>

11:13 Following this ascension, "a great (powerful) earthquake" (cf. 6:12; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; Matt. 27:51-52; 28:2) will destroy 10 percent of Jerusalem, and will cause "7,000 people" to die. One writer called this number "an obviously generalized figure."<sup>3</sup> Another believed it represents "a minor completeness of destruction and wreck," since "10" denotes completeness.<sup>4</sup> It may, however, be a rounded number. Those not killed in the earthquake will "[give] glory to ... God." This does not necessarily mean that they will all become believers, though some have concluded they will.<sup>5</sup> But at least they will acknowledge *God's* hand in these events.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps they only give glory to God the way the *demons* did, who gave glory to Jesus when He confronted them during His earthly ministry.

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 350.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 98-99; and J. B. Smith, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 183; Newell, p. 157.

### 5. The end of the second woe 11:14

This verse is transitional (cf. 9:12). It refers to the end of the "second woe" (the sixth trumpet, 9:21), and ties this judgment in with the "third woe" (the seventh trumpet). It clarifies that God interjected the revelations of the mighty angel and the little scroll (10:1-11), and the two witnesses (11:1-13), into the chronological sequence of trumpet judgments. God did so in order to give supplementary, encouraging information. The final woe will follow "quickly" (Gr. *tachy*, "soon," cf. 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20), on the heels of the second woe. This statement seems to rule out the view that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are not in chronological sequence.

### G. THE SEVENTH TRUMPET JUDGMENT 11:15-19

John's revelation continued to unfold future events as God revealed these to him in his vision. The scene John saw next was in heaven. The seventh trumpet judgment did not begin immediately (cf. 8:1-5), but John received information preparatory to it (11:15—15:8).

Midtribulationist J. Oliver Buswell Jr., identified the blowing of the seventh trumpet with the Rapture.<sup>1</sup> This view, however, makes the trumpet judgments end in the middle of the Tribulation. Furthermore, there is no exegetical basis for identifying these trumpets as the same.

11:15      When the seventh angel sounded, "loud voices in heaven" announced that the long-expected "reign" of Jesus Christ over the world would begin soon (20:1-10; cf. Ps. 2:2; Isa. 9:6-7; Ezek. 21:26-27; Dan. 2:35, 44; 4:3; 6:26; 7:14, 26-27; Zech. 14:9). "Has become" (Gr. *egeneto*) is proleptic.<sup>2</sup> This will happen after the seventh trumpet has run its course.<sup>3</sup> The "loud voices" probably belong to the whole host of heaven. "Lord" refers to God the Father.

"Jesus will return and assume the throne of His father David in this future crisis, at which time He will replace the satanically energized sovereignty of world rulers that has prevailed for so long. The

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<sup>1</sup>J. Oliver Buswell Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2:397.

<sup>2</sup>Düsterdieck, pp. 328-29; Robertson, 6:384.

<sup>3</sup>Charles, 1:294; Kiddle, p. 207.

whole theme of Revelation is the purging of evil from the world so that it can become the domain of the King of kings (cf. 19:16). Only a physical kingdom on earth will satisfy this."<sup>1</sup>

"He" includes both the Father and His Christ. The earthly reign of Christ will continue in the new heaven and new earth, when Jesus will turn over control to the Father, and "God will be all in all" (21:1—22:5; cf. Dan 2:44; 7:14, 27; 1 Cor. 15:24, 27-28). Jesus Christ will continue reigning beyond the millennial reign "forever and ever."

11:16 The 24 elders' (4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:13-14) response to this announcement was to fall prostrate ("on their faces") before God in worship. *Worship* in heaven contrasts, during the Tribulation period, with *rebellion* on earth.

11:17 The elders thank God for taking His "great power" in hand, and finally beginning "to reign." This is the only use of *eucharisteo*, "I give thanks," in Revelation. In the vision, God was *about to* do this. "Lord God, the Almighty" stresses God's irresistible power and sovereignty, which now become evident. "Who art and who wast" emphasizes God's uninterrupted existence, which makes His endless rule possible. Until now God had allowed powers hostile to His people to control the earth, but now He will begin to rule directly.

The elders' statement has led some interpreters to conclude that it signals the beginning of Jesus Christ's reign.<sup>2</sup> In view of the events that seem to follow this one, and which precede the beginning of His reign in chapter 20, a different understanding is preferable. It seems better to regard the elders' statement as anticipating the inauguration of that reign.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 197-98; Beale, p. 609; Swete, p. 146.

"The event is so certain that throughout this section it is repeatedly spoken of as already having taken place."<sup>1</sup>

Preterist Chilton believed this reign was consummated in A.D. 70, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

11:18 The elders continue to anticipate the beginning of Messiah's rule on earth, by foreseeing the *raging response* of unbelieving Gentiles (cf. 16:14, 16, 19; 20:8-9; Ps. 2:1, 5, 12), followed by the outpouring of God's holy "wrath" (cf. Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7; Rom. 2:5, 8; 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9). They also foresee the *judgment* of "the dead" and the *rewarding* of believers ("Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name"). They not only give thanks that Christ reigns *supremely* (v. 17), but that He judges *righteously* and rewards *graciously* (v. 18).

"Although rewards are all of grace (Rom. 4:4), they vary according to what each has done (1 Cor 3:8)."<sup>3</sup>

"The elders in their song make no attempt to separate the different phases of judgment as they are separated in the closing chapters of Revelation. They simply sing of that future judgment as though it were one event, much on the order of other Scriptures that do not distinguish future judgments from each other (cf. Mark 4:29; John 5:25, 28-29; Acts 17:31; 24:21)."<sup>4</sup>

The elders distinguished two groups of believers: the Old Testament and New Testament "prophets," who communicated divine revelation, and the "saints," namely, other believers.<sup>5</sup> They further described these saints as "even"

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 231.

<sup>2</sup>Chilton, *The Days ...*, pp. 290-91.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>5</sup>See Stanton, *Kept from ...*, pp. 65-69.

(ascensive use of "and," Gr. *kaí*) "those who fear [God's] name," both "small" and "great" (i.e., all kinds; cf. 13:16; 19:5, 18; 20:12). The elders also anticipated the destruction of *the wicked* ("those who destroy the earth"), who have been responsible for the divine judgments that have destroyed the earth. John would soon learn of the destruction of some of these destroyers, namely: Babylon, the beast, the false prophet, and Satan.

- 11:19 John then saw "the temple ... in heaven ... opened" (cf. Heb. 9:23). This chapter opened with the measuring of the temple, and closes with the opening of the temple, though in the first case, the temple is on earth, and in the second, it is in heaven. This event, as the others in this pericope, is proleptic (cf. 15:5).<sup>1</sup> The opening of the temple probably pictures the immediate fellowship with God that believers will enjoy following these judgments. In the temple, John viewed "the ark of [God's] covenant," the emblem and reminder of His faithfulness, presence, and atonement to the Israelites.

The last chronological reference to the ark in the Old Testament is in 2 Chronicles 35:3. What happened to it after that is not known. Many scholars believe it perished in Shishak's invasion, during Manasseh's apostasy, when Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple in 586 B.C., or during the Babylonian Captivity (cf. 1 Kings 14:26; 2 Kings 25:9; 2 Chron. 33:7; Jer. 3:16. Jewish tradition held that Jeremiah hid the ark in a cave on Mt. Sinai (2 Macc. 2:4-8). There was no ark in the second temple.<sup>2</sup> The "second temple" refers to the temple that Nehemiah built, which Herod the Great modernized, and which later perished in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

What John saw, however, was not the earthly ark—but its heavenly counterpart (cf. Heb. 9:24). Its appearance in the vision suggests that God would resume dealing with Israel, and would soon fulfill His covenant promises to that nation.

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<sup>1</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 331.

<sup>2</sup>Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 5:219:5.

As elsewhere, the storm theophany portrays the manifestation of God's presence (cf. 4:5; 16:18; Exod. 19:16-19) and His wrathful judgment (cf. 8:5; 10:3; 16:18): "flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake and a great hailstorm."

Gaebelein wrote: "The seventh trumpet brings us to the very end of the tribulation and to the beginning of the millennial reign."<sup>1</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost believed that the seventh trumpet is the second advent of Jesus Christ to this earth.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that it concludes the first half of the Tribulation.<sup>3</sup> The theophany concludes this part of John's vision, that proleptically anticipates the end of the Tribulation judgments and the inauguration of God's kingdom.

This verse is transitional, concluding the present pericope and introducing what follows.

There is no revelation in this pericope (vv. 15-19) of the *judgment* announced here by the blowing of the seventh trumpet. The record of this judgment appears in chapter 16. There we have a prophecy of seven bowl judgments. It appears that as the seven trumpet judgments were a revelation of the seventh seal judgment, so the seven bowl judgments will be a revelation of the seventh trumpet judgment.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the revelation in chapters 12—15 seems to be another insertion of supplementary information about this period of time, the Great Tribulation, that is not advancing the chronological sequence of events on earth (cf. 7:1-17 and 10:1-11:14). The chronological progression resumes again in 16:1.

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<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:237. See also Moo, pp. 198-99.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 300.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1290-91.

<sup>4</sup>Bullinger, pp. 368-69; Ladd, p. 160.

## H. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF SATAN'S ACTIVITY IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION CHS. 12—13

God now gave John knowledge of the forces and persons behind the climax of anti-God hostility, so he could understand the bowl judgments, which the seventh trumpet judgment contained.

### 1. The activity of Satan himself ch. 12

In this chapter, God gave John revelation of Satan's special activity during the Great Tribulation. Many amillennialists would say: during the New Testament era of the church.<sup>1</sup> He did so in order to enable his readers to better understand the reasons for, and the forces behind, the events of this strategic period of history.

"The method of narration beginning at this point differs from anything previous, because it focuses on the secret maneuvers that lie behind the visible conflict to be portrayed under the seven bowls ... That future struggle is merely the outworking of a conflict between God and Satan that has lasted throughout history since Satan's fall. This prepares the way for all that is anti-Christian to enter the world at 13:1."<sup>2</sup>

Many ancient civilizations had myths that resemble this story.<sup>3</sup>

### **The dragon's hostility toward the male child 12:1-6**

This pericope furnishes the plot for the drama that unfolds in the rest of the chapter.

12:1 John saw a "sign," something that signified or represented something else. This is the first in a series of signs that John saw (cf. v. 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:29). Usually John used the Greek word *semeion* ("sign") to describe something miraculous, that points to some deeper spiritual significance connected with an event or object (cf. John 2:11, 18, et al.). He called this one a "great sign" (Gr. *mega semeion*).

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 361.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup>See Beasley-Murray, pp. 192-97.



"In this section [chs. 12—14] there is what might be called a Book of Signs [cf. John 2—12]. While no signs (*semeia*, ...) appear in chapters 1 to 11, at least seven signs are mentioned in chapters 12 to 19 (cf. the seven signs in John 1—11). Three are in heaven (12:1, 3; 15:1); four on earth (13:13-14; 16:14; 19:20). Only one is a sign of good (12:1); the others are omens of evil or judgment from God. These signs explain and amplify previous material (e.g., the beast in 11:7 is more fully described in ch. 13) and also advance the drama to its final acts. More specifically, chs. 12 to 14 contain seven further images though only two are directly identified as signs."<sup>1</sup>

This sign was "in heaven," not the earth's sky or atmosphere, but the heavenly scene John had been viewing—in contrast with what he saw happening on earth. What this "woman" signifies puzzles interpreters. Some have felt that John was alluding to something that his original readers knew about, namely, the "mother of the gods" represented on Roman coins.<sup>2</sup> Others see her as standing for "the believing covenant-messianic community," including the church.<sup>3</sup> Might she be a symbol of "Mary, the mother of Jesus"?<sup>4</sup> This seems unlikely, since the "woman" will be the object of persecution during the Tribulation (v. 13; cf. v. 17).<sup>5</sup>

"The Babylonians, in their *popular religion*, supremely worshipped a Goddess Mother and a Son, who was represented in pictures and in images as an infant or child in his mother's arms (Figs. 5 and 6). From Babylon, this worship of the

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 510.

<sup>2</sup>See Stauffer, pp. 151-52.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979; Alford, 4:667; Seiss, p. 280; Lenski, p. 363; Johnson, p. 514; Beale, p. 627; Swete, p. 148; Mounce, p. 237; Ladd, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup>Chilton, *The Days ...*, pp. 298-99.

<sup>5</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 117-19, for further discussion of the most popular views.

Mother and the Child spread to the ends of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

In view of Old Testament imagery (cf. Isa. 54:1-6; Jer. 3:20; Ezek. 16:8-14; Hos. 2:19-20) and the following reasons, the "woman" seems to symbolize the nation of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Her identification as God's people throughout all of the ages, therefore, seems incorrect.<sup>3</sup> She wears a "crown (Gr. *stephanos*) [with] twelve stars," and is clothed with the "sun," "moon," and "stars," as God pictured Israel in one of the nation's early symbolic representations (Gen. 37:9-11; cf. Isa. 26:17-18; 60:1-3, 20). Henry believed, incorrectly I think, that the crown of 12 stars represents "the gospel preached by the twelve apostles."<sup>4</sup>

There are many figurative references to Israel as a "travailing" woman (pregnant and in labor) in the Old Testament (Is. 26:17-18; 66:7-9; Jer. 4:31; 13:21; Mic. 4:10; 5:3). *She* (Israel) eventually gave birth to Christ (v. 5). In Genesis 37:9-10, the "sun" corresponds to Jacob, the "moon" to Rachel, and the "12 stars" to Israel's 12 sons (cf. 7:5-8; 21:12).

12:2 In John's vision, the woman was *about* "to give birth," and "cried out ... in labor [pains]." Evidently this represents Israel's national spiritual pain before Jesus Christ's appearing at His first coming.<sup>5</sup> Another view is that it represents "the emerging nation of Israel in its sufferings prior to the second coming of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

12:3 The second "sign" John saw was the "red dragon," whom God identified in verses 9 and 20:2 as *Satan*. "Dragon" (Gr. *drakon*) occurs 12 times in the New Testament, and only in the Book of Revelation. In every instance it refers to Satan (12:3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13; 20:2). A dragon symbolizes

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:238; Ironside, p. 210; Newell, pp. 170-71; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 285-90; Morris, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup>This was Jamieson, et al., p. 1560, and Barclay's view, 2:93.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 1979.

<sup>5</sup>Kiddle, p. 220; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 188; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 121.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 958.

a powerful, aggressive, deadly foe. His "red" color suggests *bloodshed*.<sup>1</sup> His "seven heads" and "ten horns" probably represent seven nations (powers) and ten rulers (17:12). Ten kings will at first rule under his authority, but when Antichrist rises to preeminence among them, he will subdue *three* of them, leaving only seven (Dan. 7:7-8, 20, 24; Rev. 13:1). The seven royal crowns or "diadems" (Gr. *diadema*) picture the political authority of these seven rulers during the Great Tribulation.

A less literal interpretation regards the ten horns as simply symbolic of the dragon's mighty strength.<sup>2</sup> Some interpreters viewed the dragon as pagan Rome.<sup>3</sup>

12:4 The "third of the stars of heaven" in this verse probably represent the angels Satan led in rebellion against God (cf. vv. 8-9; 9:1; Dan. 8:10; Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4).<sup>4</sup> Satan has extensive authority, which this description reflects. God cast Satan and these angels out of heaven "to the earth."<sup>5</sup> That is, they no longer had access to God's presence, though they presently do. Satan "stood before the woman who was about to give birth" means he proceeded to take out his vengeance by trying to prevent the appearance ("birth") of Messiah (cf. Exod. 1:15-22; 1 Sam. 18:10-11; 2 Chron. 22:10; Matt. 2:16). The "birth" referred to is evidently that of Jesus Christ at His first advent (v. 5; cf. Matt. 2:13).<sup>6</sup> Another view is that the child represents all true believers.<sup>7</sup>

"All Satanic activities are carried on under the double motive of *ambition to rule and be worshipped*, and, *hatred toward the One whom*

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 172; Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 621; Lange, p. 246; Scott, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:668; Seiss, p. 290; Lenski, p. 365.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, p. 289; Lenski, p. 356; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>Govett, 2:21-23; William H. Simcox, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 126; Charles, 1:320.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 958.

<sup>7</sup>Seiss, p. 297.

*God has chosen to take the kingdom Satan has usurped.*"<sup>1</sup>

12:5 The birth *of Jesus* ("a son, a male") and His ascension ("caught up to God") are the events in view here. Satan failed to destroy Jesus at His birth, and because he also failed to destroy Him during His life and in His death, Jesus Christ ascended victoriously into heaven. Satan cannot persecute Him there. Christ will yet "rule" the world ("the nations") with a shepherd's "rod of iron" (Ps. 2). The emphases in this whole review of Satan's opposition to Jesus are Jesus' victory and Satan's continuing antagonism. If Jesus Christ is the child, as even many amillennialists believe,<sup>2</sup> it seems unusual that the church, which they believe is the woman, would give birth to Him. Rather it was Jesus who gave birth to the church.

12:6 Since Satan could not destroy Jesus Christ (Israel's son), he will turn his attention to Israel (the mother). John saw Israel as having "fled into the wilderness," where God protected ("nourished") her "for 1,260 days" (three and a half years), the second half of the Tribulation period (v. 14, 11:2-3; cf. Matt. 24:16; Mark 13:14). Many non-dispensational interpreters take the 1,260 days as describing the entire inter-advent period.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout Scripture, a "wilderness" often represents a place of desolation, safety, discipline, and testing. The passive "be nourished" suggests that others, perhaps Gentiles but definitely God and angels (cf. Dan. 12:1), will care for the Jews at this time. Some believe the event immediately in view was the escape of the church of Jerusalem to Pella (cf. Mark 13:14), in the first century A.D.<sup>4</sup> But we believe this reference is to an event still future.

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:668.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 646.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 152; Alford, 4:673.

**The dragon's expulsion from heaven 12:7-12**

12:7 "Michael" the archangel (Jude 9) is the leader of God's angelic army. He is Israel's special patron (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1). He evidently holds high rank among unfallen angels, as Satan does among the fallen. John saw Michael engaged in battle ("waging war") with Satan and his angels, the demons. Michael had battled with Satan in the past (Jude 9), but the conflict in view, here, evidently takes place just before the last part of the Tribulation.

12:8 In John's vision, Satan's forces proved weaker ("were not strong enough"), and God threw them out of heaven. Consequently, as a result of this battle, Satan will "no longer" have access to "heaven" (cf. 20:11; Job 1—2; Dan. 2:35; Zech. 10:10). God will no longer hear Satan's accusations against believers.

12:9 Here God identified the dragon as "Satan" ("Adversary"). He called him the "great dragon" because he is fierce, cruel, and monstrous in nature. The title "serpent of old" stresses his crafty and subtle character (cf. 20:2; Gen. 3:1-5; Luke 10:18-19; Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 11:3). The name "Devil" means "Accuser" or "Slanderer."

"This name for the evil one would have made a specially strong impact in the first century, for there was a well-known and well-hated figure called the *delator*, the paid informer. He made his living by accusing people before the authorities."<sup>1</sup>

"Satan" means "adversary." He is the one who "deceives the whole world" because he is consummately deceptive.<sup>2</sup> God cast Satan's "angels" out of His presence along with him. The threefold repetition of "thrown down" in this verse stresses the ignominious fate of Satan and these angels.

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 161. Cf. Barclay, 2:102.

<sup>2</sup>See Gregory H. Harris, "Satan's Work as a Deceiver," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:622 (April-June 1999):190-202.

Satan is active throughout the heavens now; he still has access to God (Job 1:6; Eph. 2:2; Rev. 12:10). His being thrown down to the earth with his angels will evidently take place toward the end of the Tribulation. This conclusion harmonizes with the evidence of unusual Satanic activity on earth throughout history and most of the Tribulation, including heart hardening, described in the revelation of the Great Tribulation (chs. 6—11 and 13—18).

- 12:10 John then heard another outburst of praise in heaven. This overflow of exclamation seems to have come from the Tribulation martyrs (6:10; cf. v. 10). Their rejoicing is largely proleptic, anticipating what will follow the expulsion of Satan. God's "salvation" (victory), the manifestation of His "power," and His "kingdom" (both the millennial and eternal phases), will have come even closer when this happens. Likewise, the manifestation of "the authority" of "His Anointed One (Christ)" will be nearer (cf. 11:15; Ps. 2:8). The way will then be more open than it was previously for the establishment of God's kingdom on the earth.

Satan's malevolent work of accusing believers, unrelentingly and "before God," will cease (cf. Job 1:6). However, he will continue to persecute the living brethren of the martyrs, who are still on earth, even though he can no longer accuse them in heaven. Satan "accuses" believers "day and night" (*constantly*), just as steadily as the four living beings praise God (4:8).

- 12:11 This verse contains the second stanza of the song of praise begun in verse 10. "They" refers to believers whom Satan formerly accused before God. Jesus Christ's death ("the blood of the Lamb") is the basis for believers' ultimate victory over Satan, in the face of his continual accusations against them. Because of the proleptic nature of this song, the singers were probably referring to believers who would yet suffer martyrdom during the last half of the Tribulation. The Word of God to which they bear testimony ("the word of their testimony") is another key to their success, along with the Lamb's blood (cf. 1:2, 9; 6:9; 20:4). They would consent to

die ("not love their life even when faced with death") rather than prove unfaithful to Christ.

"The blood of the martyrs, rather than signaling the triumph of Satan, shows instead that they have gained the victory over the dragon by their acceptance of Jesus' Cross and their obedient suffering with him. This is one of John's chief themes (1:9; 6:9; 14:12; 20:4).<sup>1</sup>

- 12:12 Here we have the third and final stanza in the martyrs' praise. Heaven-dwellers can "rejoice" in view of Satan's punishment (cf. Ps. 96:11; Isa. 49:13). He is no longer attacking them. However, everyone living on the earth, especially believers, must then beware—because he now moves among them more antagonistically than ever ("having great wrath"). Furthermore, he knows that his "time" is "short."

### The dragon's vengeance on the woman 12:13-17

The revelation of Satan's activity, which the song of the martyrs (vv. 10-12) interrupted, now resumes.

- 12:13 Satan will concentrate his vengeance on Israelites during the Great Tribulation, under the sovereign control of God, since he cannot antagonize or harm Christ or the church any more. The Israelites will flee from Satan ("he persecuted the woman") in the future, like they fled from Pharaoh in the past (cf. Exod. 14:5; Josh. 24:6). Jesus predicted this flight in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15-28; Mark 13:14-23). The reason Satan will oppose the *Jews* is that Christ, his archenemy, came *from them* and is one *of them*. They are also the *special objects of His favor*.
- 12:14 The Israelites will receive divine assistance in fleeing from the dragon (passive "were given"). God bore the Israelites "on eagle's wings" when He enabled them to escape from Pharaoh (Exod. 19:4; Deut. 32:11; cf. Isa. 40:31). Therefore we should probably understand "the great eagle" to be metaphorical, describing the way God will save them, namely: with strength

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 517.

and safety.<sup>1</sup> Another possibility is that the eagle represents angelic assistance (cf. 8:13). The comparison between a powerful "eagle," that can "fly" very fast overhead, going wherever it chooses, and an earth-bound "serpent," implies the superior protection of God.

Evidently many Israelites will flee from Jerusalem into desolate places to escape Satan's persecution (cf. Zech. 14:1-8; Matt. 24:16; Mark 13:14). Some commentators have felt that mountainous *Petra* in Edom (modern Jordan) is the location where all that God predicted here will take place (cf. Matt. 24:16). However, the Jews could flee to any mountainous region for safety. God will "nourish" these Israelites in their place of refuge (cf. Isa. 43:2), possibly as He fed the Israelites in the wilderness and Elijah by the brook Cherith.

The reference to "a time and times and half a time" identifies this activity as taking place during the Great Tribulation (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; cf. Rev. 11:2; 12:6; 13:5). "Times" refers to "years," as is clear from the Hebrew of Daniel 11:13, that reads: "at the end of times, even years." The various references in Revelation to "a time and times and half a time," "three and a half years," and "1,260 days," all refer to the same period: the Great Tribulation.

"References to these specific time periods show that the Great Tribulation is *not* the entire present Age but the three and one-half years preceding the second coming of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

No one will be able to buy or sell during the Great Tribulation without the mark of the beast (13:17), so perhaps God's provisions will again be miraculous.

The "serpent" is another name for the dragon (v. 9). Even though this period will be a time of intense persecution of Jews, God will preserve many of them, as He explained here (cf. 7:3-8; Zech. 13:8-9).

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:105.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 959.



12:15 Perhaps Satan will use literal "water" to try to drown this group of Israelites.<sup>1</sup> If they take refuge in a place such as Petra, this might seem to be a possibility. The topography of Palestine does not lend itself to such a flood. Another possibility is that Satan will pursue these Jews with "a river" *of soldiers* (cf. Jer. 46:7-8; 47:2-3).<sup>2</sup> A "flood" is also a biblical metaphor for overwhelming evil or persecution (Ps. 18:4; 124:2-4; Isa. 43:2). Probably this is a picturesque way of describing Satan's attempt to destroy the Jews, who will have congregated in Palestine following the Antichrist's covenant with them. He may seek to wipe them out with deceptive false teaching, since the "water" comes "out of his mouth" (v. 16).<sup>3</sup> Both water and fire (cf. 9:17; 11:5) proceeding from the mouth picture punishment in Scripture.

Note the many parallels between Israel's exodus from Egypt and her past preservation in the wilderness, including rescue from water (the Red Sea; cf. v. 15), and this future flight. The similarities have led some commentators to conclude that the 42 months refer to Israel's 42 camping stations (Num. 33), and that what John described was in the past. Yet it seems clear that John was describing a future exodus.

12:16 Evidently "the earth" (the physical ground, Gr. *gē*) will assist the Israelites in escaping from the serpent. In the past, the "ground" (actually the water) "swallowed" the Egyptians (Exod. 15:12), and later the ground "swallowed" Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:28-33; 26:10; Deut. 11:6; Ps. 106:17). Perhaps God will do similar miracles to preserve the fleeing Jews in the future.

Two thirds of these Israelites will die, and one third will escape (Zech. 13:8-9). Some of those who perish will probably be believers, the martyrs of verse 11.

12:17 "Enraged" because of his lack of success in completely annihilating all of the fleeing Jews, Satan will proceed to

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<sup>1</sup>Düsterdieck, pp. 353-54; Bullinger, p. 416; J. B. Smith, pp. 190-91.

<sup>2</sup>Govett, 2:62-64.

<sup>3</sup>Ironside, p. 217; Beale, p. 673.

concentrate his attack on those who do not flee. Jews who believe in Jesus Christ become his special target, those who "hold" fast to the truth that God and Christ revealed ("to the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus"). Specifically this group seems to be, or perhaps includes, the 144,000 (7:1-8; 14:1-5).<sup>1</sup> Some less literal interpreters view these two groups of people as "the heavenly church" and "the earthly church".<sup>2</sup> Ladd believed "the rest of her offspring" are real Christians, in contrast to the mass of professing Christians (i.e., Christendom).<sup>3</sup>

"Granting the continuity of 12:1—14:5, one must see the portrayal of the victorious 144,000 in 14:1-5 as a sequel to the battle of the dragon's two emissaries with 'the rest of her seed' in chapter 13. The extended section is a connected sequence from this point on with the mention of the dragon's animosity toward that seed here, his stationing of himself on the sands of the sea in 12:18, the appearance of the earthly agents he will use to inflict his damage in 13:1, 11, and the proleptic scene of the victorious victims of his persecution after the conflict is over in 14:1-5. This sequence says rather plainly that 'the rest of her seed' is none other than the 144,000."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The activity of Satan's agents ch. 13

John also received information about Satan's chief instruments, the Antichrist and the false prophet, through whom he will pursue his goals during the Tribulation. He recorded this to enable his readers to identify these individuals and to respond properly. This chapter records the continuation of the dragon's activities that John described in chapter 12.

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<sup>1</sup>See Stephen L. Homcy, "'To Him Who Overcomes': A Fresh Look at What 'Victory' Means for the Believer According to the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:2 (June 1995):193-201.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beckwith, pp. 619-20; and Beale, pp. 676-77.

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 142.

## The beast out of the sea 13:1-10

John stressed three things about this beast: his conspiracy with the dragon (vv. 3-4), his success in deceiving the whole world (vv. 3-4, 8), and his success in temporarily defeating God's saints (vv. 6-7a).<sup>1</sup>

"The initial description of this creature identifies it as the culminating empire of Daniel's vision of the end (Dan. 7), but it speedily becomes evident that John has in view the empire as embodied in its ruler."<sup>2</sup>

### Characteristics of the beast 13:1-4

13:1 The "dragon stood on ... the seashore" watching "a beast coming up out of the sea," in John's vision (cf. Dan. 7:2, 3, 7, 8, 19-27; Job 40—41). The AV and NKJV rendering "I stood" does not have as good textual support, I believe, as the NASB and NIV "he stood."

"... people in Asia Minor thought of whatever came 'from the sea' as foreign and whatever came from the land as native. That is, one of the initial expressions of the first beast was Rome, whose governors repeatedly came by sea to Ephesus. Roman ships literally seemed to be rising out of the sea as they appeared on the horizon off the coast of Asia Minor."<sup>3</sup>

The implication is that the dragon *summoned* the beast out of the sea.<sup>4</sup> Evidently this was part of his plan to destroy the rest of the woman's offspring (12:17).

"The Sea is an apt symbol of the agitated surface of unregenerate humanity (cf. Isa. lvii. 20), and especially of the seething cauldron of national and

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<sup>1</sup>Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse*, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 206. See also Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Beast from the Sea in Revelation 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:639 (July-September 2003):337-48.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 682. Cf. Moffatt, 5:429; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 733.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, p. 523; Mounce, p. 248.

social life, out of which the great historical movements of the world arise; cf. Isa. xvii. 12 ..."<sup>1</sup>

"Without exception the imagery of the sea monster is used throughout the OT to represent evil kingdoms who persecute God's people ..."<sup>2</sup>

When the dragon was in position, John saw a new scene in his vision ("I saw," Gr. *eidon*). The sea may represent the mass of humanity (cf. 17:15; Dan. 7:2-3). However, this interpretation cannot explain the "sands" of the seashore, or the origin of the "beast from (out of) the earth" (v. 11). A literal sea is impossible, since this beast is a *person*, as we shall see. The ancient world often associated "evil" with the sea, and used the sea as a figure for "the abyss" (the Pit; cf. Job 26:12-13; Ps. 74:13-14; 87:4; 89:9-10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10; 57:20; Dan. 7:3; Rom. 10:7).<sup>3</sup> This figurative use of the sea seems best, since elsewhere John said that the beast came "out of the abyss" (11:7; 17:8).

The beast had many of the same characteristics as the dragon. However, they also correspond to the features of the fourth kingdom, that Daniel saw in *his* vision (cf. Dan. 7:7-8). In Daniel's vision, the 10 horns represented 10 rulers (Dan. 7:24). Here in Revelation, the Antichrist with "ten horns" has authority over 10 rulers (cf. Rev. 17). The view that the first beast is a real person who will rule the world during the Great Tribulation (Dan. 7:25)—rather than the personification of evil, or the sum total of world power,<sup>4</sup> or the revived Roman Empire,<sup>5</sup> or the threat of heresy, or Nero revived (based on the Nero *redivivus* [i.e., "living again"] legend), or false prophets collectively—dates back to the early church fathers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 161. See also Seiss, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 683.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 158; Mounce, pp. 249-50; Morris, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:675; Jamieson, et al., p. 1564.

<sup>5</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252.

<sup>6</sup>See Johnson, pp. 521-25, 530. See Beasley-Murray, pp. 210-11; Swete, p. 163; Moffatt, 5:305-7; or Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 738-40, for a good summary of the Nero redivivus view. See also Andy M. Woods, "The First Beast of Revelation 13 Has Not Yet

"The ten-nation confederacy of the future anticipated in these prophecies [i.e., Dan. 2 and 7] would naturally be considered a revival of the Roman Empire if for no other reason than that it is portrayed as an integral part of the fourth empire."<sup>1</sup>

Like Satan, the beast had "seven heads" that apparently represent the remaining seven rulers of nations after three of them disappear (Dan. 7:8). The "10 diadems" or regal crowns on the horns are symbols of governmental authority (cf. 12:3).

"There are a number of suggestions as to why the diadems are placed on the horns rather than on the heads of the beast. The most plausible is that his claim to authority rests on brute force."<sup>2</sup>

The "blasphemous names" reflect the beast's opposition to God (cf. vv. 5-6; 2 Thess. 2:4).

The "beast" is evidently the Antichrist, who is the head of a future empire (cf. 13:8, 18; 17:8).<sup>3</sup> No past governmental entity is similar enough, to what John described here, to qualify as the fulfillment of this empire. The beast embodies the malevolent forces operative in this empire.<sup>4</sup> He will be the deification of secular authority.<sup>5</sup>

Barclay believed that the first "beast" was Rome, and the seven "heads" were the emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. He also believed that the three additional "horns" were Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who

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Appeared in *World History: A Comparison of the Preterist and Futurist Views* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002).

<sup>1</sup>John F. Walvoord, "Revival of Rome," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126:504 (October-December 1969):323. See also idem, *The Nations ...*, pp. 83, 102; idem, "Prophecy of the Ten-Nation Confederacy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:494 (April-June 1967):99-105; and Barclay, 2:109.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 250.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 200; Swete, p. 161; Lee, 4:689-90; Johnson, p. 521; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 153; Beckwith, p. 636.

<sup>4</sup>Philip E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 145.

<sup>5</sup>Mounce, p. 251.

reigned after Nero for only a total of 18 months. The "blasphemous names" he took to be the claims to divinity that they made.<sup>1</sup> A common preterist interpretation is that the ten horns were ten successive Roman emperors in the first century.<sup>2</sup>

The repetition of heads, horns, and diadems (12:3) suggests that there is a close affinity between the dragon and this beast. Yet there are some differences in the descriptions of these heads, horns, and crowns.

"The conflict of 12:1-5 transpires while the seven world empires are running their course, but at 13:1 the focus has shifted to the last of these kingdoms when the beast will enjoy his supremacy over the ten kings who act as subrulers under his authority (cf. 17:12)."<sup>3</sup>

John received more information about the identity of these heads, horns, and diadems in chapter 17.

13:2 This beast possessed qualities of three animals, perhaps: swiftness, agility, vigilance, craftiness, and fierce cruelty ("leopard"); brutality ("bear"); and strength and majesty ("lion"). In Daniel, these animals represented three kingdoms that previously ruled the world. These kingdoms were Greece (Dan. 7:6), Medo-Persia (Dan. 7:5), and Babylon (Dan. 7:4). The fourth kingdom that Daniel described (Dan. 7:23) includes Antichrist's kingdom. The kingdom the beast rules and represents seems to reflect his personal qualities.

"The fact that the leopard of Greece, the bear of Medo-Persia, and the lion of old Babylon (*Daniel 7*) are all seen in this Beast, shows how all-inclusive of human things will be his character; he sums up all the brilliancy (Greece), all of the massive ponderousness of power (Persia), all of the

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:110-11.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:429.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 154. Cf. Scott, p. 270; and J. B. Smith, p. 193.

absolute autocratic royal dominion (Babylon), that the Gentiles have ever known."<sup>1</sup>

Antichrist will derive his power and position from Satan, his "father" (cf. 2 Thess. 2:9). Similarly, Jesus Christ receives these things from *His Father*.

13:3 Since the beast's heads represent nations (v. 1), verse 3 seems to be saying that one of the nations under Satan's authority perished ("one of his heads ... had been slain"), but then it revived ("fatal wound was healed"). Perhaps this leader will receive a wound that would normally be fatal, but recovers.<sup>2</sup> Another possibility is that the beast himself died, and then experienced resurrection.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Wuest believed that Antichrist would be Judas Iscariot.<sup>4</sup> Some interpreters believe that the head wounded and restored refers to the Nero *redivivus* myth: the myth that Nero had not really died, but was alive, and would return to continue his monstrous atrocities as Antichrist.<sup>5</sup>

13:4 The apparent resurrection of this nation will be so amazing to the world, that many people will give their allegiance and their worship to Antichrist (cf. vv. 8, 12; 14:9, 11; 20:4). In so doing, they will also submit to Satan, "the dragon" who is behind him. Antichrist's ability to revive this nation will make him appear invincible. The expression, "Who is like the beast?" (v. 4), seems to be a parody of Old Testament praises of God (cf. Exod. 15:11; Ps. 35:10; 113:5; Isa. 40:18, 25; 46:5; Jer. 49:19; Mic. 7:18). Note that it is Antichrist's power ("Who ... is able to wage war against him?"), not his character, that will elicit worldwide admiration. Later, as we will discover, the *Lamb* will prove superior to the beast (14:1-5; 17:14; 19:11-21).

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 960.

<sup>3</sup>Gregory H. Harris, "The Wound of the Beast in the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:624 (October-December 1999):459-68; Vacendak, 2:1296; et al.

<sup>4</sup>Wuest, 3:2:68.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:115-19.

Moffatt explained his preterist understanding of this sweeping away as follows:

"The allusion is not to the murder of Caesar ..., nor to the illness of Caligula ..., but ... to the terrible convulsions which in 69 A.D. shook the empire to its foundations (Tac[itus]. *Hist[ory]*. i. II), ... It fulfilled the tradition of the wounded head (Dan. vii. 8).

"All that had transpired—Nero's own death heralding a return, and the collapse of his dynasty proving no fatal blow to the empire—had simply aggrandized the influence of Rome."<sup>1</sup>

### Activities of the beast 13:5-8

The notable abilities of the beast are blasphemy against God and deception of people. These activities also marked Antiochus Epiphanes, the prototype of Antichrist (Dan. 7:6, 8, 11, 20, 25; 12:7).

13:5      *God* (cf. 6:4, 8; 7:2; 9:5; Dan. 4:17, 25, 32) will give "authority" to the beast "to act" as he will during the Great Tribulation, the last three and a half years ("42 months") of the Tribulation.

13:6      He will "blaspheme" God by *claiming to be God* (2 Thess. 2:4). This is evidently what he will do throughout the Great Tribulation, not just at one point in it. *Enoixen*, "he opened," is a constative aorist.<sup>2</sup> The phrase "he opened his mouth" often indicates the beginning of a prolonged discourse (cf. Matt. 5:2; Acts 8:35). He will speak "against God" and God's dwelling place, "His [heavenly] tabernacle" (Dan. 7:25). The phrase "those who dwell in heaven" defines the "tabernacle" in terms of its inhabitants, namely, the church, that will be residing in heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:22).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:430.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:401.

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 467.



Apparently the beast will share the dragon's antagonism toward God and the angels for having cast the dragon out of heaven (12:7-9, 12). Caligula did this when he insisted that an image of himself be set up in the temple in Jerusalem, and some interpreters believe that it was to this event that John referred here.<sup>1</sup>

- 13:7 He will "wage (make) war" against believers ("with the saints") and "overcome" them (i.e., kill them, v. 15) and will become a worldwide dictator (Dan. 7:21, 23). No other ruler has ever been able to rule the entire world ("every people and tongue and nation").

"Incidentally this shows that something more than the Neronic persecution is in mind, for that was not world-wide."<sup>2</sup>

"This verse furnishes a most important key to the proper understanding of events occurring during the tribulation period. Since authority is given to him [the beast] over *all kindreds, and tongues, and nations* upon his ascent from the sea, any passage pertaining to rivalry of kings or conflict among kings in the 'time of the end' (such as Daniel 7:8, 24; 11:40-44) must refer to a time preceding this universal dictatorship and therefore to the first half of the tribulation."<sup>3</sup>

- 13:8 Unbelievers around the world will not only serve Antichrist; they "will worship him." The "book of life of the Lamb" contains the names of God's elect (cf. Dan. 12:1-2; Eph. 1:4). Most, if not all, *true* believers will refrain from worshipping Antichrist (cf. Matt. 24:24). The long and unusual description of unbelievers in this verse has the effect of assuring believers during this time that they are indeed secure.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:123.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 169. See Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of Revelation 13 and Nero," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:655 (July-September 2007):341-56.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 199.

**The response of believers to the beast 13:9-10**

13:9 God and John called on the readers of this book to "hear" or listen, i.e., pay attention. Particularly those living at this time in the future should do so. Note that John made no reference to "the churches," as he did in similar exhortations in chapters 2 and 3 (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This supports the fact that Christians (i.e., believers living in the Church Age) will not be present on the earth at this time (3:10). It is what comes next (v. 10) that this verse announces, not what has preceded.

13:10 God promised the saints that those He has "destined for captivity" (i.e., Antichrist, his followers, and some of the saints) will eventually end up as captives ("to captivity he goes"; cf. Jer. 15:2; 43:11). Those who "kill" people violently ("with the sword"; those violently killed being believers in Jesus Christ, v. 7) will themselves die violently ("with the sword"; cf. Matt. 26:52).

This assurance that God will execute justice should encourage the saints to persevere steadfastly, and to trust God during this period of intense "persecution" and martyrdom (cf. 14:12). Possibly, by "if anyone *is destined* for captivity, to captivity he goes," God meant that believers should willingly submit to whatever fate was in store for them, and not resist their persecutors.<sup>1</sup> The whole verse is an encouragement for believers to submit to the sovereignty of God, realizing that *He* has permitted Antichrist's activity, but that they themselves (their own souls) are secure. It also assures them of divine retribution, and urges them to persevere faithfully.

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 168; Moffatt, 5:431; Robertson, 6:402.

THE FIRST BEAST IS THE LITTLE HORN		
The First Beast (Rev. 13:1-8)		The Little Horn (Dan. 7:7-28)
"All who dwell on the earth will worship him" (13:8).	<b>Both have a worldwide empire.</b>	"It will devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it" (7:7, 23).
"For 42 months" (13:5) "it was given to him to make war with the saints" (13:7).	<b>Both have victory over the saints for three and one-half years.</b>	"The saints ... will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time" (7:25).
"The beast was ... thrown alive into the lake of fire" (19:20).	<b>Messiah destroys both at His second advent.</b>	"The beast was slain ... and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever" (7:11, 26).
"Those who had not worshiped the beast ... came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (20:4-6).	<b>Immediately following both their destructions the saints will receive the messianic kingdom.</b>	"Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints" (7:22, 27).

### The beast out of the earth 13:11-18

Most interpreters who see the first beast as an individual man also see the second beast as a man. Others, who see the first beast as a power or

movement, tend to view the second beast similarly.<sup>1</sup> However, some who see the first beast as the revived Roman Empire, and or its head identify the second beast as Antichrist.<sup>2</sup> Many of the Reformers identified the second beast as the papacy, or as specific popes.<sup>3</sup> Many modern interpreters view the first beast as the personification of secular power, in opposition to the church, and the second beast as the personification of false religion.<sup>4</sup> Preterists often interpret the second beast as a personification of the Imperial cult.<sup>5</sup> However, it seems best to take these beasts as representing individuals.

13:11 *Kai eidon*, "and I saw," marks another new scene in the vision that John had been observing since 12:1 (cf. v. 1). John saw "another beast" (Gr. *allo therion*, "one of the same kind") "coming up," i.e., rising to prominence, "out of the earth." The Greek word translated "earth" (*ges*) refers to the *land*, in contrast to the sea (v. 1).

"In the minds of the ancients, none of the terrestrial animals could compare in magnitude with monsters from the deep, so coming out of the earth in itself indicated a degree of inferiority in power of the second beast to the first."<sup>6</sup>

"The second beast represented native political and economic authorities [to people living in Asia Minor in John's day]."<sup>7</sup>

It is probably not valid to see a reference to *Palestine* in this reference to "the earth."

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 172.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:242-43, 265.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:7:25.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Mounce, p. 349. See also Alford, 4:679.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:432; Beasley-Murray, p. 216; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 756.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup>Beale, p. 682.

"To argue that the earth means Palestine and that therefore this character is a Jew is reading into the passage more than it says."<sup>1</sup>

"Both beasts are probably Gentiles inasmuch as this will be the final hour of the time of the Gentiles, when Gentiles will tramp underfoot the city of Jerusalem (Luke 21:24), and both rulers will persecute Jews as well as believing Gentiles."<sup>2</sup>

If "the sea" represents "the abyss" (the Pit, v. 1), "the earth" probably represents Planet Earth. Clearly this second beast is a servant of the dragon, but his connections with the dragon are not as obvious as those of the first beast.

His "two horns" may symbolize some political power, but less power than that of the first beast (cf. v. 1; 5:6).<sup>3</sup> Another view is that they represent two philosophies opposed to God: naturalism and heretical supernaturalism.<sup>4</sup> Probably in his *external* conduct this second beast will be peaceful, "like a lamb," but "he spoke like a dragon," i.e., his words will prove *satanic* (cf. Matt. 7:15). His speech will reveal his true loyalty. He is known as "the false prophet" (16:13; 19:20; 20:10).

"Preterist interpreters admit that it is impossible to find any ancient historical figure who is the counterpart of the second beast."<sup>5</sup>

Barclay understood the second beast to be the organization of Caesar worship.<sup>6</sup>

13:12      The second beast "exercises all the authority of," that is, he will represent "the first beast" by acting as *his prophet* (19:20; 20:10; cf. Exod. 7:1). Compare the ministries of Moses and

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Idem, "Revelation," p. 963. Many interpreters, however, have believed that the first beast will be a Jew. See, for example, Ironside, p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>Stuart, p. 646.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, p. 335.

<sup>5</sup>Ladd, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 2:115.

Aaron (Exod. 4:16; 7:9), and the Lord and Elijah (1 Kings 17:1). The false prophet will be Antichrist's effective agent in directing the persecution of believers. He will lead ("makes the earth and those who dwell in it to") "worship the first beast," evidently as the leader of a worldwide religious movement that involves a form of emperor-divinity worship or personality cult. This will be a satanic counterfeit of the Holy Spirit's ministry of pointing people to Christ.

The reference to the first beast's "fatal wound" being "healed" highlights another counterfeit impersonation, this one of Christ, who rose from the dead. Believers worship Christ because He rose from the dead (cf. Acts 17:30-31), and unbelievers will worship the beast because he will have done a similar thing (cf. v. 14). Here some type of personal revivification seems to be in view, not just the revitalization of a nation (cf. v. 3).

- 13:13 Like Pharaoh's magicians, only with greater effectiveness, the second beast will have authority to perform supernatural miracles (cf. Exod. 7:11, 22; 8:7).<sup>1</sup> These will be genuine "great signs" and wonders, not just tricks (16:13-14; 19:20; Matt. 24:4-5, 11, 24-25; 2 Thess. 2:9).<sup>2</sup> Like Elijah and the two witnesses, he will even be able to call down "fire ... from (out of) heaven." John *himself* had at one time wanted to "call down fire from heaven" on some Samaritans (Luke 9:54).
- 13:14 This supernatural, but deceptive *power*, will make many earth-dwellers erroneously conclude that the false prophet's authority is supreme. The second beast (or false prophet) will be able to produce some type of convincing lifelike likeness or "image" of Antichrist (cf. v. 15; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), perhaps an ostensibly "living" statue (cf. Dan. 3:4-6), or even an android, a *seemingly* alive and sentient, apparently conscious, definitely intelligent, possibly a bionic humanoid—nonetheless appearing to be better-than-human, a godlike man, with "divine-like" authority that he "authenticates" by

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<sup>1</sup>See Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, pp. 75-96.

<sup>2</sup>See Gregory H. Harris, "Satan's Deceptive Miracles in the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:623 (July-September 1999):308-24.

performing miracles—who appears to be a "Superman" or a divine being, a "god" (cf. v. 15).

The false prophet will be the Antichrist's "Minister of Propaganda."<sup>1</sup> The description of the first beast, as having been fatally wounded by the sword, and then having come back to life, apparently refers to his revivification ("whose fatal wound was healed"; with a miraculous recovery from the fatal wound, the first beast apparently will come back to life after being considered dead, an apparent "resurrection," which is later explained as political resurrection, see notes at 17:8; cf. v. 12).

13:15 This verse may mean that the second beast will "give [life]" (Gr. *pneuma*, "breath") to an inanimate object, or that he will only appear to do so. In either case, he will "deceive" many people (v. 14).

"Belief in statues which spoke and performed miracles is widely attested in ancient literature."<sup>2</sup>

"... similar ventriloquism was practiced by Apollonius of Tyana and Egyptian sorcerers at Caligula's court."<sup>3</sup>

The image will "speak," and will put to death ("cause ... to be killed") those "who do not worship [the image of] the beast" (cf. Dan. 3:11), possibly by issuing commands for executions.

"For the ancients, a statue that speaks is a statue that gives *oracles*."<sup>4</sup>

Evidently these events will all take place in Jerusalem, and probably in the temple that will stand there at that time (cf. 11:1-2; 2 Thess. 2:4). We should not conclude that every last

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, p. 653.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 261. Cf. Charles, 1:361, and Beale, p. 711, for additional sources.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:433.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 764.

believer will die at that time (i.e., during the Great Tribulation; cf. 12:13-16; 13:17-18; Matt. 25:31-46).

- 13:16 The second beast also implements the *marking* or branding of beast-worshippers ("the mark of the beast"). We should probably interpret "all" to mean all *classes*, rather than all *individuals*, since John mentioned six classes ("small," "great," "rich," "poor," "free," "slaves") of people: two social, two economic, and two cultural groups. However, taken together, these three groups comprise the entire population. This *branding* of unbelievers corresponds to the *sealing* of God's servants in chapter 7. It probably will begin early in the Great Tribulation shortly after the sealing of the 144,000.<sup>1</sup> Those who receive this mark will do so willingly.<sup>2</sup>

"The choice of right hand or forehead is presumably for conspicuousness. It could not be hidden. It may also be meant as a travesty of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries (little boxes containing extracts from the Bible) on the left hand (or forearm) and on the head."<sup>3</sup>

The "mark of the beast" is evidently a brand-like logo, possibly similar to a tattoo, that will identify beast-worshippers and will permit or license them to "buy" and "sell" (v. 17). It may be a parody of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries on the left arm and forehead.<sup>4</sup> Beale viewed it as "figurative of the ways in which the state keeps check on whether people submit to compulsory idol worship."<sup>5</sup> Some modern speculators believe that the "mark" will be an implanted radio "microchip," that can be used to track billions of people worldwide.

This branding probably connects with ancient customs. Domestic slave owners sometimes branded their slaves with their logo.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes Roman soldiers *branded themselves*

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 381.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, pp. 172-73.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:129.

<sup>5</sup>Beale, p. 715.

<sup>6</sup>Plutarch, *Pericles*, 26. Cf. Herodotus, 2.113, 7.233.



with the "mark" of their general, if they were particularly fond of him.<sup>1</sup>

Those bearing the "mark of the beast" will show by *their* "mark" that they are Antichrist's followers. Individuals devoted to "the beast" (Antichrist, his image, and his religion) will show their submission and loyalty by accepting his brand on (or in) their hand or forehead.

The same Greek word translated "mark" (*charagma*) also described the *seal* attached to legal documents, the logo of which bore the name of the emperor and the date. A less literal view understands the "mark" as "John's way of symbolically describing authentic ownership and loyalty."<sup>2</sup>

13:17 Many Tribulation saints will not take the "mark of the beast" (cf. 7:3; 14:1, 9-11). Perhaps they will be able to survive by pooling their resources, by obtaining the necessities of life in clandestine ways (cf. 12:16), and through God's supernatural provisions.

"Earth-dwellers" (unbelievers) who choose to worship the beast, will also accept his law and authority. In John's day, Roman coins bore the stamped "image" of the head, and the inscription of, the emperor. Likewise, those who bear the "stamped image," or "mark of the beast," will demonstrate by this that they belong to him. When a person burned a pinch of incense to "worship" Caesar, he received a *certificate* verifying that he had done so. This certificate preserved him from death by persecution, and enabled him to buy and sell.<sup>3</sup> The "mark of the beast" will resemble such a certificate of worship, in function if not in actual appearance, that a person may only obtain by affirming his or her veneration of Antichrist.

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<sup>1</sup>Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 59.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 532.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:130.

The interchangeability of the beast's "name" and the "number of his name" evidently indicates that the name, written in Greek letters, has a numerical equivalent (v. 18).<sup>1</sup>

13:18 John indicated that it would take "wisdom" (Gr. *sophia*) to figure out ("calculate") "the number of the beast" (cf. 17:9). This wisdom is the "understanding" and skill necessary to solve the riddle (cf. Dan. 9:22; 12:10). By identifying the beast's number, believers in the Tribulation will be able to recognize him for who he is. Calculating or counting (Gr. *psephisato*) is the key to the puzzle.

The number "666" has, of course, been the subject of much study by interpreters.<sup>2</sup>

"Most students work from the fact that in the ancient world (where men lacked our convenient Arabic numerals) it was usual to employ letters to denote numbers. In Greek the first nine letters of the alphabet were used for the units, the next for the tens, and so on. The problem then is to find a name which gives a total of 666 when the numbers signified by its letters are added together."<sup>3</sup>

Some people identified Nero<sup>4</sup>, and others Hitler, as the beast by this method, called "gematria".<sup>5</sup>

"The sheer disagreement and confusion created through the years by the gematria method should have long ago warned the church that it was on the wrong track."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles, 1:364; Robertson, 6:406.

<sup>2</sup>See Mark L. Hitchcock, "What Is the Mark of the Beast?" in *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 196-208, for one good study.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, pp. 173-74. Cf. J. B. Smith, pp. 206-7; Deissmann, pp. 276-78.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:434; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 780.

<sup>5</sup>See Barclay, 2:131-33, for how they did it.

<sup>6</sup>Johnson, p. 534.

On the other hand, this disagreement and confusion may be due in part to the fact that the meaning of this number may not be evident until the Antichrist appears.<sup>1</sup>

"As to the man whom the number 'Six hundred and sixty and six' represents, God will give full 'understanding' when it is needed, in those three and half [*sic*] years of horror and danger."<sup>2</sup>

Another approach takes the number "666" as a triad of sixes (6-6-6), and interprets them as Scripture uses certain numbers *symbolically* elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> The number "seven," for instance, frequently occurs in Scripture. The Israelites understood "seven" to represent a completed work of God (e.g., the seven days of creation, etc.). The number "three" often stands for the fullness of something (e.g., the Trinity, etc.). Consequently, "777" would indicate something authenticated as divine.

However, "666" would appear as representing a *deficient (fraudulent) certificate* to a believer who knows the significance of these numbers. This is especially true, since the number "six" often connects with *human*, rather than divine activities in Scripture (e.g., man works "six" days a week, etc.). Verse 18 says 666 is the number of "man." The article "a" is absent in the Greek text, and though the reader may supply it legitimately here, it seems best not to do so.

I think that neither the identity of the Antichrist, nor the number of his name, will be evident until he appears and fulfills prophecy. Then, *wise* believers will be able to calculate his number, as well as identify his person. Until then, both aspects of Antichrist's identity will in all likelihood remain a mystery.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 182-85.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1567; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 210; Ladd, p. 187; Lenski, p. 413; Jeremiah, p. 165.

<sup>4</sup>See Stephen J. Nichols, "Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows: On the History of Identifying the Antichrist," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:1 (March 2001):75-85.

"I would suggest that we not waste our time trying to identify a person by this number. Instead, we need to present Jesus Christ that we might reduce the population of those who have to go through the Great Tribulation Period and who will therefore know what the number of the Beast is."<sup>1</sup>

Amillennialist Lenski believed the first beast is "*the whole antichristian power in the whole world and nothing less.*" He saw the second beast as "*the whole antichristian propaganda in the whole world.*"<sup>2</sup> So, in his view, the beasts are not persons but personifications.

The dragon plus the two beasts mentioned in chapters 12 and 13 are a counterfeit "trinity" of the divine Trinity.<sup>3</sup> The dragon (Satan) seeks worship that belongs only to God. The first beast (Antichrist) seeks to rule the world, which is Jesus Christ's prerogative. The second beast (the false prophet) glorifies the first beast, which is a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit's ministry of glorifying Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Chapters 12 and 13 paint a picture of the Great Tribulation in which there finally exists: one government, one religion, and one economic system for the whole world. This will be a time of great persecution and martyrdom for believers. Rather than getting better and better, as postmillennialists believe, the world will get worse and worse before Jesus Christ's Second Coming. As we see world events shaping up for this scenario, we should allow them to motivate us to redeem the time, before the Rapture or death terminates our ministries here. On the other hand, we should also rejoice that our Savior's Second Coming—and even sooner the Rapture—is drawing near (Matt. 6:10)!

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1005. Cf. Phil. 3:10.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 413.

<sup>3</sup>See Vern Poythress, "Counterfeiting in the Book of Revelation as a Perspective on Non-Christian Culture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997):411-18.

<sup>4</sup>See Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, pp. 302-9, for further helpful discussion of the beast and the false prophet.

**I. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF PREPARATIONS FOR THE FINAL JUDGMENTS  
IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION CHS. 14—15<sup>1</sup>**

In the following two chapters, John received additional revelation that prepared him and the reader to understand the remaining judgments in the Great Tribulation.

**1. Judgment at the end of the Great Tribulation ch. 14**

John recorded these scenes of his vision, in order to assure his readers of the triumph of believers, and the judgment of unbelievers at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

"The two previous chapters have prepared Christians for the reality that as the end draws near they will be harassed and sacrificed like sheep. This section shows that their sacrifice is not meaningless.

"Chapter 14 briefly answers two pressing questions: What becomes of those who refuse to receive the mark of the beast and are killed (vv. 1-5)? What happens to the beast and his servants (vv. 6-20)?"<sup>2</sup>

This chapter contains several incidents which John saw in heaven and on earth, that continue the parenthetical revelation begun in 12:1. While he saw some things in heaven, most of what he saw transpired on the earth. And what he saw in heaven, in his vision, only provides background information for what he saw on earth. From the revelation of the defeat of evil forces (ch. 13), John turned to the triumph of the forces of good.

"It is the opposite side of the picture, a victorious stance of the Lamb and His followers after their temporary setbacks portrayed in chapter 13.

"The whole of chapter 14 is proleptic. As a summary of the Millennium (20:4-6), the first five verses feature the Lamb in place of the beast, the Lamb's followers with His and the

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<sup>1</sup>For a study of the many parallels between chapters 14 and 15 and Exodus 19—24, see William H. Shea, "Literary and Theological Parallels Between Revelation 14—15 and Exodus 19—24," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12:2 (Autumn 2001):164-79.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 537.

Father's seal in place of the beast's followers with the mark of the beast, and the divinely controlled Mount Zion in place of the pagan-controlled earth ... The remainder of the chapter furnishes a proleptic outline of the catastrophes and the bliss that receives a chronological and more detailed treatment in 16:17—22:5. In this fashion, the chapter is a sort of *intermezzo* to provide encouragement by telling the ultimate triumph for those who refuse the beast's mark and to predict the doom of those who do receive it."<sup>1</sup>

### The triumph of the 144,000 14:1-5

14:1 "And I looked" (Gr. *kai eidon*) introduces three scenes in chapter 14 (vv. 1, 6, 14), as this phrase did twice in chapter 13 (vv. 1, 11). "Behold" (Gr. *idou*, cf. v. 14) calls special attention to the greatness of the sight that John saw here.

John saw, in this scene, the time yet future at the end of the Great Tribulation, when Jesus Christ will return to the earth. The Second Coming does not actually take place here, chronologically, but in 19:11-21. John only saw a preview of it, as if happening here, in his vision. He saw "the Lamb ... standing" on earth, specifically "on Mt. Zion," with the "144,000" Jewish *witnesses* whom God had sealed for the Tribulation (7:3; cf. Zech. 14:4-5). The contrast between the gentle Lamb *standing*, and the fierce dragon *pursuing* (12:13-17), and the evil beasts *arising* (13:1, 11), is particularly striking. An interesting detail is that John earlier saw the beast standing on *sand* (13:1), but here the Lamb standing on *rock* (14:1; cf. Matt. 7:24-27).

Many dispensationalists take "Mt. Zion" to refer to *earthly* Jerusalem, but some dispensationalists take it (cf. 11:1, 18; 12:5) to refer to the *heavenly* Jerusalem (cf. Heb. 12:22).<sup>2</sup> Most covenant theologians also take it as the *heavenly* "New Jerusalem," that God will bring down to earth from heaven (21:1—22:5).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 88; J. B. Smith, p. 208; and Wiersbe, 2:607.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ladd, pp. 189-90; Mounce, p. 267; and Beale, p. 735.

"To interpret this as a heavenly city ... involves numerous problems . ... If this group is the same as the 144,000 of chapter 7, they are specifically said to be sealed and kept safely through the tribulation. In this case, they move on into the millennial earth without going to the third heaven [God's abode], since this is the meaning of the seal (cf. 7:3)."<sup>1</sup>

Others take "Mt. Zion" as a metaphor for strength (cf. Ps. 2:6; 48:2; 78:68; 87:2; 125:1; Isa. 28:16; 59:20; Obad. 17, 21; Mic. 4:7).<sup>2</sup> However "Zion," as that name occurs elsewhere in Scripture, usually refers to *earthly* Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam. 5:7; Ps. 48:1-2; Isa. 2:3; 24:23; Joel 2:32; Obad. 17, 21; Mic. 4:1-2, 7; Zech. 14:10).<sup>3</sup> I think it probably does here, too.

"Further, the argument that the 144,000 must be in heaven as they hear the song before the throne may be disputed. There is no statement to the effect that they hear the song, only the declaration that they alone can learn it [v. 3]."<sup>4</sup>

Apparently their sealing (7:3) protects them from *God's* wrath, but not from the wrath of the *dragon* and the *beasts* (cf. 12:12, 17). In the ancient world, a mark upon a person could stand for at least five different things: ownership, loyalty, security, dependence, and safety.<sup>5</sup> Some of the witnesses will possibly die as martyrs (13:15), according to Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Many interpreters, however, believe that none of the 144,000 will die during the Great Tribulation.<sup>7</sup> Their *seal* is the earnest (guarantee) of their ultimate victory (cf. 22:4).

"The Divine name on the forehead suggests at once the imparting of a character which

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup>See Newell, p. 209; and McGee, 5:1006.

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 214.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, 2:134-35.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 192, 194.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216.

corresponds with the Mind of God, and the consecration of life to His service."<sup>1</sup>

14:2 John did not identify the person who spoke "from heaven." This could be "the voice" of Christ (cf. 1:15; Ezek. 1:24; 43:2), the Tribulation martyrs (7:10), an angel (cf. 6:1; Dan. 10:6), or many angels (5:8, 11; 7:11; 19:6). Perhaps the last option is best, in view of how John described it here and in the next verse (pl. "they sang"). These angels, however, do not include the four living creatures and the 24 elders (v. 3).

14:3 These angels "sang a new song." A "new song" in the Old Testament was a song of praise to God for *new mercies*, particularly victory over an enemy, and sometimes for God's work in creation (cf. Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10).

"A 'new song' is one which, in consequence of some new mighty deeds of God, comes from a new impulse of gratitude in the heart, [Ps.] xl. 13, and frequently in the Psalms, Isa. xlii. 10, Judith vi. 13, Apoc. v. 9."<sup>2</sup>

The song this group "sang" in heaven is one that *only* the "144,000," of all God's creatures, "could learn." Probably they were the only ones who could learn it, in the sense that they were the only ones who could appreciate what it expressed (cf. 15:2). God had "purchased" them "from the earth" for their special ministry in the Great Tribulation (cf. v. 4), not just for salvation. Midtribulationist Archer believed that they "may be the company of true believers translated from earth to meet the Lord in the clouds."<sup>3</sup>

14:4 Three occurrences of "these" (Gr. *houtoi*) in this verse identify the 144,000 as worthy of special honor: First, "with women" (emphatic in the Greek text) they had "not been defiled," because they were "chaste men," or "celibates" (Gr. *parthenoi*, "virgins"). Should we understand this word literally or

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:402.

<sup>3</sup>Archer, p. 143.



figuratively? Literally, the text would mean that these males had no sexual relations with women. There are two possibilities here: they never married, or though married they remained faithful to their spouses.

"One of the special criteria for these slaves of God was that they have no intercourse with women. ... So in the future Great Tribulation, virginity will be requisite for this special group."<sup>1</sup>

Figuratively, it would mean that they had remained *faithful to the Lord*, as the NIV translation "they kept themselves pure" suggests (cf. 2 Kings 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Jer. 18:13; 31:4, 21; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:2; 2 Cor. 11:2).<sup>2</sup>

"It is better ... to relate the reference to purity to the defilement of idolatry. In fact, John seems to use *molyno* [defile] this way elsewhere of cult prostitution (3:4; cf. 2:14, 20, 22)."<sup>3</sup>

I think the balance of evidence is slightly in favor of the first of the literal interpretations. If this seems too severe, it may be helpful to remember that Paul advised the Corinthians to remain unmarried—because of the nature of the distressing times in which they lived (1 Cor. 7:26; cf. Matt. 19:12). A figurative interpretation of "celibates" could be the correct one, however. "Celibates" seems to me to be too strong a word to use if they will simply be faithful to their spouses. Of course, both a literal and a figurative meaning may be in view; they may be unmarried and faithful spiritually.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the 144,000 will receive special commendation because they will "follow the Lamb" *faithfully* ("wherever He

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 195. Cf. Alford, 4:685-86; Moffatt, 5:436; Newell, pp. 215-16; Wiersbe, 2:607.

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1568; Seiss, p. 352; W. M. Smith, p. 1513; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 848; Vacendak, 2:1300.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, p. 539. Cf. Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216; Ladd, p. 191; and Beale, p. 739.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:1008. Cf. Henry, p. 1980.

goes") during their lives. This was especially difficult due to the time in which they lived, the Great Tribulation.

Third, they will receive honor because they not only were "purchased" by God, but because they were "first fruits to God." Some view this as expressing the idea that they are the "first" of others who will follow, specifically believers who will enter the Millennium as living believers.<sup>1</sup> However, there will be no others that follow, who are just like the 144,000; they are unique. Probably the *first-fruits* figure represents them as a special gift to God. This is the idea behind about two-thirds of the references to first-fruits in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

- 14:5 In addition to the three "these" commendations of verse 4, the witnesses spoke the truth ("no lie was found in their mouth[s]")—even though deception abounded (13:14; cf. Isa. 53:9; Zeph. 3:13; John 8:44; 1 Pet. 2:22). In short, they were also "blameless," that is, perfectly acceptable to God as first-fruit sacrifices (cf. Phil. 2:15; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19; Jude 24).

#### Four climactic announcements 14:6-13

"And I saw" (Gr. *kai eidon*) signals another scene of this vision on earth. In this one, John heard four announcements that will provide incentives for remaining faithful to God and resisting the beasts. Angels made the first three announcements, and a voice from heaven gave the fourth.

#### The everlasting gospel 14:6-7

- 14:6 John next saw "another angel" (cf. 7:2; 8:3; 10:1), "flying [between heaven and earth]" (cf. 8:13). This angel was "another" one probably like Michael (12:7), the nearest specific angel in the context. This is the first of six specific angels who individually participate in the events recorded in this chapter (vv. 8, 9, 15, 17, 18). He was flying "in midheaven," so nothing hindered people on earth from hearing his words. (Aune noted that "this is the earliest reference in

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216; Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 89; J. B. Smith, pp. 210-11.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 198.

Jewish or Christian literature to an angel [apart from cherubim and seraphim] *flying*."<sup>1</sup>)

He had an "eternal gospel" to preach to the worldwide population. "Gospel" means good news. What this good news is comes out in the next verse. It is "eternal" because it has eternal significance.

14:7 The angel spoke loudly, revealing his urgency and concern. The loudness of his voice implies that everyone will hear his message. He commanded earth-dwellers to "Fear God" (cf. Eccles. 12:13; Luke 12:5), and to acknowledge their accountability to Him (cf. Rom. 1:32). To "give [God] glory" means to *repent*, having already acknowledged His attributes (cf. Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Matt. 4:10; Acts 14:15-17).<sup>2</sup>

The positive response to this invitation appears in 15:4, and the negative response in 16:9, 11 and 21. The reason for fearing God is that "the hour of His judgment has come." This is the very last chance that these unbelievers will have—to change their allegiance from Satan to God—before the final judgments of the Great Tribulation begin. This is the first of four occurrences of the Greek word *krisis* ("judgment") in Revelation (cf. 16:7; 18:10; 19:2).

The angel referred to *natural revelation* in making this appeal. Some commentators believed that the "eternal gospel" is the witness of natural revelation that has gone out since Creation.<sup>3</sup> God is worthy of worship because He is the Creator, and He has the right to judge what He has created (cf. Neh. 9:6; Ps. 33:6-9; 146:6). The four categories of earth's creation encompass all of it: "heaven" (sky, atmosphere), "earth" (the solid planet: rocky structure, core, and crust), "sea" (all the oceans), and "springs of water[s]" (all the rivers, lakes, and streams). The first four bowl judgments will affect each of these four aspects of creation (16:2-9).

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 824.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Wiersbe, 2:607.

### The fall of Babylon 14:8

The fact that separate and successive angels make these announcements stresses their importance and their sequential relationship. A second angel followed the first, with the message that Babylon had fallen. This is another proleptic message, in this case given before Babylon falls. It anticipates that event (ch. 18; cf. 11:7 and 13:1-8).<sup>1</sup> The repetition of "fallen" is for emphasis, and the aorist tense of this verb stresses the imminence of Babylon's fall.

One popular view concerning the identity of "Babylon" is that it is a code word (*atbash*) for "Rome," which the Christians used to disguise references to Rome, especially when Rome was persecuting Christians.<sup>2</sup> That use occurs elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).<sup>3</sup> The other view is that "Babylon" was the literal city of Babylon on the Euphrates River. The second option is better in Revelation, because in this book, place names describe literal locations (cf. 1:9; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), unless specifically identified as figurative (e.g., 11:8). Furthermore, "the great," Nebuchadnezzar's description of Babylon (cf. Dan. 4:30), always modifies the literal Babylon elsewhere in Revelation.

Viewing this place as the literal Babylon does not exclude further implications of the religious and political systems that have arisen from the city, which become the focus of the revelation later (chs. 17, 18).<sup>4</sup> "Babylon" will epitomize *ungodliness* in the world during the Tribulation, as it has throughout human history, since its origin at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). Like "Hollywood," the name represents the world system while also being the name of a particular city.

The angel personified "Babylon" as a *temptress* ("she") who gives "wine" to a man in order to seduce him to commit fornication (cf. 17:2, 4). The man ("the nations") would not choose to drink this wine without her influence.<sup>5</sup> However, what this man drinks (representing what the "nations" will "drink") comes ultimately from the *cup of God's wrath* that He gives, through Babylon, to those whom He will punish (cf. v. 10; Ps. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22). This "wine" not only leads all who drink it to commit sexual

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1981; Moffatt, 5:437; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 829; Vacendak 2:1301.

<sup>3</sup>See Barclay, 2:145, for some uses of it in this way in the apocryphal literature.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 207; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 218.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Wall, *Revelation*, p. 185.

licentiousness ("passion of her immorality"), but every kind of excess that expresses unfaithfulness to God (cf. 17:1, 2, 5, 15, 16; 18:3, 9; 19:2).<sup>1</sup> Lenski described Babylon as "*the antichristian world city or empire*."<sup>2</sup>

### The fate of beast-worshippers 14:9-12

14:9 "A third" angel followed the former two, with the third message in this sequence, warning the beast-worshippers of their judgment (cf. 13:11-17). The goal of this warning is to alert potential beast-worshippers to their doom, if they follow ("if anyone worships") "the beast," and to encourage believers to remain faithful (cf. Matt. 10:28).<sup>3</sup>

14:10 The beast will kill people who do not follow him (13:15), but those who follow the beast will receive worse judgment from God. Contrast the blessing of the faithful in 14:1-5. The combination of "wrath" (Gr. *orges*, settled indignation) and "anger" (Gr. *thymou*, vehement fury) stresses the reality and severity of God's hostility (cf. Num. 12:9; 22:22). Normally people added water to wine to dilute it, but God will not weaken His punishment ("mixed with full strength") of beast-worshippers.

Their *torment* "with fire and brimstone," as part of the bowls of wrath judgments, will be excruciating (cf. Gen. 19:24; Isa. 34:8-10), and "*in the presence of the Lamb*," but this is not a reference to their eternal torment. Their final torment will be in the Lake of Fire, *removed* from the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb (19:20; 20:10; 21:8, 27; 22:14-15; cf. Matt. 25:41; Mark 9:43; 2 Thess. 1:8-9).

"The opposite case is that of the overcomer who will receive open recognition in the presence of the Father and His angels (3:5)."<sup>4</sup>

14:11 An endless trail of ascending "smoke" will be the constant reminder ("that goes up forever and ever") of the permanent

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 432.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 211.

misery of beast-worshippers (cf. 19:3; Gen. 19:28; Isa. 34:9-10). The temporary judgments of beast-worshippers, under the coming bowl judgments in the Great Tribulation, will afterward give way to judgment that is eternal (cf. Matt. 25:46; Rom. 2:3-9; 2 Thess. 1:6-9). If the ceaseless praise of the Lamb by the living creatures is *eternal* (4:5), so must be the punishment of these unbelievers—since the same phrase, "forever and ever," describes both.

"The modern vogue of dispensing with hell has no counterpart in Revelation."<sup>1</sup>

"This is the most horrible picture of eternal punishment in the entirety of Revelation ..."<sup>2</sup>

"The doctrine of eternal punishment, though unpopular with liberal scholars and difficult to accept, is nevertheless clearly taught in the Bible. Jesus and the Apostle John say more on this subject than does all the rest of the Bible."<sup>3</sup>

14:12 This verse contains John's word of encouragement to believers going through the Great Tribulation (cf. 13:10b, 18; 17:9). It is better to experience the beast's punishment, even *martyrdom*, than *God's punishment*.

"The prospect of this fearful and imminent retaliation is not only a warning to weak-minded Christians but a consolation to the loyal."<sup>4</sup>

This verse is not saying that if Tribulation saints apostatize and worship the beast (by taking the mark), they will lose their salvation and suffer eternal punishment. It is saying that if they worship the beast, they will experience temporal punishment from God along with the beast-worshippers (v. 10). This

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 181. See also C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, ch. 8: Hell; Mounce, pp. 276-77; and Robert A. Peterson, "Does the Bible Teach Annihilationism?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:621 (January-March 1999):13-27.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 964.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:439.

temporal punishment is only the first phase of the punishment that unbelievers will experience (v. 11), but it is the only phase that Tribulation saints will experience (cf. Rom. 8:31-39).

In view of their hope, believers during the Great Tribulation should persevere in obedience and trust, good works and faith in God, plus ethical conduct and reliance on Jesus Christ. This is an encouragement *to* persevere, not a guarantee that the saints *will* persevere.<sup>1</sup> Obedience to God's "commandments" and continuing trust ("faith") "in Jesus" constitute this "perseverance," and will see the faithful through these days of tribulation successfully.

"The two supreme motives for patient loyalty on the part of the saints (ver. 12) are, (a) negatively, fear of the fate reserved for the unbelieving (xiv. 8-11), and, (b) positively, the bliss in store for the loyal (ver. 13, *cf.* 1-5)."<sup>2</sup>

### **The blessedness of those who die in Christ 14:13**

This "voice" was probably the Lamb's (1:10-11, 19; cf. 10:4, 8; 11:12; 14:2; 18:4; 21:3). The voice told John to record that it would be a blessing for the believers who live during the Great Tribulation to die as martyrs ("blessed are the dead who die in the Lord"). They will receive a unique blessing reserved for no one else.<sup>3</sup> This is the second of seven beatitudes in the book (cf. 1:3; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Here, as often in Scripture, the blessing assures a future reward for present obedience to God.<sup>4</sup>

"The faithfulness of the martyrs unto death is not a legalistic work which merits eternal bliss, but a manifestation of their devotion to Christ. These works follow them in the sense that

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<sup>1</sup>Beckwith, p. 658; Moffatt, 5:439. See Robert N. Wilkin, "The Mark of the Beast and Perseverance; Revelation 14:9-12," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 6:6 (June 1991):2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:435.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 5:439.

<sup>4</sup>Beckwith, p. 422.

there can be no separation between what a man is and what he does."<sup>1</sup>

Many believers will die as martyrs for refusing to worship the beast (13:15). They will die "in the Lord" in the sense of dying as their Lord did, namely, for His faithfulness to God. The word order in the Greek text makes this interpretation preferable to the one that takes "in the Lord" as simply a designation of believers who are "in Christ." "From now on" means "from this time on" *in the Tribulation*, specifically during the bowl judgments. They will thereby, through martyrdom, *escape* the intense persecution of the beast, which they would otherwise experience, if they remained faithful to Christ (cf. 12:17).

The Holy Spirit added (cf. 22:17) that they would also experience blessing because they would be at "rest" beyond the grave, and because God would then reward their faithful "deeds" (cf. 1 Tim. 5:24-25; Heb. 6:10). In contrast, the beast-worshippers have "no rest" (v. 11), and receive punishment ("tormented with fire and brimstone") for their unfaithfulness to God (v. 10).

"God does not save anyone for his works, but He does reward us for our works. Our works (good or bad) are like tin cans tied to a dog's tail; we cannot get away from them. They will follow us to the *bema* seat of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

This is a positive incentive to remain faithful, that balances the negative warning previously given (vv. 9-12).

### **The reaping and treading of God's harvest 14:14-20**

This is the final scene that furnishes background information before the revelation of the seven bowl judgments. Again, what John saw was mainly on the earth.

"The total scene in 14:14-20 closes the section on coming judgment (14:6-20) with a proleptic summary in anticipation

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1011.



of the more detailed account of the same in chapters 15-20  
..."<sup>1</sup>

14:14 "And I looked" (Gr. *kai idou*) again introduces a new scene, and an advance to another important subject. The whole description is very similar to Daniel's prophecy of Messiah's Second Coming (Dan. 7:13-14). The "cloud" probably represents the glory of God, the *Shekinah*. The person John saw was evidently Jesus Christ, though some commentators think he was *an angel*, in view of verse 15.<sup>2</sup> This seems clear, since John saw Him wearing a "golden [victor's] crown" (Gr. *stephanon*), and holding "a sharp sickle" (Gr. *drepanon oxy*) with which He will do the work of judging (cf. Mark 4:29). Since the sickle is "sharp," the Reaper can do His work swiftly and completely.<sup>3</sup>

"Son of Man" is a messianic title of Jesus Christ in Scripture (cf. 1:13; Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 8:20; 24:30; 26:64; John 5:27). That He receives and follows the instructions of an angel (v. 15) does not imply His inferiority to an angel. It only indicates that an angel will signal God's proper time for judging, and then the Son will proceed to judge.

Midtribulationist Archer believed that this verse marks the Rapture.<sup>4</sup>

14:15 "Another angel" (cf. v. 9) came out of the [opened heavenly] temple" (cf. 11:19; 15:5), and announced that the time ("hour") to judge those living on the earth had arrived. Three previous angels (vv. 6, 7, 9) had announced that judgment was coming, and now this one conveyed the command to execute it ("Put in your sickle and reap") "without delay." The harvest was "ripe" (Gr. *exeranthe*). Some scholars take this word as describing an over-ripe harvest, and others as simply a ripe one. The earth-dwellers, during this late stage in the Tribulation, will be "ripe," ready for judgment (cf. 19:11-21).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 849.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 445.

<sup>4</sup>Archer, p. 142.

Some believe that this is a judgment of believers.<sup>1</sup> But this runs counter to the context (14:1-5, 12-13), which is a judgment of unbelievers (cf. Joel 3:13).

"The harvest is an OT figure used for divine judgment (Hos 6:11; Joel 3:13), especially on Babylon (Jer 51:33). Jesus also likens the final judgment to the harvest of the earth (Matt 13:30, 39)."<sup>2</sup>

14:16 The Judge, described as "Him who sat on the cloud" (cf. John 5:27), then judged those on the earth ("swung His sickle over the earth and ... reaped"). This judgment will occur at the end of the Tribulation (19:17-21). Posttribulationist Moo believed that this verse refers to the Rapture and the judgment just before the Second Coming.<sup>3</sup> This is a proleptic description of the things that the Book of Revelation will describe further in its sequential unfolding of events.<sup>4</sup>

"The brevity of the statement dramatizes the suddenness of the judgment."<sup>5</sup>

14:17 The fifth ("another") "angel" in this group "came out of the [heavenly] temple," ready to execute judgment (cf. Matt. 13:30, 39-42, 49-50).

14:18 "Another angel," the sixth in this chapter, "came out from the [golden] altar of incense" in heaven (8:3). This is probably an allusion to his responding to the Tribulation saints' *prayers for vengeance* from under the altar (6:9-10). His "power over fire" may indicate his authority to execute punishment. It seems clear from verse 19, that this angel, the sixth one, was addressing the fifth one, the angel with the sickle (v. 17), not Jesus Christ. John saw a different crop here ready for harvest. The two reapings are redundant, and seem to describe a single judgment at the end of the Great Tribulation (19:15, 17-21).

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:691-92; et al.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 543.

<sup>3</sup>Moo, pp. 199-200.

<sup>4</sup>Robertson, 6:415.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 221.

Another view is that the grain harvest pictures the bowl judgments, and the grape harvest the battle of Armageddon.<sup>1</sup>

"Following the pattern of Joel 3:13, the scene furnishes two pictures of the same judgment for the same reason that Joel does, i.e., to emphasize the terror of it."<sup>2</sup>

The "vine" (full of clusters of "ripe ... grapes") may represent Israel, and the *wheat* (grain that is reaped with a sickle), Gentiles. The vine was a common symbol of Israel, and still is today among the Jews.

14:19      The earth had yielded a crop of unbelievers, which now, at the end of the Tribulation, would come into judgment. The angel took ("gathered") them from the earth to undergo judgment in God's "great grape (wine) press" (cf. Isa. 63:1-6; Lam. 1:15; Joel 3:13).

"In Biblical days grapes were trampled by foot in a trough which had a duct leading to a lower basin where the juice collected. The treading of grapes was a familiar figure for the execution of divine wrath upon the enemies of God."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Vacendak, 2:1302.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 220. Cf. Isa. 34:1-3, 6; 63:1-6.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 282. Cf. Robertson, 6:416; and J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 232.



14:20 Since "the city" in view escapes this judgment, Babylon is evidently not the city in view. It is instead Jerusalem. The Old Testament predicted that a final battle would take place near Jerusalem, in the Valley of Jehoshaphat (i.e., the Kidron Valley just to the east of Jerusalem; Joel 3:12-14; Zech. 14:4; cf. Rev. 11:2). It seems probable that "blood" will literally *flow* "up to" the height of "the horses' bridle[s]" (about four and a half feet), in some places, in that valley. Obviously many people will have to die for this amount of blood to flow.

"Blood came out from the wine press" of God's wrath "for a distance of 180 miles" (lit. "1,600 stadia"). Evidently this figure describes the judgment that will take place all over Palestine, not just in the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem, at this time.<sup>1</sup> Much of this action will take place in the "Valley of Jezreel" in northern Israel (i.e., the battle of Armageddon; 19:17-19). There God will put vast numbers of people to death (cf. Isa. 63:1-6). The blood will evidently drain out of the Jezreel Valley for a distance of 180 miles, probably flowing

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:153.

eastward down the Harod Valley to the Jordan Valley, and south all the way to the Dead Sea.

"What this affirms is a tremendous bloodletting in which blood is spattered as high as the bridles of horses."<sup>1</sup>

"When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, so great was the bloodshed that Josephus says the whole city ran down with the blood to such a degree that the fires of many of the houses were quenched by it. When Sylla took Athens, Plutarch says the blood that was shed in the market-place alone covered all the ceramicus [ceramic objects] as far as Dipylus, and some testify that it ran through the gates and overflowed the suburbs."<sup>2</sup>

Many interpreters, even some dispensationalists, believe that what we read in this verse is simply a symbolic (and hyperbolic) way of picturing a terrible judgment.<sup>3</sup> Some amillennial interpreters take this description as picturing a worldwide judgment.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter contains a prophetic preview of the major events yet future, from John's perspective in his vision. That is, they deal with events leading up to the end of the Great Tribulation.

## **2. Preparation for the bowl judgments ch. 15**

John recorded what he saw in this chapter, in order to further heighten his readers' expectation for the climactic judgments of the Great Tribulation, that we read in chapter 16 (cf. 8:1-5). This chapter (15) continues supplementary revelation, begun in 12:1, and the emphasis on preparation for the final judgments of the Great Tribulation, begun in 14:1.

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 965.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 365.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:442; Alford, 4:693; Lenski, p. 451; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 849; Wiersbe, 2:608.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 782.

"Following the sign of the seven angels with the seven last plagues, the fifteenth chapter has two visions, the first one picturing the victors fresh from their triumph and the second describing the white-and-gold clad angels who hold the seven bowls."<sup>1</sup>

"... it is not the image of a domestic bowl which John wished to conjure up in our minds, but the cup of God's wrath, of which the prophets frequently spoke and to which John himself has already referred (in 14:8 and 10)."<sup>2</sup>

### The announcement of the seven last judgments 15:1

This verse serves as a superscription for chapters 15 and 16—and even, perhaps, for the rest of the book. One writer argued that verse 1 concludes the previous revelation, rather than introducing what follows.<sup>3</sup> Most scholars disagree.

"And I saw" (Gr. *kai idou*) again introduces a new scene, this time in heaven (cf. 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:2, 5). The "sign" (symbolic portent) John saw here signified, announced, and introduced God's final ("last") judgments on earth-dwellers during the Tribulation (cf. 12:1, 3). The previous signs were "the woman" and "the dragon."

"They [the signs] point beyond themselves and disclose the theological meaning of history."<sup>4</sup>

This sign, however, is both "great and marvelous," meaning 'especially awesome.' It is *awesome* because it signifies the climax of the outpouring of God's wrath on nature, humankind, the dragon, and the two beasts. The sign itself is the "seven angels who control (had) seven plagues." As with the seals and trumpets, "angels" were God's agents in pouring out His wrath in this series of judgments. These "seven angels" were now ready to do their duty (cf. Ps. 103:20). They appear seven times as a group (Rev. 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9), and nine times individually (16:2, 3, 4, 8,

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 231. Cf. Isa. 51:17, 22.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, pp. 137-40.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 285.

10, 12, 17; 17:7; 21:9). John simply introduced them here in verse 1. They do not begin to act until verse 6 (cf. 8:2; 12:6; 21:2).

The bowl "plagues" that follow have many similarities to the plagues that God sent on Egypt, as we shall see. All seven of these bowl judgments repeat in varied ways the plagues of Egypt. These similarities suggest that God's purpose in both series of judgments is the same: to punish godless idolaters and to liberate the godly for future blessing and service.

Some interpreters believe the bowl judgments are the same as the seal and trumpet judgments. One advocate of this position wrote as follows:

"The bowls go back in time before what is depicted in ch. 14 and explain in greater detail the woes throughout the [inter-advent] age culminating in the final judgment."<sup>1</sup>

He explained their being described as "the last" this way:

"... they portray the full-orbed wrath of God in a more intense manner than any of the previous woe visions."<sup>2</sup>

Some other interpreters have seen the bowl judgments as "exactly parallel" with the preceding trumpet judgments. Baxter, for example, believed that the trumpet judgments present the *earthly* view of things, and the bowl judgments the *heavenly* view of them.<sup>3</sup> The differences in these sets of judgments, and their places in the generally chronological unfolding of future events on the book, inclines me away from this view.

### The praise of the Tribulation martyrs 15:2-4

15:2        John again "saw" (cf. vv. 1, 5) the "sea of glass" that was *similar to crystal* (4:6; cf. Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:22), though here he wrote that it also had "fire" in it. The "sea" most likely represents chaotic evil (cf. 4:6). The "fire" suggests the judgment that is about to come. Another view is that the *fiery sea* represents the persecution by the beast during the Tribulation.<sup>4</sup> The place of eternal punishment for unbelievers

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 786.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 788.

<sup>3</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:341, 344.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:1017.

will be a "lake of fire" (cf. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8). The people ("those who had been victorious over the beast") "standing" on this sea appear to be the Tribulation martyrs (6:9-11; 7:9-17; 12:11; 14:1-5, 13). I see no reason to limit these martyrs to Jews, as some have done.<sup>1</sup> They had *overcome* "the beast," "his image," and "the number of his name," three specific entities that combine to heighten appreciation for their victory.

God probably intended that we see allusions to the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea here. Jesus Christ will lead these believers in a great deliverance, as Moses led the Israelites long ago. However, these overcomers stand "on" the sea, not *beside* it, as they give thanks to God (cf. Exod. 15). "Harps" denote dedication to the service of God (1 Chron. 16:42; cf. Rev. 5:8; 14:2).

- 15:3 These martyrs sang two songs, as seems clear from the repetition of the words "the song" in the phrase: "sang the song of Moses ... and the song of the Lamb." Moses recorded two songs in praise of God's faithfulness and deliverance of the Israelites. Of these, the one in Exodus 15 seems slightly more appropriate, for these martyrs to echo, than the one in Deuteronomy 32, because it is a song of victory. Nevertheless, they both contain similar emphases. The "song of the Lamb" seems to be a song not recorded elsewhere in Scripture, though some commentators have suggested several different Psalms as its basis. Probably *this song* is the one that follows in verses 3-4. In the case of both songs, the genitive "of" is probably subjective: Moses and the Lamb were responsible for these songs, not the subjects of them.

"Moses celebrated a deliverance by the Lord which adumbrated a greater deliverance to come. The greater redemption eclipsed the former by a similar degree as the second redeemer transcended the first. Moses and the Lamb are no more to be bracketed than the promised land of Israel is to be equated with the kingdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 271.



The unity of God's purpose and the continuity of God's people under both covenants include a disjunction of his action in Christ and of his people's experience of redemption."<sup>1</sup>

Other writers, who emphasize the unity of God's people throughout history and do not distinguish His different purposes for Israel and the church, sometimes view these two songs as one.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of this song extols God's "works" and "ways." Specifically, God's "works" in judging His enemies are in view. His might makes judgment possible. His "ways" of judging are just and faithful. His sovereignty makes His judgment necessary and certain.

- 15:4 It is inevitable that everyone *fears* God and *glorifies* Him. The rhetorical questions make this crystal clear (cf. 13:4). This will happen after He finishes judging (cf. Ps. 86:8-10; Jer. 10:7). One reason for this "fear" and "glory" is God's unapproachable majesty (Gr. *hosios*), which is associated with His holiness ("You are holy"). Another reason is that everyone ("all the nations") will "worship" Him when Christ returns, because He has purged the earth. He will *reveal* His "righteous acts" when He judges the earth. The martyrs do not refer to what they did in overcoming the beast, but to *who God is* and *what He did*.

### The preparation of the agents of judgment 15:5-8

- 15:5 "After these things I looked" (Gr. *meta tauta eidon*) indicates a transition to a new vision and a new subject: the bowl judgments. These final judgments—of God's wrath poured out—are in a category all their own. John saw the *heavenly* "temple ... opened." This gave the seven angels who carried the bowl judgments egress from God's presence. He is the one who sends them. The "tabernacle of testimony" refers to the temple as the building that housed God's law, which the earth-

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:694.

dwellers had constantly disregarded. God was now going to hold them to it, and judge them by it.

- 15:6 The "seven angels" now "came out" from God's presence (cf. v. 1). Each of them had received a plague (judgment) from God. Beale regarded these seven judgments as *figurative* of complete, severe punishment—and not as seven literal woes.<sup>1</sup> The angels' "clean linen" garments represent holiness and righteousness (cf. 19:8, 14), and their "golden sashes" identify them as on a punitive mission (cf. 1:18). Their clothing befits their purpose, which is to purify the earth.<sup>2</sup>
- 15:7 "One of the four living creatures" (4:6) gave each angel a *bowl* "full of God's wrath." It is interesting that God also described the "prayers of the saints" as being held in "gold bowls," in 5:8. Those prayers will thus be connected with the outpouring of these judgments, in an implied cause-and-effect relationship. The two sets of bowls in chapter 5 and here in 15:7 are different, however, and they contain different things. The priests in Israel's earthly temple also used "gold bowls" in their worship (1 Kings. 7:50; 2 Kings 12:13; 25:15). The reference to the *living God* "who lives forever and ever" adds more solemnity to an already solemn scene (cf. 10:6; Deut. 32:40; Heb. 10:31).
- 15:8 The "smoke," described here as coming from God's "glory" and "power," probably symbolizes the *presence of God* (cf. Exod. 19:18; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron. 5:11-14; 7:1-3; Isa. 6:4; Ezek. 11:23; 44:4). No one could enter God's presence until He had finished judging the earth-dwellers. This indicates the climactic nature of these judgments.

This chapter is really more of a prelude to chapter 16, than a conclusion to chapters 12—14. Chapters 12—14 record prophetically historical information about the Great Tribulation, but not in the chronological sequence of the three sets of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls. Chapter 15 is similar to 8:1, in that it prepares for the next set of judgments, in this case the bowls). It prepares the stage for the resumption

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 803 and 812.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 242-43.

of the chronological progression of events on earth, that had ended *temporarily* in 11:19.

## J. THE SEVEN BOWL JUDGMENTS CH. 16

John next revealed the outpouring of the bowls to enable his readers to understand the climactic judgments of the Great Tribulation. The setting of John's vision in this chapter is the earth.

"These plagues are not the expression of God's wrath against sin in general, nor are they punishments for individual wrongdoing. They are the outpouring of his wrath upon him who would frustrate the divine purpose in the world—the beast—and upon those who have given their loyalty to him.

"These plagues are God's answer to Satan's last and greatest effort to frustrate the divine rule."<sup>1</sup>

### 1. The commencement of the bowl judgments 16:1

The "voice" John heard was evidently *God's* (cf. 15:8; 16:17). The fact that God told *all* "seven angels" to pour out their bowls seems to indicate that these judgments will follow each other in rapid succession.

The frequent use of the Greek adjective *megales*, in this chapter, indicates the unusual severity and intensity of the bowl judgments. The NASB translators rendered this word "loud" here and in verse 17; "fierce" in verse 9; "great" in verses 12, 14, 18 (twice), and 19 (twice); and "huge" and "severe" in verse 21. The same Greek word also occurs nine times in chapter 18, which is an elaboration on the seventh bowl judgment introduced in 16:17-21.

The relationship in *time*, of the bowl judgments to the trumpet judgments, has been a matter of disagreement among futurist commentators. On the one hand, there are some similarities between them, as a side by side

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 209.

comparison reveals.<sup>1</sup> However, the differences make it most difficult to conclude that they are identical judgments.<sup>2</sup>

TRIBULATION JUDGMENTS			
	Seals (ch. 6)	Trumpets (chs. 8—9)	Bowls (ch. 16)
1.	Antichrist	Storm	Sores
2.	War	Meteor	Bloody Seas
3.	Famine	Bitterness	Bloody Springs
4.	Death (1/4 of Population)	Darkness	Fire
5.	Imprecations	Locusts	Darkness
6.	Earthquake	Horses (1/3 of Population)	Invasion
7.	7 Trumpets	7 Bowls	Earthquake and Hail

It seems more likely that the bowls will constitute the seventh trumpet, as the trumpets constituted the seventh seal. This would make the bowls the last plagues to come on the earth at the end of the Great Tribulation (15:1). Many details in the text, to be pointed out below, support the conclusion that this is the correct interpretation.

"The first four affect individuals directly either through personal affliction or through objects of nature, and the last three are on more of an international scale, leading the way to a final major confrontation."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Moffatt, 5:446; Beasley-Murray, pp. 238-39, and Beale, pp. 809-10.

<sup>2</sup>See Swete, p. 200; and Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 525-43.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

"After almost a century of insipid preaching from America's pulpits, the average man believes that God is all sweetness and light and would not discipline or punish anyone. Well, this Book of Revelation tells a different story!"<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The first bowl 16:2**

The first four trumpet judgments will fall on man's environment, rather than on man himself, but the first bowl judgment will fall directly on man himself. This plague resulted in some "loathsome" (bad) and "malignant" (evil) *sores* breaking out on the beast-worshippers (cf. Exod. 9:9-11; Lev. 13:18-27; Deut. 28:27, 35; Job 2:7). The same Greek word, *helkos*, occurs in the Septuagint translation of these Old Testament passages.

Beale argued that since the bowls are figurative, so are these sores.<sup>2</sup> For him, the sores represent afflictions. However, the plague of boils in the Exodus was literal, so it seems this plague will be literal, too.<sup>3</sup> This "sore" appears to be some type of skin ulcer that breaks out on the surface of the body. Might this be the result of germ or chemical warfare, from a weapon of mass destruction (cf. v. 17)? Believers who apostatize and worship the beast may suffer from this plague (cf. 14:9-12), but the faithful will be in a safe refuge (cf. 12:13-17), or God may protect them in other ways.

"It is an awesome thought to consider almost the entire population of the world suffering from a painful malady that nothing can cure. Constant pain affects a person's disposition so that he finds it difficult to get along with other people. Human relations during that period will certainly be at their worst."<sup>4</sup>

Compare the aggressive and ongoing spread of various epidemics.

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1022.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 814. Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:248-51, also favored a symbolic interpretation of these judgments.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, pp. 374, 376.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:609-10.

### 3. The second bowl 16:3

This judgment resulted in the destruction of *all* sea life ("every living thing in the sea died"), not just one third of it, as in the second trumpet judgment (8:8-9). This may involve actual coagulated, rotting blood, or a liquid that resembles blood (cf. Exod. 7:19-25). I think it probably means real blood. Some commentators interpret "the sea" here as the masses of humanity, but there are no clues in the text that this sea is any more symbolic than the waters that Moses turned to blood.

"The sea is a great reservoir of life. It is teeming with life, and the salty water is a cathartic for the filth of the earth. However, in this plague, blood is the token of death; the sea becomes a grave of death instead of a womb of life."<sup>1</sup>

### 4. The third bowl 16:4

All the fresh water sources ("springs," "rivers," lakes, etc.) become blood in this plague (cf. 8:11; Exod. 7:24; Ps. 78:43-44). If the water is literal water, should we not understand the blood as literal blood too? People cannot exist long without any water to drink. However, other cataclysmic changes follow, that will evidently make water available again (cf. vv. 17-21).

### 5. Ascriptions of angelic and martyr praise 16:5-7

John then heard praise of God in heaven, that briefly interrupted his narration of the outpouring of the bowls of wrath.

16:5      The "angel of the waters" evidently refers to the angel responsible for the sea (oceans) and fresh water, the superintendent of God's water department. Scripture reveals that angels affect the elemental forces of nature (cf. Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:7; Rev. 7:1; 9:11; 14:18). This angel attributes *righteousness* to the eternal God for judging "in kind," i.e., appropriate to what people "deserve," giving them back what they did to others (cf. 15:3-4; Gal. 6:7). The "holy" and

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1023.

"righteous" God can judge humanity according to the *lex talionis* principle because He is eternal.

- 16:6 Specifically, God *poured out* "blood," so to speak, on the earth-dwellers because they "poured out the blood" of His "saints and prophets." He makes the punishment fit the crime (cf. Isa. 49:26).

"Pharaoh tried to drown the Jewish boy babies, but it was his own army that eventually drowned in the Red Sea [Exod. 1:22; 14:28]. Haman planned to hang Mordecai on the gallows and to exterminate the Jews; but he himself was hanged on the gallows, and his family was exterminated (Es. 7:10; 9:10). King Saul refused to obey God and slay the Amalekites, so he was slain by an Amalekite (2 Sam. 1:1-16)."<sup>1</sup>

At least an Amalekite *claimed* to have slain Saul. "The saints" refer to all believers, and "the prophets" are those who delivered messages from God to humankind (cf. 11:18; 18:24). The angel affirmed that those guilty of slaying the saints and prophets deserve what they get. They took lives contrary to God's will, and now God is taking their lives in exchange.

- 16:7 The Tribulation martyrs offer their "amen" from under the altar (6:9; 15:3-4). The "altar" here is the *personification* ("I heard the altar saying") of those associated with it earlier in John's vision (cf. 9:13; Gen. 4:10; Luke 19:40; Heb. 12:24). God always judges consistently with His character, which these martyrs describe as being almighty ("the Almighty"), "true," and "righteous."

## 6. The fourth bowl 16:8-9

- 16:8 The fourth trumpet judgment had *darkened* the sun (8:12), but this judgment *increased* the sun's intensity. There is a definite article before "men" in the Greek text. The "men" in

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:610.

view are evidently the people who have the mark of the beast and who worship him (v. 2). The faithful will apparently escape this judgment. Similarly, the Israelites escaped *some* of the plagues on Egypt (Egypt's land, water, animals, people, leaders, and even Pharaoh).

- 16:9 Evidently climatic changes will take place, resulting in the sun's heat becoming "fierce," much hotter than normal (cf. Deut. 32:24; Isa. 24:6; 42:25; Mal. 4:1; perhaps caused by the destruction of the ozone layer?). Nevertheless, instead of repenting, the beast-worshippers curse ("blasphemed the name of") "God" (cf. vv. 11, 21). They will recognize His sovereignty ("who has the power over these plagues"), but they will refuse to honor Him as sovereign ("did not repent" and "give Him glory"; cf. Rom. 1:28; 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1; James 2:7). Deserved judgment hardens the callous heart even more, as it did Pharaoh's.<sup>1</sup>

"This is the only chapter in the visional portion of the book that speaks of widespread human blasphemy, the other references being to blasphemy from the beast (13:1, 5-6; 17:3). These men have now taken on the character of the god whom they serve ... They blame God for the first four plagues, rather than blaming their own sinfulness."<sup>2</sup>

Previously some people repented because of the earthquake in Jerusalem (11:13), but now none do. Giving God glory is the result of repentance.

## **7. The fifth bowl 16:10-11**

- 16:10 The *darkening* of the (first) beast's "throne" appears to be literal; light will diminish (cf. Exod. 10:21-23; Isa. 60:2; Joel 2:1-2, 31; Mark 13:24).

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<sup>1</sup>Ford, p. 262; Robertson, 6:422.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 257.



"An entire year after the eruption of Krakatoa in the East Indies in 1883, sunset and sunrise in both hemispheres were very colorful. Lava dust suspended in the air and carried around the globe accounted for this phenomenon. ...

"If the eruption of a single volcano can darken the atmosphere over the entire globe, a simultaneous and prolonged eruption of thousands of volcanoes would blacken the sky."<sup>1</sup>

Another possibility is that this may be a figurative darkening, in which God somehow complicates the *rule* of the beast.<sup>2</sup> Beale wrote the following:

"It is metaphorical for all ordained events designed to remind the ungodly that their persecution and idolatry are vain, and it indicates their separation from God."<sup>3</sup>

Johnson also took this judgment metaphorically:

"... in terms reminiscent of the ancient battles of Israel, John describes the eschatological defeat of the forces of evil, the kings from the East."<sup>4</sup>

The weakness of the figurative interpretations is that the fifth trumpet judgment apparently involved literal darkness (9:2), as did the ninth Egyptian plague (Exod. 10:21-22). God also darkened Jerusalem when Jesus Christ died on the cross (Matt. 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44). Since the beast's "kingdom" is worldwide, this darkening apparently amounts to a *global* judgment. Perhaps the faithful remnant will remain unaffected by this judgment, as it did earlier in Egypt (cf. Exod. 10:23).

This judgment of worldwide darkness, in addition, inflicts excruciating "pain" on the beast-worshippers. Just how

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<sup>1</sup>Immanuel Velikovski, *Worlds in Collision*, pp. 138, 139.

<sup>2</sup>Kiddle, pp. 321-22; Hughes, p. 175; Caird, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 824.

<sup>4</sup>Johnson, p. 550.

darkness will cause so much pain is hard to understand, but the chaos that darkness caused in Egypt may suggest some ways.

- 16:11 The earth-dwellers will still fail to repent, and continue to blaspheme God. The title "the God of heaven" recalls the pride of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors (cf. Dan. 2:44). One indication that the bowl judgments will follow each other quickly, is that the "sores" of the *first* bowl are still on the people in the darkness of the *fifth* bowl. The bowl judgments come in swift succession, and will overlap, one right after another. In contrast, each of the seal and trumpet judgments ended before the next one began.

"The Scriptures plainly refute the notion that wicked men will quickly repent when faced with catastrophic warnings of judgment. When confronted with the righteous judgment of God, their blasphemy is deepened and their evil purpose is accentuated."<sup>1</sup>

### **8. The sixth bowl 16:12-16**

The final three bowl judgments all have political consequences.

- 16:12 The problem that this judgment poses for earth-dwellers is not some immediate affliction from the judgment itself, but its later consequences, namely: war. This sixth bowl does not inflict a plague on people, but serves instead as a preparation for the final eschatological battle.<sup>2</sup> The "Euphrates" River is the northeastern border of the land God promised to Abraham's descendants (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7; 11:24; Josh. 1:4). The Bible calls the Euphrates River (cf. Gen. 2:14), the eastern border of the Promised Land, "the great river"; and it calls the Mediterranean Sea, the western border of the Promised Land, the Great Sea.

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 212.

Now God *dries up* this river, that had previously turned into blood (v. 4), so that "the kings of (from) the east" can cross with their armies (cf. Dan. 11:44; Isa. 11:15).

"As the largest river in the southwest Asia, the Euphrates was *never* known to dry up, unlike most of the rivers in the Near East."<sup>1</sup>

God much earlier had dried up the Red Sea so that the Israelites could advance on the Promised Land from the west (Exod. 14:21-22; cf. Isa. 11:16). He had also dried up the Jordan River, so they could cross over from the east (Josh. 3:13-17; 4:23). Elijah, too, parted the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8). Cyrus may have conquered Babylon by draining the Euphrates, and marching into the city over the riverbed (cf. Jer. 50:38; 51:36).<sup>2</sup> All of these previous incidents should help us to accept that a *literal* fulfillment of this prophecy is possible.

A figurative interpretation sees Babylon as the world system, and the waters of the Euphrates River as the multitudes of Babylon's religious adherents, who, throughout the world during the inter-advent age, became disloyal to Babylon.<sup>3</sup> Another figurative interpretation understands Babylon to be the apostate church and the drying up of the Euphrates as the draining off of the apostate church's resources.<sup>4</sup>

Some interpreters believe this is an Oriental invasion of Babylon in the future, that will be similar to Cyrus' invasion of it in the past.<sup>5</sup> However, these are probably the Oriental armies that will assemble in Israel for the Battle of Armageddon, referred to in verses 13-16.<sup>6</sup> The drying up of the Euphrates will be an immediate help to these advancing armies, but it will set them up for defeat, as was true of Pharaoh's army.

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 890-91.

<sup>2</sup>Herodotus, 1:191. But see Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:191.

<sup>3</sup>See Beale, p. 828.

<sup>4</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1572.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 236. See also Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 340-58.

"... in the Old Testament a mighty action of God is frequently associated with the drying up of waters, as the Red Sea (Ex. xiv. 21), the Jordan (Jos. iii. 16 f.), and several times in prophecy (Is. xi. 15, Je. li, 36, Zc. x. II)."<sup>1</sup>

"A more immediate suggested identification of the kings from the east (i.e., 'the rising of the sun') could be the Parthian rulers who were a continual threat to Rome during John's day, but this was hardly a factor in preparation for the battle of Harmagedon in 16:16."<sup>2</sup>

Presently, some sections of the Euphrates River are dry at certain times of the year, due to dams that Iraq has built to create reservoirs. These dams generate power for the Middle East. Perhaps when the Euphrates dries up, even artificial light will end in that region.

16:13 Verses 13-16 give further comments on the sixth bowl judgment. They are not an interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls (except verse 15). They reveal that rulers from all over the earth will join the kings of the East in a final great conflict.

The dragon, beast, and false prophet will evidently join in making a proclamation that will mobilize the armies of the world to converge on Palestine. Something proceeding from the mouth suggests a proclamation. This is the first mention of "the false prophet," but he is clearly the "beast out of the earth" (cf. 13:11-17). He *deceives* the mass of people. What he urges them to do (i.e., take the mark, worship the beast, and assemble in Palestine), supposedly for their advantage, results in their destruction eventually.

The "three unclean spirits" that proceed from their mouths, the agents of this diabolical trio, are "demons" (fallen angels, v. 14; cf. Matt. 10:1; Mark 1:23-24; 3:11; 5:2, 13; Acts 5:16;

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 263. Cf. Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 903.

8:7).<sup>1</sup> They resemble "frogs," in that they are "unclean" and *loathsome* (cf. Lev. 11:10-11, 41). The second Egyptian plague involved actual frogs (Exod. 8:5), but these demons are only "like" frogs.

16:14 Here John identified the "spirits" as "demons." The "demons go out to the kings of the whole world," deceiving them into assembling their armies in Palestine for the Battle of Armageddon. Similarly, a deceiving spirit once lured King Ahab into battle (1 Kings 22:21-23). They will do this under the influence of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet. The demons persuade them, but their decision is something that God, the ultimate cause, puts in their hearts (17:17).

It may also be the advancing army from the east that moves these kings to assemble for war.<sup>2</sup> These kings from all over the world will gather to destroy Israel (cf. Ps. 2:1-3; Joel 2:11; 3:2; Zech. 14:2-3). Satan's purpose in bringing all these soldiers into Palestine, in the first place, appears to be to annihilate the Jews. When Jesus Christ returns to earth, specifically to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:1-4), they will unite in opposing Him. However, God's sovereign hand will be regulating Satan's activities (Zech. 14:2). This will not be the day of Satan's triumph, but that of the Lord God Almighty. God will show Himself supreme in this climactic battle (cf. Joel 2:31). The description of this battle follows several chapters later, in 19:11-16.

Gundry believed that "the day of the Lord" includes the Battle of Armageddon, but not the Tribulation.<sup>3</sup> Most premillennial interpreters believe this distinction lacks convincing support, and I agree with them.

16:15 Jesus Christ Himself evidently gave this parenthetical invitation and warning (cf. 3:3, 18). His Second Coming will be "like a thief," in that it will be sudden, and His enemies will not expect it (cf. Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2). Tribulation

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<sup>1</sup>See Unger, *Demons in ...*, pp. 101-21.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:447.

<sup>3</sup>Gundry, p. 92.

saints who understand the revelation of this book, on the other hand, will be expecting His return.

Christ's coming for the church (the Rapture) will *not* be as a thief, because the church is looking for His return (1 Thess. 5:4; Titus 2:13), though, of course, the exact *time* of this upward call is unknown. Jesus Christ urged *these* faithful believers, the Tribulation saints, to be watchful ("Blessed is the one who stays awake") and pure ("keeps his clothes [on]"; cf. Matt. 25:1-30).<sup>1</sup> The alternative is embarrassment ("walk about naked ... men will ... see his shame"; cf. Exod. 20:26; Lev. 18:6-19; Deut. 23:14; Isa. 47:3; Ezek. 16:37; 23:24-29; Hos. 2:10; Nah. 3:5). This is the third of the seven beatitudes in Revelation (cf. 1:3; 14:13; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14).

Another interpretation sees this encouragement as directed to the Christian readers of this prophecy during the Church Age, before the Tribulation begins. Advocates of this view point out that by the sixth bowl, believers who have not taken refuge (12:13-17) will have suffered martyrdom (13:15; 14:1-5, 13; 15:2). Therefore, according to this view, there will be few believers on the earth by the time the sixth bowl judgment occurs.

"The close similarity to 3:3, 18 and the parenthetical nature of the announcement favor the latter alternative [i.e., this view]."<sup>2</sup>

I think this verse is a general word of encouragement addressed to believers in the Great Tribulation, in view of the context, but applicable to believers in the Church Age. If believers do not understand that Jesus Christ will return very soon, they may behave in ways that will be embarrassing when He does return, at either the Rapture or the Second Coming.

"Each guard [unit—each night in the temple in Jesus' day—] consisted of ten men; so that in all two hundred and forty Levites and thirty priests

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 238; J. B. Smith, p. 235; Newell, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 267.

were on duty every night. ... Any guard found asleep when on duty was beaten, or his garments were set on fire—a punishment, as we know, actually awarded. Hence the admonition to us who, as it were, are here on Temple guard, 'Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments.'"<sup>1</sup>

16:16 "And" (Gr. *kaí*) resumes the exposition of the sixth bowl judgment from verse 14. The demons will assemble the kings of the earth and their armies. They will go to "the place" that in Hebrew is called "Har-Magedon" (lit. "mountain of Megiddo," *Megiddo* meaning either "place of troops" or "place of slaughter"). John was writing to Greek-speaking readers who were generally unfamiliar with Palestinian geography (cf. 9:11).

This mountain may refer to the small hill, on the south-central edge of the Jezreel (Esdraelon) Valley in northern Palestine, on which the town of Megiddo stood. Alternatively, "Har-Magedon" may refer to the "mountain" closest to Megiddo, namely, "Mt. Carmel." On that mountain, God humiliated the entire host of the 450 prophets of Baal, who gathered to oppose Him in Elijah's day (cf. 1 Kings 18:16-40). God and Elijah slaughtered them in the Valley of Jezreel. Mt. Tabor is another prominent hill (1,850 feet high) at the east end of this valley. Some believe "Tabor" is the mountain in view here.<sup>2</sup>

Probably "Har-Magedon" refers to the hill country surrounding Megiddo, which includes *all the mountains* that border the approximately 14 by 20-mile Valley of Jezreel. Earlier, Deborah and Barak had defeated the Canaanites in this valley (Judg. 4–5), and Gideon had routed the Midianites (Judg. 7). King Josiah also died there, when he opposed Pharaoh Neco (2 Chron. 35:22-23).

"The plain of Megiddo is admittedly not large enough to contain armies from all over the world,

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<sup>1</sup>Edersheim, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 260.

so this must be the assembly area for a much larger deployment that covers a two hundred mile distance from north to south and the width of Palestine from east to west (cf. 14:20). Some decisive battles against this massive force will probably occur around Jerusalem (Zech. 14:1-3)."<sup>1</sup>

Less literal views see the name "Har-Magedon" (Armageddon) as standing for an event, rather than any single locality.<sup>2</sup> Some see it as representing the entire world.<sup>3</sup>

### **9. The seventh bowl 16:17-21**

16:17 This final judgment has the greatest impact of all, since "the air" into which the angel pours his bowl is what humans breathe.<sup>4</sup> The "loud voice" is probably once again God's, since it comes "from the throne" in the heavenly temple (cf. 16:1). With the outpouring of the final bowl, God announced that His series of judgments for this period in history was complete. This statement is proleptic, since it anticipates the completion of the seventh bowl judgment, which John had yet to reveal (cf. 21:6).

"The pouring out of the seventh vial into the air is probably a gesture pointing to the utter demolition of man's greatest final weapon in human warfare, when once the wrath of God is poured out in the great day of God Almighty."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 270-71. Cf. Jamieson, et al., p. 1573; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 238-39; and William Sanford Lasor, *The Truth about Armageddon*, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beasley-Murray, p. 246.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 838.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 210.

<sup>5</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 236.



"Men would not have the Savior's 'It is finished!' on Calvary; so they must have the awful 'It is done!' from the Judge!"<sup>1</sup>

The Greek words used are not the same.

16:18 "Lightning," "thunder," and the *greatest* ("great") "earthquake" this planet has ever experienced, will accompany, and to some extent produce, the desolation that follows. The storm theophany again appears at the end of another series of judgments (cf. 8:5; 11:19). These are signs of divine judgment, but this earthquake is much larger than any previous one: "such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth" (cf. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; Hag. 2:6; Heb. 12:26-27). It heralds the seventh bowl judgment and the end of the seals and trumpets judgments. All three series of judgments end at the same time.

16:19 A result of this unprecedented earthquake will be the *splitting* of "the great city ... into three parts." The "great city" could refer to Jerusalem (11:8). Some believe it refers to Rome.<sup>2</sup> Still others identify it with Babylon on the Euphrates (14:8; 17:18; 18:10, 21), to which this verse refers explicitly later.<sup>3</sup> Probably Jerusalem is in view.<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem contrasts with "the cities of the nations," and the phrase "the great" was used earlier to specifically identify it (11:8). Zechariah's prophecy of topographical changes taking place around Jerusalem, at this time, argues for a geophysical rather than an ethnographic change (Zech. 14:4).<sup>5</sup>

Evidently this greatest earthquake of all time, a *megaquake*, will destroy virtually *all* of the cities of the world ("the cities of the nations fell"). Babylon on the Euphrates is the most significant of these cities (14:8). It is the special object of God's judgment ("wrath"), which "the cup of the wine" that

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:703; Mounce, p. 304; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 900-901.

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, p. 218; Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 696..

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:449; J. B. Smith, p. 237; Ford, p. 264; idem, "The Structure and Meaning of Revelation 16," *Expository Times* 98:11 (August 1987):327-31.

<sup>5</sup>Lee, 4:727, believed this would be a division into three groups of people.

she receives symbolizes. Chapters 17 and 18 describe the fall of Babylon in more detail.

"The fall of Babylon is the central teaching of the seventh bowl. It is an event already announced in 14:8 and prefigured in the harvest and vintage of 14:14-20. ... Stages in Babylon's downfall come in 17:16 and 18:8 ..., but her ultimate collapse is in 19:18-21"<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the government of Iraq under Saddam Hussein was trying to rebuild Babylon.<sup>2</sup> Literal interpreters have differed on the question of whether the city will be completely rebuilt or not. Some believe that Iraq will in fact rebuild Babylon, mainly in view of what the prophets predicted would happen to Babylon in Isaiah 13 and 14, and in Jeremiah 50 and 51. They say this has not yet taken place.<sup>3</sup> Others hold that Scripture does not require the rebuilding of Babylon, since they believe God has already fulfilled these prophecies.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that a *literal city* is in view in Revelation, but that *what the city has stood for*, throughout human history, is also in view.

16:20 The earthquake will produce other effects. It will level "mountains" and cause "island[s]" to disappear. A less literal view is that it will only produce political turmoil.<sup>5</sup> As the Flood produced global topographical changes, so will this *megaquake*. It will prepare the earth for the Edenic conditions that the prophets predicted would characterize the earth

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup>Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon*, pp. 21-27.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Kenneth Allen, "The Rebuilding and Destruction of Babylon," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133:529 (January-March 1976):19-27; Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17—18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:576 (October-December 1987):440-49; Newell, pp. 253, 265, 268; Henry M. Morris, *The Revelation Record*, pp. 348-49; Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 969, 973; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 290, 307; and McGee, 5:1036. Cf. 18:2; Zech. 5.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 1917 ed., pp. 1346-47; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 368-69; and Homer Heater Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach that Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the *Eschaton*?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:1 (March 1998):23-43.

<sup>5</sup>Caird, p. 209.

during the Millennium. These changes will be a foreview of the final disappearance of the old creation, and the subsequent creation of a new, glorious, and perfect earth (cf. 20:11; 21:1-2). A literal interpretation of these changes does not preclude an earthly reign of Christ, as some have claimed.<sup>1</sup>

- 16:21 The accompanying storm will drop "huge hailstones" that will fall on the earth, crushing people (cf. 8:7). Hail was often an instrument of divine judgment in biblical history (cf. Josh. 10:11; Job 38:22-23; Isa. 28:2, 17; Ezek. 13:11-13; 38:22-23). In spite of all these judgments, the hearts of earth-dwellers will remain hard, as Pharaoh's did during the plague of hail in Egypt (cf. Exod. 9:24). They will know that *God* sent this calamity, but rather than repenting, they will shake their fists in God's face ("men blasphemed God"). God will stone these blasphemers with these huge hailstones (cf. Lev. 24:16).

"We cannot emphasize too strongly that in the three series of divine judgments—first the seals, second the trumpets, third the vials (or bowls) of wrath—we have those preliminary hardening actions of God upon an impenitent world, by which He prepares that world for the Great Day of Wrath—at Christ's coming as King of kings, as seen in Revelation 19:11-15. ...<sup>2</sup>

Henry believed that this verse describes what happened when Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70 (a preterist view). According to him, judgment "fell on them as a dreadful storm, as if the stones of the city, tossed up into the air, came down upon their heads, like hailstones of a talent weight each, yet they were so far from repenting that they blasphemed that God who thus punished them."<sup>3</sup> Yet the text says "hailstones [not the stones of the city] ... came down from heaven."

J. Dwight Pentecost believed that the bowl judgments describe the second advent of Jesus Christ to the earth, and that they occur in the 45-day

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Beasley-Murray, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup>Henry, p. 1982.

period following the end of the Tribulation, not during the Tribulation period itself.

"Since the bowl judgments must span some period of time, we must view the second advent of Christ as an event that encompasses a period of time. In that regard, we find an interesting chronological note in Daniel 12:11-12: 'From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.' Twelve hundred ninety days span the second half of Daniel's seventieth week, and that time period brings us to the end of the Tribulation period. But the blessings of Messiah's reign are not enjoyed until some forty-five days later. Therefore, it is suggested that the forty-five day period is the period in which the judgments associated with the second advent of Christ are poured out on the earth. And that entire forty-five day period, then, could be called the second advent of Christ.

"Further, it is suggested that the 1,290 days come to their completion with the appearance of the sign of the Son of Man in heaven (Matt. 24:30). The judgments of Revelation 16 follow in a forty-five day period and are concluded with the physical descent of Jesus Christ to the earth. Hence, Revelation 11:15 brings us to the second coming of Jesus Christ back to the earth at which time He will experience the fulfillment of the Father's promise ... [in Ps. 2:8-9]."<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that the 45-day period may be the time of preparation for the beginning of the Millennium following Christ's return. It seems unnatural to describe the return of the Lord as taking this long to happen (cf. Acts 1:9-11). Therefore, I prefer the view that the bowl judgments describe what happens *before* Jesus Christ returns, rather than *when* He returns. These final judgments, then, *set the stage* for the return of Jesus Christ to the earth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 301.

<sup>2</sup>See John F. Walvoord and John E. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East*, for more "stage settings."

Before recording the Second Coming, in chapter 19, God led John to give more revelation concerning the fate of Babylon, in chapters 17 and 18.

Thomas viewed the *description* of the seventh bowl as extending through 22:5.<sup>1</sup> He saw all that follows, up to 22:5, as being part of this final, climactic, seventh bowl judgment. More students of Revelation, however, have seen the description of the seventh bowl as limited to 16:17-21, with the *consequences* of that judgment following through 22:5.

**K. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF THE JUDGMENT OF UNGODLY SYSTEMS IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION CHS. 17—18**

Further revelation concerning the destruction of Babylon follows in chapters 17 and 18.

"One-eighth of the entire book of Revelation, some fifty verses [out of a total of 404], is devoted to the subject of judgment upon Babylon (14:8-10; 16:17—19:5)."<sup>2</sup>

Beale took 17:1—19:10 as an interpretive review of the sixth and seventh bowls.<sup>3</sup> Chapters 17 and 18 are parenthetic, in that they do not advance the revelation chronologically. They give further supplementary information about matters referred to in the chronological sections (as do 7:1-17; 10:1—11:14; and 12:1—15:8). "Babylon" in chapters 17 and 18 represents the head of Gentile world power. For this reason, many interpreters take the city and empire in view as referring to "Rome" (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Alford understood it to be "Rome, pagan and papal, but principally papal."<sup>4</sup> Daniel saw "Babylon" as the gold head of an image that represented Gentile world powers, in Daniel 2.

The focus of attention in chapter 17 is on the *religious system* that God identified with Babylon in Scripture, and that of chapter 18 is on the *commercial system* He identified with it. Tenney described chapter 17 as the heavenly viewpoint, and chapter 18 as the earthly viewpoint, on

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 567-85. See Chilton, *The Days ...*, p. 418, for a similar view.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1516.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 847.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:705. See also 4:688.

Babylon's destruction.<sup>1</sup> Babylon is not just the name of a city in the Middle East. It is also a name that symbolizes the chief characteristics of that city throughout history, which have been a particular religious system and a particular commercial system. We need to keep this double use of the name—as both a real city and a symbol—in mind as we read these chapters. In a similar way, "Rome" may mean both the Roman Catholic Church and the city of Rome in Italy, and the name "Hollywood" represents both a town and an industry associated with that town.

Amillennialists generally see "Babylon" as a symbol of evil. Some of them see chapter 17 describing the demise of evil, and chapter 18, the song celebrating that demise. Premillennialists generally see "Babylon" as a real city, and or a symbol of the world system. Those who see a literal city of *Babylon*, rebuilt and destroyed, cite Isaiah 13—14 and Jeremiah 50—51 as unfulfilled prophecies of Babylon's destruction.<sup>2</sup> Amillennialist Leon Morris wrote:

"She [Babylon] stands for civilized man apart from God, man in organized but godless community."<sup>3</sup>

"Babylon stands for the whole system of organized godlessness in the history of the human race."<sup>4</sup>

Premillennialist Alan Johnson wrote:

"The ancient Babylon is better understood here as the archetypal head of all entrenched worldly resistance to God. Babylon is a trans-historical reality including idolatrous kingdoms as diverse as Sodom, Gomorrah, Egypt, Babylon, Tyre, Nineveh, and Rome. Babylon is an eschatological symbol of satanic deception and power; it is a divine mystery that can never be wholly reducible to empirical earthly institutions. It may be said that Babylon represents the total culture of the world apart from God, while the divine system is depicted by

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<sup>1</sup>Tenney, p. 85.

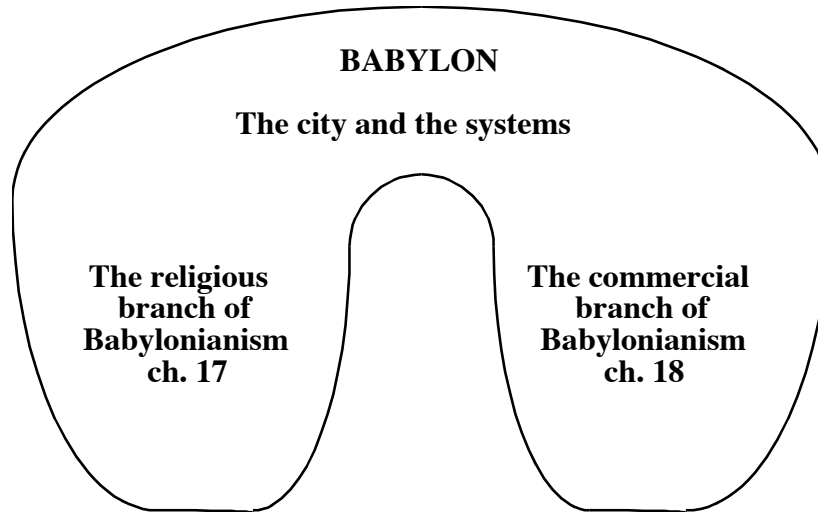
<sup>2</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 397-403.

<sup>3</sup>Leon Morris, pp. 202-3.

<sup>4</sup>Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 539.

the New Jerusalem. Rome is simply one manifestation of the total system."<sup>1</sup>

I think it is helpful to think of Babylon as a yoke having two parts.



Unquestionably, "Babylon" is a symbol here, as the text itself makes clear. It is probably used this way also in 1 Peter 5:13, as a symbol of all that the city of Rome stood for.<sup>2</sup> Those who say the city will not be rebuilt, assert that the Old Testament passages present a symbolic picture of Babylon's destruction, which does not require a literal rebuilding and destruction of Babylon in the future. However, it is interesting that Saddam Hussein was rebuilding the ancient site of Babylon when his rule was cut short. I think "Babylon" definitely represents the *world system*, at the very least, and in view of how aggressively Iraq was rebuilding the site of Babylon, I would not be surprised to see a literal destruction of the city in the Tribulation. I do not think the Old Testament prophecies require this, however.

### 1. Religion in the Great Tribulation ch. 17

The Lord gave the following revelation, of the divine destruction of the religious system identified with Babylon, in order to enable the readers to understand God's plans for this system more exactly.

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 554.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252.

## The invitation of the angel 17:1-2

17:1 The fact that this chapter is describing the *judgment of Babylon*, referred to earlier in 14:8 and 16:19, seems clear. It was "one of the seven angels" who poured out the bowl judgments, who served as John's guide as he viewed these events in his vision. This is the only vision in which an interpreting angel interprets the significance of aspects of the vision. The "great harlot" (Gr. *pornes tes megales*) is Babylon (v. 5), though some believe "Babylon" is another name for "Rome" (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).<sup>1</sup> The connection between Babylon and immorality (Gr. *porneia*) was evident as early as 14:8. She is the personification of spiritual fornication or idolatry (cf. Isa. 23:15-17; Jer. 2:20-31; 13:27; Ezek. 16:17-19; Hos. 2:5; Nah. 3:4).<sup>2</sup> This "Babylon, the Mother of Harlots" (v. 5) is a *harlot* in that she prostituted herself with many devils and allured many to godlessness and immorality.<sup>3</sup>

"In OT prophetic discourse the imagery of the harlot is commonly used to denote religious apostasy."<sup>4</sup>

It is probably better to translate *epi* as "beside," rather than "on" many waters, since the harlot sits astride the beast (v. 3). Sitting, in contexts like this one, indicates enthronement.<sup>5</sup> Evidently the beast and the mounted harlot were on the shore in John's vision (cf. John 21:1). The "many waters" represent humankind (v. 15), not a specific geographical site. This fact indicates that it is Babylon as a *symbol*, that is in view here, rather than the physical city. Expressed another way, Babylon (the world system) dominates all of humankind, sitting on (ruling over) many waters (peoples; cf. Jer. 51:7). It is also true, however, that literal Babylon stood beside many waters; it was built on a network of canals (Jer. 51:13). This description helps make the identification more certain.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1310.

<sup>2</sup>Ford, *Revelation*, p. 277; Wall, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:185.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 307.

<sup>5</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 930.



"She leads the world in the pursuit of false religion whether it be paganism or perverted revealed religion. She is the symbol for a system that reaches back to the tower of Babel (Gen. 10:9-10; 11:1-9) and extends into the future when it will peak under the regime of the beast."<sup>1</sup>

Though false religion seems to be in view, it is probable that this kind of spiritual fornication was the result of political alliances.<sup>2</sup>

There is similarity between this angel's invitation to John and the one in 21:9. This is the first of many clues that the New Jerusalem (21:9—22:5) is the divine counterpart of humanistic Babylon.<sup>3</sup>

17:2 The "kings of the earth" are world leaders who personify kingdoms (16:14; et al.). They committed "immorality" (fornication) with Babylon by uniting with the system she symbolizes.

"Religious compromise necessitated in this kind of association is totally incompatible with the worship of the one true God, and so amounts to spiritual prostitution."<sup>4</sup>

This system made all earth-dwellers, not just kings, "drunk." That is, it had a controlling influence on them. When people reject the truth, they will believe lies (cf. 2 Thess. 2:10-11). Obviously this "harlot" is different from the "woman" in chapter 12, and the "bride" in chapters 19, 21, and 22.

### The vision of the system 17:3-6

17:3 The angel "carried [John] away in the Spirit" to "a wilderness" area (cf. 1:10; 4:1; 21:10). This wilderness may refer to the

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 282-83. Cf. Seiss, pp. 387-90; Jamieson, et al., p. 1573.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 931.

<sup>3</sup>Lee, 4:735; Wall, p. 205.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 284.

desert of Saudi Arabia, near literal Babylon.<sup>1</sup> Or it may anticipate the desolate condition of the harlot.<sup>2</sup> Wildernesses were traditional places where God met with people and gave revelations (cf. Exod. 3:1; 1 Kings 19:4; Luke 1:80). There in the desert John saw "a woman," the harlot of verse 1, again "sitting on a ... beast." (Contrast this scene with the description of the rider on the white horse in 19:8, 11, and 14.)

The description of this animal ("beast") is exactly the same as the one of Antichrist in 13:1, except that it is "scarlet" here, probably symbolizing luxury and splendor (cf. 14:8-11; Isa. 1:18; Matt. 27:28-29). The harlot woman sat in a position of *control* over Antichrist, and he *supported* her. Another view is that the woman is Rome, and the scarlet beast is the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Some believe that the woman is the papal system and the beast is the revived Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

17:4 The woman's clothing was "purple," symbolic of royalty, and "scarlet," representing luxury (v. 3; cf. Matt. 27:28; Mark 15:17, 20; John 19:2, 5). Her ornaments included "gold," "precious stones," and "pearls"—jewelry that made her look like a queen. Contrast this woman with the bride of the Lamb, whom John saw adorned with "bright, clean linen" (19:8). The "gold cup" in her hand added to her royal appearance, but it contained idolatrous "abominations" (cf. Deut. 18:9; 29:17; 32:16; Jer. 51:7; et al.), namely, "unclean things" connected with her spiritual "immorality." The harlot wore expensive, attractive garments and accessories that made her externally appealing, but she is a counterfeit beauty. What is *inside* her is "unclean."

"In Rome the prostitutes in the public brothels wore upon their foreheads a frontlet giving their names. These frontlets with the names on them

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:429.

<sup>2</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 429; Lee, 4:737.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:179.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252-53.

were the signs and trade-marks and identification marks of the Roman prostitutes."<sup>1</sup>

"Any institution or facet of culture that is characterized by pride ..., economic overabundance, persecution, and idolatry is part of Babylon."<sup>2</sup>

17:5 It was customary in John's day for Roman prostitutes to wear their names on their headbands.<sup>3</sup> However, it is not clear in the Greek text whether this woman's name was on a headband or on her "forehead" (cf. 7:3; 9:4; 13:16-18; 14:1; Jer. 3:3). Her name was a "mystery," namely: something not previously revealed but now made clear. A *name* in Scripture represents something about the person who bears it, often the person's reputation.

The basic content of the mystery about this Babylonian system is what John revealed here, especially the new revelation about its evil character and judgment (vv. 17-18).<sup>4</sup> The harlot represents Babylon as the "mother of harlots," not just one harlot by herself, but the *fountainhead* of many other evil religious systems, and everything anti-Christian (cf. Gen. 10:9-10; 11:1-9).<sup>5</sup> God attributed *all kinds of* "abominations" to her.

"In our day the ecumenical church has faced a lot of problems. It seems that they have recognized psychological differences in people and that it is impossible to water down theologies and practices to suit everyone. So each group will come into this great world ecumenical system but retain some of its peculiarities. For example, those who want to immerse will immerse. Those who want to sprinkle will sprinkle. Those who want elaborate ritual will have it, and those who want no ritual will have

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:178.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 856.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 496.

<sup>5</sup>Alford, 4:707; Scott, p. 342.

that. You see, there is going to be more than the mother harlot—there will be a whole lot of harlots, a regular brothel."<sup>1</sup>

Many writers have traced the religiously apostate system of worship, begun in Babylon and carried on throughout church history, to Roman Catholicism and the modern Christian ecumenical movement.<sup>2</sup> However, the Scripture's description here, of Babylonianism, encompasses *all forms* of paganism, including perversions of orthodox Christianity and non-Christian religions.<sup>3</sup> Some interpreters believe that what is in view here, as well as in chapter 18, is "the literal rebuilt city of Babylon."<sup>4</sup>

17:6 The Mother of Harlots had drunk (and was "drunk" with) "the blood" of believers: "the saints" generally, and witnesses to Jesus Christ specifically (cf. 11:10; 13:7, 15). This system had destroyed true believers and rejoiced in their deaths. This revelation amazed John ("I wondered greatly"). A system purporting to honor God was killing His faithful followers!

Alternatively, John may have "wondered" (questioning) why God allowed her to live, or "wondered" (perplexed) because he did not understand the meaning of what he saw, or "wondered" (astounded) because he saw a splendidly attired woman instead of a ruined city. In his day, the Roman Empire was the greatest manifestation of Babylonianism. It is not surprising, then, that preterists identify these martyrs as Jews who died in the Jewish revolt against Rome, in A.D. 66-70, primarily.<sup>5</sup>

#### Further revelation about the beast 17:7-14

17:7 The angel promised to interpret these revelations ("I will tell you ...") that were so baffling to John, particularly "the mystery" concerning "the woman and (of) the beast." More

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1033.

<sup>2</sup>See Hislop for an extended treatment, or Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 970-71, for a brief one. Ironside, pp. 287-95, is also helpful.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. W. M. Smith, p. 1517.

<sup>4</sup>Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise ...*, p. 162. See also pp. 167-69.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:452.

information about "the beast" follows in verses 7-14, and more about "the woman" in verses 15-18. The beast supplied the woman's power and purpose. He had "seven heads" and "10 horns," which the angel explained later (vv. 9-10).

- 17:8 The "beast," as we have already seen, is *Antichrist* (13:1-3). Here the angel referred to his resuscitation of a formerly dead nation ("that he was and is not and will come"; cf. 13:3, 12, 14). Ladd held that we should identify the beast itself with its heads, but this leads to a confusion of the figures.<sup>1</sup> Evidently this resuscitation (or resurrection) will happen near the middle of the Tribulation.<sup>2</sup>

The beast comes "out of the abyss," the home of Satan (11:7) and the hold of his demons (9:1-2, 11), when the mortally wounded, once-dead nation, he *miraculously* revives. This verse suggests that when the beast revives the dead nation, Satan will at that time give him supernatural powers; in other words, this "resurrection" will coincide with the filling of the beast with the dragon's presence and power. Finally, Jesus Christ will destroy the Antichrist and the false prophet—and Satan—forever (19:20; 20:2-3).

The beast's resurrecting of this nation will greatly impress earth-dwellers (i.e., unbelievers "will wonder when they see the beast"; cf. 13:3, "the whole earth was amazed and followed the beast"). They will conclude that he is a divine savior, but actually he will be a demonic slaughterer. He will deceive everyone but the elect (i.e., believers; cf. 13:8; Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22).

- 17:9 The angel prefaced his identification of the beast's "seven heads" with a statement that understanding this part of the revelation requires "wisdom" (cf. 13:18). Evidently many would incorrectly identify these seven heads. Indeed, various writers have suggested a multitude of different interpretations. The most popular of these include seven

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 293.

Roman emperors,<sup>1</sup> the seven hills of Rome,<sup>2</sup> and various non-literal views, such as the following two:

"By his use of seven, he indicates completeness or wholeness. The seven heads of the beast symbolize fullness of blasphemy and evil. It is much like our English idiom 'the seven seas,' i.e., all the seas of the world."<sup>3</sup>

"These seven *mountain heads* of the beast appear to be *the high, proud, imposing thoughts, plans, designs of the antichristian power*..."<sup>4</sup>

Verses 9-11 are an exposition or clarification of verse 8. The text is always its own best interpreter. The seven heads are "seven kings" (v. 10). They are the heads and personifications of seven empires (cf. Dan. 7:17, 23). The angel also referred to them as "mountains" (v. 9). In the Bible, a mountain is sometimes a symbol of a prominent government or kingdom (cf. Ps. 30:7; 68:15-16; Isa. 2:2; 41:15; Jer. 51:25; Dan. 2:35, 44; Hab. 3:6, 10; Zech. 4:7).

"The call for special wisdom in v. 9a probably has in view the ability to grasp this double meaning of the mountains [i.e., as individuals and kingdoms]."<sup>5</sup>

The woman "sits" over the "seven" rulers and empires ("mountains"), but she is not one of them. She exercises authority over them.

17:10      The seven kings are rulers over seven kingdoms. The prominent kingdom in John's day, that "is," was certainly the Roman Empire. The five most prominent world powers

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<sup>1</sup>Beckwith, pp. 699, 704-11; Swete, pp. 220-21. For refutation of this view, see Ladd, pp. 228-29.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1982; Barclay, 2:180-81; Newell, p. 263; Mounce, pp. 313-14; Beasley-Murray, p. 256. For extensive evidence that these are kingdoms rather than literal mountains, see Seiss, pp. 391-94.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, p. 559.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 504.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 296.

preceding Rome, that had "fallen," were probably Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece.<sup>1</sup> The Old Babylonian Empire may have been the first (Gen. 10:8-10). The seventh kingdom, that was yet to "come," and would "remain a little while" (last a short time), is the beast's kingdom (13:3; 17:8).<sup>2</sup> All of these kingdoms either have persecuted, or will persecute, God's people (cf. Ezek. 29—30; Nah. 3:1-19; Isa. 21:9; Jer. 50—51; Dan. 10:13; 11:2-4).

Another common view is that the number "seven" here is symbolic, and stands for the power of the Roman Empire as a whole. Some writers have interpreted the seven kingdoms as figuratively representing various kings throughout history.<sup>3</sup>

Barclay took these "kings" to be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (the five that had fallen), Vespasian (the one who was), and Titus (the one who had not yet come). He took the eighth "king" (v. 11) as *Nero redivivus* (resurrected, i.e., Domitian, who, he believed, anticipates Antichrist).<sup>4</sup> Barclay dated Revelation about A.D. 95, during the reign of Domitian, so he explained the anachronism by saying: either John wrote this portion of the book earlier, during Vespasian's reign, or he may have projected himself back into the time of Vespasian.<sup>5</sup>

"No matter how the list of Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Domitian is juggled, they do not neatly fit John's scheme of seven. This suggests that the number seven may simply be a schematic representation for the complete number of Roman emperors (who were generally called 'kings' in the eastern provinces)."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 393; cf. Ladd, p. 229; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 251; Alford, 4:710-11.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 298; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 254; Kelly, pp. 364-68.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Mounce, p. 315; Beckwith, pp. 704-8. Beale, p. 871.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:181-83.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 2:183-84.

<sup>6</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 961. See *ibid.*, pp. 946-49, for several lists of Roman emperors who have been proposed as fulfilling this prophecy.

Others take these kings as personifications of the dominating thoughts, plans, and designs of the anti-Christian world, and the horns as the sum of the powers that strike to overthrow the church.<sup>1</sup>

17:11 Evidently the beast is "one of the seven," in the sense that his first kingdom is on a par with (same level as) the seven major empires just mentioned. He is the eighth, in that he establishes "an eighth" major empire with a worldwide government, after he revives a previously dead nation, having received supernatural powers from Satan. This explanation views the beast's kingdom before his revival as the seventh kingdom, and his kingdom after these events as the eighth.<sup>2</sup> A variation of this view sees the seventh kingdom as the revived Roman Empire, and the eighth as the beast's kingdom, which comprises the revived Roman Empire plus all other nations.<sup>3</sup> Still another possibility is that this "revived Roman empire is an amalgamation of parts of the previous world empires. The preceding ones are absorbed by the last, the Roman Empire."<sup>4</sup>

The United States of America is never mentioned in the Bible, but, some people have asked, might it be a nation in the "revived Roman Empire"? As the old Roman Empire had a controlling effect on its world, so does the United States, at the time of the writing of these notes: culturally, linguistically, politically, economically, and in other ways. Might the "toes" of this "empire" (Dan. 2:41-43) represent the global influence that it exercises over the other nations of the earth—figuratively standing atop them?

The mixed iron-and-clay consistency of these "toes," in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, may represent diversity, which has always characterized the United States: "the melting pot" of the world. If the United States does not turn out to be the revived Roman Empire, or part of it, another similar future global power might be. (The emphasis on the "little horn," in

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 505.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 254.

<sup>4</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:241.



Daniel's vision of the fourth beast [Dan. 7:7-8, 11-12, 23-26], focuses on the powerful leader of this "empire.")

Jesus Christ will destroy the beast and his (eighth) kingdom when He returns to the earth. It will not just "fall" to a conquering kingdom like the other major empires did (cf. Dan. 2:44). Beale explained the eighth kingdom as "another way of referring to his [Antichrist's] future attempted mimicry of Christ's resurrection."<sup>1</sup> Moffatt, in a rather confusing explanation, identified Domitian as the eighth emperor, but cautioned against identifying him with *Nero redivivus*, whom he also said was the Beast (out of the sea).<sup>2</sup>

17:12 The specific identity of the "10 horns" (other kings but without kingdoms when John wrote) is not yet clear. Robert Mounce took them as symbolic of the sharing of complete power without reference to kings or kingdoms.<sup>3</sup> Moffatt interpreted the "10" horns as a round number, describing Parthian satraps, or Roman provinces, or Rome's allies.<sup>4</sup> They will be allies of the beast, and serve under him in his worldwide government, during the Great Tribulation (Dan. 7:23-24).

Each of the 10 leaders will rule a different kingdom—simultaneously—with one another and with the beast (cf. Dan. 7:7-8, 24).<sup>5</sup> They will have authority to rule "for one hour," very briefly during the Great Tribulation (cf. 18:10, 17, 19). Evidently their short, independent rule will immediately precede the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (v. 14). The beast will give them their authority, but only because God will permit him to do so.

The fact that these "horns" ("kings") had not yet received a kingdom seems to rule out their identification as Roman Emperors of the first century. Barclay, who held this view (see

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 875. Cf. Johnson, pp. 560-61. For refutation of the preterist view that Nero is in view, see Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of Revelation 17:9-11 and Nero," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:656 (October-December 2007):472-85.

<sup>2</sup>See Moffatt, 5:453.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 317. Cf. Lenski, p. 507; Beale, p. 878.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:453-54.

<sup>5</sup>Bullinger, pp. 545-48; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 255; Kelly, pp. 368-76.

above under v. 10), interpreted the 10 "kings" in this verse as follows:

"... the ten kings are the satraps and leaders of the Parthian hosts, who will make common cause with Nero redivivus [i.e., Domitian, who, in his view, anticipates Antichrist], and who under him [i.e., Antichrist] will fight the last battle in which Rome will be destroyed and in which the Lamb will subdue every hostile force in the universe."<sup>1</sup>

"Or they may simply stand for all the world powers which in the end will turn against Rome and destroy her."<sup>2</sup>

17:13      The single "purpose" of these end-time kingdoms, or divisional realms, is to rule the world (v. 14). The 10 rulers will submit to the Antichrist's leadership ("power and authority") in order to achieve this end. Evidently he will have to put down three of them who revolt against him (Dan. 7:24; cf. Rev. 12:3; 13:1; 17:3).

17:14      At the very end of the Tribulation, these kings will fight against Jesus Christ ("wage war against the Lamb") as He returns to earth (cf. 16:14, 16; 19:19-21). "The Lamb will defeat (overcome) them," and will prove to be "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16), the very title Antichrist seeks to claim in his worldwide empire.

"Those who are with" Christ accompany Him from heaven (cf. 19:14). They are the "called," the elect ("chosen"), and the "faithful." These are probably just three different terms for the same group, namely, *believers*, rather than three different groups of believers. The three terms become progressively more specific. God "called" everyone to believe through the preaching of the gospel, but only those "chosen" for salvation are elected (predestined) by the Father (cf. Eph. 1:4-5). They are also the "faithful," the same ones who then respond to

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:184.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 2:191-92. Cf. Alford, 4:711.

God's grace by faithfully believing on Him. These believers who accompany Christ from heaven will be Christians from the Church Age, as well as the saints who died during the Tribulation.

### The judgment of the harlot 17:15-18

17:15 The angel next helped John understand the identity of "the waters" (v. 1). *Water* is a common symbol for people in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 18:4, 16; 124:4; Isa. 8:7; Jer. 47:2). The harlot exercises a controlling influence over the entire population of the whole world, both the faithful (cf. 5:9; 7:9) and the rebellious (cf. 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). There will be one religious system that will encompass all nations and peoples during the Tribulation (cf. vv. 1-2), though there could be various local forms of it.

17:16 The beast and his allies will eventually throw off the harlot and thoroughly destroy her. They will plunder her wealth, expose her corruption, and utterly consume her ("eat her flesh"), as dogs ate Jezebel's flesh (1 Kings 21:23-24; 2 Kings 9:30-37; cf. Ps. 27:2; Jer. 10:25; Mic. 3:3; Zeph. 3:3). They will completely desecrate her ("make her desolate and naked ... and will burn her up"), as the Israelites burned the bodies of people who committed detestable fornication (cf. Lev. 20:14; 21:9; Josh. 7:15, 25).

This will probably occur in the middle of the Tribulation, when Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel and demands that everyone on earth must worship him or die (Dan. 9:27; 11:26-38; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:8, 15). Satan's kingdom will divide and turn against itself, the sure sign that it cannot endure (cf. Mark 3:23-26).<sup>1</sup> Moffatt believed that the destruction of Rome by Nero and his allies is in view.<sup>2</sup>

17:17 The ultimate cause of this action is God's sovereign purpose ("God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose"). God has used the forces of evil for His own purposes before (cf.

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<sup>1</sup>Wilcock, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:454.

16:13-14, 16; Judg. 7:22; 1 Sam. 14:20; 2 Chron. 20:23; Jer. 25:9-11; Ezek. 38:21; Hag. 2:22; Zech. 14:13). Nevertheless, the sinner is always responsible for his or her actions (Ezekiel 18).

"This verse denies the existence of any ultimate dualism in the world. In the final analysis the powers of evil serve the purposes of God."<sup>1</sup>

The "common purpose" in view in this verse is world domination (v. 13). The allied kings will submit to the beast's leadership ("giv[e] their kingdom to the beast"), because they will think this will help them achieve their goal of attaining universal power and resisting God. This situation will continue until the end of the age, until all of God's "words," about rebellion against Him in the Tribulation, have been "fulfilled" (cf. 10:7).

17:18      The woman represents "the great city." In the context, this undoubtedly refers to "Babylon." It is the only city referred to specifically in this chapter (v. 5; cf. 16:18; 14:8). As a *system* of apostate religion, which the city of Babylon originated (Gen. 10—11) and symbolizes, it has reigned over the leaders and kingdoms of the world. Though *religion* has always guided the decisions of political rulers, this was especially clear during the Middle Ages in Europe. At that time, the popes wielded great influence over the political leaders of the Holy Roman Empire. The religious influence of Jezebel over King Ahab is a striking parallel in biblical history.

The focus of the revelation in this chapter is the age-old apostate religious system, and its relation to government, during the seven-year Tribulation period. During the first half of the Tribulation, it will be an ecumenical, worldwide body that will stand above government, and will be aggressively hostile to true believers in God. In the middle of the Tribulation, Antichrist will terminate it and demand universal worship of himself.

"In view of the fact that there does not seem to be any religious opposition to the woman, and her sway seems to be

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, pp. 319-20.

complete except for individual saints whom she persecutes, the evidence seems to support the fact that the woman represents an ecumenical or worldwide church embracing all of Christianity religiously, and therefore including not only the Roman Catholic Church but Protestant and Greek Orthodox as well. ...

"The final form of world religion will not even be Christian in name, and will actually be an atheistic, humanistic, satanic system which denies everything related to the true God, and is the persecutor of all who fail to worship the political ruler."<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Commerce in the Great Tribulation ch. 18**

God next led John to reveal the destruction of the commercial/economic system, that Babylon also symbolizes, in order to inform his readers of its end in the future. "Wall Street" identifies a particular geographical location in New York City, but it also represents a commercial/economic system that has its center there. Likewise "Babylon" has, throughout history, represented a particular commercial/economic system—that originated in the geographical city of Babylon—as well as a particular religious system.

Many commentators believe chapters 17 and 18 describe the same thing, namely: the destruction of Babylon.

"Having portrayed the fate of the harlot-city through the onslaught of the Antichrist and his allies, John composes a dirge over the city in the style of the doom-songs of Old Testament prophets."<sup>2</sup>

What "Babylon" symbolizes, in this chapter, is somewhat different from what it symbolizes in chapter 17. Nevertheless, the *literal city* is also in view in both chapters, since it is the historical and philosophical headwaters for both systems. In chapter 18, there are many references to Babylon's commercial activity. Although God did not identify Babylon's religious influence expressly (in great detail) in chapter 17, the harlot clearly seems to symbolize that influence. The vision in chapter 18 gives further information about the announcements in 14:8 and 16:19-21. The belief

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revival of ...," pp. 326-27.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 262. Cf. Beale, p. 890.

that salvation is *by works* is the bedrock of religious Babylon (Gen. 11:4: "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven."). The desire to glorify *self*—rather than God—is the foundation of commercial/economic Babylon (Gen. 11:4: "and let us make for ourselves a name").

The parallels between chapters 17 and 18 are as distinctive as the differences. Note Babylon's designation (17:5, 18; cf. 18:2, 10), its description (17:4; cf. 18:6, 16), its deeds (17:2, 6; cf. 18:3, 24), and its destruction (17:16, 17; 18:5, 8).

"The striking parallels between the chapters go beyond coincidence to point to a unified system. That system is identified in both chapters as a city that rules the world."<sup>1</sup>

"The distinction between the two chapters is that between two systems or networks that have the same geographical headquarters. In chapter 17 it is a religious system that operates independently of and in opposition to the true God, but in chapter 18 it is an economic system that does the same."<sup>2</sup>

Johnson did not believe we should look for the rebuilding of ancient Babylon, because he viewed the city only as representing a system.

"He [John] is not writing a literal description, even in poetic or figurative language, of the fall of an earthly city, such as Rome or Jerusalem; but in portraying the destruction of a city, he describes God's judgment on the great satanic system of evil that has corrupted the earth's history."<sup>3</sup>

I expect that the literal city of Babylon may be rebuilt, and that it may suffer a final destruction at the end of the Tribulation. However, I also believe that what is in view here is more than just the literal city. It is also what the city has stood for and promoted throughout history, namely, a satanic system marked by every form of idolatrous humanism. Harris

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<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17—18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:575 (January-March 1987):311.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 313-14.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson, p. 565. *The New Scofield ...*, pp. 1370; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 368-69; Heater, pp. 23-43; and Wiersbe, 2:614, also held this view.

preferred the view that a literal city is in view, but he did not know what city.<sup>1</sup>

There are many allusions to Jeremiah's prophecies of Babylon's destruction, and at least one to Isaiah's, in this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

### The first angelic announcement of judgment 18:1-3

18:1 John next saw another scene on earth (Gr. *Meta tauta eidon*, "After these things I saw," cf. 4:1). "Another angel," of the same kind as in 17:1 (i.e., one who descends from heaven to fulfill a special mission; cf. 10:1; 20:1), announced the next scene that John saw in his vision. This angel possessed "great authority" and "glory," probably indicative of the importance of the judgment he announced. His description ("the earth was illumined with his glory") has led some interpreters to conclude that he is Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

However, this messenger's clear identification as an "angel," as well as the function he performs, seem to mark him as an actual angel (cf. 14:8).<sup>4</sup> Evidently his task required great authority.<sup>5</sup> His *great* "glory," with which he illumined ("illumined") the earth, probably suggests that he had just come from God's presence (cf. Exod. 34:29-35; Ezek. 43:2).

18:2 The repetition of the word "Fallen" (cf. 14:8; Isa. 21:9; Jer. 51:8) probably indicates that God guaranteed this judgment, and that it will happen quickly (Gen. 41:32; cf. 2 Pet. 3:8). This is another proleptic announcement, in which the angel described a future action as already having happened. The prophetic aorist tense of the Greek verb makes this clear.

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<sup>1</sup>Harris, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 983, for his chart of them.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., M. Robert Mulholland, *Revelation, Holy Living in an Unholy World*, p. 284; and Chilton, *The Days ...*, pp. 445-46.

<sup>4</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 442; Beckwith, p. 712.

<sup>5</sup>Wilcock, p. 166.

"It is the prophetic way of declaring that the great purpose of God in triumphing over evil is a *fait accompli*."<sup>1</sup>

The description of Babylon in this verse is what it will be after God judges it (cf. Isa. 13:21; 34:11, 14; 47:7-9; Jer. 50—51; Ezek. 26—28; Nah. 3; Zeph. 2:15). Ancient Babylon fell to Cyrus the Persian in 539 B.C., but that fall did not completely fulfill the Old Testament prophecies about Babylon (cf. Isa. 47:11; Jer. 51:8).<sup>2</sup> John had described God only through hymns of worship to this point, and he now similarly described the fall of Babylon through the laments of onlookers.<sup>3</sup>

"The prophecy thus indicates that before the advent of the warrior-king in 19:11-16, Babylon will rise to its greatest heights, not only of idolatry (chap. 17), but also of luxury (chap. 18). ... Babylon of the future, therefore, will be the center for both false religion and world economic prosperity."<sup>4</sup>

Apparently it is the *city* (of Babylon) that will "become" the "prison of every unclean spirit" and "place of demons," a place where they are safe but kept against their wills (cf. Isa. 13:21-22; 34:11-17; Jer. 51:37). A prison (or haunt) for "unclean and hateful (repulsive) bird[s]" is a figure of desolation (cf. Isa. 34:11, 13; Jer. 50:39). Babylon will become utterly desolate.

18:3 This verse is very similar to 17:2. However, it seems that in view of the description God gave of Babylon, in the rest of chapter 18, it is not exactly the same "Babylon" pictured in chapter 17. The political, economic, commercial system that originated in Babylon—and that leaves God out—seems to be in view here. Her philosophy, as a result, has influenced all the nations that have acted immorally and grown rich, at the expense of and in defiance of others. Babylon's

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 323.

<sup>2</sup>Kiddle, pp. 359-60; Wilcock, p. 168; Bullinger, p. 553.

<sup>3</sup>Caird, p. 227; Sweet, p. 267; Mounce, p. 323.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 317.



*commercial/economic* influence has been worldwide. Political self-interest and materialism are its chief sins (cf. v. 23).<sup>1</sup>

"Three reasons are given for God's judgment of Babylon (v 3): (a) her corrupting influence on the nations of the world, (b) the kings of the earth fornicated with her (cf. 17:2), and (c) the merchants of the earth shared her excessive wealth (seafarers were thought to be motivated primarily by greed)."<sup>2</sup>

### The prediction of the voice from heaven 18:4-20

This section contains a call for believers to leave Babylon, lamentations over Babylon's destruction by those affected by it, and rejoicing in heaven over Babylon's fall.

### The call for God's people to leave Babylon 18:4-8

18:4 "Another voice from heaven" instructed God's people to separate from the system that the city symbolizes ("come out from among her"), so they would avoid getting caught in her judgment ("her sins ... her plagues"). The being who spoke may have been an angel speaking for God (vv. 4, 5; cf. 11:3; 22:7-8). Probably He was God or, more specifically, Christ.<sup>3</sup> He called on His people to *leave* the symbolic city of Babylon (cf. Gen. 12:1; 19:12; Exod. 8:1; Num. 16:26; Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6-9, 45), but beyond that, to forsake the enticements of the idolatry, self-sufficiency, love of luxury, and violence that the city symbolizes.

The people addressed are faithful believers living in the Tribulation. Unless they separate from her (the world's) sins, they will be hurt by the judgment (painful torment and gruesome death, God's wrath, and hell) coming upon her; but if they *do* separate, they will enjoy God's protection (cf. 12:14; Matt. 24:16). They should not have the attitude of Lot's wife,

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<sup>1</sup>Wall, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, pp. 1011-12.

<sup>3</sup>Charles, 2:97; Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 990.

who hankered after another worldly city (Sodom) that God destroyed (cf. Gen. 19:26; Luke 17:32).

18:5 Another reason for abandoning Babylon and Babylonianism, is that God will be about to judge her (the world's religious and commercial systems). "Her sins," like the bricks used to build the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:3-4), have accumulated so they finally reach ("have piled up as high as") "heaven." She has exhausted God's patience (cf. Jer. 51:9). God has noticed and "remembered" her sins, and because He is righteous, He must judge them.

18:6 The angel furthermore called on God's enemies (the beast and the 10 horns), whom He will use to pay Babylon back *fully*, "even as she has paid" into with her wicked "deeds," pride, and self-indulgent conduct (cf. 17:16-17; Jer. 50:29). This is a call for God's application of the *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation (cf. Matt. 7:2; Gal. 6:7-8). To "pay back double" is another way of saying to *pay back fully* (cf. v. 7; Exod. 22:4, 7, 9; Isa. 40:2; 61:7; Jer. 16:18; 17:18; Zech. 9:12).<sup>1</sup> Babylon had persecuted and murdered the saints (v. 24; 19:2). The "cup" she had used to seduce others will become the instrument of her own punishment ("in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her"; cf. v. 3; 14:10).

"This is not a prayer for personal vengeance by the persecuted saints, but a heavenly interpretation of the divine response to cruelty committed by wicked persons who have passed the point of no return in their moral choices. The last hour has now struck, and it is too late for repentance. This is a judicial pronouncement against a sinful civilization that has reached the ultimate limit of evil."<sup>2</sup>

18:7 *Luxurious* living provides another reason for Babylon's judgment. Her claims of superiority ("she glorified herself")

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<sup>1</sup>Hailey, pp. 361-62; Hughes, p. 191; Meredith G. Kline, "Double Trouble," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32:2 (June 1989):171-79.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 322-23. Cf. Kiddle, pp. 366-67; Hughes, p. 190.

and self-sufficiency ("lived sensuously" or "luxuriously"; "I sit as a queen ... not a widow") echo those of ancient Babylon (cf. Isa. 47:7-9; Ezek. 27:3; 28:2; Zeph. 2:15). They also recall the words of the Laodicean church (3:17).

- 18:8 The "one day" may very well be literal (cf. Dan. 5:1, 3-5, 30). "One day" also expresses suddenness, as does the "one hour" in verses 10, 17, and 19 (cf. Isa. 47:9). Likewise, we could interpret the burning literally (cf. Isa. 47:14). Rebuilt Babylon and the cities that are the centers for this worldwide network of political, commercial activity will evidently "be burned up with fire" in the great earthquake (16:18-19). She will collapse suddenly, like the World Trade Center towers in New York City in 2001, not decline gradually. The *strength* of "the Lord God" will accomplish this destruction, but He will use unusual means (His enemies; 17:16-17).

#### Laments over this judgment by those affected 18:9-19

Three groups of people mourn Babylon's destruction in these verses: kings (vv. 9-10; cf. Ezek. 26:15-18), merchants (vv. 11-13, 15-17a; cf. Ezek. 27:36), and ocean-traveling tradesmen, sailors, and passengers (vv. 17b-19; cf. Ezek. 27:29-36).<sup>1</sup>

- 18:9 World government leaders ("kings of the earth") will mourn when they see the collapse of the system that has sustained them and enabled them to live luxuriously. "Commit[ting] fornication (immorality) with her" is a way of expressing their sharing in Babylon's luxury (cf. Ezek. 26:16; 27:30-35).<sup>2</sup> Evidently fire will be the main cause of the city's destruction (cf. vv. 8, 18; 14:11; 17:16; 19:3). "The smoke of her burning," the evidence of her fall, is what caused these rulers misery (cf. Gen. 19:28; Isa. 34:10; Ezek. 28:18).
- 18:10 Babylon will fall quickly, in "one hour" (v. 10, cf. v. 19; Jer. 51:8; Ezek. 27). These "kings" (political leaders) will mourn because they have lost their power suddenly. These rulers must be different from the 10 kings, who will destroy the city

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<sup>1</sup>See Barclay, 2:200-13, for a summary of the excessive wealth and materialism of ancient Rome.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 567.

(17:16). *These* "woes" are an exclamation of sorrow; the earlier ones in the book are announcements of doom (8:13; 12:12).<sup>1</sup> Doubling the woes increases the perception of the strength of the sorrow (cf. v. 6). This city was "strong," but its Judge is stronger.

"This spatial separation from Babylon not only expresses the horror they [the "kings"] feel at its sudden and unexpected destruction; it also reflects their attempt to distance themselves from a judgment they deserve to share (*T[heological] D[ictionary of the] N[ew] T[estament]* 4:373)."<sup>2</sup>

"There is a weird charm in a burning city."<sup>3</sup>

18:11 The "merchants" also lament over the destruction of this system because of the resulting death to their business, further indicating that this is a different system than the religious one symbolized in chapter 17. The collapse of economic Babylon results in merchants being unable to buy and sell goods. They sorrow over the loss of customers and profits that its destruction causes. However, the *city itself* is a treasure that they also regret losing (cf. Ezek. 27:25-31).<sup>4</sup> The wailing of the merchants is greater than that of the politicians and ocean travelers, in this context, because their loss is greater. They bemoan the loss of customers, but they *themselves* had previously denied the right to buy and sell to anyone who did not have the mark of the beast (13:17).

18:12-13 The variety of the goods that John listed here suggests how extensive the trade will be at this time in history. The market is the world. Most of the items listed were luxuries in John's day (cf. Isa. 23; Ezek. 16:9-13; 27:12-24). There are eight categories into which these 29 items fall.

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, 4:770.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 997.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:440.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 267; Wall, p. 216.

These categories are: (1) precious metals and gems ("gold and silver and precious stones and pearls"), (2) clothing ("fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet"), (3) furnishings ("citron wood and every article of ivory ... from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble"), (4) spices ("cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense"), (5) food ("wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat"), (6) animals ("cattle and sheep," and "horses"), (7) implements ("chariots"), and (8) people ("slaves and human lives"). Note that they were even buying and selling other human beings, having reinstituted worldwide slave trade!

"Persons are 'bought and sold' (and even traded!) by athletic teams; and our great corporations more and more seek to control the lives of their officers and workers. As people become more enslaved to luxury, with more bills to pay, they find themselves unable to break loose from the 'system.'"<sup>1</sup>

The "human trafficking" practiced in the world today is tied to illegal arms dealing, and is reportedly the second most lucrative crime, globally, surpassed only by the drug trade.<sup>2</sup> It could become more pervasive—than ever before in history—in the Tribulation period.

18:14 The "fruit" (Gr. *opora*, lit. "ripe autumn fruit") these merchants so badly desire is no longer available (cf. Jer. 40:10, 12; Jude 12). "Luxurious" and "splendid" refer to food and clothing respectively.<sup>3</sup> The merchants will also lose their luxurious possessions. People will not be able to find the treasures they once collected. The Greek construction of the last clause indicates that these things will never ever return.<sup>4</sup> There are two double (extra strong) negatives in the Greek text.

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:615.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* (June 2012), available on the Internet.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 235; Charles, 2:108.

<sup>4</sup>Robertson, 6:442.

- 18:15 Again the merchants bewail their fate. Selfishness and greed characterize these individuals. They too, like the politicians, "stand at a distance" viewing the destruction of the city (cf. vv. 10, 17).
- 18:16 The description of the city here is very similar to that of the harlot in 17:4. The same city is in view in both chapters. This dirge begins and ends the same way as that of the politicians in verse 10 did. However, the merchants bewail the city's lost opulence and splendor, whereas the politicians will grieve over its broken strength (cf. Ezek. 16:23; 28:13).
- 18:17 The first clause of this verse concludes the mourning of the merchants. It expresses the reason for their sorrow.
- The second part of this verse begins the description of the mourning of ocean travelers, ship captains, and sailors. The four groups of ocean travelers are represented by: helmsmen (ship captains and other ship crew officers, "shipmaster[s]," Gr. *kybrnetes*), "passenger[s]" (*pas ho epi topon pleon*), "sailor[s]" (*nautai*), and those who work ("make their living by") "the sea" (*ten thalassan ergazontai*), such as fishermen and divers for pearls.<sup>1</sup> These, too, "stood at a distance" watching the city burn. Perhaps these ocean travelers are of special interest in the text because they represent sea merchants and shipping companies, being the shippers and distributors of goods.
- 18:18 They also lament greatly, because of the collapse of this great commercial empire ("her burning"). Their question ("What city is like the great city?") echoes the one about Tyre in Ezekiel 27:32.<sup>2</sup> The implied answer is that no city can match Babylon in its material greatness.
- 18:19 *Throwing dust on one's head* symbolized great grief in the Old Testament (cf. Josh. 7:6; 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; 13:19; 15:32; Job 2:12; Lam. 2:10). People long ago behaved similarly over Tyre's demise (Ezek. 27:30). These ocean

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup>Lee, 4:774; Wall, p. 217.

tradesmen also echo the laments, and repeat the behavior of, the politicians (v. 10) and the merchants (vv. 15, 16-17).

"How do *we* see the luxury of this world? Do we see it as it really is? Can we use it without getting it into our hearts? How would you feel if the luxuries in your life which you have come to consider necessities suddenly went up in smoke?

"Would it break your heart if you saw the things of this world go up in smoke? Or is your heart in heaven, fixed on Christ?"<sup>1</sup>

### **Heavenly rejoicing over Babylon's fall 18:20**

In contrast to the earth-dwellers, God's people ("saints and apostles and prophets") will "rejoice" when Babylon falls (cf. 11:10). The songs in 19:1-5 may be their response to this invitation. "Heaven" rejoiced over the fall of ancient Babylon, too (Jer. 51:48-49).<sup>2</sup> What causes bitter mourning on earth brings great exultation to heaven.

The speaker is evidently the angel (v. 4; cf. 12:12). "Saints" are all believers. "Apostles," who died as martyrs, and "prophets," are special groups of saints (cf. 11:18). The similar exhortation in 12:12 suggests that all these believers are now in heaven. The reason for this merry-making is that "God has pronounced" a verdict in their favor ("judgment for you"). He has vindicated them by punishing their oppressors (cf. 19:2-3). This justice view seems much more likely, than the interpretation that they should rejoice because God was punishing their enemies in kind (revenge).

Believers characteristically have greater interest in glorifying God and helping other people, than they do in hoarding earthly treasures for themselves (Matt. 6:19-34; 22:34-40). The desire (greed) of unbelievers to accumulate wealth for themselves has resulted in untold opposition to the gospel and God's servants throughout history (cf. 6:9-11).

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1041.

<sup>2</sup>Hughes, p. 194.

### The third announcement of judgment 18:21-24

18:21 The angelic act of throwing the "millstone ... into the sea" is symbolic of Babylon's fate (cf. Jer. 51:63-64; Matt. 18:6). As it is impossible for that huge stone to rise to the surface, so certainly the economic system, that has driven this world virtually throughout its history, will sink. It will never rise again (cf. Exod. 15:5; Neh. 9:11). Millstones in John's day often measured four or five feet in diameter, were one foot thick, and weighed thousands of pounds (cf. Mark 9:42).<sup>1</sup> The "strong angel" (cf. 5:2; 10:1) also explained his symbolic action: Babylon's destruction will be sudden, *violent*, and permanent.

18:22-23 Many things will end with the destruction of this system. John mentioned the rejoicing of unbelievers, the work of producers of goods, the use of their tools, the light their activities produced (literally and figuratively), and the happiness that resulted. No music, trades, or industry will continue (cf. Jer. 25:10). Where there had previously been hustle and bustle, there will then be silence.

The angel gave three reasons for this devastation, two in verse 23 and one in verse 24. The Greek word *hoti*, "because," appears twice in verse 23. Each time it introduces a reason. First, men whom the world regards as great have enriched themselves and lifted themselves up in pride because of Babylon's influence (cf. Isa. 23:8). Second, as a result of the first reason Babylon has seduced all nations. She deceived all the nations into thinking that joy, security, honor, and meaning in life (i.e., "success") come through the accumulation of material wealth. She had used "sorcery" (Gr. *pharmakon*; cf. 9:21) to "deceive" and seduce "the nations" into following her (cf. 2 Kings 9:22; Isa. 47:9, 12; Nah. 3:4).

"If one is puzzled over the connection between medicine and sorcery as illustrated by this word (our pharmacy), he has only to recall quackery today in medicine (patent medicines and cure-

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 568. Cf. Robertson, 6:444.



alls), witch-doctors, professional faith-healers, medicine-men in Africa. True medical science has had a hard fight to shake off chicanery and charlatany."<sup>1</sup>

18:24 The third reason for Babylon's judgment is that she slew the saints (cf. Jer. 51:35, 36, 49). The angel stated this reason as a historical fact, rather than as an accusation. The responsibility for "the blood" of God's servants, martyred for their testimonies, lies at the feet of this system. The murder of "prophets" is especially serious, since they bore the word of God, but killing *any* saint is bad enough.

*Unbelievers* have killed many believers ("saints"), directly and indirectly, in their pursuit of material possessions. This verse could hardly apply *only* to the city of Babylon, though it includes that city. Through her influence and example, Babylon, symbolic of the satanic world system, has been responsible for "all" the slayings "on the earth" (perhaps hyperbole), so enormous guilt rests on her shoulders.

"Blood violently shed cries out for vengeance until it is rewarded by the punishment of the murderers. The destruction of Babylon answers to that punishment."<sup>2</sup>

To summarize, it seems that the "Babylon" John described in this chapter is the commercial system of buying and selling goods to make a profit. As *religious* Babylon includes all forms of religion (non-Christian as well as Christian religions), so *economic* Babylon includes all types of economies (capitalism, socialism, communism, etc.). This economic system will have its headquarters (at least ideologically, if not also geographically) in Babylon on the Euphrates River during the Tribulation, and it will burn up. Self-interest is at the root of this system.

Whereas believers have always lived within this system, we have always known that we must not adopt the philosophy that drives it, namely,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 6:445.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 347. Cf. Gen. 4:10.

selfishness. Possession of wealth is not the problem, so much as the arrogant use of it.<sup>1</sup>

This system has become so much a part of life, that it is hard for us to imagine life without it. Nonetheless, this chapter teaches that it will end, just before or when Jesus Christ returns at His Second Coming, and it will exist no longer.

This system began long ago, when people first assembled to make a name for themselves at Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). As Christians, we need to make sure that we are not citizens of this Babylon, by laying up treasure on earth, but truly citizens of heaven, by laying up treasure there (cf. Matt. 6:19-21). This chapter should challenge us to evaluate our financial goals and to repudiate selfish, arrogant living.

"The destruction of the city of Babylon is the final blow to the times of the Gentiles, which began when the Babylonian army attacked Jerusalem in 605 B.C. (cf. Luke 21:24)."<sup>2</sup>

Following this revelation concerning the destruction of the major religious and commercial systems of the world, God moved John along in his vision. He proceeded next from the Great Tribulation (chs. 8—18) to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (ch. 19), which is the climax of this book.

## L. THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST CH. 19

John wrote the record of his vision of events, surrounding the Lord Jesus' Second Coming, in order to share with his readers the future vindication of Jesus Christ. The chapter has two parts: the rejoicing triggered by Babylon's fall (vv. 1-10), and the events surrounding the Lamb's return to the earth (vv. 11-21).

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<sup>1</sup>Sweet, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 973. See Andrew M. Woods' series of articles that refute the preterist interpretation of chapters 17 and 18: "Have the Prophecies in Revelation 17—18 about Babylon Been Fulfilled? Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:673 (January-March 2012):79-100; "... Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:674 (April-June 2012):219-40; "... Part 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):341-61; "... Part 4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:676 (October-December 2012):465-85; "... Part 5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170:677 (January-March 2013):82-101; and "... Part 6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170:678 (April-June 2013):194-214.

### 1. The praise of God in heaven 19:1-10

This pericope has strong ties to what precedes (16:17—18:24). It is the concluding revelation concerning the fall of Babylon (the latter-day Egypt and Tyre) and Antichrist (the ultimate Pharaoh of the Exodus and King of Tyre). The *praise* in this section is in response to the angel's invitation for those in heaven to rejoice (18:20).<sup>1</sup> Verses 9 and 10 conclude the section begun in 17:1-3.<sup>2</sup> The proleptic *silence* of ruined Babylon on earth now gives way in the narrative to enthusiastic *rejoicing* in heaven.<sup>3</sup> This is the climactic expression of praise in Revelation (cf. 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12-14; 7:10, 12, 15-17; 11:15, 17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-7).

The four songs in verses 1-5 look back to the judgment of Babylon, and the song in verses 9-10 looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The Harlot dies, but the Bride begins to enjoy new life.<sup>4</sup>

19:1        This first song praises God for judging the harlot. After John received the revelation about the destruction of commercial Babylon, he evidently heard another angelic chorus singing loudly in heaven (cf. 4:8, 11; 5:12-14). "Hallelujah" means "Praise the Lord." Its only four occurrences in the New Testament are in this pericope (vv. 1, 3, 4, 6), though it occurs frequently in the Psalms. One writer called this section "heaven's Hallelujah Chorus."<sup>5</sup> In the Old Testament, "hallelujah" usually has some connection with the punishment of the ungodly, as it does here (e.g., Ps. 104:35). God is worthy of praise because He has (possesses) all "salvation" (cf. 7:10; 12:10), "glory" (cf. 15:8), and "power" (cf. 4:11; 7:12; 12:10; 1 Chron. 29:11).

"The *salvation* of God should awaken the *gratitude* of man. The *glory* of God should awaken the *reverence* of man. The *power* of God is always exercised in the love of God, and should, therefore, awaken the *trust* of man. Gratitude,

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<sup>1</sup>Charles, 2:117-19; Wall, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 353.

<sup>3</sup>Kiddle, p. 375.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 355.

<sup>5</sup>Ford C. Ottman, *The Unfolding of the Ages*, p. 402.

reverence, trust—these are the constituent elements of real praise."<sup>1</sup>

- 19:2 This group praises God because of His "true" (fair) and "righteous" (just) judgments (cf. 15:3; 16:7), especially upon "the great harlot" Babylon. It is only right that Babylon, which brought moral ruin on ("corrupting") "the earth," should lie in ruins.

"By now all men have made their choice between God and Satan. Universal worship of the beast and universal rejoicing over the deaths of the two witnesses mark the world not only as guilty but also as irreclaimable. The earth-dwellers have hardened their hearts forever to a point that precludes any possibility of repentance ... God's judgment of those with this disposition is the special occasion of praise to God."<sup>2</sup>

The angels were anticipating God's judgment of the harlot; it had not happened yet. Probably both aspects of Babylonianism are in view here: religious and commercial. The essence of the harlot's guilt lies in her "corrupting the earth with her [immoralities]" ("immorality"; cf. 14:8; 17:2; 18:3). By destroying Babylon, God will "avenge the blood" of believers who died as a result of its influences (cf. 18:24; Deut. 32:42-43; 2 Kings 9:7).

The outpouring of God's wrath on the earth-dwellers will come as a consequence of believers' petitions (cf. 5:8; 6:9-11; 8:3-5; 9:13; 10:6; 14:18; 16:7; 19:2).<sup>3</sup>

- 19:3 A "second" burst of praise from the same group glorified God for judging Babylon—summarily, for good and for all time—so that its influences will never rise again. This encore heightens the praise of the first song. The divine judgments of Sodom and Gomorrah and Edom were previews of this judgment (cf.

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:218.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 357-58.

<sup>3</sup>Idem, "The Imprecatory ...," pp. 123-31; and idem, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 517-24.

Gen. 19:28; Isa. 34:10).<sup>1</sup> The "smoke" represents the effects of the fire that will destroy Babylon (cf. 17:16; 18:8, 9, 18). It will stop rising when the fire dies out, but the destruction that it symbolizes will be permanent ("her smoke rises up forever"). The punishment of God's enemies will be everlasting (cf. vv. 20, 21; 14:11; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:46).

19:4 The "24 elders" and the "four living creatures" echoed these sentiments in the third song of praise (cf. 4:9-10; 5:8, 14; 7:9-11; 14:3). The one "who sits on the throne" is evidently "God" *the Father*. "Amen" voices the elders' and creatures' approval of the two previous expressions of praise (vv. 1-2, 3), and "Hallelujah" expresses their own praise (cf. 7:12).

19:5 The authoritative "voice ... from the throne" probably belonged to an angel (v. 10). It called for added continuous "praise" from "all" of God's servants ("bond-servants"; cf. Ps. 113:1; 115:13). Allusions to the Hallel psalms in this pericope connect the vindication that the psalmists cried out for, so often, with what was now imminent (cf. Ps. 113:1; 135:1, 20). The "bond-servants" to whom the voice appealed for praise probably include *all* the "servants" of God in heaven, both angelic and human, including "the small and the great," the saints and prophets (cf. 18:14, 20; 19:2). The angel called for the "fear" of God, since judgment is in view. The call extends to creatures of all classes (cf. Ps. 115:13).

19:6 This praise in verse 6 followed the call to praise in verse 5, and probably included that of the angels. Together, all of God's servants in heaven now praised Him: for the fact that *He* now "reigns," after destroying Babylon. In this proleptic statement, they look forward to what is about to happen, namely, Jesus Christ's return to earth and the beginning of His eternal reign.<sup>2</sup> Here He receives the title "the Lord our God, the Almighty." This praise is appropriately *great*, since Messiah's earthly reign is the climax of history. Thus John heard a "voice" that sounded like multitudes ("a great multitude") of people, the roar of a huge waterfall ("many waters"), and loud "peals of

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup>Beckwith, p. 726; Robertson, 6:449; Ladd, p. 246.

thunder" announcing Messiah's arrival to reign (cf. Ezek. 1:24; 43:2; Dan. 10:6). The singers are evidently angels (cf. 6:1; 10:1-4; 11:15-17; 14:2).

- 19:7 The song begun in verse 6 continues with an exhortation to "rejoice" and to glorify God ("give the glory to Him"; cf. Matt. 5:12). This is the last song of praise in the Apocalypse, of which there are 14 (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:16-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-6, 7; 19:1-3, 4, 6-8). God deserves praise because He has prepared the bride for the Lamb.<sup>1</sup>

The "bride of the Lamb" is evidently *the church* (cf. v. 9; 3:20; 21:2, 9; 22:17; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-32). Even though the translators usually render the Greek word *gyne*, translated "bride," as "wife," here the context clearly shows that a wedding is in view. *Gyne* clearly describes a bride in other contexts, too (e.g., Gen. 29:21; Deut. 22:24 [both in the Septuagint]; Matt. 1:20; Rev. 21:9). The bride is the Lamb's newly married wife, having been joined to Him in heaven immediately after the Rapture. This is the third of three metaphors in Revelation that describe women: the "woman" (mother) in chapter 12 is *Israel*, the "harlot" in chapter 17 is *Babylon*, and the "bride" in chapter 19 is *the church*. Another view is that the "bride" is the new Jerusalem (21:2).<sup>2</sup>

Why is it the wedding of the *Lamb*? Why is this title of Christ used rather than one of the hundreds of others? Perhaps it is because it is the Lamb, who offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, that the church loves.<sup>3</sup>

God referred to Himself as Israel's *Husband* in the Old Testament (Isa. 54:6; 62:5; Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 16:7-14; Hos. 2:2, 16, 19). However, that marriage figure almost always describes Israel as an unfaithful wife. Only Isaiah used the marriage analogy in a consistently positive way.<sup>4</sup> He did so to

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, p. 201; Sweet, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 428.

<sup>3</sup>See Jeremiah, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup>Jan Fekkes III, "'His Bride Has Prepared Herself': Revelation 19—21 and Isaian Nuptial Imagery," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109:2 (Summer 1990):272-73.

show the future relationship between God and the faithful Jewish remnant.<sup>1</sup>

Israel cannot be *this bride*, or even part of this bride, because this bride comes to earth with Christ *when* He returns, and because Old Testament saints will not experience resurrection until *after* Christ returns to the earth (Dan. 12:1-2). The fact that the bride, later in 21:12 and 14, includes Israel, indicates that the bride will be a growing body of people that will *eventually* encompass Israel as well as the church. In chapter 21 the bride is the New Jerusalem. However, at this time, just before Christ returns to the earth (19:7), the figure of the bride must describe *the church alone*. (Covenant theologians see no real distinction between Israel and the church at this time.<sup>2</sup>)

Jesus Christ, the Lamb, frequently referred to Himself as a bridegroom (cf. Matt. 9:15; 22:2-14; 25:1-13; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-35; 14:15-24; John 3:29). For the Jews, the wedding figure stressed the intimate relationship that will exist between God and His people in the earthly messianic kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

We can clarify the general time and place of the marriage of the Lamb by comparing it with marriage customs in the ancient Near East.<sup>4</sup> There were three main events involved in a marriage: First, the parents chose a bride for the groom. This takes place presently in the Church Age, as the Holy Spirit calls the elect out of the world to be Christ's bride through regeneration.

Second, when the time for marriage (the wedding ceremony) had come, the groom would leave his home with his friends, go to the home of the bride, and escort her from her home to his. The bride did not know when this would occur, just as

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<sup>1</sup>See Richard D. Patterson, "Metaphors of Marriage as Expressions of Divine-Human Relations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51:4 (December 2008):689-702.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ladd, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 246; Lee, 4:731; Robertson, 6:449.

<sup>4</sup>See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Cultural Aspects of Marriage in the Ancient World," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:539 (July-September 1978):241-52; and Zola Levitt, *A Christian Love Story*.

Christians do not know when the Rapture will occur. This will take place when Christ comes to take His bride from her home, earth, to His home, heaven—at the Rapture—for their wedding (cf. John 14:1-2).

Third, the groom provided a feast for his bride and his friends, at his home, that lasted several days. This will take place *on earth*: either at the beginning of the Millennium,<sup>1</sup> throughout the Millennium,<sup>2</sup> or beginning with the Millennium and continuing throughout eternity (cf. 21:2, 9).<sup>3</sup> I favor the first view.

The present verse (v. 7) describes the *wedding proper*, stage two (cf. vv. 8, 14), which had already taken place in John's vision. It also announces that the bride is ready for *the feast*: stage three.

The preparedness of the bride is one reason for the celebration called for in this verse. The bride had prepared herself ("made herself ready"; cf. Matt. 25:14-23; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 John 3:3; Jude 21), but the ultimate preparation was God's, so He deserves the praise (cf. Matt. 20:1-16; Eph. 5:25-27). The theme of the first song (vv. 1-3) was the *destruction* of the harlot, but the theme of this song is the *wedding* of the Lamb to His bride—who is the antithesis of the harlot.

- 19:8 The angelic chorus continued to describe the preparation of the bride for the wedding feast. God graciously enabled her ("it was given to her") "to clothe herself in fine linen" (cf. 6:4; 8:3; 9:5; 15:6; 18:12; 19:14; Gen. 41:42; Isa. 61:10; Dan. 10:5; 12:6-7). "Bright" indicates divine glory.<sup>4</sup> "Clean" reflects purity (cf. 21:18, 21). These wedding garments are appropriate for God's presence. "Fine linen" represents the bride's "righteous deeds (acts)," as this verse explains (cf. 14:13). These are the *works* of the saints, rather than their positional standing before God. Their good deeds, which God's

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 618.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 227-28; McGee, 5:1048.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 365.

<sup>4</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*lampo, et al.*," by A. Oepke, 4(1967):16-28.



grace made possible, make them dressed appropriately for their righteous Lord (cf. Matt. 22:1-14). The bride's clothing contrasts starkly with the harlot's gaudy garments (cf. 17:4; 18:16).

"Contrast the prostitute and her lovers in the preceding chapters with the Lamb and His chaste bride ..."<sup>1</sup>

19:9 The person who now spoke to John is apparently the same angel who had been guiding him through the revelation concerning Babylon (cf. 17:1, 15). He instructed John to write again (cf. 1:11, 19; 14:13; 21:5), this time another beatitude (cf. 14:3). This *blessing* gives the Tribulation saints an additional motivation to remain faithful. Those "invited" to the Lamb's marriage supper include His *friends*, not just the bride (cf. 3:20). This implies the presence of other believers besides church saints at this celebration.

Those invited to the supper will include the bride (all true Christians of the Church Age) plus other believers who are not members of the church. These *other believers* will be the Tribulation martyrs and believers who survive the Tribulation and enter the Millennium alive (cf. 12:13-17; 20:4-5; Matt. 22:11-14; 25:1-13). They may also include the Old Testament saints, who will experience resurrection at the beginning of the Millennium (cf. Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2). This celebration will evidently take place in heaven,<sup>2</sup> though some believe it will be on earth.<sup>3</sup> Some believe that this marriage supper is synonymous with the millennial kingdom,<sup>4</sup> but most believe that it is an event at the beginning of that kingdom.

The angel concluded with the final sentence: "These are true words of God" (cf. 22:6, 8-9). He could have been referring to what we read in the first part of this verse.<sup>5</sup> However, since

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 571.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 226-28; René Pache, *The Future Life*, p. 254; Thomas S. McCall and Zola Levitt, *The Coming Russian Invasion of Israel*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., See Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 975.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1318.

<sup>5</sup>Hughes, p. 201.

this statement concludes all that this angel had revealed since 17:1, it seems better to take it as referring to all the intervening revelation.<sup>1</sup>

19:10 The wonder of this revelation and the certainty of its fulfillment seem to have overwhelmed John. He "fell" down ("at his feet") "to worship" the angel, because the angel had revealed these things to him (cf. 1:17; Acts 10:25). This was not proper, as the angel explained (cf. 22:9).

"... because any reverential act that has been joined with religion cannot but savor of something divine, he could not have 'knelt' to the angel without detracting from God's glory."<sup>2</sup>

Human beings should never worship angels (Col. 2:18). The beast, who is not even an angel, will receive worship gladly (cf. 13:4, 8, 12, 15). How easy it is to fall into idolatry! The angel described himself as a "fellow servant" *of God* with John (cf. Heb. 1:14). Angels, like humans, can only bear witness to ("hold") "the testimony borne by (of) Jesus" (cf. 1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:17; 20:4; 22:9, 20).

"St John's repeated reference to his temptation and the Angel's rebuke (cf. xxii. 8f.) may well be due to his knowledge that such a tendency existed in the Churches to which he wrote."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore the angel directed John to "worship God" (cf. 22:9; Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:10; John 4:21-24; Acts 10:25; Gal. 4:8). To emphasize the centrality of *Jesus Christ* in this revelation, and to encourage the worship of God, the angel said that the "spirit of prophecy" is the "testimony of Jesus."

The last clause of the verse ("for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy") is capable of various interpretations. Some take the genitive "of Jesus" as objective, which yields two possible understandings. Perhaps the angel meant that

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<sup>1</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 454; Alford, 4:725.

<sup>2</sup>Calvin, 1:12:3.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 248.

testimony *about Jesus* is the common substance (underlying theme) of all prophecy, that all prophecy ultimately reveals Him (cf. 6:9; 11:7; 12:11; 17:6).<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, the angel could have meant that the *true spirit* of prophecy *always* manifests itself in specifically "pointing to," or *bearing witness to*, Jesus; prophecy that does not bear witness to Him is false prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

If the genitive is subjective, the angel meant that the testimony *that Jesus has given* (by or from Jesus) is the essence of prophetic proclamation.<sup>3</sup> This last view seems preferable to me, since it affords the best explanation of why John should not worship the angel: Jesus is the *source* of revelation, but angels only communicate it. Moreover, the phrase "of Jesus" in the preceding clause also seems to be subjective. Some interpreters believe that John intended a double meaning: Jesus is both the originator and the subject of true prophecy.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly true, but it may not have been what John meant.

## 2. The return of Christ to earth 19:11-16

"There is general agreement among commentators that this pericope is a description of the return or Parousia of Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

"This paragraph has always seemed to me almost too overwhelmingly glorious for exposition."<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, the return of Jesus Christ to the earth is the climax of all that has gone before in Revelation. On the other, it is the first of seven final things that John saw and recorded. These things are: Christ's return, Satan's capture, Satan's binding, the Millennium, Satan's final end, the last

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<sup>1</sup>Erdman, p. 148; Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1039; David J. MacLeod, "Heaven's Hallelujah Chorus: An Introduction to the Seven 'Last Things' (Rev. 19:1-10)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:621 (January-March 1999):83.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 342; Beasley-Murray, p. 276.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:228.

<sup>5</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1046.

<sup>6</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1518.

judgment, and the new heavens and earth, including the New Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> These events are in chronological sequence, as will become clear. The view that they are non-sequential rests on similarities between Ezekiel 38—39 and Revelation 19—22.<sup>2</sup> But it fails to account for the differences. The chronological progression of events on earth resumes from 16:21. Thomas viewed the Second Coming of Christ, plus everything else through 22:5, as part of the seventh bowl judgment.<sup>3</sup> Most other commentators have seen it as the first event after the seventh bowl judgment. I agree with the majority.

"The second coming of Christ is an absolutely essential theme in New Testament theology. In his cross and resurrection, Christ won a great victory over the powers of evil; by his second coming, he will execute that victory. Apart from his return to purge his creation of evil, redemption remains forever incomplete."<sup>4</sup>

"Those who believe in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must also look for his return."<sup>5</sup>

19:11      John saw another scene in heaven (Gr. *kai eidon*, "And I saw"). He now saw "heaven" standing open (cf. Ezek. 1:1), not just a door open (4:1) or the heavenly temple open (11:19). A "white horse" symbolizes *victory* over one's enemies (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). Here John saw *Christ* ("called Faithful and True"), rather than Antichrist (6:2), riding a white horse (cf. Isa. 62:11). John described Him as "Faithful" (loyal and reliable) and "True" (trustworthy and authentic, the real Messiah; cf. 1:5; 3:7, 14; 3 Macc. 2:11). The Antichrist was *unfaithful*, in that he broke his covenant with Israel, and he was *untrue*, in that he deceived people. Jesus Christ came out of heaven, dramatically and openly presenting Himself to the whole world, to judge the beast and to make war with him on earth (cf. Isa. 11:3-5).

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<sup>1</sup>See David J. MacLeod, *The Seven Last Things*.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, p. 195; and Wall, pp. 227-28.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 381, 567-85.

<sup>4</sup>Ladd, pp. 252-53.

<sup>5</sup>Lilje, p. 244.

19:12 Jesus Christ's "eyes," appearing like "a flame of fire," suggest His piercing and all-knowing judgment of sin, that takes everything into account (cf. 1:14; 2:18). His "many diadems" (Gr. *diadema*, "regal crowns," cf. 12:3; 13:1) symbolize His right to rule the world as King of kings.<sup>1</sup>

"Christ, who refused the diadem when [it was] offered to Him by the Tempter (Mt. iv. 9) was crowned on the merit of His victorious Passion, and now appears wearing not one royal crown alone, but many."<sup>2</sup>

"The crowns upon Christ's head are either His personal glories, or at least in most direct and intimate connection with these."<sup>3</sup>

His *unknown* "name" was not known to John or to anyone else in John's day, but it might become known when Jesus Christ returns (cf. 2:17; Gen. 32:29; Judg. 13:18; Matt. 11:27).

"Throughout the ancient world a name revealed the nature of an individual, who he is and what he is. The unknown name of the Christ comports with the fact that his nature, his relationships to the Father, and even his relationship to humanity, transcend all human understanding."<sup>4</sup>

"It is possible that there is another thought. Those who practiced magic in the first century believed that to know a name gave power over him whose name it was. John may well be saying that no-one has power over Christ. He is supreme. His name is known only to Himself."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Caird, p. 241; Robertson, 6:451-52; David J. MacLeod, "The First 'Last Thing': The Second Coming of Christ (Rev. 19:11-16)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:622 (April-June 1999):213.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 251.

<sup>3</sup>F. W. Grant, *The Crowned Christ*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, pp. 279-80. Cf. Swete, p. 252; Barclay, 2:232.

<sup>5</sup>Leon Morris, p. 230.

- 19:13 The "blood" on His robe is probably symbolizing the blood of His enemies, in view of the context (cf. Isa. 63:2-3). John did not see Christ as the Redeemer in this vision, but as the Warrior and Judge.

"It was inevitable that this older image of God as the divine warrior with blood-soaked garments transposed into the Messiah as divine warrior would be understood as a reference to the death of Christ by both the author and his readers when placed in a Christian context."<sup>1</sup>

As with many of the symbols in this passage, this one is also proleptic, anticipating His victory. The "Word of God" is a familiar title, signifying that Christ is the expression of God's mind and heart (Isa. 49:2; John 1:1, 14; cf. 1 John 1:1; Heb. 1:1). This "word" also includes prophecies about God's purposes (v. 9; 1:2; 17:17). It is the same "word" that brought the worlds into existence as God's active agent (John 1:3; cf. Gen. 1:3, 6, 9; Ps. 33:6; Heb. 4:12). As the title is used here in Revelation, "Word of God" emphasizes the authoritative declaration that results in the destruction of God's enemies rather than the self-revelation of God.<sup>2</sup>

- 19:14 "Armies" mounted on "white horses" will come with Christ.

"As the Lamb, Christ is followed by the saints (17:14); as the heavenly Warrior, he is followed by the angels."<sup>3</sup>

Angels will accompany Jesus Christ at His Second Coming (Matt. 13:41; 16:27; 24:30-31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 2 Thess. 1:7), but it seems unlikely that *they* are the persons on horses. Rather, these "soldiers" seem to be human beings (cf. 17:14; 21:2-7; Zech. 14:5). Their clothing ("fine linen, white and clean") connects them with the Lamb's bride (v. 8).

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1057.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 345.

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, p. 255.

"This heavenly army, unlike their leader, has no swords or spears. They take no part in the action. They wear no armor because, being immortal, they are immune to injury. They are noncombatant supporters of the Messiah as He wages the war single-handedly ..."¹

- 19:15 Christ will "strike down" His enemies with a "word" (verbally executed judgment) that His long, "sharp," tongue-shaped "sword" (Gr. *hromphaia*) symbolizes (cf. 1:16; Isa. 11:4; 49:2; 2 Thess. 2:8). He will destroy His enemies ("the nations") with inflexible *righteousness*, which the "iron" shepherd's "rod"—that will serve as His scepter—pictures (cf. 2:27; 12:5; Ps. 2:9; 45). "Ruling" includes destroying the wicked, not just reigning over the good (Ps. 2:9). Christ will "tread the wine presses," i.e., execute the "fierce wrath of God" Almighty, and "mix" the "wine" that His enemies must drink (cf. v. 13; 14:8, 10, 19-20; 16:19; Isa. 63:1-6). God will judge both Israel, namely Jews living when He returns (Ezek. 20:33-38), and the Gentiles living then (Matt. 25:31-46).
- 19:16 The "robe" is a symbol of *majesty*, and the "thigh" suggests *power*. Evidently the "name" appeared on the part of Christ's robe that covered His thigh, which would be a most conspicuous place on a mounted rider.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation takes the "and" (Gr. *kai*) ascensively, meaning "even," specifying the location of the name more exactly. The title "King of kings" is one that Persian and Parthian rulers ascribed to themselves (cf. Ezra 7:12), but only the Messiah qualifies for it in its true sense (cf. Deut. 10:17; Dan. 4:37 LXX).<sup>3</sup>

People living on earth at the time of the Second Coming will *see* Jesus Christ return (Matt. 24:30). The more important passages on the Second Coming of Christ are: Deuteronomy 30:3; Ps. 2; Isaiah 63:1-6; Daniel 2:44-45; 7:13-14; Matthew 24—25; Mark 13; Luke 21; Acts 1:11; Romans 11:26; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:7—2:12; 2 Peter

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 387.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:235-36.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:468-69; Wall, p. 229.

2:1—3:17; Jude 14-15; and Revelation 1:7; and 19:11-21.<sup>1</sup> What a contrast *this coming* is, with the Lord Jesus' first coming: as a baby, in humility and obscurity, riding a donkey into Jerusalem rather than a horse, coming to *die* rather than to reign!

### **3. The destruction of the wicked on earth 19:17-21**

Beginning at this point and continuing through 21:8, John recorded the defeat of Christ's enemies: the Beast, Satan, the lost of all ages, sin, and death.<sup>2</sup>

19:17 John saw next "an angel standing in the sun," a conspicuous position in which all the birds could see him. He shouted loudly for "all the birds" flying "in midheaven" to "assemble" (cf. Ezek. 39:4, 17). Jesus referred to the same battle, and mentioned "vultures" (or "eagles," Gr. *aetoi*) being present (Matt. 24:28; Luke 17:37). After the coming battle, the site will provide a feast for vultures (cf. Ezek. 39:4, 17-20). It is a "great supper" that God gives them. This is the Battle of Armageddon (16:16). This picture of it stresses the greatness of God's victory over His enemies.<sup>3</sup> The "great supper of God" is not the same event as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (v. 9). The former event will be a scene of great sorrow, but the latter one of great joy.

"John took Ezekiel's prophecies [in 39:4, 17-20] broadly enough to foreshadow both Harmagedon and the final attack on Jerusalem (20:8-9). ... Harmagedon precedes the thousand years and the other battle follows ..."<sup>4</sup>

19:18 The angel's graphic invitation to the birds indicates how devastating the destruction of Christ's enemies will be when He returns. Some experts have estimated that perhaps one

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<sup>1</sup>For a concise review of the major revelation in each of these passages, see John F. Walvoord, "Christ's Coming to Reign," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:491 (July-September 1966):195-203.

<sup>2</sup>Vacendak, 2:1321.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, pp. 255-56; Hughes, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 394.



million birds of prey migrate annually, between their nesting places in Africa to the south, and Europe and Asia to the north. They cross the only arable land bridge that connects these continents, namely, Palestine.

Jesus Christ will destroy all who resist Him, people from all classes of society and from every status in life (cf. 6:15; 13:16). The indignity of having their bodies unburied is a judgment *in kind*, since they did not bury the bodies of the two witnesses (11:9-10; cf. Ezek. 39:11-15). Their death also recalls the ignominious fate of Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37).

The only people left alive will be faithful believers who have not died or suffered martyrdom during the Tribulation (cf. 12:13-17). They will enter the Millennium with mortal bodies and will repopulate the earth (cf. Gen. 9:1).

- 19:19 John now saw another scene on earth: The "beast" at this time will have "10 horns," or allies (17:12-14; cf. Ps. 2:2). Their "armies" will represent the worldwide population of earth-dwellers. These armies will unite to oppose Christ (16:13-16). The battle will be about world leadership. When Jesus Christ returns, the beast's 10 allies, that will have been fighting each other (Ezek. 38:21; Dan. 11:40-44), will unite against Christ (16:14). This is a description of the judgment, previously portrayed proleptically, in 14:14-20. It is surprisingly brief in view of its importance in history. This probably indicates that the battle will not last long (cf. Matt. 24:13-45).

"The Seer is not describing the gradual conquest of evil in the spiritual struggles of the faithful, but a great historic event which brings to an end the Antichrist and his forces and ushers in the long-awaited era of righteousness."<sup>1</sup>

- 19:20 The Lord Jesus Christ will then throw the "beast" and the "false prophet" into the "lake of fire" *alive* (cf. Num. 16:30; Ps. 55:15; 2 Thess. 2:8). The description here of the false prophet ("who performed the signs ... by which he deceived

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 349.

those who had received the mark of the beast") vindicates his punishment. The satanic duo will still be there 1,000 years later (20:10). Therefore, consignment to the Lake of Fire does not mean annihilation. The wicked who have died throughout history are not yet in the Lake of Fire (cf. Matt. 5:22; 10:28; 25:41; Mark 9:43; James 3:6). They are in "Hades" (or "the grave;" cf. Matt. 16:18; Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27), the temporary abode of dead unbelievers, where they are held awaiting their resurrection.

The "Valley of Hinnom," or "Gehenna," was a foreview of the Lake of Fire (cf. 2 Kings 16:3; 23:10; Jer. 7:31-32; 19:6; Matt. 5:22; Mark 9:43). Nor is the Lake of Fire the same as "the abyss," which is a temporary place of confinement for angels (9:1; 20:1). At the end of the Millennium, Christ will cast *all unbelievers* into the Lake of Fire (20:14-15). God originally prepared the Lake of Fire for Satan and his rebel angels (Matt. 25:41).

"Because no one has yet experienced the lake of fire, it is difficult to portray in human language the awful nature of that punishment. The figure of a burning lake is God's chosen imagery for visualizing eternity separated from Him. One should remember that figures of speech are always less than the reality, not more!"<sup>1</sup>

"Brimstone" is a sulphurous material that, united with fire, represents indescribable torment (cf. Gen. 19:24-25; Ezek. 38:22).

"The fact that in the gospels hell is pictured not only as a place of fire but also as a place of darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) suggests that both descriptions use metaphorical language drawn from contemporary Judaism to describe final and irremedial [*sic*] judgment."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 398.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 258.

19:21 "The rest" of Jesus Christ's enemies, the 10 kings and their armies, will die in a moment by His word ("the sword" from His mouth)—and will go to Hades. There they will await resurrection and final judgment at the end of the Millennium (20:11-15). "The rest" probably also includes all unbelieving earth-dwellers still alive then. They had plenty of opportunity to repent but did not do so. How they will die is not clear, but their death proceeds from the mouth of Jesus Christ. Probably "the sword" proceeding from "His mouth" represents a *word of judgment* that He utters. The means that He uses are obscure, as is true of how He created the universe with a word. So many people will die that the birds will have plenty to eat (Ezek. 39:17-20).<sup>1</sup>

"I cannot help believing that this battle is to be taken literally ..." <sup>2</sup>

Some interpreters have seen the Rapture occurring at the same time as the Second Coming (i.e., posttribulationists). However, none of the events John recorded in 19:11-21 correspond to the events predicted to take place at the Rapture (John 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; 1 Thess. 4:15-18). The differences in the descriptions of these two events argue for a pretribulation Rapture.<sup>3</sup>

What is the relationship of the Tribulation to the dispensation of grace? Dispensational writers have suggested several answers. Three of these are the major views. Some have seen the Tribulation as a revival of the dispensation of the law. They believe the dispensation of grace ends at the Rapture.<sup>4</sup> The major problem with this view is that no other dispensation begins again once it has ended.

A second explanation is that the Tribulation is a dispensation itself, occurring after the dispensation of grace. Advocates of this view say the dispensation of grace ends with the Rapture, and the dispensation of the kingdom begins with Christ's Second Coming.<sup>5</sup> Critics of this view point out

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<sup>1</sup>For another exposition of this passage, see David J. MacLeod, "The Second 'Last Thing': The Defeat of Antichrist," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:623 (July-September 1999):325-35.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1518.

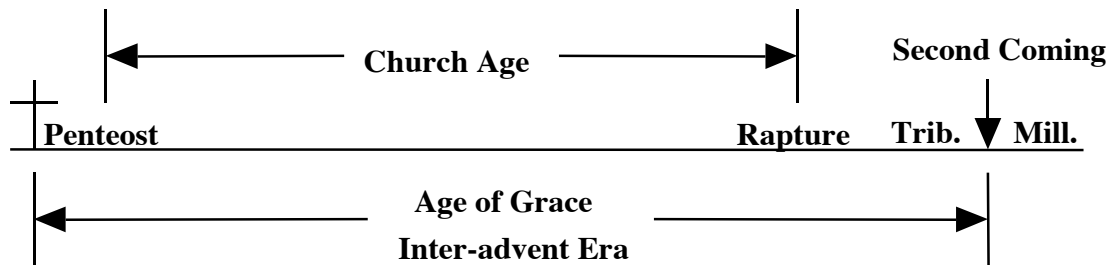
<sup>3</sup>See Feinberg, pp. 80-86.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lewis S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p. 100.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., William Evans, *Outline Study of the Bible*, pp. 30-37.

that the Tribulation does not bear the marks of a full-fledged dispensation. The distinctives of a dispensation include a change in God's basic governmental relationship with humankind, and a consequent change in people's responsibility to God.

A third view is that the Tribulation occurs within, and at the end of, the dispensation of grace.<sup>1</sup> All other dispensations also end with human failure and divine judgment. The Tribulation is the period of divine judgment following believers' failure to fulfill God's will during the *inter-advent era* (i.e., the dispensation of grace). The Church Age is only *a part of* this inter-advent era, since it began on the day of Pentecost and will end with the Rapture. This view seems to me to offer the best explanation. It views the dispensation of grace as identical with the inter-advent era, rather than with the Church Age.



#### M. THE MILLENNIAL REIGN OF CHRIST CH. 20

John now recorded his vision of Jesus Christ's 1,000-year reign on earth, in order to inform his readers of what would take place after He returns to the earth.

"... it is usually assumed that the millennial reign of Christ occurs on the *earth*."<sup>2</sup>

"Few verses in the Bible are more crucial to the interpretation of the Bible as a whole than the opening verses in Revelation 20."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 475; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 56-57; idem, *Dispensationalism*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1084.

<sup>3</sup>John F. Walvoord, "The Theological Significance of Revelation 20:1-6," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, p. 227.

Many other passages in Scripture indicate that a reign of peace and righteousness on earth will follow the Second Coming (Ps. 2; 24; 72; 96; Isa. 2; 9:6-7; 11-12; 63:1-6; 65-66; Jer. 23:5-6; 30:8-11; Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-8; Zeph. 3:14-20; Zech. 8:1-8; 14:1-9; Matt. 19:28; 25:31-46; Acts 15:16-18; Rom. 11:25-27; Jude 14-15; Rev. 2:25-28).

"The New Testament does not dwell on the doctrine of the Millennium, though one chapter is devoted to it (Rev. 20). The Millennium is the theme of so many Old Testament prophecies that this truth did not need to be repeated."<sup>1</sup>

It seems clear that chapter 20 describes what will follow chapter 19 in chronological sequence.<sup>2</sup> Many amillennialists view 20:1-10 as a recapitulation of 19:11-21.<sup>3</sup> Most amillennialists believe 20:1-6 describes the course of the Church Age.<sup>4</sup>

"There are a number of theological positions that are keyed to this passage: *amillennialism* holds that the thousand-year reign of Christ is a symbol for the period of the Christian church (Augustine; Roman Catholic; Reformed; Presbyterian); *postmillennialism* holds that the kingdom of Christ is a reality in the hearts of Christians and that the conversion of all nations will occur before the return of Christ, though the term 'thousand years' refers to the quality of life and not to a literal length of time (Lutheran); *premillennialism* holds that the return of Christ will occur before the beginning of the millennium, which is understood as a literal period of a thousand years (Dispensationalism)."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., *Major Bible Prophecies*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup>See Harold W. Hoehner, "Evidence from Revelation 20," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, pp. 235-62; Charles E. Powell, "Progression versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:649 (January-March 2006):94-109.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., R. Fowler White, "Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989):319-44; idem, "Making Sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:4 (December 1994):539-51; and Dave Mathewson, "A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1-6: Consummation and Recapitulation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:2 (June 2001):237-51..

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 972.

<sup>5</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1089.

Evidently Jesus Christ will begin to reign almost immediately after He returns to the earth.

"... we may note that the ancient church down to the time of Augustine (354-430) (though not without minor exceptions) unquestionably held to the teaching of an earthly, historical reign of peace that was to follow the defeat of Antichrist and the physical resurrection of the saints but precede both the judgment and the new creation ..."<sup>1</sup>

Mounce, who believed that the Millennium will be an earthly reign of Christ following the Second Coming, held an unusual view of this period.

"The millennium is not, for John, the messianic age foretold by the prophets of the OT, but a special reward for those who have paid with their lives the price of faithful opposition to the idolatrous claims of Antichrist. ...

"In short, John taught a literal millennium, but its essential meaning may be realized in something other than a temporal fulfillment."<sup>2</sup>

It is quite common, unfortunately, for preachers of this passage to refrain from taking a position on the Millennium, as the following quotation illustrates:

"Brothers and sisters in Christ can hold any view of this mini-arena of Christ; what is important is that Jesus returns in all."<sup>3</sup>

### **1. The binding of Satan 20:1-3**

20:1      The first word, "And" or "Then," supports the idea of chronological sequence. It implies a continuation from the things (Armageddon and the Second Coming) that John had

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, p. 578. See Mounce, pp. 358-59; Erdman, pp. 154-62; and especially Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, for much evidence to support this statement.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 359.

<sup>3</sup>Wright, p. 330.

just revealed (cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22). Amillennial interpreters disagree.<sup>1</sup>

"John says nothing to place this chapter in the time sequence."<sup>2</sup>

It is logical that, having judged the beast and the false prophet (19:20), Jesus Christ should next deal with Satan. God assigned "an angel" to bind Satan. Previously God had cast Satan out of heaven (12:9), and now He cast him out of the earth. This is the end of Satan's "short time" in which God allowed him to spread havoc on the earth (12:12). This angel had already been given "the key to (of) the abyss" (cf. 9:1-2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; Luke 8:31; Rom. 10:7).

The binding of Satan is real, though the "chain" must be figurative, since it is impossible to bind spirit beings with physical chains (cf. 9:14). Though Jesus Christ defeated Satan at the Cross (Luke 10:18; John 12:31; 16:11), He did not *bind* him then, nor will He bind him until the beginning of the Millennium. Presently Satan has considerable freedom to attack God's people and oppose His work (cf. 2:13; 3:9; Eph. 2:2; 6:10-18; 1 Pet. 5:8).

20:2 Four titles occurring in this same verse make the identity of the bound creature certain: "The dragon" is his most frequent name in Revelation (12:3, 4, 7, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13). This title alludes to "the serpent of old" (cf. Gen. 3). This is an *anacoluthon*, a parenthetical reference (cf. 1:5; et al.)<sup>3</sup> "The devil" (v. 10; 2:10; 12:9, 12) and "Satan" (2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9) are his more common biblical names.

There is no reason to take this thousand-year time period as symbolic, as amillennialists do.<sup>4</sup> All the other numbers in Revelation make sense if we interpret them literally, and this

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 974-83.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, p. 235. Jack Deere answered this objection very effectively in "Premillennialism in Revelation 20:4-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:537 (January-March 1978):60-62. Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 404-5, is also helpful here.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:257.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 568-90.

one does too. It is impossible to prove that any number in Revelation is only symbolic.<sup>1</sup> The repetition of this number six times, in this pericope, stresses the length of Satan's confinement. God did not reveal the *length* of the Millennium (from the Latin *mille*, thousand, and *annum* year) before now. Neither did He reveal many other details about the future before He gave John these visions (cf. 17:5).

"The millennial reign on earth does not rest on an isolated passage of the Apocalypse, but all Old Testament prophecy goes on the same view (cf. Isa. 4:3; 11:9; 35:8)."<sup>2</sup>

After referring to Psalm 50:10 and Job 9:3, where 1,000 is used in a nonliteral way, Barclay concluded:

"Quite plainly a thousand is simply used to describe a very large number or a very long time."<sup>3</sup>

He made the mistake of assuming that, because it was used in a nonliteral way in those passages, we should take it in a symbolic way here. Morris offered the following reason for taking the thousand years as symbolic.

"One thousand is the cube of ten, the number of completeness. We have seen it used over and over again in this book to denote completeness of some sort, and this is surely the way we should take it here. Satan is bound for the perfect period."<sup>4</sup>

Morris acknowledged that God will release Satan at the end of this period (v. 8).<sup>5</sup> To him, the thousand-year reign is a reign of martyrs in heaven that has no relation to the Second

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 269; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 295; Hoehner, p. 249.

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1584.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:245.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Morris, p. 235. Cf. Lenski, p. 572; Vern S. Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36:1 (March 1993):41-54.

<sup>5</sup>Leon Morris, p. 236.



Advent.<sup>1</sup> However, there is no reason in the text or context to assume that we should interpret 1,000 symbolically. In fact, in view of the other numbers in this book, we would expect another literal number here.

"If 1,000 is a symbol, what about 7,000 (11:13), 12,000 (7:5), or 144,000 (7:4)? Are these symbols also? If 1,000 years is a symbolic term, what about 5 months (9:10), 42 months (11:2), and 1,260 days (11:3)? To ask these questions is to show the absurdity of regarding the numbers as figurative, for on what ground could one consistently hold that one, 1,000, is figurative, and the others, including where multiples of 1,000 are used, are literal?"<sup>2</sup>

"If the term 'a thousand years' designates a nonspecific but long period of time, the present Age between Christ's two advents, as amillenarians hold, then one would expect John to say simply that Christ would reign 'a long time,' in contrast to the 'short time' of Satan's release (20:3)."<sup>3</sup>

Amillennialist Lenski believed that the binding of Satan took place when Jesus died on the cross.<sup>4</sup> That event began the millennium, which he viewed symbolically as the present era.

"So the 1,000 years are the complete New Testament era."<sup>5</sup>

Since the cross, Lenski believed, Satan has been confined and restricted.<sup>6</sup> But he also believed that "The Messiah will return in glory and usher in this millennial period of glory."<sup>7</sup> So, it

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 234, 237.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 269. See also McClain, pp. 493-95.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 980-81.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 574-75.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 568.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 571.

seems, he believed in *two* "millenniums": the present age (between the Lord's death and His Second Coming) and the eternal state.

20:3 The angel will *throw* Satan "into the abyss," and then "shut" and *seal* the opening to it—to guarantee that he will not escape (cf. Dan. 6:17; Matt. 27:66). This action assures his confinement, but it does not specify that he will suffer otherwise. Satan will not have access to the earth, but will be confined in "the abyss" (bottomless pit, 9:1-2; 11:7; 13:4, 7; 17:8) throughout the Millennium. His confinement will preclude his deceiving the nations, which he had been doing (13:14; 16:13-14).

"Is this a literal transaction? Certainly it is. The battle is literal; the taking of the Beast and the False Prophet is literal; the slaying of the kings and their armies is literal; Satan is literal; and his binding must be equally literal."<sup>1</sup>

"The nations" in view are *people* who will be the descendants of mortal believers who did not die during the Great Tribulation, but lived on into the Millennium (11:13; 12:13-17). All unbelievers will evidently be destroyed when Christ returns to the earth (19:19-21). Life spans will be much longer in the Millennium (Isa. 65:20), so the earth's population will increase rapidly, as was the case before the Flood.

The *children* who are born during the Millennium will need to believe on Jesus Christ for salvation, but some of them will not do so. This large group of people, born throughout the 1,000 year period, will likely constitute the unbelievers whom Satan leads in rebellion at the end of the Millennium (vv. 8-9). God will release Satan, out of divine necessity (Gr. *dei*), in order to fulfill His plans after the thousand years. White argued that the epic ideology, of victory over the dragon followed by house-building, constitutes a fundamental hermeneutical paradigm

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 446.

for the historical-grammatical, yet non-literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3.<sup>1</sup>

"The final answer as to why God sees this as a necessity with its fruition in another rebellion is hidden in the counsels of God (cf. 1:1; 4:1; Isa. 55:8; Mark 8:31; 13:7; Luke 24:26, 44) ... Yet one purpose may be a partial answer. Through his release the whole universe will see that after the thousand years of his imprisonment and an ideal reign on earth, Satan is incurably wicked and men's hearts are still perverse enough to allow him to gather an army of such an immense size."<sup>2</sup>

"Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Cyprian, among the earliest Fathers, all held the doctrine of a millennial kingdom on earth; not till millennial views degenerated into gross carnalism was this doctrine abandoned."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The resurrection of tribulation martyrs 20:4-6

"... it is not difficult to see why the early church understood John to be teaching a millennium in Revelation 20. Three arguments support this interpretation: (1) the teaching of two resurrections, (2) the binding of Satan, and (3) the ruling of the saints with Christ."<sup>4</sup>

20:4      John saw a new scene. The purpose of the "thrones" that John saw was twofold: ruling and judging (cf. Dan. 7:9-10, 22; Matt. 19:28). Those sitting on them are probably the faithful

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<sup>1</sup>R. Fowler White, "On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Rev 20:1-3: A Preconsummationist [i.e., Amillennialist] Perspective," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42:1 (March 1999):53-66.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 411. See also David J. MacLeod, "The Third 'Last Thing': The Binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1-3)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:624 (October-December 1999):469-86.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1583.

<sup>4</sup>Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 274. See also Ford, *Revelation*, p. 350; and David J. MacLeod, "The Fourth 'Last Thing': The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev. 20:4-6)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:625 (January-March 2000):44-67.

raptured saints who have returned with Christ to the earth (19:7-8, 14, 19; cf. 2:26-28; 3:12, 21).<sup>1</sup> Other views are, that they are: either the 24 elders viewed as representatives of the church,<sup>2</sup> the Tribulation saints,<sup>3</sup> or the apostles and perhaps some other saints.<sup>4</sup> They will receive authority from God to take charge of the earth ("judgment was given to them"), the beast's domain, under Christ's rule.

John also saw "the souls" of some people not yet resurrected ("those who had been beheaded ... who had not worshiped the beast"). These are quite clearly Tribulation martyrs, who died because they held steadfastly to "the testimony of Jesus" and the "word of God" (cf. 6:9; 12:17; 18:24; 19:2).<sup>5</sup> They had refused to take "the mark" of the beast, or to worship "his image," and had died for their faith (13:15). John saw these martyrs come back to life; that is, they experienced bodily resurrection (cf. v. 5; 1:18, 2:8; 13:14; John 11:25; Acts 1:3; 9:41).<sup>6</sup> As a reward for their martyrdom, these martyrs will reign with Christ on earth during the Millennium (cf. 5:10). The name "Christ" (Anointed One) looks back to Psalm 2:2 here, as it does wherever it occurs in Revelation (11:15; 12:10; 20:6), tying this reign to Old Testament expectations of God's kingdom on earth.

"They who were once judged by earth's courts to be worthy of death are now the judges of the earth under Christ."<sup>7</sup>

Posttribulationist Moo wrote the following, summarizing his study of this verse:

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, pp. 457-58; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 414.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 270; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 296.

<sup>3</sup>Charles, 2:182-83; Caird, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 261; Beasley-Murray, p. 293; Beale, p. 991.

<sup>5</sup>Ladd, p. 263; Herman Hoeksema, "The Reign of the Saints," *The Researcher* 20:4 (Winter 1990):20-21.

<sup>6</sup>See Richard S. Yates, "The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:652 (October-December 2006):453-66.

<sup>7</sup>Johnson, p. 582.

"For these reasons, it is probable that Revelation 20:4 depicts the resurrection of all the righteous dead—including church saints. Since the Rapture occurs at the same time as this resurrection, and the first resurrection is clearly posttribulational, the Rapture must also be considered posttribulational."<sup>1</sup>

Many amillennialists believe this reign of Christ refers to His *spiritual* reign over the hearts of His people, or to the triumph of the martyrs but in a symbolic sense of their reigning. There are four good reasons why Jesus Christ's reign will be a physical, earthly reign rather than a spiritual, heavenly one: First, Christ will be on earth after He returns (19:11-16). Second, at the end of His reign, the saints, who have reigned with Him, will still be on the earth (v. 9). Third, God promised the saints an earthly reign (5:10). Fourth, the Old Testament messianic prophecies anticipated an earthly kingdom (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:10-16; Ps. 2:8; Isa. 65:17—66:24; Dan. 7:27; et al.).

"From the late first century until the time of Augustine in the fourth century, some form of premillennial expectation of Jesus' return was either the dominant view or was held by a number of prominent leaders and theologians."<sup>2</sup>

In the article just cited, House went on to list the following early church fathers who held some form of Premillennialism: Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Papias, Ignatius, the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Commodianus, Victorinus, Lactantius, and Methodius. Aune added Melito.<sup>3</sup>

"The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [before the council of Nicea in A.D. 325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is, the belief of a visible reign

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<sup>1</sup>Moo, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>H. Wayne House, "Premillennialism in the Ante-Nicene Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):271.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1089.

of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment."<sup>1</sup>

Calvin's comments about this period are curious. He responded to the chiliasts, or to a variation of chiliastic teaching that he knew, as follows:

"But a little later there followed the chiliasts, who limited the reign of Christ to a thousand years. Now their fiction is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation. And the Apocalypse, from which they undoubtedly drew a pretext for their error, does not support them. For the number 'one thousand' does not apply to the eternal blessedness of the church but only to the various disturbances that awaited the church, while still toiling on earth."<sup>2</sup>

20:5      The "rest of the dead" evidently refers to *the wicked* who are physically dead, whom God will raise at the end of the Millennium (v. 12).

The "first" resurrection refers to the first of the two resurrections John spoke of in the entire passage's context (vv. 4-6, 12). This includes the resurrection of the Tribulation martyrs at the Second Coming of Christ (v. 4), plus other believers resurrected at the same time (i.e., Old Testament saints; Dan. 12:2; John 5:28; cf. 1 Cor. 15:23). The second resurrection in this passage is the resurrection of the wicked at the end of the Millennium (vv. 12-13).<sup>3</sup>

Other names for this "first" resurrection are: the "resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:14; Acts 24:15), the "resurrection from among the dead" (Luke 20:34-36), the "resurrection of life" (John 5:29), and the "resurrection to everlasting life" (Dan. 12:2). This verse clearly opposes the view that there is only

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<sup>1</sup>Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church*, 2:482. Schaff was not a Premillennialist.

<sup>2</sup>Calvin, 3:25:5.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 273.

one resurrection at the end of history, which amillennialists and postmillennialists prefer.<sup>1</sup>

The "first" resurrection cannot be first in temporal sequence, since God has already resurrected Jesus Christ (Matt. 27:52-53). Furthermore, Christians will have experienced resurrection in the Rapture by this time (1 Thess. 4:16). Various groups of the righteous will experience resurrection at various times. However, God will raise all the wicked at one time, namely, at the end of the Millennium (vv. 12-13).

The occurrences when God will raise the righteous are as follows: First, He raised Jesus Christ who is the "first fruits" of those who sleep (1 Cor. 15:23). Second, He raised some saints near Jerusalem shortly after Jesus' resurrection (Matt. 27:52-53), though this was probably a *temporary* "resurrection" like that of Lazarus.

Third, He will raise Christians at the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Fourth, He will raise the two witnesses during the Great Tribulation (11:3, 11). Fifth, He will raise the Tribulation martyrs at the beginning of the Millennium (vv. 4-5). Sixth, He will raise the Old Testament saints at the same time (Isa. 26:19-21; Ezek. 37:12-14; Dan. 12:2-4).

Seventh, He will apparently raise the saints who die during the Millennium (cf. vv. 12-13). The idea that the resurrection of believers takes place in stages also finds support in 1 Corinthians 15:23. Many premillennialists believe that the first resurrection refers to the resurrection of the righteous, and the second resurrection refers to the resurrection of the unrighteous.<sup>2</sup>

Historic amillennialists usually take the first resurrection as a reference to spiritual regeneration (i.e., salvation). They believe the second resurrection describes a general physical resurrection of all the dead at the end of time. This view takes

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 588.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Roy Aldrich, "Divisions of the First Resurrection," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:510 (April-June 1971):117-19; and Newell, p. 330.

"resurrection" figuratively in one case, but literally in the other.<sup>1</sup>

"If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned ... the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave;—then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to any thing. If the first resurrection is spiritual, then so is the second ..."<sup>2</sup>

20:6 Revelation's fifth beatitude, here in this verse, reveals that those who participate in the "first resurrection" are "blessed and holy." The "second death" is a final, eternal death beyond this earthly life, that takes place after physical death (cf. v. 14; 2:11; 21:8). It involves death of the soul (whole person) as well as the body (Matt. 10:28). Specifically, the first resurrection involves deliverance from the Lake of Fire.

Those who participate in the first resurrection are further blessed because they will be "priests of God" and "of Christ," and they "will reign with Christ (Him) for 1,000 years." These priests will apparently have unlimited access to, and intimate fellowship with, God. Exactly how they will reign remains to be seen, though the extent of their authority under Christ seems proportionate to their previous faithfulness (cf. Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27).

Note that many of the promises to the overcomers in the letters to the seven churches find their fulfillment in the Millennium (cf. 2:11 with 20:6; 2:26-27 with 20:4; 3:5 with 20:12, 15; and 3:21 with 20:4). This verse seems to indicate that the rewards Christians receive from the Lord at the judgment seat will also entail serving and reigning under Him in the Millennium (cf. Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27) and beyond (22:3, 5).

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<sup>1</sup>See McClain, pp. 488-91, for arguments against this view.

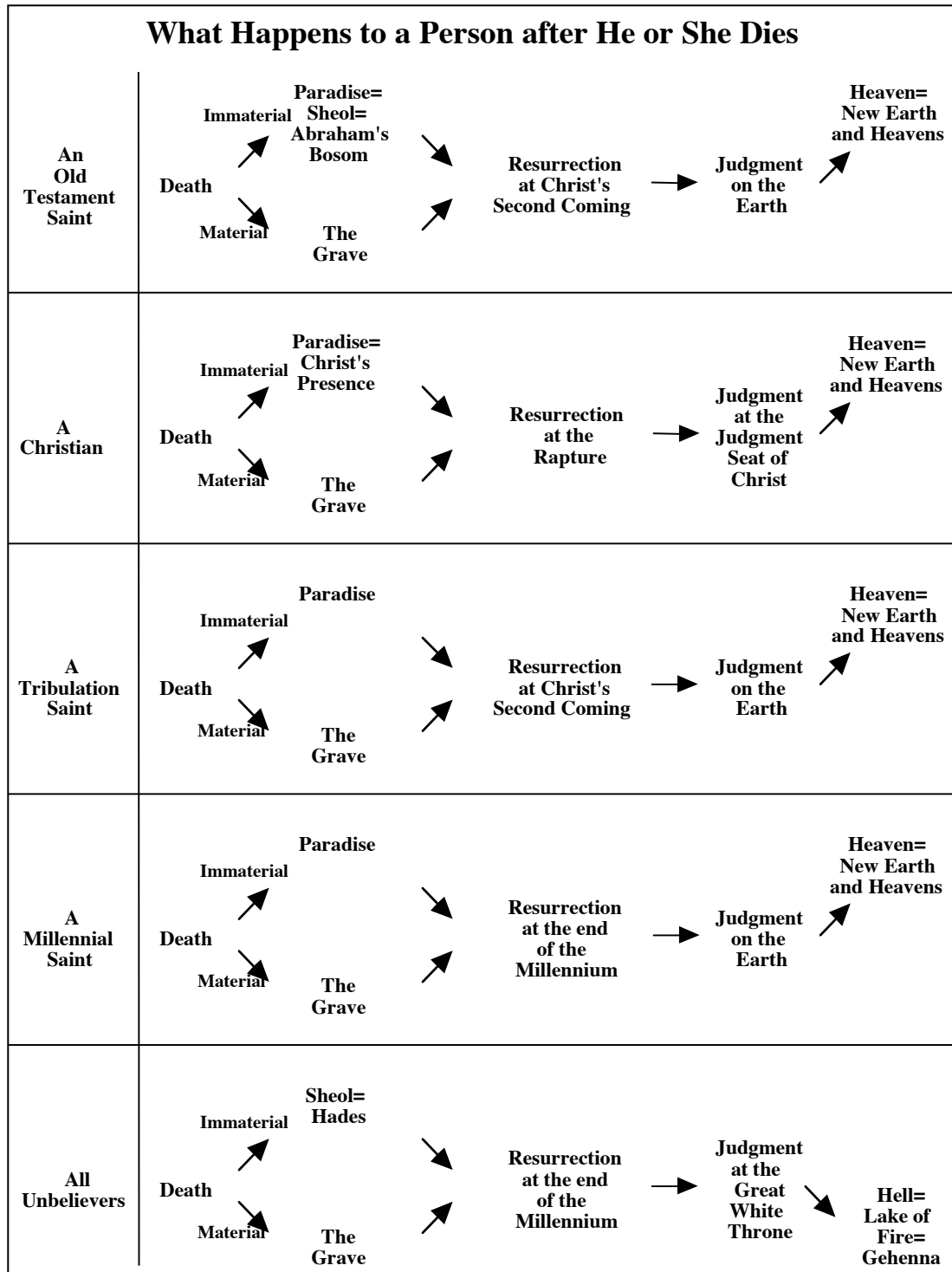
<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:732.



"The Scriptures say very little about what we will do in heaven. But the Bible does say that Christians will reign with Christ in the administration of the millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:6) It also speaks of Christians reigning with Christ in eternity (22:5). Apparently Christians will be given spheres of authority in God's government both in the Millennium and in the eternal state. These spheres of service will relate to how well we have served Christ in this life."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John F. Walvoord, *End Times*, p. 57.



The phrase "a thousand years" occurs six times in this chapter (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). Since God revealed that events will occur both before and after Christ's thousand-year reign, we should interpret this number literally (cf. 11:2, 3; 12:6; 13:5; 20:3). John specifically located this reign—yet future—in this verse.

This is a strong argument against interpreting it simply as Jesus Christ's present reign in human hearts, or His reign throughout eternity, as many amillennialists do.

*"As the Church began at Christ's ascension, so the kingdom shall begin at His second advent."*<sup>1</sup>

John gave us no information here regarding what life will be like on earth during the Millennium, but many Old Testament passages provide this revelation.<sup>2</sup> The main point here seems to be that the Millennium will directly follow Jesus Christ's Second Coming, the main event in the Book of Revelation.

There are three major schools of interpretation that deal with millennial prophecies: First, amillennialists interpret the Millennium figuratively, and believe it does not correspond to any specific era. Some of them teach that it refers to Jesus Christ's rule in the hearts of His people *presently* living on earth. For example, Arthur Lewis wrote that the "Millennium" of chapter 20 is *not* a perfect state, but that the "future messianic kingdom" *is* a perfect state. Therefore, according to Lewis, the "Millennium" of chapter 20 cannot be the future messianic kingdom, but rather it is the present age. He equated the "kingdom age" with the Eternal State of chapters 21 and 22.<sup>3</sup> Other amillennialists teach that the Millennium refers to Christ's rule over His people in heaven throughout eternity. Berkouwer articulated the view of many amillennialists regarding this pericope:

"This vision is not a narrative account of a future earthly reign of peace at all, but is the apocalyptic unveiling of the reality of salvation in Christ as a backdrop to the reality of the suffering and martyrdom that still continue as long as the dominion of Christ remains hidden."<sup>4</sup>

Postmillennialists, who comprise the second school, hold that Christ will return *after* the Millennium. Some of them believe we should interpret the

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1584.

<sup>2</sup>See John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 296-323, for a full discussion of government, spiritual life, social, economic, and physical aspects of the Millennium.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur H. Lewis, *The Dark Side of the Millennium: The Problem of Evil in Revelation 20:1-10*. For a good critique of this book, see Jeffrey L. Townsend, "Is the Present Age the Millennium?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140:559 (July-September 1983):206-24.

<sup>4</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, p. 307.

thousand-year reign of Christ figuratively, as referring to the present age in which we live. Others believe it is a literal thousand-year period yet future. Postmillennialism has not been very popular since the First World War. Since then, it has become increasingly clear to most people that the world is not getting better and better, but worse and worse. While there has been progress in many areas of life, it seems clear that worldwide peace, and the other millennial conditions that the prophets described, will never come without divine intervention that will change the course of history. Postmillennialism teaches that world peace and all the millennial conditions will *precede* the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The Christian Reconstruction Movement is postmillennial, as are the Emerging and Emergent Church Movements.<sup>1</sup>

Premillennialists, the third school, take the revelation in these passages more literally, as a description of events that will proceed *chronologically*, in precise order. We believe the Second Coming will precede a literal, earthly, millennial reign of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Among premillennialists there are two main groups: "Historic premillennialists" (covenant premillennialists) believe that God will fulfill His promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; et al.) through the *spiritual* seed of Abraham, namely believers, whom the Old Testament writers called "Israel" and the New Testament writers called "the church." "Dispensational premillennialists," the second premillennialist group, believe that God will fulfill His promises to Abraham through the *physical* seed of Abraham, namely the Jewish people, whom the writers of both testaments referred to as "Israel."

Jesus Christ's earthly reign will be the fulfillment of many prophecies in the Old Testament predicting the reign of a completely faithful descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:10-16; et al.). God promised David that one of his descendants would reign over the Israelites forever, that *His* kingdom would have no end. Most dispensationalists have believed that this reign will begin after Jesus Christ returns to earth at His Second Coming, and that it will continue through the Millennium and on into eternity—forever. We believe, that since David's kingdom was an earthly kingdom, and since David and

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<sup>1</sup>See Gary E. Gilley, "The Kingdom of Emergent Theology," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow & Beyond*, pp. 419-35.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on these views, see Walvoord, *The Millennial ...*, pp. 263-75, idem, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 282-90; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 476-94. See also the diagram of premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism at the end of my comments on chapter 6 in these notes.

his successors ruled on the earth, the coming fulfillment of Davidic kingdom promises will take place *on the earth*.

Progressive dispensationalists, on the other hand, believe that Jesus' rule as David's successor began when He ascended into heaven, following His resurrection, and that it will move to earth at the Second Coming—and will continue throughout eternity. They view the promised Davidic kingdom as having *heavenly* (already happened) and *earthly* (not yet happened) stages. Almost all dispensationalists believe that what is in effect now is some form of God's kingdom program (cf. Matt. 13). The difference of opinion is over whether the present form of the kingdom, the church, is a stage of the Davidic Kingdom or distinct from it.

### 3. The final judgment of Satan 20:7-10

20:7 At the end of the Millennium, God will "release" Satan from the abyss ("his prison"; cf. 1 Pet. 3:19). Two reasons are implied in the text: to demonstrate the incorrigibility of Satan, and to demonstrate the depravity of humanity.<sup>1</sup> God may use an angelic agent for this purpose (cf. vv. 1-3).

20:8 The devil will then resume his former work of *deceiving* "the nations" (v. 3) into thinking they will be better off submitting to his authority than to Jesus Christ's (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). He will eventually gather innumerable soldiers ("like the sand of the seashore") from all parts of the world to fight against Jesus Christ (cf. 7:1; Isa. 11:2; Ezek. 38:3-6; 39:1-2).

"At the close of the Millennium, Satan will be released from the pit and permitted to lead one last revolt against the Lord. Why? As final proof that the heart of man is desperately wicked and can be changed only by God's grace [cf. Jer. 17:9]. Imagine the tragedy of this revolt: people who have been living in a perfect environment, under the perfect government of God's Son, will

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<sup>1</sup>See David J. MacLeod, "The Fifth 'Last Thing': The Release of Satan and Man's Final Rebellion (Rev. 20:7-10)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:626 (April-June 2000):204-5.

finally admit the truth [that they hate Him] and rebel against the King! ...

"In one sense, the millennial kingdom will 'sum up' all that God has said about the heart of man during the various periods of history [dispensations]. It will be a reign of law, and yet law will not change man's sinful heart. Man will still revolt against God [cf. Gen. 2:16-17]. The Millennium will be a period of peace and perfect environment, a time when disobedience will be judged swiftly and with justice; and yet in the end the subjects of the King will follow Satan and rebel against the Lord. A perfect environment cannot produce a perfect heart."<sup>1</sup>

The people who follow Satan in this rebellion will evidently be those who have not trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior during the Millennium. Even though everyone will know who Jesus Christ is during the Millennium (Jer. 31:33-34), not everyone will trust in Him as Savior. Only believers will enter the Millennium, but everyone born during that time will need to trust Christ and be "born again" to experience eternal salvation.

The phrase "Gog and Magog" (v. 8) evidently refers to the world's rulers and nations in rebellion against God. "Gog," the ruler, and "Magog," his land, probably have symbolic significance as well as a literal meaning, much as Babylon does, and they signify Messiah's enemies. People will come from all over the world to rebel against Christ (Ezek. 38:3-6). It seems quite clear that the total invasion by Gog, described in Ezekiel 38 and 39, is not in view here, though part of it is. One phase of the invasion will evidently occur at the end of the Tribulation (cf. 19:17-21).

Similarly, Revelation chapters 17 and 18, that record the destruction of Babylon, allude to Isaiah 21 and Jeremiah 51, which record both future and eschatological destructions of

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:620.

Babylon. In view of its description in Ezekiel, Gog's invasion of the Promised Land finds fulfillment in two events. In Revelation 20, we see a worldwide rebellion at the end of the Millennium. The Battle of Armageddon (cf. 16:14) will be a similar, earlier, and limited fulfillment.

"That rebellion of the godless forces from the north will have made such an impression on mankind that after one thousand years, that last rebellion of man bears the same label—Gog and Magog.

"We have passed through a similar situation in this century. World War I was so devastating that when war broke out in Europe, involving many of the same nations and even more, it was also labeled a World War, but it was differentiated by the number two."<sup>1</sup>

Amillennialist Meredith Klein argued that "Har Magedon" is "Mount Zion," that the battle in 20:7-10 is the one described in Ezekiel 38—39, and that the Battle of Gog and Magog is the same as the Battle of Armageddon in 16:12-16.<sup>2</sup>

20:9 The rebels will occupy Palestine ("the broad plain;" cf. Ezek. 38:9, 11-12, 15-16; 39:2). This probably refers to the Plain of Jezreel in northern Israel (cf. Ezek. 11-16). However, topographical changes will precede and accompany Christ's Second Coming, so the location of this plain may not be exactly identifiable then. The rebels will also surround the dwelling place ("camp") of believers, even the earthly city of Jerusalem. This city will be Christ's capital during the Millennium (Jer. 3:17; cf. Isa. 24:23; Ezek. 43:7; Mic. 4:7; Zech. 14:9-11), the center of the world (Ezek. 38:12). Nevertheless, God will destroy the rebels with "fire ... from heaven" (cf. Gen. 19:24; Lev. 10:2; 2 Kings 1:10, 12; Ezek. 38:22; 39:6; Luke 9:54).

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1058.

<sup>2</sup>Meredith G. Kline, "Har Magedon: The End of the Millennium," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:2 (June 1996):207-22. Cf. C. C. Torrey, "Armageddon," *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938):237-48.

John described the destiny of these mortal rebels in verses 12-15.

Many less literal interpreters understand this verse as a description of the church's final victory over her enemies. They usually equate this city with the New Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

20:10 Then God, perhaps using an unnamed agent, will cast Satan, the deceiver, into "the lake of fire" that He previously prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). The fact that the "beast" and the "false prophet" are still there a thousand years later shows that this is a place of conscious torment, not annihilation (19:20).<sup>2</sup> However, "tormented" should not be understood to mean "tortured." Satan is a spirit being, so he cannot experience physical torture. Furthermore, "death" is cast into this lake, so it cannot be a literal lake. "The lake of fire" is a figure of speech for judgment, not a literal burning.<sup>3</sup>

The "Gog" (world ruler) of the former invasion of Palestine (19:17-21) is "the beast." The Lake of Fire is a place of eternal judgment: "day and night forever and ever." This will be Satan's final abode, and this judgment will constitute the ultimate bruising of his head (cf. Gen. 3:15; John 12:31).

"It is hard for humans to conceive of how literal fire can bring torture to nonphysical beings, but the reality of unbearable pain inflicted on Satan is unquestionable. However the Bible may speak of that future punishment—whether as the lake of fire, outer darkness (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28), a never-dying worm and unquenchable fire (Mark 9:48), or fire and brimstone—it presents a picture of mental agony and corporeal suffering combined in

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Swete, pp. 268-69; and Beale, pp. 1025-28.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 1100.

<sup>3</sup>See Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, p. 185.



proportion to the guilt of those who have sinned  
(Luke 12:47-48) ..."<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. The judgment of the wicked 20:11-15

20:11 This "And I saw" introduces something else John saw in this vision (cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 12; 21:1, 2). The continuation of chronological progression seems clear from the continued use of "And" to introduce new information. Almost every verse in this chapter begins with "And."

The "great white throne" John saw seems to be different from the thrones he referred to earlier in this chapter (v. 4). It is evidently *God's throne in heaven* (cf. 4:2; 5:7; Dan. 7:9; Ezek. 1:26-28). It is "great" because it is God's throne, and because it is the seat of this last judgment. Its *whiteness* suggests that the verdicts that proceed from it are pure, holy, and righteous (cf. Ps. 97:2; Dan. 7:9). The *judgment* described here is the last in a number of future judgments (cf. vv. 4-5; Matt. 25:31-46; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The One sitting on this throne ("Him who sat upon it") is God. This is probably a general reference to both the Father and to Jesus Christ, since both of them will judge in the final judgments (cf. 3:21; 4:2-3, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5; 22:1, 3, 12; Dan. 7:9-10; John 5:22-23, 26-27; 8:16; 10:30; Heb. 1:3).

John saw "earth and heaven" *flee* from God's presence (cf. Ps. 114:3, 7). This seems to indicate that we have come to the end of His dealings with this earth as we know it (cf. 2 Pet. 3:7, 10-12). The flight of the present earth and heaven from God's presence strengthens the description of Him as the ultimate Judge. Some believe that God will destroy the present heavens and earth and create completely new ones (cf. Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33; 2 Peter. 3:10-13).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 426. See also Pache, *The Future ...*, ch. 15: "Hell," pp. 279-325.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 982, 983.

Others believe that He will renovate the present heavens and earth.

20:12 "The dead" before this throne are mainly the *unsaved* of all time who then will stand trial, having been resurrected (v. 5; Dan. 12:2). They come from all classes and groups of humanity ("the great and the small"). The "books" contain a record of their "deeds" (cf. Deut. 32:34; Ps. 56:8; Isa. 65:6; Dan. 7:10; Mal. 3:16; Matt. 12:37). The "book of life" contains the names of God's elect (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27; Isa. 4:3; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). God will condemn unbelievers, raised to face this judgment, based on their works ("deeds"), including their failure to believe in Jesus Christ (John 6:29). Since He will evaluate ("judge") their deeds, there seems to be a difference in degrees of punishment, just as there will be differences in rewards for believers (cf. Matt. 11:20-24).

"The teaching of judgment by works runs throughout both the OT and the NT."<sup>1</sup>

There is no revelation about what will happen to *mortal believers* who are alive at the end of the Millennium. Perhaps Satan and his followers will kill them all before God judges the rebels. Another possibility is that they will live through this rebellion, and that God will give them immortal bodies with which they will be able to enter the new earth.

Neither is there information about the divine judgment of these believers. There will probably be a judgment of them, since God judges everyone else who has ever lived—at one time or another. Probably He will judge them at the end of the Millennium. A resurrection of believers who died during the Millennium is also probable (cf. Isa. 65:17-20).

20:13 This verse describes the resurrection and judgment of the unrighteous more fully. In logical sequence, this verse fits in the middle of the preceding one. This resurrection results in

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 365. Cf. Ps. 62:12; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:17.

death (cf. v. 6), whereas the previous one (v. 4) resulted in life.

God will resurrect the bodies of *all* unbelievers, and unite them with their spirits, even those bodies decomposed in "the sea" and in every other way. The special allusion to death by drowning and burial at sea may be due to the fact that the ancients regarded these fates as especially abhorrent.<sup>1</sup> "Death and Hades" probably refers to the *state* of death and the *place* of death.<sup>2</sup> "Hades" is the temporary abode of unbelievers' spirits until the Great White Throne judgment.

"Hades" is the unseen place where all non-Christians (including believers from other dispensations and unbelievers), who have died, will reside until their resurrection (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8). It includes "Paradise" (Luke 23:43) and "Gehenna" (Luke 12:5), also called "Abraham's bosom" and "the place of torment and anguish" (Luke 16:22-28), respectively. It is a place of conscious torment for unbelievers (Luke 16:23). "Hades" is the New Testament word for this place, and "Sheol" is the Old Testament word.

Another reference to judgment on the basis of ("according to their") "deeds" again stresses personal responsibility (cf. v. 12; 2:23; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; 1 Pet. 1:17). God will judge all people on the basis of their works (v. 12; cf. Ps. 62:12; Matt. 25:41-46; Heb. 4:12-13). This is also true of Christians at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:10).

"The White Throne Judgment will be nothing like our modern court cases. At the White Throne, there will be a Judge but no jury, a prosecution but no defense, a sentence but no appeal. No one will be able to defend himself or accuse God of unrighteousness. What an awesome scene it will be!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 273.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 433.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:621.

20:14 From this point on there will be *no more* death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:24-28). God will cast "death and Hades ... into the lake of fire." The Lake of Fire is another term for "hell," the place of eternal punishment.

"Death and Hades are an inseparable pair, as in i. 18, vi. 8 ..., representing the two aspects of Death, the physical fact and its spiritual consequences ... Here they appear as two voracious and insatiable monsters who have swallowed all past generations, but are now forced to disgorge their prey."<sup>1</sup>

Probably "death and Hades" refers to all those people who have died and are in Hades.<sup>2</sup> The "second death" is separation from God in the Lake of Fire (cf. 19:20; 21:8). Evidently the wicked, too, will receive resurrection bodies that are different from their former mortal bodies. They will be indestructible.<sup>3</sup>

"As there is a second and higher life, so there is also a second and deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death (ch. xxi. 4), so after that death there is no more life, ver. 10; Matt. xxv. 41)."<sup>4</sup>

20:15 The names of the wicked will be *absent* from the "book of life." This will confirm their eternal fate (cf. 14:11).

"When taken seriously, this final note evaporates all theories of universalism or *apocatastasis* [restoration] ..."<sup>5</sup>

*Eternal punishment* is a doctrine that is becoming increasingly unpopular in our day. Notice that Jesus Christ, the Judge, spoke very plainly when He

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 273.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 1103.

<sup>3</sup>See Robert A. Peterson, "A Traditionalist Response to John Stott's Arguments for Annihilationism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:4 (December 1994):553-68.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:735-36.

<sup>5</sup>Johnson, p. 590. Cf. Robertson, 6:465; and Ladd, p. 258. See Berkouwer, pp. 387-423, for a very good discussion of eternal punishment.

affirmed it (vv. 14-15; 20:10; 19:20; 14:10; Matt. 18:8; 23:15, 33; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:46).<sup>1</sup>

"If we once saw sin as God sees it, we would understand why a place such as hell exists."<sup>2</sup>

#### **N. THE ETERNAL STATE 21:1—22:5**

The next scenes in John's visions proved to be of conditions that will exist after the Millennium. He recorded this insight to reveal the final home of believers.<sup>3</sup> There are many allusions to Isaiah 60 and 65, and to Ezekiel 40—48, in this pericope. The final two chapters of Revelation also tie up strands of revelation from every major previous section of the book. This pericope is a picture of new beginnings, a sharp contrast with the Lake of Fire, another final end, in the previous one.

Beale believed the purpose of this section is to contrast the church imperfect (chs. 1—3) and the church perfected. He took most of the descriptions figuratively, but believed in a literal destruction of the old cosmos.<sup>4</sup>

Note some contrasts between the former creation and the future creation.<sup>5</sup>

Genesis	Revelation
Heavens and earth created (1:1)	New heavens and earth (21:1)
Sun created (1:16)	No need of the sun (21:23)
The night established (1:5)	No night there (21:25; 22:5)
The seas created (1:10)	No more seas (21:1)

<sup>1</sup>See David J. MacLeod, "The Sixth 'Last Thing': The Last Judgment and the End of the World (Rev. 20:11-15)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:627 (July-September 2000):315-30.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:621.

<sup>3</sup>See also Pache, *The Future ...*, ch. 16: "Heaven," pp. 329-76.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, pp. 1039-40.

<sup>5</sup>Adapted from Wiersbe, 2:621.

The curse announced (3:14-17)	No more curse (22:3)
Death enters history (3:19)	No more death (21:4)
Man driven from paradise (3:24)	Man restored to paradise (22:14)
Sorrow and pain begin (3:17)	No more mourning, crying or pain (21:4)

### 1. The vision of the new heaven and earth 21:1

John now saw a new scene that explained the *passing away* of the present earth and heaven, to which he had just briefly referred (20:11). The "new earth" and "new heaven" will come into existence after the Millennium and the Great White Throne judgment. Many interpreters take the new earth and heaven as a picture of the present age of the church, but this is unwarranted. Baxter understood chapters 21 and 22 as describing neither the Millennium nor Heaven (the Eternal State) but only a renovated earth and heavens.<sup>1</sup>

The reason God will destroy the present heaven and earth is that He originally made them as the habitat for perfect humanity. However, sin so thoroughly corrupted not only the human race, but the race's environment, that He will destroy it—and create "a new heaven and a new earth," in which righteousness dwells. This is the final stage in His plan to deliver humanity into the blessing He originally intended people to enjoy.

"Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God's people is an earthly destiny. In typical dualistic Greek thought, the universe was divided into two realms: the earthly or transitory, and the eternal spiritual world. Salvation consisted of the flight of the soul from the sphere of the transitory and ephemeral to the realm of eternal reality. However, biblical

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<sup>1</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:346-47.

thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence."<sup>1</sup>

Is this a creation "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*), like the creation of the first heaven and earth (Gen. 1)?<sup>2</sup> Or is it a thorough *renovation* of the present heaven and earth?<sup>3</sup> I tend to favor a *renovation*, though this is a hard call. A *renovation* of the present earth will also take place earlier, namely, at the beginning of the Millennium.

Is the "new heaven and new earth" that John saw the *same* new heaven and earth that Isaiah predicted (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; cf. Ps. 102:25-26; Isa. 51:6)? We would normally assume that the entities are the same, since the terms that describe them are almost identical. However, the descriptions of these places *vary*. Isaiah wrote that people will "die" in the new earth (Isa. 65:17-20), but John said there will "no longer be death" there (Rev. 21:4). Isaiah predicted that the "moon will shine" in the new heavens (Isa. 66:22-23), but John implied that there will be *no* "moon" there (Rev. 21:23). Apparently Isaiah was referring to *both* the Millennium and the Eternal State, in general terms, when he used the phrase "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17—66:24)—which is accurate, since even in the Millennium the world will experience renovation.

John, in the progress of revelation, distinguished these two aspects of the *eschaton*, and applied the term "new heaven and new earth" only to the Eternal State—which is appropriate here in a specific sense, since God will eventually destroy the present world and create a new world (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10). Isaiah's view of the future was more general, while John's was more specific. Similarly, the Old Testament prophets spoke of Messiah's coming, but did not distinguish the first coming from the second coming. Later revelation clarified that there would be two comings. This is in harmony

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 275.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 561; Walvoord, *Major Bible ...*, pp. 413-14; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 439-40; Beasley-Murray, p. 307; Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1117; MacLeod, *The Seven ...*, p. 248; et al.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:736; Seiss, p. 484-87; W. M. Smith, p. 1521; McClain, pp. 510-11; Gaebelien, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:274-75; Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:1 (March 1997):37-56; Michael J. Svingel, "Extreme Makeover: Heaven and Earth Edition—Will God Annihilate the World and Re-create It *Ex Nihilo*?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:684 (October-December 2014):401-17; Glenn R. Kreider, "The Flood Is as Bad as It Gets: Never Again Will God Destroy the Earth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:684 (October-December 2014):418-39.

with how God has revealed many things in His Word: first generally, then more specifically (e.g., the biblical covenant promises).

By "the first heaven" and "earth," John quite obviously meant this planet and the heavens (the atmosphere and the solar system, the sky) above it. He did not mean the *abode of God*, that Scripture also calls "heaven" elsewhere (i.e., "the third heaven" of 2 Cor. 12:2; cf. Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14).

The new earth will have no oceans ("no longer [any] sea"), but oceans will exist in the Millennium (Ps. 72:8; Jer. 31:9-10; Ezek. 47:8-20; 48:28; Zech. 9:10; 14:8). This is another indication that what John saw in chapter 21 was not the Millennium, but the Eternal State that will follow it. "The sea" is the first of seven *evils* that John said would not exist in the new creation, the others being: "death," "mourning," "weeping," "pain," "night," and "the curse" (vv. 4, 25; 22:3, 5). Since these other evils are literal entities, we should probably understand the sea as literal too.

"The sea" is *an evil* in the sense that it opposes humankind. For example, it was the sea that kept John on the Island of Patmos, separated from the churches of Asia.<sup>1</sup> Presently the seas cover over three-quarters of the earth's surface. Therefore, an earth without oceans will be a radically different planet. The oceans affect the atmosphere, the climate, and other living conditions—as well as human transportation. The *absence* of "any sea" is the chief characteristic of the new earth, as John described it.

## 2. John's first vision of the New Jerusalem 21:2-8

21:2 In the same vision, John next saw a "city" descending "out of heaven from God" (cf. v. 10; 3:12; Heb. 11:13-16). Many interpreters believe that John saw the city literally descending from heaven above to the earth below. But some believe that "coming down out of heaven from God" simply means that God is its "architect and builder" (Heb. 11:10).<sup>2</sup> This city was uniquely "holy," in contrast to the former Jerusalem (cf. 11:8; Isa. 52:1; Matt. 4:5; 27:53).

"A **holy** city will be one in which no lie will be uttered in one hundred million years, no evil word

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 275.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1327.



will ever be spoken, no shady business deal will ever even be discussed, no unclean picture will ever be seen, no corruption of life will *ever* be manifest."<sup>1</sup>

As the old Jerusalem will be Jesus Christ's capital during the Millennium, so the "[N]ew Jerusalem" will be His capital, from then on, in the Eternal State. In the bride-husband simile, the city is like a bride, and Christ is like a husband (vv. 9-10; cf. 3:12). Obviously some symbolism is present in the descriptions of the New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

"Just as the four actual kingdoms of Daniel 2, 7 do not literally correspond to the imagery that portrays them, so the New Jerusalem does not literally correspond to the imagery of Revelation 21—22. Though it is an actual literal city, its glory will far surpass the language that John uses to portray it. John's language is an attempt to describe what is in one sense indescribable."<sup>3</sup>

The use of the bride figure ("*as* a bride adorned for her husband") to describe the New Jerusalem should not lead us to conclude that the New Jerusalem is identical with the church. Some interpreters have equated the two.<sup>4</sup> The bride figure elsewhere describes *the church* (e.g., 19:7; 2 Cor. 11:2), but here "the city" is compared to a bride. The bride figure describes different entities, each one in a separate intimate relationship to Christ. The Old Testament also used the *bride* as a figure to describe Israel's relationship to God (Isa. 62:5; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:19-20). This does not mean that Israel, the church, and the New Jerusalem are three names for the same entity.

However, this city, the "New Jerusalem," now evidently encompasses two previous brides of Christ: Israel and the

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<sup>1</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1522.

<sup>2</sup>See Ironside, p. 350; Tan, *The Interpretation ...*, pp. 285-92.

<sup>3</sup>David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1—22:5," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 276.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lilje, p. 259; Vacendak, 2:1328.

church. The city *is* (constitutes), at the same time, the *corporate identity* of those who reside in it. Like Babylon, it is a real city, but it also represents the people who live there, which in this case include old covenant and new covenant believers. It is "the (a) place" that Jesus Christ went to the Cross "to prepare for" His disciples (John 14:2). Like the name "Babylon," "New Jerusalem" probably represents both a real city and what Jerusalem has represented throughout history.

The "city" *contains* people, but it is not another name for, or a reference to, those people. This should be clear because: (1) the city is *like* a bride, so it cannot *be* the bride, (2) verse 7 says that the saints inherit the city, so they cannot be the city, and (3) the city is described as a place where saints dwell (vv. 24-26).<sup>1</sup>

"Revelation as a whole may be characterized as *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the sub-title, *The Harlot and the Bride*."<sup>2</sup>

There have been several explanations of the relationship of the New Jerusalem to the new earth. It may be that John saw *as a city* what he had formerly seen as "a new heaven and a new earth." In other words, the "New Jerusalem" and the "new heaven and new earth" may be two different figures describing the Eternal State. In this case, the eternal dwelling place of believers will be a completely new creation by God that John saw in his visions: first as a *new world*, and then as a *new city*.

Alternatively, the New Jerusalem could be a *satellite* above the new earth. Some suggest that the New Jerusalem will be a satellite orbiting the present earth during the Millennium, and then, when God creates the new earth, it will descend out of heaven and rest on the surface of the new earth.<sup>3</sup> Some believe that the New Jerusalem will be *within* the new earth.<sup>4</sup> The text does not say the New Jerusalem will come down *to*

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<sup>1</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1122.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 315.

<sup>3</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 580.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:1068-72.

*the new earth*, only that John saw it "coming down out of heaven from God" (cf. v. 10).

21:3 For the last of 20 times in his vision, John had heard "a loud voice" signifying the importance of the proclamation that followed. "Behold" further stressed its importance. *This* probably angelic voice (cf. 19:5) announced that "God's tabernacle," evidently the entire New Jerusalem, was now "among men." Finally the relationship between God and humankind, that God has always desired for people to enjoy, will be a reality (cf. 7:15; Gen. 3:8; 17:7; Exod. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:11-12; Num. 15:41; Deut. 29:13; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Zech. 2:10; 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16). God will *dwell among* His cleansed people, and they will experience intimate fellowship with Him. This is the supreme blessing of the New Jerusalem (cf. Ezek. 37:27; 48:35).

This fellowship existed, to some extent, when God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and when He dwelt among the Israelites in the tabernacle and later in the temple, hence the reference to "the tabernacle" (cf. 13:6; 15:5). It also existed *partially* when Jesus Christ "tabernacled" among people (John 1:14). It exists today as God inhabits the bodies of Christians individually (1 Cor. 6:19-20) and the church corporately (Eph. 2:21-22).

"The essence of v. 3 is the focal point of John's whole description of the new Jerusalem: God's immediate presence with men. The prominence of the theme is evident in v. 3 itself by virtue of a fivefold repetition of the same essential truth in that one verse. It is the principal focus again in 21:7 where the promise to the overcomer is that God would be his God and He [*sic* he] would be God's son. The glory of God in the city in 21:11 is another indication of God's immediate presence, a presence that is also the direct emphasis of 22:3-4 which speaks of the presence of the throne of God and the Lamb in the city and immediate

access to Him for His slaves, enabling them to see His face."<sup>1</sup>

The plural "peoples" (NASB, 1972 ed.) hints at other groups besides Israel in the New Jerusalem. A usual designation for Israel is the "people" (singular, Gr. *laos*) of God. God had promised Abraham that He would bless *many peoples* ("all the families of the earth") through the patriarch (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gal. 3:8, 16, 26-29). This is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise.

21:4 Verse 3 describes the benefits of the New Jerusalem positively, and verse 4 does so negatively. Probably God "will wipe away all tears (every tear)" at the inception of the Eternal State, rather than at some time after that. These are *tears* caused by life in, and memories of, the old creation, not tears *of repentance*. This reference to wiping away tears highlights God's compassion for His people. *Sorrow*, "death," and "pain" will all end—along with all the *tears*, "mourning," and "crying" that result from them. This is a final reversal of the curse (Gen. 3). All these former experiences ("first things") will be gone forever (will "have passed away") then.

However, note that the removal of tears will take place after the judgments, including the judgment seat of Christ, when some Christians will suffer the loss of reward (1 Cor. 3:15; cf. 1 John 2:28). The "first" things are the former things, the things associated with the old creation.

"How different is this concept of heaven from that of Hinduism, for example? Here heaven is depicted as a city, with life, activity, interest, and people, as opposed to the Hindu ideal of heaven as a sea into which human life returns like a raindrop to the ocean."<sup>2</sup>

21:5 John now turned from describing the New Jerusalem, briefly, to describing some of God's utterances (cf. 1:8; 20:11).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 443. Cf. Erdman, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup>Johnson, p. 593.

"Behold" introduces a special pronouncement, namely, that God will bring a new creation into existence. The description of the "new creation" in the preceding verses was proleptic. Evidently an angel subsequently instructed John to write down what God had said, because His "words" were "faithful and true," not incredible (cf. 22:6).<sup>1</sup> Possibly it was God Himself who uttered this second statement.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the vision so enthralled John that he stopped recording it.

- 21:6 The One sitting on the throne resumed speaking. The judgments of the Tribulation (cf. 16:17) and of the whole old creation stood accomplished (cf. v. 5). He (the One on the throne) again referred to Himself as the eternal, sovereign God ("the Alpha and Omega"; 1:8; cf. 22:13), the originator and terminator ("the beginning and the end") of all things (cf. Isa. 44:6). His promise of abundant satisfaction for the *thirsty* ("one who thirsts") is metaphorical, symbolizing His ability to meet the deepest needs of His people (7:17; cf. Isa. 55:1; John 4:13-14; 7:37-39).

Contrast "the spring of the water of life" with "the cup" from which the harlot drank (17:4; 18:3). This is an invitation and a promise to anyone, including believers, to come to God to receive what is *truly satisfying* from Him freely ("I will give ... the water of life without cost"). It is a beautiful gospel invitation (cf. 3:20; 22:17).<sup>3</sup>

- 21:7 The *overcomer* ("he who overcomes"; i.e., every believer) will inherit these things (i.e., the blessings of the new creation mentioned). This promise completes and summarizes the other seven promises to overcomers in chapters 2 and 3. *Inheriting* emphasizes the privilege of obtaining something because of the work of another, in contrast to one's own work.

"The phrase 'I will be his God and he will be My son' is defined elsewhere as a statement of special honor, not of regeneration. The Davidic Covenant

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, 4:818.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 279; Barclay, 2:261.

<sup>3</sup>See Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit*, pp. 108-28.

promised to David's son, Solomon, 'I will be a Father to him and he will be a son to Me' (2 Sam. 7:14). The intent of the phrase was to signify a special, intimate relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Paul used the two Greek words *huioi*, "sons," and *tekna*, "children," synonymously, but John distinguished their two meanings whenever he used them: mature sons versus simply children.

21:8 The sins mentioned here are some that typically characterize unbelievers, the other group in contrast to overcomers. While these sins do mark some believers who follow the dictates of their flesh (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21), they more generally identify the lost. That the unsaved are in view seems clear, since "their part" (i.e., their destiny) will be in the Lake of Fire ("which is the second death").

Since "the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" still exists after the passing of the present heaven and earth, "hell" is probably not in the center of the present earth, nor is it connected to this earth spatially. Therefore it will exist separately from the new heaven and new earth and the New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Even though this passage does not say that *sin* will be *absent* in the Eternal State, it seems quite clear that there will be none, since the *consequences* of sin will be *absent*.

### 3. John's second vision of the New Jerusalem 21:9—22:5

God now provided John with more information about the New Jerusalem (v. 2). In a similar way, the section of 17:1—19:10 expounded on the announcement of Babylon's fall in 16:19. The chronological progression of the revelation in 19:11—22:5 locates the New Jerusalem in the new creation, not in the Millennium.

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<sup>1</sup>Dillow, p. 472.

<sup>2</sup>See Peterson, "Does the ...," pp. 25-26.

"Much discussion has been raised among premillennialists as to whether the New Jerusalem is millennial or eternal. In reality the city seems to belong to both periods."<sup>1</sup>

### John's guide to the city 21:9-10

21:9 "One of the seven angels" who had poured the "seven bowls" of judgment served as John's guide in this part of his vision (cf. 17:1). The fact that one of these particular angels helped John understand both the mystery of Babylon and that of the New Jerusalem sets these two cities in stark contrast.

"It is impossible to dwell both in Babylon and in the new Jerusalem."<sup>2</sup>

It is quite clear that the "bride," the wife of the Lamb, is the New Jerusalem (v. 10; cf. v. 2). Contrast the harlot of 17:1 (cf. 19:7; 21:2). From the description that follows, it also seems clear that the New Jerusalem is a *city*. It is not just a person or a single group of people, such as the Christians exclusively. Some have identified it as *the church* ("the bride, the wife of the Lamb").<sup>3</sup> Others believe that it corresponds to the new universe.<sup>4</sup> This is the first of seven references to "the Lamb" in this section (vv. 9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3). He becomes increasingly prominent as the book draws to a close. "The Lamb is all the glory in Immanuel's land."<sup>5</sup>

21:10 John entered a fresh state of prophetic ecstasy, and he now saw another new vision (cf. 1:10; 4:1; 17:3). The angel took him to a high vantage point ("great and high mountain"), from which he could see the New Jerusalem (lit. "City of Peace") descending "out of heaven from God" (cf. v. 2; Ezek. 40:2). John was receiving here a fresh revelation that expanded on

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<sup>1</sup>Ryrie, *Biblical Theology* ..., p. 362.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Robert Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum* 29:3 (July 1987):256.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:482.

<sup>5</sup>"Immanuel's Land" by Anne Ross Cousin.

something he had already witnessed in an earlier scene (vv. 2-8; cf. 16:19; 17:1).

"The holy city descending from God out of heaven should be understood as a 'real event' within the visionary experience. ... The descent is an announcement in visionary terms of a future event which will usher in the eternal state. That the city comes down from God means that the eternal blessedness is not an achievement of man but a gift from God."<sup>1</sup>

### The physical features of the city 21:11-22

21:11 This city obviously appeared extremely impressive to John. The first and most important characteristic that John noted was its radiant glow ("brilliance"). It shone with the splendor ("glory") "of God" *Himself*, because He was in it (cf. Exod. 40:34; Num. 9:15-23; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 5:14; Isa. 24:23; 60:1; Ezek. 43:5; John 12:41; Acts 26:13).

John compared the glory of the city to that of a beautiful gem ("very costly stone"). Jasper stones were very beautiful but not always clear. As mentioned earlier (cf. 4:3), *this* "jasper" is most likely a "crystal-clear" gem, with many facets of "brilliance," probably what we call a *diamond*. This gemstone described *God Himself* earlier (4:3), so its "brilliance" is a further reflection of God's presence in the city.

21:12 The city's "wall" with its "12 gate-towers (gates)" was what caught John's attention next. The city evidently looked *square* (v. 16). Its high walls suggest its security and inviolability. Certainly its inhabitants will need no defense from attacking enemies there. The "12 gate-towers" (Gr. *pylon*, cf. Luke 16:20) stood "three" on each side (v. 13). The gate-towers provided access into the city. In the case of this city, the many gate-towers also suggest great freedom of access.

The "12" angelic guards also present a picture of great security (cf. Gen. 3:24; Isa. 62:6). The tribal names were

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 378.



apparently *on the gates*, not on the angels stationed beside them (cf. Ezek. 48:31-34). Ezekiel 48:31-34 describes Jerusalem in the Millennium, not in the new earth. The fact that each gate-tower bears a distinct name of one of Israel's 12 tribes, probably indicates that Israel will have a distinctive identity and role in this city, as it had throughout history (cf. 7:1-8).<sup>1</sup> God will perpetuate the memory of Israel throughout eternity.

21:13 Evidently geographical directions will exist in the new creation as they do in the old, suggesting that physical space will exist throughout *eternity* as well as time (cf. 20:10). *Which* names will be on *which* gate-towers remains to be seen. The placement of the tribes around the post-exodus tabernacle in the wilderness, and or the gates in the millennial temple, do not necessarily provide this information. It has been suggested that three gates in each of the four directions signifies that there is free access from any part of the world.<sup>2</sup>

21:14 Since there are *foundations* to the city (cf. Heb 11:10, 13-16), it will be a permanent abode for the righteous, in contrast to their former temporary dwellings that lacked foundations. The foundations ("foundation stones") may be one on top of each other in layers, but probably each section of the wall, between the gate-towers, has its own foundation.<sup>3</sup> As the walls and gates represent *protection*, so the foundations speak of *permanence*.

Evidently the church, represented by the apostles (cf. Eph. 2:20), will be in the New Jerusalem, as will Israel (v. 12). However, assigning the name of each apostle to a particular foundation stone, is as impossible at this time as matching the names of Israel's tribes with the gates. Even identifying exactly which of the "apostles" and "tribes" will receive this honor is impossible now. Note the distinction between *Israel* and *the church* even in the Eternal State (cf. Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). God had a role for each group, and an identity separate from

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 463.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, p. 1985.

<sup>3</sup>Wilcock, p. 208.

the other, in the past as well as the present.<sup>1</sup> This distinction between the foundations and the walls harmonizes with our belief that the church *did not replace* Israel in the plans of God.

"The combination of the twelve tribes in verse 12 and the twelve apostles is a way of saying that Israel of old and the Christian church are united in God's final scheme of things."<sup>2</sup>

Being a covenant theologian, Morris did not mean that Israel and the church will be distinct throughout eternity as different segments of the people of God. He meant that this passage presents "Israel and the church" as "all the people of God *united*" in God's final scheme of things. However, as a dispensationalist I can accept his statement at face value.

That these are apostles "of the Lamb" again focuses glory on the Lamb in this city.

21:15 The fact that the angel's "measuring rod" was "gold" reflects the *dignity* of the task of measuring this city's gate-towers and walls (cf. Ezek. 40:3). Again, the temple that Ezekiel described being measured, in Ezekiel 40—43, was the millennial temple, which seems clear from the distinct contexts and the differing measurements. Only the *utensils* used in the holy of holies were gold in the tabernacle and temple, but *even this measuring rod* is "gold," suggesting the high value of the city.

21:16 John described the shape and then the size of the city. Its base was "square," the same shape as ancient Babylon and Nineveh.<sup>3</sup> The dimensions of this city were 12,000 stadia (approximately 1,500 miles) on each of its four sides and 1,500 miles high. (The distance from Dallas, Texas, to Philadelphia or Los Angeles is about 1,500 miles.)

Beasley-Murray wrote that the reader should not translate this measurement into miles, because "it represents the ordinary

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<sup>1</sup>Scott, pp. 433-34; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 322-23; Johnson, p. 596.

<sup>2</sup>Leon Morris, p. 250.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:473.

unit of distance (the furlong) multiplied by the number of God's people (twelve) and extended indefinitely."<sup>1</sup>

Beale observed that the size of the city is the approximate size of the Hellenistic world in John's day, and so suggests the inclusion of all the redeemed. He held that the city's measurements are not literal, but symbolic of the inclusion of Gentiles in the true temple and city (the church).<sup>2</sup>

Swete said, "Such dimensions defy imagination, and are permissible only in the language of symbolism."<sup>3</sup>

Such interpretations as the above are very subjective and amount to guessing.

This verse's description, understood literally, could allow for either a *cube*<sup>4</sup> or a *pyramid*<sup>5</sup> shape, the latter being the shape of a Babylonian ziggurat. The fact that the holy of holies was a cube in shape tempts one to conclude that the New Jerusalem will also be cubical ("its length and width and height are equal").

"The cube was an ancient symbol of perfection."<sup>6</sup>

Probably we should interpret these dimensions literally. Some interpreters believe they only symbolize what the "holy of holies" in Israel *anticipated*, namely, a perfect environment in which God dwells. Others hold that they symbolize the fulfillment of all God's promises.<sup>7</sup>

21:17      The city wall was evidently "144 cubits" (about 216 feet or 72 yards) thick (cf. Ezek. 40:5; 42:20). An American football

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 322.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 1074.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 289.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 4:741; Moffatt, 5:483; Mounce, p. 380; Beasley-Murray, p. 322; Seiss, p. 498; McGee, 5:1070-71; Ladd, p. 282; Swete, p. 288; Pache, *The Future ...*, p. 331; Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1160-61.

<sup>5</sup>Lilje, p. 267; William Hoste, *The Visions of John the Divine*, p. 178; W. M. Smith, p. 1523; Ironside, p. 357.

<sup>6</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2200.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Johnson, p. 596.

field is 100 yards long. John explained that even though an angel was doing the measuring, he was using human units of measurement. Thus these measurements meant the same to John as they would have meant if something else in his day was being measured.

- 21:18 The walls appeared to be glistening (cf. v. 11; 4:3). The word "material" (Gr. *endomesis*) means "building in," and suggests that the *material* on the wall was of "jasper," not that the wall was solid jasper. Perhaps John meant that the walls were *overlaid* with this brilliant material, further suggesting the radiance of God's holy presence. The whole "city" appeared to *shine* as a mass of "pure gold."

The many limestone buildings of old Jerusalem today take on a beautiful golden color in the light of the rising or setting sun, but this is a pale shadow of what the New Jerusalem will look like. *Clear glass* was the best quality glass in John's day, so when he compared the "gold" to "clear glass," he probably meant that there was no impurity in the city.<sup>1</sup> John was apparently describing the New Jerusalem by using similes and metaphors in order to artfully communicate its ineffable glory.

- 21:19-20 The apostle further explained the "foundation stones" of the city (v. 14). The foundation of a building is usually completely functional, and not decorative, but these foundations, which were at least partially visible above ground, were adorned and studded with precious, beautiful gems.<sup>2</sup> Another view is that jewels did not cover the foundation stones, but the foundation stones were themselves whole jewels.<sup>3</sup> These gemstones were of many different colors of the rainbow, suggesting the extreme beauty of the city. We cannot identify all of them exactly today, but they were undoubtedly precious gems in John's day.

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 381.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:742.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:484.

"Our God is a God of beauty, and He will lavish His beauty on the city He is preparing for His people."<sup>1</sup>

The Israelite high priest carried 12 gems, representing each of the twelve tribes, on his breast-piece (Exod. 28:17-20). Perhaps there is some symbolic connection between these 12 foundation jewels and those, though only eight of them appear in both lists. In the new order of the heavenly Jerusalem, *everyone* will have the privilege of access to God, that once was only the unique privilege of the high priest in Israel—and *that* just once a year.

21:21 Evidently "each" gate-tower that John saw (vv. 12-13) had been carved out of one huge ("a single") "pearl" (cf. Isa. 54:11-12).<sup>2</sup>

"Among the ancients, pearls were ranked highest among precious stones, because their beauty derives entirely from nature, improvement by human workmanship being an impossibility ..."<sup>3</sup>

John further described "the street" or *pavement*, "of the city," probably referring to *all the streets*, since all would be connected. *These* were (or *it* was) "pure gold" (v. 18), as pure as "transparent glass." Old Testament priests who ministered in Solomon's temple walked on a gold floor originally (1 Kings 6:30).

21:22 Unlike old Jerusalem, there will be "no temple" in the new city, because God Himself will be there, and He "and the Lamb are its temple." The whole city, infused with the glory and presence of "Almighty" God and "the Lamb," will therefore be a virtual "temple."<sup>4</sup> This heavenly perfection of the glorious presence of God and the Lamb, who both radiate their presence continuously throughout the glorified Jerusalem, is another respect in which the millennial temple contrasts with the New Jerusalem. "The Lamb" will play the central role in *this*

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:623.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 294.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 473. Cf. Barclay, 2:275.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Overstreet, pp. 460-62.

"temple," along with "Almighty God." The earthly tabernacle and temple were mainly symbols of the presence of God with man, but in the New Jerusalem, that presence is a reality.

"The writer is simply trying to convey the impression of a radiant and superb structure."<sup>1</sup>

This verse and verses 23-27 stress that God will bring His people into an intimate relationship with Himself in the New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

### The illumination of the city 21:23-27

21:23 Perhaps there will be "no ... sun" or moon (or stars?) in the new heaven, because God's "glory" will *illuminate* the whole earth (cf. Isa. 60:19). Actually the text does not say that there will be no sun or moon, but that we will *not need* the light of the sun and moon. So they may still be shining.<sup>3</sup> The need for created light sources may end when the Creator Himself lives among His people. God illuminated the camp of Israel with His presence in the pillar of fire, and He lit the holy of holies with His presence between the cherubim. He will similarly dispel all darkness of all kinds in the new city ("there will be no night there," v. 25). "The Lamb" is the radiance ("the lamp," or we might say, the "Sun") of the Father's glory (Heb. 1:3), but the Father is also a source of the light (22:5).

"It truly will be the Jesus Christ Light and Power Company then."<sup>4</sup>

21:24 The city will be so bright that it provides light for the whole new creation. The identity of "the nations" and "the kings" mentioned is difficult to determine. The most probable explanation seems to be that the nations are groups of believers viewed according to their old-creation nationalities, which they will retain in the new creation. The "kings" (rulers) probably are believing national leaders who ruled over nations

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:484.

<sup>2</sup>Wilcock, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1523; Vacendak, 2:1329.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:1072.

during the old creation.<sup>1</sup> These leaders will bring their glory into the city, thus increasing its glory, by simply entering it, since they are glorious individuals by God's grace. A similar view is that the kings are glorified saints.<sup>2</sup>

21:25 In John's day, cities closed their gates to keep enemies out, but there will be no enemies in the Eternal State, so the gates will *remain open* (cf. Isa. 60:11). John said the city "gates will never [ever be] close[d]" (Gr. *ou me kleisthosin*). These kings, therefore, may enter whenever they wish. There will be "no night" in the New Jerusalem, because the light of God's glory illuminates all.

21:26 The gates will admit these leaders, who "will bring the glory" and "honor of the nations" to God, representing their respective groups of followers (from all over the earth). This is a picture of worship in the new creation.

"... these verses reflect the ancient practice of kings and nations bringing their wealth and glory to the city of the greatest king. In the heavenly city, everyone will honor the 'King of kings' (see Pss. 68:29; 72:10-11; Isa. 60)."<sup>3</sup>

21:27 Only *believers* will enter the city. The unsaved will "in no way" be able to do so (Gr. *ou me eiselthe*, cf. 22:15). Evidently *any* believer will be able to enter the city, since the contrast is with those whose names are not in the Lamb's book of life (i.e., the lost). This verse warns the reader that the only way to gain entrance into this heavenly and holy city, is to have one's name recorded "in the Lamb's book of life" (cf. 20:15).

### The restoration of Paradise 22:1-5

Essentially what John saw next was *Paradise regained* (cf. 2:7; Gen. 2; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:2). Having viewed the splendor of the New Jerusalem, he now saw what will nourish and enrich the lives of God's people there.

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<sup>1</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 476-78, for 10 suggested identifications.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 501.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:624.

"So far the description has been of the exterior of the holy city; but now the scene moves to the interior."<sup>1</sup>

"Up to this chapter, the New Jerusalem seems to be all mineral and no vegetable. Its appearance is as the dazzling display of a fabulous jewelry store; we wonder if there is no soft grass to sit upon, no green trees to enjoy, and no water to drink or food to eat. However, here are introduced the elements which add a rich softness to this city of elaborate beauty."<sup>2</sup>

22:1 "And he showed me" signals new aspects of the city that John's angel-guide proceeded to point out. The pure ("clear as crystal") "river" seems to be *symbolic* of the refreshment and sustenance that God provides through eternal life (cf. Jer. 2:13; 17:13; Ps. 36:9; Prov. 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22; Zech. 14:8), though it, like the city itself, is probably at the same time a *literal* river (cf. Gen. 2:10, 14). We should not confuse this river with the one flowing from the Jerusalem temple during the Millennium (Ezek. 47:1, 9, 12; Zech. 14:8). John described the river he saw as "bright" or "clear as [a] crystal"; it was a shimmering, sparkling stream of unpolluted water.<sup>3</sup>

This heavenly New Jerusalem *river* proceeded "from the throne" that belongs to "God" and "the Lamb" (cf. v. 3; 3:21; Isa. 35:6-9; Ezek. 47:1; Zech. 14:8; Heb. 1:3). This throne evidently stood at the head of the main street of the city (v. 2), so that, looking down this street, the throne (not the river) appeared to be in its middle. Verses 1 and 2 make slightly better sense if we take the clause "in the middle of its street" as describing the location of the throne. In this case, it completes the thought begun in verse 1. The other option is to take it as describing the location of the tree. In that case it begins the thought that continues through verse 2.

"This is a symbolic way of describing the reign of eternal life in the age to come [and God as its

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:281.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1075.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:479.



source]. The symbolism of a river of life is a common one in biblical thought [cf. Ps. 46:4; Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8; John 4:10, 14]."<sup>1</sup>

"The point of the passage is to teach that in the eternal state God's people will live at the source of the life-giving stream, the very presence of God Himself ..."<sup>2</sup>

22:2 John also saw the "tree of life." Several commentators take the reference to the "tree" (singular) as generic. They believe that John really saw many trees.<sup>3</sup> I think it is better to interpret the reference as *one* tree, since this is the normal meaning of the singular noun. When Adam and Eve fell, they lost their access to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24). In the eternal city, the residents will have access to the "tree of life" there.

The description of this tree's location is debatable, but perhaps John saw the river dividing and flowing on both sides of it. A tree surrounded by water is the epitome of a fruitful tree (cf. Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:8; Ezek. 19:10; 47:12). This tree was perpetually, rather than seasonally, in fruit; it produced a new crop of "fruit" each ("every") "month" of the year. Evidently the new creation will not have a lunar calendar, since there will be no moon (21:23), but another type of calendar will define months. Most fruit trees in the old creation bear fruit only a few months each year at most. In contrast, God's blessing of fruitfulness *all year long* will typify life in the new earth.

The tree of life in the Garden of Eden could perpetuate life *forever* (Gen. 3:22, 24). Evidently that will be the function of *this* "tree" in the new earth as well: to sustain immortality. "Healing" really means "health-giving" (Gr. *therapeian*). Since there will be no death to be "healed" from in the new earth,

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 286.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 482. See Mounce, p. 386.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 484).

this tree's "leaves" will evidently promote well-being.<sup>1</sup> They will provide healing from the other negative conditions of the old creation, as the wiping away of tears removed the *sorrows* of the old creation (cf. 21:4; Ezek. 47:12). The "nations" are people groups in the new creation viewed according to their old creation divisions (cf. 21:24).

"To eat of the tree of life was, in the popular religious phraseology of the age, to possess immortality."<sup>2</sup>

"It seems possible therefore to understand participation in the tree of life as a regular experience of fellowshiping with God, i.e., eating of this monthly fruit."<sup>3</sup>

"It is sometimes asked whether the glorified saints are to eat in heaven? We may safely answer that *they can eat*, although under no need to eat; just as we can enjoy a rose, and yet not suffer from its absence."<sup>4</sup>

22:3 There "will no longer be a (any) curse," because the tree of life will *heal* (redeem?) the nations. The "curse" in view is probably the curse that God pronounced on the old creation at the Fall (cf. Zech. 14:11; Mal. 4:6). God will have intimate fellowship with His people, because this curse will then have been lifted. Evidently believers ("His bond-servants" in the new creation; cf. 1:1) will occupy themselves serving God and the Lamb in the new earth. The Greek word for "serve" (*latreuo*) suggests *priestly* service, in view of its other uses in this book (cf. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). "His" and "Him" present God and the Lamb as essentially one Being.

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<sup>1</sup>For an amillennial study of the symbolism used in Genesis 2—3 and Revelation 21:9—22:5, as ancient cosmography used the figures of a garden, a city, and a mountain, see Ken Olles and Warren Gage, "The City of God and the Cities of Men."

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:487.

<sup>3</sup>Dillow, p. 474.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, p. 506.

22:4 God's bond-servants "will see His face"; we will enjoy personal, intimate fellowship with Him. We will be able to do this because we will be pure in heart, righteous, and holy then (cf. Ps. 11:7; 17:15; Matt. 5:8; 1 Cor. 13:12; Heb. 12:14). Adam and Eve's sin broke their fellowship with God, and they hid from Him (Gen. 3:8; cf. Exod. 33:20, 23). Our ability to *view God's glory* ("see His face") is limited now (cf. Job 19:25-27; 2 Cor. 3:18; Heb. 9:7), but then it will be *unhindered* (1 John 3:2). Scripture does not reveal whether we will see one, two, or three persons of the Godhead.

"The phrase 'seeing the face of God' is a metaphor in Judaism and early Christianity for a full awareness of the presence and power of God (Job 33:26; Pss 10:11; 17:15; 3 John 11), for worshiping God in the temple (Ps 42:2), or for seeing God in the context of a prophetic vision (Isa 6:1 ...)."¹

Moreover, we will bear "God's (His) name on [our] foreheads." Having His name on our foreheads means that we will be His representative servants, children, and heirs, and will reflect His divine glory in our persons. Having God's "mark" (seal or logo) on one's body appeared three times earlier in this book (3:12; 7:3; 14:1). In each case it was a great privilege, indicating ownership and protection, not just identification (cf. Exod. 28:36-38).

22:5 The final point John stressed was the great, intensely bright glory of God that will illuminate ("illumine") the whole new earth (21:23-25; cf. Zech. 14:6-7, 9). Previously he mentioned this to show how glorious the *city* will be, but now he did so to emphasize what a delightful blessing this will be for the *city-dwellers* (cf. Num. 6:22-27). He added that His bond-servants will "reign" with Him "forever," not just in the millennial kingdom (20:4, 6). This is the fulfillment of God's desire and command that man should rule over His creation (Gen. 1:26).² Evidently faithful believers will have more authority in the new

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¹Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1179.

²Beckwith, p. 767; Wall, pp. 257-58.

creation than unfaithful believers, as will be true also during the Millennium (cf. Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). However, we should not think of a type of rule in which some people become the objects of oppression.

"Our faithfulness in life prepares us for higher service in heaven."<sup>1</sup>

"Who knows but what He will give to each saint a world or a solar system or a galactic system to operate. Remember that Adam was given dominion over the old creation on this earth."<sup>2</sup>

Thus the prophecy of "things that shall take place after present (these) things" (contemporary with John's time; 1:19), which began in 4:1, closes with another picture of God's servants worshipping around His throne and ruling under His authority.<sup>3</sup> John revealed seven glories of the new creation in verses 3 through 5.

"As seen in the Book of Revelation, worship today should involve adoration of God's being, declaration of the Lamb's worthiness, a celebration of God's presence, submission to His authority, and fearing and serving Him."<sup>4</sup>

Many commentators believed that the New Jerusalem is the "place" to which Jesus referred when He told His disciples that He was going "to prepare a place for" them (John 14:2). However, He probably was emphasizing His purpose in going to the Cross ("I go to prepare")—that His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension constituted His preparatory work for their "place" (position of salvation in Him)—rather than to His special creation of the new heavens and earth.

Sometimes people describe "the new heavens and earth" as the *Eternal* (as in *timeless*) *State*. This terminology has led some to conclude that *time* as we know it, which marks events in sequence, will end when God destroys

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:624.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1077.

<sup>3</sup>The description of heaven in Flavius Josephus, *An Extract Out of Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, par. 6, is helpful and edifying.

<sup>4</sup>Mazie Nakhro, "The Meaning of Worship according to the Book of Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:629 (January-March 2001):85.

the present heavens and earth. This view was popular with some pagan Greek philosophers, and Origen held it. Some non-Christian eastern religions teach this view, and some Christians hold it today. There is no indication in the text, however, that the new creation will introduce a *timeless* form of existence. In fact, the term "forever and ever" (20:10; 21:5) rather implies the *continuation* of time—without end. Furthermore, the reference to *months* (v. 2) implies the sequence of events. The references to *distances* picture a creation in which there is not only time, but space (cf. 21:2, 3, 8, 10, 13-17, 24-27; 22:1-2).

"'Eternity' to Old Testament people was not timelessness or *absence* of time. They knew no such realm. It was, rather, *extension* of time—as far back and as far forward as one could imagine—'time in its wholeness' (JB), 'sense of time past and future' (NEB)."<sup>1</sup>

"We do well to return again and again to Revelation 21 and 22, for it is the end of the pilgrim path. The more distinct the vision to the pilgrim of the beauty and glory of the city to which he journeys, the less the immediate environments of his journey attract him."<sup>2</sup>

"This final vision of the book concerning these same five themes—new covenant, new temple, new Israel, new Jerusalem, and new creation—is also the climax and the expression of the main point of the Apocalypse thus far. But it is not the main point of the whole book. Why is this vision placed at the end of the book? It is here to underscore the ultimate basis for John's final goal and purpose in writing: to exhort God's people to remain faithful. ...

"While the main goal of the book's argument is to exhort God's people to remain faithful so that they will inherit final salvation, this is not the most important theological idea in the book. The major theological theme of the book is the glory that God is to

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<sup>1</sup>David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, pp. 106-7. See also Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation, Apocalypse and Empire*, p. 67; and Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 348.

receive for accomplishing consummate salvation and final judgment ..."<sup>1</sup>

#### IV. THE EPILOGUE TO THE BOOK 22:6-21

In this final section of the book, John reported concluding information and instructions that God gave him. He did this in order to comfort and caution his readers, and to affirm the authority of this book.

"The concluding paragraphs of the Revelation sum up and press home on the reader's conscience the foremost practical lessons of the book."<sup>2</sup>

This section consists of verbal exchanges between an angel and John, and between Jesus and John. Three emphases mark this epilogue.<sup>3</sup> First, this prophecy is genuine (vv. 6-7, 8-9, 16, 18-19). Second, Jesus will return imminently (vv. 6-7, 10, 12, 20). Third, the unfit should beware, and the faithful should take courage (vv. 11-12, 15, 17-19). The whole epilogue is very similar to the first chapter in many ways.

COMPARISONS OF REVELATION 1 AND 22		
Origin of the prophecy: God and Jesus	1:1	22:6
Subject of the prophecy: coming events	1:1	22:6
Mediator of the prophecy: an angel	1:1	22:6, 8, 16
Writer of the prophecy: John	1:1, 4, 9	22:8
Genuineness of the prophecy: true prophecy	1:3	22:6, 7, 9, 10, 18-19
Vehicle of the prophecy: a prophet	1:1, 9-11	22:8, 9, 10

<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 1119-20. Italics omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 493.

Addressees of the prophecy: bond-servants	1:1	22:6
Destination of the prophecy: churches	1:3, 11	22:16, 18
Blessing of the prophecy: for obedience	1:3	22:7, 12, 14
Warning of the prophecy: for unfaithfulness	1:7	22:11, 12, 18-19
Center of the prophecy: Christ	1:2, 5, 9	22:16, 18, 20
God of the prophecy: Alpha and Omega	1:17	22:13
Chief character of the prophecy: God	1:5, 7	22:12, 13, 16
Hope of the prophecy: soon return	1:3, 7	22:7, 10, 12, 20

Notice, too, the trinitarian emphasis in both the Introduction and the Epilogue.<sup>1</sup>

"From Him who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4)	"The God of the spirits of the prophets" (22:6)
"From Jesus Christ" (1:5)	"Jesus" (22:16)
"From the seven Spirits" (1:4)	"the Spirit" (22:17)

### **A. THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANGEL 22:6-7**

These verses are very similar in form and content to 1:1-3. These two sections function as bookends (frame, *inclusio*) for the chapters that they enclose.<sup>2</sup>

22:6        The angel who had been revealing the new creation to John, one of the angels who had the seven bowls (21:9), continued

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<sup>1</sup>Tenney, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1188.

to speak to him.<sup>1</sup> He assured John that "the things" prophesied to happen "soon" (4:1—22:5), which John had just seen, were "faithful and true" (cf. v. 6; Dan. 8:26).<sup>2</sup>

"No book in the Bible has a more pointed attestation, a stronger safeguarding against tampering, or a more urgent recommendation for study and observance than does the Apocalypse, especially in its Epilogue."<sup>3</sup>

The angel proceeded to explain why these words are faithful and true. It was "the Lord, the God" who inspired ("the spirits of") "the prophets," who had revealed what John had received. The "spirits of the prophets" are their own human spirits (cf. 19:10). God had sent His angel to reveal these things to His bond-servant John, who was one of these prophets. Specifically, He had revealed "things" that *must* happen "soon." The purpose of this verse is to stress the authenticity of this revelation and to encourage anticipation of its fulfillment.

This statement reinforces a *futuristic* interpretation of Revelation, because the book deals with events yet future. It also indicates that God intended the reader to understand this book. It is a revelation, not an incomprehensible mystery, even though much of the revelation is symbolic and difficult to understand.

22:7 Probably *the angel* relayed these words of Christ (cf. vv. 12-13) to John (cf. 16:15), rather than Jesus speaking them directly to him. Jesus Christ promised to return soon (cf. vv. 12, 20; 3:11). *Reconstructionism* (dominion theology) and *preterism* interpret this "imminence" as having been fulfilled at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.<sup>4</sup> The Greek word translated "quickly" (*tachy*) means "soon." The Second Coming is the great climactic event in view through most of this prophecy,

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 302; Beckwith, p. 772; Robertson, 6:481; Beasley-Murray, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:746; Swete, p. 302; Lee, 4:837; Beckwith, p. 772; Robertson, 6:481.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 495.

<sup>4</sup>See Chilton, *The Days ...*, p. 575; and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell*, pp. 142-45.



but applying this word about imminence to the Rapture is certainly legitimate.<sup>1</sup>

"... it is quite evident that He would have us live in the constant expectation of His advent being imminent."<sup>2</sup>

The book closes as it opened, with a special blessing for those who pay close attention to ("he who heeds") what it teaches (1:3; cf. 16:5). Here, however, the speaker is Christ, whom the angel apparently quoted. John evidently wrote this book as his visions unfolded (cf. 10:4).

It is ironical that people have neglected *this* book—of all the books in the Bible—even though it contains more promises of blessing than any other book in the Bible. Everyone should continue to study it.

#### **B. THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN 22:8-11**

Some scholars have regarded verses 10 through 20 as an epilogue, because they are similar to 1:1-8, which is a prologue.<sup>3</sup>

22:8 John now resumed addressing the reader in the first person, directly, which he had not done since 1:1, 4, and 9. He affirmed the angel's words that the prophecy was genuine. He himself had "heard" and had seen ("I ... saw") "these things" that he had recorded (cf. Dan. 8:15; 12:5). He was an *eyewitness* of these things (cf. John 1:14; 19:35; 21:14; 1 John 1:1-3; 4:14).

"This is the concluding signature of John ..."<sup>4</sup>

John confessed that when he had heard and seen these things, he had reacted by *worshipping the angel* who revealed them

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<sup>1</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 489.

<sup>2</sup>W. Lincoln, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, p. 241. See also Stanton's discussion of imminency in *Kept from ...*, pp. 108-37, and Wayne A. Brindle, "Biblical Evidence for the Imminence of the Rapture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:630 (April-June 2001):150-51.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, pp. 1195, 1236.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1185.

to him (cf. 19:10). It was the revelation of the new creation that evidently had moved John to respond this way *a second time*. John's strong reaction further attests the genuineness of the amazing revelations that he had received.

- 22:9 This angel, like the one in chapter 19, also rebuked John for worshipping him (cf. 19:10). This may have been the same angel as the one whom John had tried to worship earlier (19:10). People should worship *God*, not His servants. The angel presented himself as a "fellow servant" of John's; they both served God. He said he also served the other prophets besides John ("your brethren the prophets"), as well as all believers who pay attention to ("heed"; take to heart) what God has revealed (the words of the prophecy) in "this book." The specific mention of "the prophets" as a special group of "believers," here, heightens respect for all prophecy—and this prophecy in particular.

"The ultimate goal of the book's revelation is that it would inspire worship of God."<sup>1</sup>

- 22:10 John received instruction from the angel to leave his book (scroll) open ("do not seal"). He was not to close (seal) it, because the fulfillment of the events predicted was near, and people needed to be aware of them (cf. 1:11). God had told Daniel, on the other hand, to "seal up" and "conceal" (hide; put away and store; or possibly, in the context, "encrypt") his prophecy, evidently because there was more prophecy to come (Dan. 8:26; 12:4, 9-10; cf. Rev. 10:4). As an artist covers his work when it is under construction until it is complete, so God covered His picture of the future until He finished it.
- 22:11 The angel gave John this warning to pass along because "the time is near" (v. 10; cf. Dan. 12:10). This is a strong warning to unbelievers, not to put off becoming a believer in Jesus Christ. It presents the *hopelessness* of the final state of unbelievers. When Christ comes, people will not be able to change their destiny. What they are then, they will remain

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 1129.

forever! People should not expect some second chance in the future (after the Rapture), but should make the decision about worshipping (trusting in) God now, in the light of what they have read in this book (cf. Matt. 25:10; Luke 13:25; Heb. 9:27).

"It is not only true that the troubles of the last days will tend to fix the character of each individual according to the habits which he has already formed, but there will come a time when change will be impossible—when no further opportunity will be given for repentance on the one hand or for apostasy on the other."<sup>1</sup>

Remember the pharaoh of the Exodus.

"All four parts of v. 11 indicate with a tone of irony the fixity of state in which the good and the evil find themselves at a time when no further opportunity for repentance remains. The lesson is, 'Change while there is time.'"<sup>2</sup>

"No worse punishment can God lay on ungodly men than to give them up to themselves."<sup>3</sup>

This verse does not teach that for some people, now living in the Church Age, repentance and conversion are impossible (cf. v. 17). It is a guarantee of personal responsibility for one's decisions (cf. Ezek. 3:27; Matt. 11:15; Rev. 2:7; 13:9; et al.).

### C. THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS AND JOHN'S RESPONSE 22:12-20

22:12 Jesus Christ repeated His promise that He would return soon (v. 7, cf. 1:3; 22:20): "Behold, I am coming quickly."

"Nowhere is a date set, nor was there any definite promise that the consummation would occur within the lifetime of the first century Christians.

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 305.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 502.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1590.

Nevertheless, the possibility of the Lord's advent was always present ..."<sup>1</sup>

Christ's words continue through verse 19. Instead of promising a blessing, as He did earlier (v. 7; 16:5), this time He promised to judge. He will reward both the good and the bad ("every man according to what he has done"). This is a reward that *He has* (possesses the judgment and authority concerning; "My reward is with Me") to give ("render to every [person]"). This prospect strengthens the warning in verse 11. Jesus Christ will judge ("reward") *all people*—when all is said and done—on the basis of their works (cf. 20:12; Jer. 17:10; 2 Cor. 5:10-11).

"Whereas salvation is of grace, rewards are according to works."<sup>2</sup>

"God *gives* us His salvation, but He *pays* us for our good works."<sup>3</sup>

"The judgment seat of Christ can be a time of great regret [1 John 2:28], or it can be an occasion of supreme joy (see 2 Cor. 5:9-11)."<sup>4</sup>

In view of Jesus Christ's soon return, we who are Christians should be diligent to "lay up treasure in heaven" while we have the time (Matt. 6:19-21).

22:13 Jesus Christ offered three titles for Himself that give assurance that He both *can*—and will—fulfill His former promise to reward (cf. 1:4, 8, 17; 2:8; 21:6): (1) Jesus Christ, as well as God the Father, is "The Alpha and Omega" (cf. 1:8; 21:6). This title stresses His eternality and sovereignty. (2) "The first and the last" is also a title for Christ (1:17; 2:8) and the Father (Isa. 44:6; 48:12). It emphasizes that God is the cause and goal of history. (3) "The beginning and the end" describes *God* in 21:6

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<sup>1</sup>Tenney, p. 150.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 302. Cf. Matt. 16:27; Luke 23:41; 1 Cor. 3:8; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; 2 Tim. 4:14; Heb. 2:2; Rev. 2:23; 11:18, 18:6; 20:12, 13.

<sup>3</sup>Zane C. Hodges, "The Doctrine of Rewards, Part 1: Rewards and Grace," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 9:5 (September-October 1994):4.

<sup>4</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2202.

and *Christ* in Hebrews 12:2. It means that He finishes what He starts.<sup>1</sup>

- 22:14 This final blessing in the book (cf. 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7) announces God's favor on those who cleanse themselves ("wash their robes") by turning to Christ for salvation (cf. 7:14; 21:27). The "robe" one wears is a figure for one's *works*, which others see (19:8; cf. 7:14).

People who "wash their robes" in the blood of the Lamb will have access to ("the right to") the "tree of life" (i.e., they will live forever in the new creation). They will also "enter" the New Jerusalem "by [its] gates" (i.e., they will be able to enjoy intimate fellowship with God).

- 22:15 The opposite of the blessings described in verse 14 is exclusion from the New Jerusalem, namely, eternity in the Lake of Fire (20:15; 21:8). Jesus described the people who will not enter the city by the works that mark their lives of unbelief: "Dogs" is a metaphor for the morally impure (cf. Deut. 23:18; 2 Kings 8:13; Ps. 22:16, 20; Isa. 56:10; Matt. 7:6; 15:26; Mark 7:27; Phil 3:2-3). In John's day, many dogs were wild, aggressive scavengers.<sup>2</sup> The fate of these human "dogs" should warn believers not to fall into apostasy and its associated vices.<sup>3</sup> The other types of individuals named here appear in other lists of wicked unbelievers (cf. 21:8).

- 22:16 The combination "I, Jesus" occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. Here Jesus used it to stress His role in producing this book, and in this way to strengthen its authority (cf. vv. 7, 12). "My angel" is the main angel who revealed this material to John (cf. v. 6). Jesus' specially appointed angel gave the whole revelation ("these things") to John, but it was ultimately for *all the churches*, not just the seven "churches" of Asia Minor (cf. 1:4; chs. 2—3). (This is the first reference to the church (Gr. *ekklesia*) since the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.)

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:485; Johnson, p. 602.

<sup>3</sup>Wall, p. 266.

David established old Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but David's greatest Son will establish the New Jerusalem. However, Jesus was the *ancestor* of David, not just His *offspring*, "the root" as well as "the descendant of David" (cf. Isa. 11:1). Consequently He fulfills *all* the prophecies concerning *David's family*. Jesus also called Himself "the bright morning star" that was prophesied to come the second time (cf. 2:28).

As the appearance of the morning star heralds the dawn of each *new day on earth*, so the Second Coming will herald the dawn of a *new day in history*. He is the brightest of all *personal* stars, just as the morning star is the brightest *physical* star in the sky. He is the "Star" that, in fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy, would "come forth from Jacob" (Num. 24:17).

"The 'root' is buried in the ground where no one can see it, but the 'star' is in the heavens where everyone can see it."<sup>1</sup>

22:17 Jesus continued speaking to John. The "Spirit" is God's Holy Spirit, and the "bride" is probably the church, not the New Jerusalem, since this appeal is to the present bride of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was quoting both of these entities figuratively, reiterating their appeal *to Himself*, to *come back* to the earth (cf. 1:7). "The one who hears" is everyone who hears this book read in the churches, as was common in John's day. This includes modern readers of it, of course. These individuals, as well as the bride gathered corporately, should likewise pray for the Lord's return (cf. Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2).

"If the Holy Spirit, the church, and the Apostle John knew that Christ could not return at any moment because of other events or a time period that had to transpire first [i.e., Daniel's seventieth week], why did they command Him in a way that implied that He could come at any moment?"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:625.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 492.

<sup>3</sup>Showers, *Maranatha ...*, p. 142. See also his brief history of belief in the imminent coming of Christ on pp. 142-47.

Now Jesus turned the invitation around. He invited the "thirsty" to "come" to Him and "take the water of life [freely]" (cf. v. 1; 7:16; 21:6; Isa. 55:1; Matt. 5:6; John 6:35; 7:37). Unbelievers obviously need to "come" in order to take their first drink of this living water, which represents Christ and eternal life, but believers also need to keep *slaking* their thirst *by coming to Him* again and again. "The one who is thirsty" is the person who senses his or her need (cf. Matt. 5:6; John 4:10).

"The one who wishes" is broad enough to include every single individual. This is an unusually winsome invitation (cf. 21:6; Matt. 11:28). The "water of life" costs the one who comes for it nothing ("let whoever [the one who] wishes, take the water of life without cost"). It costs us *nothing*, but it cost Jesus Christ *everything* to give Himself for us.

22:18 *Jesus* continued to speak in this verse. The high degree of authority of this statement, which continues in the next verse, supports this conclusion. This warning sharply contrasts with the invitation that the Lord had just extended (cf. Deut. 4:2; 7:15; 12:32; 28:27, 60; Prov. 30:5-6; Jer. 26:2). "This book" refers to the Book of Revelation. "The prophecy of" it summarizes the contents of the book. Those who *hear* it are not only "everyone" in the seven churches, but all subsequent *hearers* (cf. 1:3). This includes copyists, translators, and teachers of it.

"He is not concerned about possible mechanical errors in transmission or mistakes of judgment in interpreting his message, but in deliberate distortions and perversions of it."<sup>1</sup>

*Adding* material to (v. 18), or deleting sections from (v. 19), the prophecies contained "in this book," will result in punishment from God. Specifically, God will visit the offender with "the plagues ... written in this book." This seems to imply that anyone who does this will either lose his or her salvation, or not have been a believer in the first place. Another

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 295. Cf. Swete, p. 313.

possibility is that Jesus was using hyperbole to stress the heinousness of this sin. The best solution seems to be that "the plagues ... written in this book" are severe judgments from God.

What Jesus meant here was that anyone who *perverts the teaching* of "this book" (Revelation) will experience a judgment from God that is similar to the judgments that will come on the earth-dwellers during the Tribulation. Jesus warned of "plagues," not loss of salvation. How important it is to understand and communicate God's truth accurately, especially the truths God revealed in *this book* (cf. Gal. 1:6-7)! Thomas believed that this verse announced the termination of the gift of prophecy and the cessation of revelation in the church.<sup>1</sup> However, that seems to be going beyond what Jesus really said.

Flavius Josephus wrote a similar statement claiming the accuracy of his history in his preface to *Antiquities of the Jews*:

"As I proceed, therefore, I shall accurately describe what is contained in our records, in the order of time that belongs to them; for I have already promised so to do throughout this undertaking, and this without adding any thing to what is therein contained, or taking away any thing therefrom."<sup>2</sup>

22:19 Taking away "his part" from the tree of life and the New Jerusalem does not mean the person will lose his or her salvation, either. If the person who corrupts Revelation is an unbeliever, he or she will have *no part* (share) *at all* in the blessings of the new creation. If he or she is a believer, the part (share) lost must be some special privilege in the Eternal State. In other words, a believer who perverts the teaching of this book may lose part of his or her eternal reward. To say

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Thomas, "The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Rev 22:18," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32:2 (June 1989):201-16.

<sup>2</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, preface, par. 3.



that a true child of God would never tamper with these Scriptures is simply naïve. "Anyone" means anyone.

The Book of Revelation opened with a *blessing* on all who obey its instructions (1:3), and it closes with a *strong curse* on all who disobey it.

22:20 Evidently John now quoted Jesus' promise to come soon: "Yes, I am coming quickly" (cf. vv. 7, 12; 2:16; 3:11; 16:15). Christ's promise to come soon was His response to the prayers of the Spirit, the bride, and the faithful hearers (v. 17). "He who testifies to these things" is Jesus. The things in view are the words of Jesus in verses 12-19, but beyond that everything in this book (cf. 1:2). This is the third time in this pericope that we read that Jesus Christ promised to come "quickly" (Gr. word meaning "quickly," "any moment," or "soon"; vv. 7, 12). How can we doubt His word?

"Nor is it here alone, but throughout the New Testament in general, that such expressions are used. Everywhere is the promised Apocalypse of the Lord Jesus represented as close at hand, liable to occur at any time. The impression thus made upon the early Christians was, that Christ might come at any day or hour, even in their own lifetime. Exactly when he would come, was nowhere told them. ...

"Ever, as the Church moves on through time, and above all in the days in which we live, the next thing for every Christian to be looking for in this world is the coming of Christ to fulfill what is written in this Book. The Bible tells of nothing between us and that day."<sup>1</sup>

An exhortation follows each of the three promises of the Lord's soon return: an appeal to the will (v. 7), and appeal to the intellect (v. 12), and an appeal to the emotions (v. 20).

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 523.

John added his "Amen," affirming his belief that Jesus would come soon, and he voiced his personal petition that He would do so as He promised: "Come, Lord Jesus." This verse and the next one are the only two verses *in Revelation* that refer to Jesus Christ as the "Lord Jesus," though this title is common in other New Testament books. It acknowledges Jesus' deity and thus His right to judge.

"The first word we hear man address to the Lord in the Bible is the solemn word 'I heard they voice in the garden, and I was afraid' (Gen. 3:10). The last word addressed to the Lord by redeemed man is 'even so, come, Lord Jesus.' And between these two utterances in Genesis and Revelation is the story of redemption."<sup>1</sup>

The following chart compares the first creation in Genesis 1—3 with the final creation in Revelation 21—22.<sup>2</sup>

	<b>First Creation</b> (Gen. 1—3)	<b>Final Creation</b> (Rev. 21—22)
<b>Chaos</b>	Abyss	No sea
<b>Source of light</b>	Luminaries (sun, etc.)	God
<b>Division of light</b>	Day and night	No night
<b>Creation</b>	Under a curse	Curse lifted
<b>Human moral state</b>	Capable of sin	Sinless
<b>Human physical state</b>	Mortal and painful	Immortal and painless
<b>Human political state</b>	Divided in allegiance to God	Universal allegiance to God

<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:284.

<sup>2</sup>From Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 169.

Human spiritual state	Banished from God	God with humans
Sanctification	Seventh day	Universal
God	Invisible	Visible
Son of God	Concealed	Revealed
Water	Provides physical life	Provides spiritual life

#### D. THE FINAL BENEDICTION 22:21

This benediction wishes God's enabling "grace" on "all" who read the book. Aune called it an "epistolary postscript."<sup>1</sup>

"As in revelation, so in history: **grace** shall have the last word!"<sup>2</sup>

God's "grace" makes *faith*, for the unbelieving reader, and *faithfulness*, for the believing reader, possible (cf. 1:4). This benediction is a *prayer* that "all" its hearers and readers may respond to the revelation of this book appropriately. It is an unusual way to end an apocalypse, but it was a common way to close a first-century Christian letter (cf. 1:1).

"We are reminded here again, as in 1:1-4, that the Apocalypse is broadly conceived of as an epistle, the contents of which are apocalyptic and prophetic in genre (see on 1:1-3)."<sup>3</sup>

"*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* begins and concludes the Book of Revelation (1:4), implying that the message of grace and the free gift of eternal life in Christ (see Eph. 2:8, 9)—not merely the message of judgment upon unbelievers—can be found in this book."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1238.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 1156.

<sup>4</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2202.

## Appendix 1

### Schools of Interpretation of Revelation

Name	Viewpoint	History	Theology	Writers <sup>1</sup>
<b>Idealist</b>	Describes the perennial battle between good and evil, God and Satan, symbolically. Events are not real or predictive.	Most recent view.	Mostly liberal in theology though some conservatives hold it.	G. Beale, R. Calkins, P. Carrington, W. Hendriksen, M. Kiddle, W. Milligan, P. S. Minear, M. Rissi, et al.
<b>Preterist</b>	Describes what happened in John's day (i.e., the first century)	Alcasar, a Spanish Jesuit, introduced the view in 1614.	Most contemporary scholars hold it (i.e., liberals, amillennialists, and postmillennialists).	D. E. Aune, W. Barclay, G. B. Caird, R. H. Charles, J. M. Ford, T. F. Glasson, H. Hannegraf, W. Harrington, W. G. Heidt, J. Moffatt, A. Pieters, R. C. Sproul, R. Summers, J. P. M.

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<sup>1</sup>See Walvoord, *End Times*, pp. 225-28, for a bibliography that includes the tribulational and millennial positions of many writers who have published books on prophecy.

				Sweet, H. B. Swete, et al.
Historicist	Describes the past history of the church from the first century to the present.	Joachim of Floris, a Franciscan monk, introduced this view about 1200.	Most who hold this view are amillennialists and postmillennialists.	H. Alford, J. Calvin, E. B. Elliott, M. Luther, et al.
Futurist	Describes what will precede and follow Jesus Christ's Second Coming.	Held by many early church fathers including J. Martyr and Irenaeus (second century), and Hippolytus and Victorinus (third century).	Most who hold this view are premillennialists including dispensationalists.	G. R. Beasley-Murray, I. T. Beckwith, F. F. Bruce, R. C. H. Lenski, J. N. Darby, V. Eller, A. F. Johnson, W. Kelly, G. E. Ladd, H. Lilje, L. Morris, R. H. Mounce, J. D. Pentecost, C. C. Ryrie, J. A. Seiss, J. B. Smith, M. C. Tenney, R. L. Thomas, J. F.

				Walvoord, et al.
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## Appendix 2

### Roman Emperors in New Testament Times

Emperor	Important Events	Bible Books Written
<b>Augustus</b> (31 B.C.- A.D. 15)	Ordered the census that took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1)	
<b>Tiberius</b> (A.D. 15- 37)	Jesus' earthly ministry conducted during his reign (Luke 3:1; 20:22, 25; 23:2; John 19:12, 15)	
<b>Caligula/ Gaius</b> (A.D. 37- 41)	Appointed Herod Agrippa I king over Palestine (Acts 12:1)	Matthew (A.D. 40-70)
<b>Claudius</b> (A.D. 41- 54)	Extensive famines (Acts 11:28) Expelled the Jews, including Priscilla and Aquilla, from Rome (Acts 18:2)	James (A.D. 45-48)  Galatians (A.D. 49)  1 & 2 Thess. (A.D. 51)
<b>Nero</b> (A.D. 54- 68)	Paul appealed for trial before him (Acts 25:11) Favored Christianity early in his reign, but when Rome burned in 64 A.D., he blamed the Christians, and from then on persecuted them Had Paul and Peter executed (according to early Christian tradition)	1 & 2 Cor. (A.D. 56)  Romans (A.D. 57)  Luke (A.D. 57-59)  Prison Epistles (A.D. 60-62)

		Acts (A.D. 60-62)  1 Tim. (A.D. 62-66)  Titus (A.D. 62-66)  Mark (A.D. 63-70)  1 Pet. (A.D. 64)  2 Tim. (A.D. 67)  2 Pet. (A.D. 67-68)  Jude (A.D. 67-80)
<b>Galba</b> (A.D. 68-69)		Hebrews (A.D. 68-69)
<b>Otho</b> (A.D. 69)		
<b>Vitellius</b> (A.D. 69)		
<b>Vespasian</b> (A.D. 69-79)	Crushed the Jewish revolt against Rome (A.D. 66-70) <sup>1</sup>	

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<sup>1</sup>See Josephus, *The Wars . . .*, books 3 and 4.



<b>Titus</b> (A.D. 79-81)	Vespasian's son, who assisted his father in the wars against the Jews, and destroyed Jerusalem (A.D. 70). <sup>1</sup>	
<b>Domitian</b> (A.D. 81-96)		John (A.D. 85-95)  1, 2 & 3 John (A.D. 90-95)  Revelation (A.D. 95-96)
<b>Nerva</b> (A.D. 96-98)		
<b>Trajan</b> (A.D. 98-117)		

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., books 3-7.

## Appendix 3

### Symbols Used in the Book of Revelation That the Book Itself Interprets

1. The seven lampstands (1:12) are seven churches (1:20).
2. The seven stars (1:16) are seven angels or messengers (1:20).
3. The morning star (2:28; 22:16), the male child (12:5), and the root and offspring of David (22:16) are Jesus Christ (19:15; 22:16).
4. The Lamb (17:14) is Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14) and Jerusalem's lamp (21:23).
5. The white horse rider (19:11) is Faithful and True (19:11), the Word of God (19:13), and King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16).
6. The city of my God (3:12), the Lamb's bride (19:7; 21:9), and the holy city (21:10) are the New Jerusalem (3:12; 21:10; cf. 21:2).
7. The seven lamps of fire (4:5) and the seven eyes (5:6) are the seven spirits of God (4:5; 5:6).
8. The incense in the golden bowls (5:8) is the prayers of the saints (5:8).
9. The fallen star (9:1) is the angel or messenger of the abyss (9:11).
10. The great city (11:8), Sodom (11:8), and Egypt (11:8) are Jerusalem (11:8).
11. The stars of heaven (12:4) are the angels or messengers of Satan (12:9).
12. The great dragon (12:9), the old serpent (12:9), and the devil (12:9) are Satan (12:9).
13. Time, times, and half a time (12:14) are 1260 days (12:6).
14. The beast out of the earth (13:11) is the false prophet (19:20).

15. The waters (17:1) are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (17:15).
16. The woman (17:3) is Babylon the great (17:5), the great city (18:10) that reigns over the kings of the earth (17:18).
17. The seven heads (17:9) are seven mountains (17:9) which are seven kings (17:10).
18. The beast (17:11) is the eighth king (17:11).
19. The ten horns (17:12) are ten kings (17:12).
20. The fine linen (19:8) is the righteous acts of the saints (19:8).
21. The faithful souls come to life (20:4) is the first resurrection (20:5).
22. The lake of fire (20:14) is the second death (20:14).
23. The Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb (21:22) are the temple in Jerusalem (21:22).

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