

# Revelation

## Authorship

The book itself names John as the author (1:1, 4, 9; 21:2; 22:8). The supposition that this is John the apostle is supported by church tradition, certain similarities with the Gospel of John, and the author's knowledge of and relationship with the churches of Asia Minor.<sup>1</sup>

## Date

A majority of scholarly opinion places the writing of Revelation during the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, c. A.D. 90-95. Arguments for this date include the rather weighty testimony of Irenaeus who was acquainted with Polycarp, a disciple of John. Other evidence includes the existence and condition of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3, the nature of Roman persecution under earlier emperors (notably Nero), and the book's dependence upon other New Testament writings, particularly Matthew and Luke. A strong case can be made for an earlier date, c. A.D. 68. An early date results in a better understanding of the reference to seven rulers in Revelation 17:10 as well as accounting for the implication that the temple in Jerusalem is still standing (ch.11).<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Setting

As an epistle, Revelation addresses seven churches of Asia Minor in the later part of the first century A.D. As a prophecy, Revelation addresses the period just subsequent to the end of the church age, though exactly when that will be is still unknown.

## Original Readers

Revelation was written as a circular letter to seven churches in Asia Minor. These Christians were in need of encouragement and, in some cases rebuke, with respect to living under the Lordship of Christ in their respective circumstances. As such they were, no doubt, to

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of authorship issues see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* 4<sup>th</sup> rev. edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 932-47; and Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 440-45.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 221-53; Robinson observes that "the simplest hypothesis is to take literally the indication of 17.10 that Galba is on the throne and to put the book late in 68, some six months after the suicide of Nero, when, with the public collapse of the structure of authority, the imminent end of 'Babylon' and all it stood for might plausibly have seemed in sight" (248) though this must not necessarily be taken to indicate that John was somehow manufacturing his vision on the basis of his evaluation of the current Roman situation. See also Zane Hodges, *Power to Make War* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1995), 33-36, who argues for seeing Galba as the king who "is" in 17:10.

be taken as representative of other churches who would face similar situations. There is both an individual and a corporate aspect to the various pronouncements and predictions.

### **Occasion**

Revelation was written at the instigation of the Lord Jesus, who had received permission to reveal certain things about the present condition of the seven churches and also about how the end of the age would come. The book is not a product of John's desire to instruct and encourage, though he certainly possessed a shepherd's concern for these people. Revelation was undoubtedly occasioned by the Lord's knowledge of these seven churches' needs for encouragement as well as the need of all churches throughout the age to hear this message.

### **Special Issues**

Hermeneutical Issue. With respect to interpretation one must decide whether Revelation is a purely human composition creatively reflecting on the historical situation during the first century as a way of encouraging Christian faithfulness, an allegory that denies any literal reality to the events and persons described, as relating to events that had already transpired in the first century, as depicting the course of church history (Rev. 4-20), or as describing for the most part (Rev. 4-22) the future fulfillment of the seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy and beyond.<sup>3</sup> The last view is most consistent with the content of the book, especially given the stated intent (cf. 1:7) and derived application (22:6-21). Revelation is obviously filled with symbolism. As apocalyptic literature these symbols must be interpreted in accordance with their previous use in Scripture. Thus, the control for understanding Revelation's signification (cf. 1:1) is how the symbols are verifiably employed in the inspired Word.

Relation to Daniel. The prophecies of Daniel set forth a chronological framework for the outworking of God's program for the nation of Israel. Revelation primarily amplifies and develops the seventieth week of Daniel 9:25-27. Daniel is the outline or skeleton; Revelation serves to flesh out that picture, though not necessarily in a strictly chronological manner.

### **Theme Statement**

Jesus Christ presently rules over His own and will one day return to judge the nations and establish the kingdom on earth.

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<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of the various approaches see Gary Cohen, *Understanding Revelation: A Comprehensive Study of the Chronology and Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978; Christian Beacon Press, 1968), 21-49.

**Outline**

- I. Prologue: The Revelation of Jesus Christ is commissioned.....1:1-8
  - A. Report of the divine commission.....1:1-3
    - 1. Jesus is authorized to reveal his unveiling. ....1:1a
    - 2. John bore witness to all he saw. ....1:1b-2
    - 3. All who read and keep the revelation are blessed. ....1:3
  - B. Greeting of divine validation. ....1:4-8
    - 1. Triune authentication: John wishes grace in the name of the triune God. ....1:4-5a
    - 2. Honorific dedication: John dedicates his work to Jesus Christ.....1:5b-6
    - 3. Summary prediction: John expresses certainty in Jesus' return.....1:7
    - 4. Divine affirmation: Jesus affirms his sure return. ....1:8
- II. The Eternal Victor: Vision of the things which John had seen. ....1:9-20
  - A. John is instructed to record his vision for the churches. ....1:9-11
  - B. John is overwhelmed by a vision of the Lord.....1:12-20
    - 1. Lampstands: Presence in the churches. ....1:12-13a
    - 2. Robe with gold band: Dignity of exalted position. ....1:13b
    - 3. White head and hair: Wisdom, dignity and honor.....1:14a
    - 4. Eyes like flames of fire: Penetrating insight .....1:14b
    - 5. Feet like fine brass: Strength and stability. ....1:15a
    - 6. Voice as many waters: Awe inspiring power of his word. ....1:15b
    - 7. Stars in hand: Sovereignty over his messengers. ....1:16a
    - 8. Sword from mouth: Power of divine judgment. ....1:16b
    - 9. Face like the sun: Glory of divine perfection. ....1:16c
  - C. John's fear is redirected toward service. ....1:17-20
- III. The Vigilant Overseer: Vision of the things which are. ....2:1-3:22
  - A. Ephesus: Vision of the loveless church. ....2:1-7
    - 1. Commission: Jesus is present to rule.....2:1
    - 2. Commendation: The church is steadfastly pure. ....2:2-3
    - 3. Condemnation: The church had left its first love. ....2:4
    - 4. Exhortation/Prediction: The church must return to its first deeds or loose its opportunity for service.....2:5-6
    - 5. Admonition/Promise: Overcomers will eat of the tree of life.....2:7
  - B. Smyrna: Vision of the persecuted church. ....2:8-11
    - 1. Commission: Jesus is eternally sovereign.....2:8
    - 2. Commendation: The church is wealthy in tribulation.....2:9
    - 3. Exhortation/Prediction: The church must not fear suffering even though persecution is certainly coming. ....2:10
    - 4. Admonition/Promise: Overcomers will not be hurt by the second death. ....2:11
  - C. Pergamos: Vision of the compromising church. ....2:12-17
    - 1. Commission: Christ wields the authority of discernment. ....2:12
    - 2. Commendation: The church was steadfast in confession.....2:13
    - 3. Condemnation: The church held the doctrine of Balaam and Nicolaitans. ....2:14-15

- 4. Exhortation/Prediction: The church needed to repent or be visited with the judgment of the word. ....2:16
- 5. Admonition/Promise: Overcomers will eat hidden manna and receive a white stone.....2:17
- D. Thyatira: Vision of the corrupt church. ....2:18-29
  - 1. Commission: Christ sees truthfully and will stand against evil.....2:18
  - 2. Commendation: The church had experienced continual growth. ....2:19
  - 3. Condemnation: The church allowed immorality to go unchecked.....2:20-21
  - 4. Prediction/Exhortation: The church will experience physical discipline for serious sin so it must hold fast what it had.....2:22-25
  - 5. Promise/Admonition: Overcomers will have a sphere of rule and splendor like Christ's. ....2:26-29
- E. Sardis: Vision of the dead church. ....3:1-6
  - 1. Commission: Christ is present in full power and authority.....3:1a
  - 2. Condemnation: The church's works did not betray real life.....3:1b
  - 3. Exhortation/Prediction: The church must be watchful, mindful, and faithful lest it be set upon by Christ like a thief. ....3:2-3
  - 4. Promise/Admonition: Overcomers will walk in white. ....3:4-6
- F. Philadelphia: Vision of the faithful church. ....3:7-13
  - 1. Commission: Christ is the faithful key to life.....3:7
  - 2. Commendation: The church manifested faithfulness and perseverance. ....3:8
  - 3. Prediction/Exhortation: The church will be exalted and protected from the hour of trial; it should hold fast what it has. ....3:9-11
  - 4. Promise/Admonition: Overcomers will have the special privilege of upholding the Name. ....3:12-13
- G. Laodicea: Vision of the lukewarm church. ....3:14-22
  - 1. Commission: Christ is the faithful and true witness.....3:14
  - 2. Condemnation: The church neither evangelized nor mended. ....3:15
  - 3. Prediction/Exhortation: The church will be removed from spiritual opportunity unless it replenishes its spiritual resource.....3:16-20
  - 4. Promise/Admonition: Overcomers will share in the privileged fellowship of reigning with Christ. ....3:21-22
- IV. The Valiant Conqueror: Vision of the things which shall take place hereafter. ....4:1-22:5
  - (Summary: John is invited to heaven).....4:1
  - A. Vision of the Throne Room of Heaven. ....4:2-11
    - 1. The resplendence of the Throne Room and its occupants are described. ....4:2-7
    - 2. The activity of worship in the throne room is recounted. ....4:8-11
  - B. First Vision of the Day of the Lord: World-wide conflict and calamity means death for many but also testimony and salvation before the Day of the Lord. ....5:1-8:1
    - 1. Heavenly Prelude: The Lamb is able to open the scroll of judgment. .5:1-14
      - a. The Lamb that was slain is therefore worthy.....5:1-7
      - b. The Lamb that was slain is thereby worshipped. ....5:8-14
    - 2. Six Seals of Judgment: Personal agents produce natural calamities of a more general and non-specific nature.....6:1-17

- a. First Seal: A conqueror goes forth to conquer. ....6:1-2
- b. Second Seal: Conflict is let loose on the earth. ....6:3-4
- c. Third Seal: Scarcity afflicts the earth. ....6:5-6
- d. Fourth Seal: Death engulfs the earth. ....6:7-8
- e. Fifth Seal: Martyrs cry out to be avenged on earth. ....6:9-11
- f. Sixth Seal: The Great Day of Wrath is fulfilled. ....6:12-17
- 3. Earthly Parenthesis: Many avoid judgment and are able to stand in the Day of the Lord. ....7:1-17
  - a. A multitude is sealed for tribulation witness upon the earth. ....7:1-8
  - b. A multitude is saved in the tribulation for worship in heaven. ....7:9-17
- 4. Seventh Seal of Silence: A dramatic pause. ....8:1
- C. Second Vision of the Day of the Lord: Despite global calamity and severe and sustained Satanic persecution, Israel is spared from the judgment of the Day of the Lord. ....8:2-14:20
  - 1. Heavenly Prelude: The prayers of the saints invoke God's judgment upon the earth. ....8:2-6
  - 2. Six Trumpets of Judgment: Angelic agents call forth various other agents to inflict supernatural calamities on a universal scale. ....8:7-9:21
    - a. First Trumpet: Fire burns the vegetation of the earth. ....8:7
    - b. Second Trumpet: Fire pollutes the sea with death. ....8:8-9
    - c. Third Trumpet: The fresh waters are polluted with death. ....8:10-11
    - d. Fourth Trumpet: Destruction is cast into the heavens. ....8:12
    - e. Three woes are announced. ....8:13
      - 1) Fifth Trumpet: Evil angelic hosts are loosed on mankind. ....9:1-12
      - 2) Sixth Trumpet: Four demonic agents are released to lead armies against all mankind. ....9:13-21
  - 3. Earthly Parenthesis: The time of fulfillment is at hand. ....10:1-11:14
    - a. A mighty angel delivers the sealed scroll of completion. ....10:1-11
      - 1) The delay in the Lord's coming is ended. ....10:1-7
      - 2) The coming judgment is both sweet and bitter. ....10:8-11
    - b. Death of the two witnesses signals the beginning of the end. ....11:1-14
      - 1) The end period is introduced. ....11:1-2
      - 2) The witnesses will have prevailed for 1260 days. ....11:3-6
      - 3) The witnesses will be killed by the beast. ....11:7-10
      - 4) The witnesses will be raised to heaven. ....11:11-12
      - 5) An earthquake will strike Jerusalem. ....11:13-14
  - 4. Seventh Trumpet of Judgment: The kingdom of Christ is established on earth. ....11:15-19
  - 5. Postlude: Depiction of the principals of the Great Tribulation drama. 12:1-14:20
    - a. The Woman, the Child and the Dragon are depicted. ....12:1-17
      - 1) Israel, after Christ's departure, is persecuted by Satan during the Tribulation. ....12:1-6
      - 2) Satan is cast to the earth during the Tribulation. ....12:7-12
      - 3) Satan persecutes Israel during the Tribulation. ....12:13-17
    - b. The two beasts are depicted. ....13:1-18
      - 1) The beast from the sea is depicted as a Gentile authority with satanic enablement. ....13:1-10

- 2) The beast from the land is depicted as a Jewish prophet who brings worship to the beast from the sea.....13:11-18
- c. The Lamb maintains His presence upon the earth.....14:1-20
  - 1) The Lamb directs the sealed witnesses.....14:1-13
    - a) The witnesses act in accordance with heaven. ....14:1-3
    - b) The witnesses live in devotion to the Lamb. ....14:4-5
    - c) The witnesses proclaim the everlasting gospel. ....14:6-13
      - i) It is a gospel of worship and salvation. ....14:6-7
      - ii) It is a gospel of judgment and doom .....14:8
      - iii) It is a gospel of wrath and indignation.....14:9-11
      - iv) The witnesses endure through an everlasting hope.....14:12-13
    - d) The Son of Man reaps the harvest of the earth. ....14:14-16
    - e) Two angels reap the grapes of wrath. ....14:17-20
- D. Third Vision of the Day of the Lord: Divine wrath is inflicted directly upon unrepentant humanity in a final judgment.....15:1-18:24
  - 1. Heavenly Prelude: The songs of the overcomers initiate the completion of the wrath of God. ....15:1-16:1
    - a. Seven angels are entrusted with the seven plagues. ....15:1
    - b. Songs sung by the overcomers declare the manifestation of the judgments of God. ....15:2-4
    - c. The vindictive judgments of God proceed from the temple in heaven. ....15:5-16:1
  - 2. Six Bowls of Judgment: Severe judgments are inflicted directly upon the worshippers of the beast in final preparation for the Lord's return.....16:2-12
    - a. First Bowl: Worshippers of the beast are afflicted with sores.....16:2
    - b. Second Bowl: The sea becomes blood resulting in the extinguishing of all its life. ....16:3
    - c. Third Bowl: The waters become blood in righteous retribution for the shed blood of saints and prophets.....16:4-7
    - d. Fourth Bowl: The sun's heat scorches unrepentant humanity.....16:8-9
    - e. Fifth Bowl: Darkness drives unrepentant humanity to a self-inflicted torment over distress with its plight.....16:10-11
    - f. Sixth Bowl: The Euphrates is dried up in preparation for the final defeat of the enemies of God.....16:12
  - 3. Earthly Parenthesis: Deceiving spirits empower the dragon, beast, and false prophet to summon the kings of the earth to battle against the Lord. ....16:13-16
  - 4. Seventh Bowl of Judgment: The earth is shaken in a final paroxysm of preparatory purification.....16:17-21
    - a. An angel announces the completion of judgment. ....16:17
    - b. A great earthquake strikes the earth in judgment. ....16:18-20
    - c. Great hail falls on blasphemous humanity in judgment. ....16:21
  - 5. Postlude: Rome, depicted as religious and commercial Babylon, will fall, never again to defy the Lord. ....17:1-18:24
    - a. Religious Babylon will fall through the treachery of the beast.....17:1-18

- 1) Babylon is depicted as a false religious system of world-wide proportions. ....17:1-6
- 2) Babylon is delivered to the beast by her ruling authorities. ....17:7-18
  - a) The beast is identified as a revived king. ....17:7-11
  - b) The ten horns are given authority by the beast and make war with the Lamb. ....17:12-14
  - c) The ten horns will destroy the harlot in obeisance to the beast. ....17:15-18
- b. Commercial Babylon will fall through an act of God. ....18:1-24
  - 1) Babylon is denounced for her fornication and luxury and declared to be under God's judgment. ....18:1-8
  - 2) Babylon's demise will be mourned by the world and rejoiced over by heaven. ....18:9-20
  - 3) Babylon's doom will be final. ....18:21-24
- E. Vision of the Kingdom of God come to Earth. ....19:1-20:15
  - 1. The kingdom is established. ....19:1-20:3
    - a. Heaven rejoices and declares the reign of the Lord. ....19:1-6
    - b. Heaven declares the marriage of the Lamb. ....19:7-10
    - c. Heaven sends forth the King and Lord to make war. ....19:11-16
    - d. The Beast and his armies are defeated. ....19:17-21
    - e. Satan is bound for 1000 years. ....20:1-3
  - 2. Christ rules over the kingdom for a millennium. ....20:4-6
  - 3. Satan leads a rebellion against the King. ....20:7-10
  - 4. Final judgment takes place at the Great White Throne. ....20:11-15
- F. Vision of the Eternal State: Heaven has descended to earth with the Lamb at its center. ....21:1-22:5
  - 1. John sees the new heaven and the new earth. ....21:1
  - 2. John sees the New Jerusalem. ....21:2-27
    - a. The inhabitants of the city are described. ....21:2-8
    - b. The environs of the city are detailed. ....21:9-21
    - c. The temple of the city is delineated. ....21:22-27
    - d. The throne of God and of the Lamb define the city's character. ...22:1-5
- V. Conclusion: Since these things are certain, people ought to live in rapt anticipation of Jesus' return. ....22:6-21
  - A. Jesus' words stand ready to be fulfilled. ....22:6-11
  - B. Jesus' reward stands ready to be delivered. ....22:12-15
  - C. Jesus' return must not be taken lightly nor misrepresented. ....22:16-21

### Theme Statement

Jesus Christ presently rules over His own and will one day return to judge the nations and establish the kingdom on earth.

## Theme Development

The book of Revelation is an epistle, an apocalypse, and a prophecy.<sup>4</sup> It serves as a conclusion not only of the events set in motion by Jesus Christ but with the program of God begun in Genesis. As such, it is informed by the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. However, it also completes those writings as to the final outworking of God's program of blessing for the ages.

### I. Prologue: The Revelation of Jesus Christ is commissioned (1:1-8).

#### A. Report of the divine commission (1:1-3).

The book of Revelation is the “unveiling” (*apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ. This is to be taken in two senses: (1) a disclosure of Jesus Christ as the present overseer of the churches and as the coming ruler of the earth and (2) a disclosure given by Jesus Christ to his servant, John. Jesus has been authorized to reveal the future scenario of His return to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the sense that John had signified to him the entire content of the book it is prophecy. John was not relating his understanding of future events by means of his own creative analogies. Rather, he was, reporting, as a commissioned witness, exactly what he had seen. The “signification” of the conveying angel is communication by way of symbols to be sure, but symbols that ultimately derive from Old Testament images, the meaning of which could be determined by the readership on the basis of their common understanding of all that God had said and done before. The meaningful sharability of this communication is the basis for the promised blessing to those who would read or hear and then keep what had been written (1:3). Careful attention to these opening words are crucial to a proper interpretation of the book.

#### B. Greeting of divine validation (1:4-8).

Using a customary form of epistolary greeting, John invokes the Trinity as the readership's source of grace and peace, thus lending divine authentication to what he is about to proclaim (1:4-5a). He dedicates the work to the One who is its center, Jesus Christ (1:5b-6). The announcement of Christ's coming (1:7), when taken at face value, forces the interpreter to discount any scheme of interpretation that negates the public, visible, bodily return of the Lord to the earth. The direct quotation of Jesus' words in 1:8 serves to further validate the divine source of John's message and to underscore the centrality of the Lord's return to that message.

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<sup>4</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* New Century Bible Commentary rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 12-29.



## II. The Eternal Victor: Vision of the things which John had seen (1:9-20).

Most commentators see 1:19 as providing an inspired outline of the book's contents that can be taken as either a three-fold or a two-fold division. The three-fold division (followed in this study) takes the "things which you have seen" as referring to the vision of 1:9-20, the "things which are" as relating to the messages to the seven churches (2:2-3:22), and "the things which will take place after this" as referring to the rest of the book beginning in 4:1. The two-fold division takes "the things which you have seen" as referring to the whole book which is then divided into two sections: (1) "the things which are" (1:9-3:22) and (2) "the things which will take place after this" (4:1-22:5). Either alternative is acceptable.

In John's first vision he is overwhelmed with the signified representation of the Lord Jesus Christ. The various qualities depicted were essential to Christ's oversight of His church and to His imminent victorious return.

## III. The Vigilant Overseer: Vision of the things which are (2:1-3:22).

The letters to the seven churches were written to actual assemblies of believers in the named locations. However, they are also representative of all churches, everywhere, then and throughout the age (note the repeated command ". . . let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.") The general pattern of each letter includes the addressee, an identifying description of the Lord who is sending the message, a statement of Jesus' knowledge of the church's performance and/or spirit, condemnation of some failure or deficiency (in five of the seven), a commendation of some sterling quality (5 of 7) with a promise of reward, and various exhortations all underscored by the admonition "He who has an ear . . ." The main message to each church seems somehow related to a physical, cultural, social, political, or religious feature of the town in which it existed.

### A. Ephesus: Vision of the loveless church (2:1-7).

Ephesus was a city whose harbor was continually silting in. This church was challenged to keep Christ's presence as a vital reality by maintaining a life of love and good works.

### B. Smyrna: Vision of the persecuted church (2:8-11).

Smyrna was a city of great beauty and culture and known for its loyalty to Rome. The church had been greatly persecuted. The challenge was to remain loyal to the Lord even in death.

C. Pergamos: Vision of the compromising church (2:12-17).

Pergamos was the center of worship for four pagan deities, boasting a great altar to Zeus. It was a center of Caesar worship. The church, compromised by false doctrine, idolatry and sexual immorality, is challenged to repent.

D. Thyatira: Vision of the corrupt church (2:18-29).

As an active commercial center, the pursuit of material things would have been a cultural staple, which always presented the threat of idolatry for Christians. Trade guilds also posed problems for a separated church. Although the church's works were great, it had been compromise by the immorality and idolatry of a member.

E. Sardis: Vision of the dead church (3:1-6).

Though built on a seemingly impregnable cliff, Sardis had been conquered by Cyrus. Like the city, the church was smug in its outward display, but in great need of strengthening itself for the tasks that remained.

F. Philadelphia: Vision of the faithful church (3:7-13).

Like the famous act of brotherly loyalty and devotion commemorated in the city's name, the church had kept the Lord's word and not denied his name. The temptation is always to make a name for oneself rather than honor the One who truly deserves it.<sup>5</sup>

G. Laodicea: Vision of the lukewarm church (3:14-22).

Laodicea brought hot and cold water from outside the city, both of which arrived lukewarm. If the church is failing to carry on either of its two-pronged ministry (the refreshment of the gospel and the healing of the spiritually weak) then it has no warrant to continue.<sup>6</sup>

IV. The Valiant Conqueror: Vision of the things which shall take place hereafter (4:1-22:5).

This section picks up the "after this" of 1:19. After the church age has run its course, the seventieth week of Daniel will be fulfilled according to the prophecies set forth in 4:1-19:21. Daniel gives the chronological framework. Revelation fills in the details. There are three series of judgments, described as seals, trumpets, and bowls. Each of them ends with what appears to be a statement of the Lord's return (cf. 6:17; 11:15; 16:17). Besides the decipherment of the symbolic

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<sup>5</sup> The promise in 3:10 is often taken by dispensationalists as referring to the rapture of the church. This, of course, only works if the seven churches represent the course of church history as well as types of churches and tendencies in every age. See Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 283-90.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. 3:20 is not an evangelistic verse but an appeal to the church to open up the door of fellowship so that they might know the Lord's presence to refresh and heal.

signification of Revelation, the main problem for the interpreter lies in relating the three sets of judgments to each other. There are two basic schemes proposed: the successive view and the parallel view.<sup>7</sup> It is very common to view the second and third sets of judgments as proceeding out from the previous one and continuing on in a successive fashion. One of the problems with this scheme is that each series seems to end in a statement of the Lord's return. The second scheme, or parallel view, sees the three sets of judgments as in some way going over the same time period. This approach understands the three series as overlapping one another. As normally presented, this second approach to handling the judgments sees them more or less exactly paralleling each other, a kind of recapitulation. This view makes it necessary to correlate the individual judgments from each series. This is extremely difficult to do. However, there is another way to argue the overlapping scheme so as to minimize such objections. This scheme is built on the fact that each series is seen to have the same pattern, namely a heavenly prelude, followed by judgments one through six, an earthly parenthesis, then judgment seven and a postlude (except for the seals).<sup>8</sup> According to this understanding each one of the three judgment series proceeds to the end of the Tribulation and issues in Christ's return, but without necessarily recapitulating the previous judgments. This could be called an overview-flashback technique. In fact, the main groups of judgments may well end up being more or less successive, just not structurally so. The reason for this pattern is so that the events of the Tribulation may be explored from different aspects, all the while moving toward a definite climax. The advantage of this view is that it treats the "return" statements in a more straight forward manner. Also, it helps explain why the supplementary revelation is handled the way it is. Each series of judgments, together with its accompanying prelude, parenthesis and postlude, thus constitutes a vision of the Day of the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

#### A. Vision of the Throne Room of Heaven (4:2-11).

Christ and His kingdom will come down from heaven. Therefore, John is first shown the heavenly throne room where worship is being continually offered to the One who is worthy to receive glory, honor, and power. This worship is Christ's due because He is the Creator.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these approaches, which favors the successive view, see Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, 83-123.

<sup>8</sup> This is the structural analysis presented by Zane C. Hodges, "The First Horseman of the Apocalypse," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October, 1962): 324-334.

<sup>9</sup> So Elliott E. Johnson, "Revelation," unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000.

B. First Vision of the Day of the Lord: World-wide conflict and calamity means death for many but also testimony and salvation before the Day of the Lord (5:1–8:1).

The first series of judgments sets the pattern for the rest and introduces the primary participants from heaven's standpoint.

1. Heavenly Prelude: The Lamb is able to open the scroll of judgment (5:1-14). A sealed scroll is the object of attention in the heavenly throne room, a scroll which demands someone worthy of opening it. Whether it is the book of Daniel 12:4, or some other, it is obviously the key to initiating the Day of the Lord. Only the Lion of Judah, the Lamb, is worthy to open the seals, and that because of His redemption. Worship is renewed with a new song, as redemption is about to be completed.

2. Six Seals of Judgment: Personal agents produce natural calamities of a more general and non-specific nature (6:1-17). These are the introductory judgments of the Tribulation period, taking place during the first three and one-half years of Daniel's seventieth week. By way of the image of horsemen, they represent a general upheaval in the world's social and political structures, punctuated by the greatest of all fears, death. The identity of the first horseman is much debated. Certain Old Testament images clearly point to Messiah as the first horseman. Objections to this identification center on the fact that Christ returns at the end of the Tribulation rather than the beginning. However, the first horseman is a general description of one wielding a weapon of long-distant warfare—the stefanos of the victor (cf. Heb. 2:9) will later be replaced with the diadhma of royalty. The fact that Christ does not return until the end of the Tribulation does not mean that he is not in control of the whole process from the beginning.

The martyrs of the fifth seal (6:9-11) are those who have died sometime during the (first part of the) Tribulation, who become a righteous catalyst for the Lord's return in judgment (1:9-11). The sixth seal has obvious parallels to the signs of Matthew 24:29-30. The interpretation that sees the three judgment series as successive must take this as something other than the events of the final cataclysm, though what this could possibly describe at or near the mid-point of the Tribulation is hard to imagine. An overview/loopback scenario can take this as the initial snapshot of the outcome of the God's victory on earth.

3. Earthly Parenthesis: Many avoid judgment and are able to stand in the Day of the Lord (7:1-17). Just as there were special witnesses selected for testimony during the church age (cf. Acts 1:8), so the period of Israel's conversion also has its evangelistic corps (7:1-8). These are sovereignly protected until their work is finished. The fact that their witness is successful is seen

by the great company of believers who have been saved during the Tribulation to become worshippers at the throne (7:9-17).

C. Seventh Seal of Silence: A dramatic pause (8:1).

The reader has been brought right up to the end, and yet there is no conclusion. Rather a parenthesis about witness and response on earth has intervened. The silence of the seventh seal is a dramatic device that says, in effect, “Wait! There is much more to say about this whole program!”<sup>10</sup>

C. Second Vision of the Day of the Lord: Despite global calamity and severe and sustained Satanic persecution, Israel is spared from the judgment of the Day of the Lord (8:2–14:20).

Doubling back to somewhere near the middle of the Tribulation (to a point that may well be subsequent to at least the first five seal judgments) the whole program of divine conquest is once again examined, but with a different focal point. Opinion is divided with respect to whether the objects of judgment are to be taken non-symbolically or symbolically.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that the fifth trumpet involves symbolism, for the star is a personage who is given a key and who is addressed as “he” (9:1-2). The symbolic identifications for the first four trumpets are difficult to establish. Perhaps there is a combination of symbolic and non-symbolic in this series of judgments. This snapshot of the Day of the Lord centers on the great Satanic persecution, which claims, at least briefly, victory over the two special witnesses of the Lamb.

1. Heavenly Prelude: The prayers of the saints invoke God’s judgment upon the earth (8:2-6). Once again heaven controls the unfolding of divine judgment. Divine agency (the seven

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<sup>10</sup> Hodges relates it to the structure in the following way: “It is evident upon close scrutiny that each of the three sevenfold series brings the reader right up to the very end, yet dramatically withholds the final climax. Thus the sixth seal (6:12-17) presents a state of things which we know from Matthew 24:29-30 immediately follows the great tribulation and immediately precedes the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the seventh seal—delayed by the intervening seventh chapter—is unexpectedly anticlimactic. Likewise the seventh trumpet leads us to expect an immediate description of the second advent (cf. 10:7;11:15) but is followed by an extremely lengthy postlude which fails to present it. In turn, the seventh vial, the last of the seven last plagues, is so described as to invite expectation of the climax (cf. 16:17 and compare 16:20 with 6:14), yet once more a long postlude is introduced. Accordingly it is evident that, with consummate literary technique, the apostolic author builds up to what is clearly the most dramatic moment of his whole apocalypse—the sudden appearing of the all-prevailing Rider upon the white horse.” Hodges, “Horseman,” 329.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 15-18 who argues against the symbolic view. Elliott E. Johnson vies for a symbolic interpretation. He states: “The seals judgments attack the national structures so that restraint on evil is removed and evil spreads . . . The trumpet judgments attack the spiritual structures so that satanic oppression becomes a destructive presence on earth. Principle of Interpretation: The structures of creation symbolize the structures of spiritual order” in “What’s happening to our world?” unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2000.

angels) and human partnership (cf. “the prayers of all the saints”) become the means by which God invokes His wrath.

2. Six Trumpets of Judgment: Angelic agents call forth various other agents to inflict supernatural calamities on a universal scale (8:7–9:21). The striking of the earth, sea, rivers, and skies speaks of a global catastrophe that is preparatory for the final woes (8:1-13). Whether these realms symbolized spiritual structures or simply the structure of the physical universe, it is clear that they are a prelude to direct demonic persecution (9:1-19). This second vision of the Day of the Lord is clarifying the spiritual nature of the conflict on earth. It is also demonstrating the exceedingly corrupt nature of the human race (9:20-21).

3. Earthly Parenthesis: The time of fulfillment is at hand (10:1–11:14). Supplementary revelation adds some specifics to the overview of the second snapshot of the Tribulation just completed. As Satanic opposition increases, revelation of the culmination of the Lord’s promised return becomes ever more certain; the seventh trumpet will sound the end! (10:1-7). The prospect of this awful event is both comforting and disturbing (10:8-10). The end of many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings must yet be foretold (8:11).

The ministry and death of the two witnesses, first introduced here, provide clues for delineating the course of the Tribulation (11:1-14). As with the bowl judgments, there will be a “hastening” to the end (11:1-19) followed by a more leisurely development of some of the features just introduced (12:1–14:20). The treading under foot by the Gentiles of Jerusalem describes the second three and one-half years of Daniel’s prophecy (cf. Dan. 9:27), a time of great persecution by the beast (cf. 13:7). The two witnesses ministry has taken place during the first half of the Tribulation. Their murder by the beast will signal the beginning of his overtly murderous campaign. The world’s joy will be short lived as the Lord resurrects his witnesses and transports them to heaven (11:11-12). This signifies that not even death can stop God’s advance (11:13).

4. Seventh Trumpet of Judgment: The kingdom of Christ is established on earth (11:15-19). This victory over death heralds the third woe, the final manifestation of heaven’s rule on the earth, though it is still over three years away (11:15-19). Though the temple on earth is to be defiled, the temple in heaven remains pure (11:19).

5. Postlude: Depiction of the principals of the Great Tribulation drama (12:1–14:20). The first set of judgments lacked a seventh seal and a postlude, perhaps to be understood structurally as making the rest of the book its explanatory conclusion. The second and third sets

of judgments have both a seventh judgment and a postlude. Explanation of the Tribulation are becoming more detailed.

The principals of the Tribulation are the same as those at the first advent: Israel, Christ, and the dragon, Satan (12:1-6). Unable to defeat the Son then, Satan now makes war against Israel in a last ditch effort to spoil God's designs for a kingdom on earth. The great earthquake at the ascension of the witnesses (11:13) has opened the way for Israel to escape into the wilderness for divine protection (12:6; cf. 12:15-16). At this point Satan is forever barred from access to the heavenly realms and so pours out his fury on the woman, Israel (12:7-12).

This fury is undertaken by the beast from the sea, a Gentile ruler who has dazzled the world by recovering from a mortal wound (13:1-3). To him it was given to make war with the saints and overcome them, and to rule over all the nations (13:4-10). His stature is enhanced by another "beast," from the sea, who performed supernatural acts of wonder as a false prophet (13:11-18). In concert with the dragon, they bring the whole unbelieving world under their control (13:16-18).

However, not all men have bowed to the beast. The Lamb leads a multitude of the redeemed, the sealed witnesses, who have a message that was entirely in tune with the worship of heaven (14:1-3). These follow the Lamb in His quest for a kingdom (14:4-5). Their message emanates from heaven and is fearlessly announced to all men (14:6-7; cf. Matt. 24:14). This gospel includes the pronouncement of judgment on all who refuse it (14:8-11) and the blessedness of all who accept, though it cost them their lives (14:12-13). In the end it is the Son of Man who will reap the earth under the direction of the Father and with the aid of designated angels (14:14-20).

D. Third Vision of the Day of the Lord: Divine wrath is inflicted directly upon unrepentant humanity in a final judgment (15:1-18:24).

The bowl judgments bring to conclusion the layered unfolding of the Tribulation. They belong at the very end of the seven year period, which suits the successive scheme as well as the overview and backtrack pattern. Significant information about the beast and the world system is added in this vision.

1. Heavenly Prelude: The songs of the overcomers initiate the completion of the wrath of God (15:1-16:1). Once again it is seen that the events on earth are determined by the activities of heaven. Those who have already overcome the beast sing the song of his defeat, thereby

initiating the seven plagues (15:2-7). The glory and power of God are about to spill onto the world in full force (15:8–16:1).

2. Six Bowls of Judgment: Severe judgments are inflicted directly upon the worshippers of the beast in final preparation for the Lord's return (16:2-12). Whereas the earlier judgments fall on the earth generally and, for the most part impersonally (unless a symbolic view is taken), these judgments afflict unrepentant humanity specifically. The time for repentance is past. God's wrath is now being manifested fully (16:2-11). Even the impersonal judgment of drying up the waters of the Euphrates is so that the kings of the earth may be gathered at Megiddo for slaughter (16:12-16).

3. Earthly Parenthesis: Deceiving spirits empower the dragon, beast, and false prophet to summon the kings of the earth to battle against the Lord (16:13-16). Only the power of demonic deception explains humanity's headlong rush into judgment under such ominous conditions, though not all are deceived, since all Israel will be saved (16:15; cf. Rom 11:26).

4. Seventh Bowl of Judgment: The earth is shaken in a final paroxysm of preparatory purification (16:17-21). The final devastation leaves nothing untouched, including the cities and islands of the earth. It is done (16:17-21)! Just as the whole of creation was affected by the fall (cf. Rom. 8:20-22) so all comes under purifying judgment.

5. Postlude: Rome, depicted as religious and commercial Babylon, will fall, never again to defy the Lord (17:1–18:24). Although the destruction of Babylon has been mentioned twice to this point (14:8; 16:19) its full role is only now made clear. What is said about Babylon points to a world government and system, in both a political and religious sense, that is notorious for its wickedness and its opposition to God and his people.<sup>12</sup>

a. Religious Babylon will fall through the treachery of the beast (17:1-18). Having described the abominable character and despicable cruelty of religious Babylon (17:1-6), the angel explains her relationship with the beast and describes their awful end (17:7-18). The beast (from the sea) is at first under the domination of the world-wide political-religious system (16:3, 7). The beast becomes so powerful, however, that eventually he comes to have authority over the system and its rulers (16:13). The reason for his ascendancy involves his identity and nature

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas concludes: “. . . it is beyond dispute that this woman of Rev. 17:1 is the epitome of spiritual fornication or idolatry. 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 . . . and extends into the future when it will peak under the regime of the beast. . . . So this woman represents all false religion of all time . . . .” (*Revelation*, 282-83).



(16:8-11). A case has been made for the beast becoming infused with the spirit of a past Roman emperor (perhaps Augustus) released from the realm of the dead for just such a purpose (cf. 8).<sup>13</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is clear

that he takes control of the whole wicked system and makes war with the Lamb (17:13-17). In the process, however, the religious-political system is betrayed and destroyed (17:16).

b. Commercial Babylon will fall through an act of God (18:1-24). Babylon is identified as a city, most likely Rome (17:18) and a system. Whereas the religious/political system is betrayed and made desolate by her council of kings, commercial Babylon, depicted in 18:1-24, is overthrown by God himself for her fornicacious commitment to wealth and luxury, at the expense of people (cf. 18:20, 24). Her doom is final and her judgment is deserved (18:21-24). The final piece of the puzzle of God's wrath has been put into place. Now the kingdom may be established.

E. Vision of the Kingdom of God come to Earth (19:1–20:15).

The objective of the Tribulation has not been merely to mete out righteous judgment. The goal has been to see God's kingdom established on earth. Heaven rejoices at the demise of the great harlot and proclaims the reign of the Lord God Omnipotent (19:1-6). The Lamb has readied his wife (19:7-10) and thus may return to earth to banish His enemies (19:11-21). In order to secure a kingdom of righteousness and peace Satan's will be bound lest he deceive the nations (20:1-3).

The reign of God on earth, the kingdom of God, occupies just one verse! That is because sixty-six books had already been written about it (19:4). The privilege of reigning with Christ belongs to the faithful (19:4-6). One last battle, prompted by a permitted renewal of Satanic deception displays the necessity for a complete recreation of the realm of the kingdom (20:7-10; cf. 2 Per. 3:13). The last business before the creation of such a realm is judgment of those who remain characterized by the rebellion which necessitated such a new creation in the first place (20:11-15). The history of planet earth as man has known it is at an end.

F. Vision of the Eternal State: Heaven has descended to earth with the Lamb at its center (21:1–22:5).

A new environment has been created where there is no more disorder ("there was no more sea"), death, sorrow, crying or pain, where all members live in perfect harmony with God

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<sup>13</sup> See Hodges, *Power*, 33-36. Cf. above n. 2.

(21:1-8). Heaven has come to earth as represented by the descent of the New Jerusalem, a perfect vehicle for displaying the glory of God (21:9-27). At its center is the illuminating presence of the Lamb (21:23), who, along with the Father, will forever be attended by the service of the saints, as is only proper (22:1-5).

V. Conclusion: Since these things are certain, people ought to live in rapt anticipation of Jesus' return (22:6-21).

It cannot be denied that John, and Jesus, expected the prophecy of this book to be understood as guaranteeing a future, physical, visible return of Jesus Christ to the earth. The words are not to be sealed up (22:10) because the “things which will take place after this” may begin at any time (22:12-17). Once they do begin the opportunity for repentance will be severely restricted. Therefore, the present is the time for response (22:17). Any tampering with the words of the prophecy will garner severe consequences (22:18-19). The desired application of a proper understanding of the message of Revelation is “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20).

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