

# Notes on Revelation

2025 Edition  
Dr. Thomas L. Constable

## Introduction

### WRITER

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 John was 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 that the Apostle John wrote it. Others believe that some other John wrote the book.<sup>2</sup> This is due mainly to the fact that the style of Revelation is quite different from that of John's Gospel and his epistles. This differences, however, may be due in part to the different genres (types of literature) of these writings.

### DATE

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 the Roman Emperor Domitian's reign (1:9).<sup>3</sup> They wrote that the government allowed John to return to Ephesus after

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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; Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, p. 28.

<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.

Domitian's death in A.D. 96.<sup>1</sup> Consequently many conservative interpreters date the writing of this book near A.D. 95 or 96.<sup>2</sup> There is good evidence that this was the last of John's inspired writings.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Gentry argued that John wrote Revelation in the late 60s.<sup>4</sup> Several writers have refuted this view.<sup>5</sup>

## AUTHENTICITY

"Perhaps more than any other book in the NT, the Apocalypse enjoyed wide distribution and early recognition."<sup>6</sup>

Where did John get "the revelation" that he wrote down in this book?<sup>7</sup> He said that he received it from God (1:1), though much of it came from God through angels. Most of the details of this revelation were undoubtedly new to John. However there are remarkable parallels between this revelation and Isaiah's "little apocalypse" (Isa. 24—27) 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>8</sup> The apocalyptic (doomsday) sections of certain books of the Old Testament—

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<sup>1</sup>See Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 3:20:103.

<sup>2</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 Commentary: New Testament*, p. 925; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospels to Glory*, p. 484. See also Aune, p. lxix.

<sup>3</sup>See Lenski, pp. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, pp. 451-71; Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary), 2005.

<sup>6</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>8</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; Louis A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse*.

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>1</sup>

### CHARACTERISTICS

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>2</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, Jeremiah, and Zechariah.<sup>3</sup> The United Bible Society's Greek New Testament lists over 500 Old Testament passages that John alluded to.<sup>4</sup> Despite all these allusions, however, there are no formal quotations from the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> The revelation that Jesus gave in the Olivet Discourse and later to John on Patmos supplements the earlier Old Testament 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>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:295. See Hanna, pp. 485-88; and Elliott E. Johnson, "Apocalyptic Genre in Literal Interpretation," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 197-210, for discussions of the apocalyptic character of Revelation.

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

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:14.

<sup>4</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>5</sup>Fanning's commentary is particularly helpful in identifying Old Testament and extrabiblical sources.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 53-54.

## INTERPRETATIONS

There have been four basic interpretations of Revelation throughout church history.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

The *idealist*, or allegorical, interpretation sees the book as an allegory that teaches 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 (study of future things).<sup>3</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 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 that the book points ahead as well as back, and not just to the present (early church era).<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>Robert Vacendak, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:1250.

<sup>3</sup>See Tenney, pp. 147-67; or Hanna, pp. 490-92, for discussions of millennial views.

<sup>4</sup>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.

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 events that are mainly in the eschatological (end times) 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 than some interpreters are comfortable 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. 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>2</sup>

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 (Israel), you will come out a premillennialist. That is the normal meaning of Israel. They reject this approach, however, because they believe that prophecy requires a special

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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>J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:338. See Appendix 1 at the end of these notes for a chart of these views and a list of some expositors and commentators who held each one.

(spiritual, really mystical) hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, an amillennialist, wrote the following:

"... the doctrine of a pre-millennial advent to Christ has been extensively held from the days of the Apostles to the present time."<sup>2</sup>

Still another view deserves brief mention. We might label it the *Jewish* interpretation. This view, which was advocated primarily by E. W. Bullinger in *The Apocalypse or the Day of the Lord*, 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 that literal interpretation yields unbelievable and fantastical results when applied to 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, ch. 12). But normal interpretation yields a possible scenario, though it stretches the faith of some. Opponents of a special hermeneutic for prophecy say that fulfilled prophecy has been fulfilled literally (e.g., Jesus' virgin birth in Bethlehem). For God to be faithful to His Word, there must be a Tribulation, a return of Christ to the earth to reign, a millennial reign of Christ, 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 of the church through His Second Coming), not His first advent.

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 they serve the purpose of creating only a general impression in the reader. The modern "reader response" approach to Bible study is similar: The emphasis is on

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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*.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:861.

what the text means to the reader, rather than what it meant to the original recipients of the revelation. 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, or normal) 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.

So what kind of a picture did God and 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 that 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 its many different interpretations have 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 the main things that the book reveals, though they differ in interpreting some of the details. The symbolism is drawn from many previous Bible books, so the interpreter is not left to simply guess about their meaning. Revelation is similar to an airport, or a railway terminal, or a weaver's loom, where materials from many other sources come together.

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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.

"No one book of Scripture can be understood by itself, any more than any one part of a tree or member of the body can be understood without reference to the whole of which it is a part."<sup>1</sup>

## 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>2</sup> I think we should view the book as mainly prophetic (cf. 1:3; 10:11; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) with some apocalyptic descriptions, and I believe that it was written in the form of a letter (epistle).<sup>3</sup> The book claims to be a revelation (1:1). A revelation reveals something, so we should expect it to be comprehensible and not completely obscure, although there are things in this Revelation that are difficult to understand. The book makes good sense if interpreted using the same principles 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
    - 4. The divine confirmation 1:8
  - 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

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<sup>1</sup>Hodge, 1:38.

<sup>2</sup>See Aune, pp. lxxii-xc.

<sup>3</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. Gordon Fee, "The Genre of New Testament Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Word of God*, pp. 123-25, took it as mainly apocalyptic.



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
    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 3:9-12
  - 4. Exhortation 3:13
- 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 announced 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 Jesus Christ 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>

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

The subject of the Book of Revelation is Jesus Christ (1:1). It is an unveiling (a revelation) of Him. What does this book reveal about Christ? It reveals the person of Jesus Christ, the power of Jesus Christ, and the program of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</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 (the branch of Christian theology that deals with the person, nature, and role of Christ).

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 who possesses a fully human nature (1:13). Moreover, He will always be fully human (22:20). Second, He is also fully divine: one in essence with God 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. Ten 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.

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<sup>1</sup>See Tenney, pp. 117-34, for a study of the Christology of Revelation.

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 than He had before his incarnation (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 affect 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 is 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 in 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 ever 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 human 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. 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 of Revelation contains a prologue to the book that is similar to the ones in John 1:1 through 18, the prologue to John's Gospel, and 1 John 1:1 through 4, the prologue to John's first epistle. It also relates a vision that God gave to John that prepared him for what follows. This prologue 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 constitute the bulk of this book.

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

John's prologue in Revelation 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 of chapter 1 in order to introduce the book's main subject and His purpose for writing the book. In similar fashion, John explained his purposes in writing 1 John (1 John 1:1-4) and his Gospel (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 it is a translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, the transliteration of which is an alternative title for the book, namely, "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> He is also its main subject.<sup>2</sup> That Jesus could be both the giver of the revelation and the main subject of the revelation is consistent with the genitive case in the Greek

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

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



text, which should probably be understood as both objective and subjective here.

"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 Book of 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 His bond-servants (cf. 22:6; Acts 2:18) to have this revelation of the things which must soon take place.

"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 "soon" (*en tachei*) is probably that the events to be revealed could happen at any time without delay (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. Cf. Fanning, p. 75.

"... 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."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

There are many similarities between how John wrote 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 His angel (Gabriel? cf. Dan. 8:16; 9:21-22; Luke 1:26-31) who then passed it on to His bond-servant 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>3</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.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 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>3</sup>Aune, p. 15.

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; 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 all that he saw on to the church. By the time that the original recipients of this book had read it, the visions that he had seen, which the book describes, were finished. John testified to the book as being 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" here 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 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 concerning Himself.

"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 keep this prophecy will receive a special blessing from God. Thus John identified what follows as prophecy (prediction).

"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

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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.

writer and the reader would have no claim on this 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, relatively speaking (cf. 22:10; Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8-9). "Near" is the translation of the Greek word *eggus*, meaning "at hand," "imminent." The fulfillment could begin at any time, not that it definitely would begin soon.<sup>6</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; A. Johnson, pp. 416-17; Ladd, p. 22.

"... the Apocalyptist claims for his book that it shall take rank with the prophetic books of the O.T. ..."¹

"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."²

## 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 a greeting.

Robert Thomas argued that the genre of Revelation is prophecy written in epistolary style (the style of a letter).³ Henry Swete saw it as a prophetic vision and a letter (from 1:4 on).⁴ Gregory Beale viewed it as an epistle that contains apocalyptic and prophetic material.⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, and Donald Carson and Douglas Moo, also advocated a combination of apocalyptic, prophecy, and epistle.⁶ Most scholars have classed it as apocalyptic.⁷ 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 of 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."⁸

The Apostle Paul also wrote letters to churches in seven places: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and

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¹Swete, p. 3.

²G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 52.

³Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 28, 59. Cf. Aune, p. 40.

⁴Swete, pp. 3, 4.

⁵Beale, p. 1156.

⁶Beasley-Murray, pp. 12-29; Carson and Moo, p. 716.

⁷See Mounce, pp. 18-25, for a helpful discussion of apocalyptic.

⁸Barclay, 1:36. See also Jamieson, et al., p. 1527; Fanning, p. 79.

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, "who is and who 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 God's eternality and the continuity of His sovereign dealings with humankind.

"The seven Spirits who are before" God's "throne" 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 popular 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).

"His [John's] emphasis on the Trinity [in Revelation] exceeds any other NT document. The Spirit plays major roles as the one sent by the Father and Son to be their eyes in the world; to indwell, discipline, and disciple believers to witness for Christ; and to lead in worship. Ultimately, the Spirit joins the Father and Son in delivering end-

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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; A. Johnson, pp. 420-21; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 67, 68; Harris, p. 202; Beasley-Murray, p. 56; Ladd, p. 24; Beale, p. 189; Alan D. Hultberg, "The Origin and Function of the Image of the Seven Spirits in Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66:4 (December 2023):685-96.

time judgment on unbelievers and experiencing the fellowship of eternal bliss with believers."<sup>1</sup>

God's "throne" represents (is a symbol of) His majesty, dominion and power. Obviously God the Father is a spirit being, and He does not sit on a material throne.

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>2</sup>

As a "faithful witness" Jesus Christ's present revelation of what follows can be relied on (cf. v. 2; 22:20). Another view is that John was referring to Jesus' witness during His earthly ministry (cf. John 18:37). Jesus has always been a faithful witness, but in this context His witness to what follows is probably in view.

John also called Jesus "the firstborn 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 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>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Kuykendall, "An Expanded Role for the Spirit in the Book of Revelation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 64:3 (September 2021):544.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 69.

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

Revelation.<sup>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

John described Jesus Christ further as "Him who [always] loves us and released us from [the bondage of] our sins by His blood [death]." Some ancient Greek manuscripts read: "He washed us from the stain of our sins."

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 believers "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. This is another evidence of His present love for us.

"What Israel was to be Christ made us to be."<sup>4</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 442.

<sup>4</sup>Lenski, p. 46.



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 earthly messianic kingdom, which will begin when Jesus returns to the earth. Presently believers in Jesus are a "kingdom" and "priests," and that privilege will continue to be ours in the Millennium.

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).

John ascribed eternal "glory" and "dominion" (cf. v. 5) to Jesus Christ, who is the subject and object of this revelation.

"Amen" means: "So be it!" Here it signifies the writer's assent to the truthfulness of his 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>1</sup>

It is interesting that John, the so-called apostle of love, would emphasize God's love in this first doxology as His dominating 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.

### **3. The theme 1:7**

"Behold" (Gr. *idou*) indicates the importance of paying attention and occurs 26 times in Revelation. "Behold" validates the statement it introduces, and it draws attention to what follows.<sup>2</sup> This verse summarizes the main

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 53.

features of the revelation to follow. It is in this sense the key verse, "the motto and the text" of Revelation.<sup>1</sup>

"The theme of the book is the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all enemies and the establishment of His earthly kingdom."<sup>2</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 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 those who crucified Jesus who are now dead (Zech. 12:10, 12, 14; cf. John 19:37).<sup>3</sup> Another possibility is that these people stand for Jesus' enemies.<sup>4</sup> Representatives from "all the tribes of the earth" then "will mourn over Him," 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>5</sup>

This great text announces the climactic event in Revelation, namely, the return of Jesus Christ to the earth at His second coming (19:11-16).<sup>6</sup> All that intervenes between this verse and 19:11 through 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. The Second Coming will be a public, gradual manifestation, but the Rapture will be a private, 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>7</sup>

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

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup>See J. B. Smith, p. 44; and Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>6</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>7</sup>A. Johnson, p. 422.

"So it is to be. Amen" provides firm assurance that the coming of Christ will happen as prophesied in this verse.

### The divine confirmation 1:8

God confirmed the preceding prophecy with a solemn affirmation of His own eternity and omnipotence. This verse contains the first prophetic oracle (divine pronouncement) of the book in which God Himself speaks. The only other one in which God the Father speaks is in 21:5 through 8.

This is also the first of five "I am" sayings in Revelation (cf. v. 17; 2:23; 21:6; 22:16).

"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."<sup>1</sup>

"Alpha" and "omega" are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and they 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. God 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.

"'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>

God is not only Lord of the future (knowing and controlling future events), but 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." John frequently used "the 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 80.

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

"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>

This whole introduction (1:1-8) 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 prophecies to pass.<sup>2</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>3</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 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>4</sup> John now addressed directly the seven churches to which he sent this prophetic letter. He described himself to his readers as their "brother" in Christ and as a "fellow participant" with them in three things. These were, first, the religious persecution ("tribulation") they were presently experiencing as a result of

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

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Tenney, pp. 42-49.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 75.

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>1</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, they shared the experience of "perseverance in Jesus" as they remained steadfast in the midst of tribulation and persecution.

"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 Pet. 2:21; 4:13; cf. also 2 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 5:1)."<sup>2</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"). He was there as an exile, not primarily to receive this revelation from God (cf. 6:9).<sup>3</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>4</sup> There he worked in the mines (quarries). There is no evidence that Patmos was ever a Roman penal

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

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Alford, 4:553.

<sup>4</sup>See Beckwith, pp. 434-35; Barclay, 1:51-53; J. B. Smith, p. 49; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 41; et al.

colony.<sup>1</sup> Evidently it was for his faith that John had been sent to Patmos by the Roman authorities. 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, where he died.<sup>2</sup>

1:10a "The [Holy] Spirit" apparently caught John up (took hold of him) and projected him in his human 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>3</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 major sections of the revelation that John received.<sup>4</sup>

"To say that this presents John as writing in 'excitement' because he was 'in spirit,' and that thus oddities crept into his language, is to misconceive what the phrase 'in spirit' means."<sup>5</sup>

"The Lord's day" probably refers to Sunday.<sup>6</sup> But it could refer to the future day of the Lord referred to frequently elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament writers never called Sunday the Lord's day elsewhere in Scripture. This term became common after the apostolic age.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>Eusebius, 3:31:116; A. Johnson, p. 424. See Appendix 2, "Roman Emperors in New Testament Times," at the end of these notes.

<sup>3</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>4</sup>See Tenney, pp. 32-34.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Alford, 4:554; Swete, p. 13; Morris, p. 51; Newell, p. 24; A. 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>7</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>8</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 91.

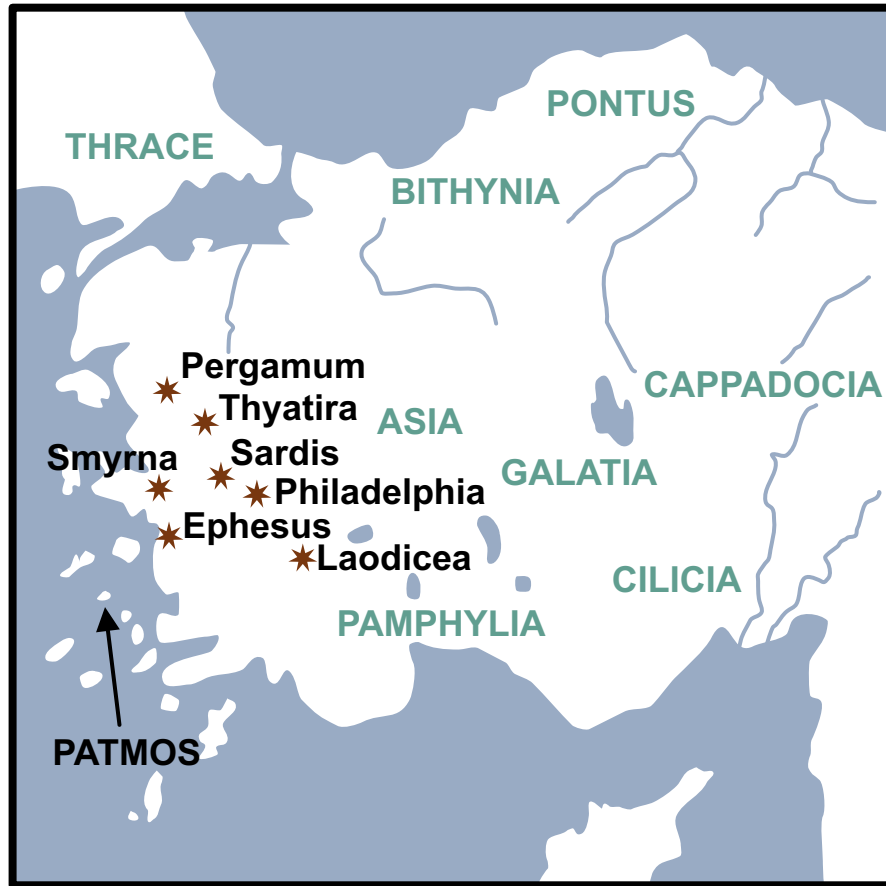
1:10b-11 "A loud voice"—"like ... a "trumpet" is loud—instructed John to "write" down what he saw and to "send it to ... seven churches" in Asia Minor. The trumpet reference perhaps implies that submission to its command was necessary, since trumpets were often used to summon soldiers to take a specific action. 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 "scroll" in view was a roll of papyrus made from a plant that grew in Egypt. Normally papyrus scrolls were about 15 feet long.<sup>1</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 all of these churches, not just the special letter to each one contained in chapters 2 and 3.

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<sup>1</sup>Frederic G. Kenyon, *Handbook to Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p. 30.



Why did God select these churches in these particular towns? In view of what he wrote to them 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.

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



1:12 When John "turned to see" the person whose "voice" had spoken to him, he saw "seven golden lampstands" (not seven lamps on one lampstand; cf. Exod. 25:31-40; 1 Kings 7:49; Zech. 4:2, 10; Matt. 18:20). John saw seven lampstands, not just one, which was in the Israelite tabernacle, nor ten, which were in Solomon's temple. Later John learned that the seven golden lampstands represented seven churches (v. 20; cf. Zech. 4:2-6).<sup>1</sup>

1:13 In addition, John saw a person "in the middle of the lampstands." The description of this person in such a setting resembled an Israelite priest ministering in the tabernacle or temple. The person looked like "a son of man." This expression refers to the divine Messiah in Daniel 7:13 and 14 (cf. Dan. 3:25; 10:5-6, 18; Acts 7:56). "The 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 that John saw looked like a human man. His clothing was similar to that of a priest. He wore a long "robe reaching to the feet" with "a golden sash" around it ("wrapped around the 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 (Gr. *poderes*) and its high sash were also signs of rank and/or dignity in those who wore them (cf. 1 Sam.

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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.

18:2-4; 24:5, 12; Ezek. 9:2; 26:16; Dan. 10:5).<sup>1</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>2</sup>

"... when in Rev. i. 13, the Saviour is seen 'in the midst of the candlesticks,' 'girt about the paps [chest] 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 [hips]. 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>3</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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>E.g., Barclay, 1:58.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, p. 98.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 97.

1:14 This person's "head and ["even," specifically] His hair" was pure white ("like white wool, like snow"). This is how 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 he did here (i.e., head and hair).<sup>1</sup> White hair often represents wisdom, purity, and the dignity of age in Scripture.

"... Revelation borrows components of complex OT figures, not the figures themselves."<sup>2</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, and 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>3</sup> This was one way of stressing the equality of Jesus with the Father, here specifically His eternal pre-existence and sinlessness.

"His eyes" were similar to "a flame of fire," which is 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 burnished bronze" (or fine brass) as that 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;

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<sup>1</sup>Beckwith, pp. 241-42, 438.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Swete, p. 16.

Rom. 3:15; 10:15; Heb. 12:13).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it also implies His purity as proved during His earthly walk, which 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, glittering rays stand for *speed*, for the swiftness of the feet of God to help His own or to punish sin."<sup>2</sup>

"His voice" sounded like a rushing river, 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>3</sup>

John, while he lived on Patmos, would have hardly ever been far away from the sound of ocean waves roaring as they beat 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). These stars 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>4</sup> Another view is that these stars represent true believers who shine in

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

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:62.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:569.

<sup>4</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2166.

a dark world.<sup>1</sup> Some regard these stars as representing the ministers of these churches.<sup>2</sup>

"The hand of Christ is strong enough to uphold the heavens and gentle enough to wipe away our tears."<sup>3</sup>

"A sharp two-edged sword" (Gr. *hromphaia*), the type that the Romans used to kill with (2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21), proceeded from "His mouth." His 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>4</sup> It may be a metaphor for the tongue.<sup>5</sup>

"His face" shone like the unclouded "sun shining in its strength," which is 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>6</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

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<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, 4:2:213.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Seiss, pp. 41, 52.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:63.

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

<sup>5</sup>Aune, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "The Glorified Christ on Patmos," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122:487 (July-September 1965):246.

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>1</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 unsaved dead (20:11-15). The first 20 chapters of the book deal with judgment, and the last two deal 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 that 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; cf. Matt. 14:27).

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 (v. 8; 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) and "the beginning and the end" (cf. 22:13). All three titles stress the eternal sovereignty of God. The consoling words, "Do not be

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

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).

"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>2</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 was revealing to him. The repetition of the command to "write" (cf. v. 11) indicates that "Therefore" is resuming the earlier command where it had left off.<sup>3</sup> Jesus proceeded to give John more specific instructions about what to write down.

This verse provides an inspired outline of the Book of Revelation. Some interpreters have thought that God may not have intended it as such.<sup>4</sup> However, it represents the literary pattern that John followed in recounting his visions.<sup>5</sup> Some of what John was to record he had already "seen," namely, his vision of the glorified Christ (vv. 12-18). Some had to do with present conditions in the churches ("things which are") as exemplified by the seven churches addressed in chapters 2 and 3. Some had to do with revelations about the times after the conditions represented by the seven churches ended ("things

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

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

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Aune, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>Fanning, p. 106.

which will take place after these things"; chs. 4—22).<sup>1</sup> Beale, who described himself as an "eclectic idealist," held that each of the three clauses refers to the entire book.<sup>2</sup> However, I agree with those who see revelation of the past, present, and future alluded to in this verse.

"History, so Christianity teaches, is not sound and fury, signifying nothing, as the barbarians had believed, nor is it a weary repetition of cycles as the Greeks had regarded it. It had a beginning in the creative act of God and moves towards a culmination determined by Him."<sup>3</sup>

1:20 Jesus Christ then interpreted the meaning of some of the symbolic things that John had seen. They were mysteries (things previously unknown) until the Lord interpreted them for John. "The seven stars" represented "the angels [lit. messengers] of the seven churches." These may have been their angelic guardians.<sup>4</sup> Some interpreters have taken these angels as meaning the expressions of the prevailing spirit that characterized each church.<sup>5</sup> Others take them as the ideal of each church.<sup>6</sup> Still others understand them to be the churches themselves.<sup>7</sup> Ramsay believed that 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>8</sup> Others view them as the human representatives, the leading elders (pastors or ministers) of these churches, although "angel" (Gr. *aggelos*) is a strange term to describe an elder.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Robert L. Thomas, "John's Apocalyptic Outline," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:492 (October-December 1966):334-41.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, pp. 48, 168.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 553.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 22; J. B. Smith, pp. 57-58; Ladd, p. 35; Beale, p. 217; Aune, p. 131; Vacendak, 2:1258; Fanning, p. 107.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. Morris, p. 57; Mounce, p. 82, 85.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Barclay, 1:68.

<sup>7</sup>Alford, 4:560.

<sup>8</sup>William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Robertson, 6:295-96; Jamieson, et al., p. 1531; Lenski, pp. 62, 82; Tenney, p. 55.



I think that these messengers were probably men such as Epaphroditus, Tychicus, and Onesimus, who went to Rome in order 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 they could have carried the Revelation scrolls back with them to their respective congregations.<sup>1</sup> The Greek word *aggeloi* ("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," which Jesus identified as representing the "churches" that He proceeded to address in chapters 2 and 3, figuratively supported the corporate witness of the Christians in each of those churches as they lived in a dark world, shining a bright flame of testimony for all to see (cf. Matt. 5:14; 1 Tim. 3:15).

God interpreted many of the symbols that He used in Revelation elsewhere in Scripture. The correct interpretation of this book, therefore, depends to a large extent 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 claimed that "... every figure, every symbol, found in this book is explained somewhere else in the Bible."<sup>2</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>3</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 that is drawn from 1:12 through 20 that is appropriate to that church. Moreover, each

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

<sup>2</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Revelation*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Tenney, p. 50.

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>1</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>2</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 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>3</sup>

The messages of these seven letters are applicable both to today's individual local churches and to 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>4</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 432.

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

<sup>3</sup>Ladd, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, p. 130.

has proven to be prophetic, although there is no statement in the text that God intended them to be prophetic. Nevertheless, the situations that these churches faced represent characteristic situations that 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 and 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>1</sup>

"... they are more like prophetic oracles than formal epistles. The likeness extends to form and content."<sup>2</sup>

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

Jesus Christ instructed John to write the letter to the church in Ephesus in order to commend the Ephesian Christians for their labors and perseverance in God's truth. But 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 his ministry 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>3</sup> It was the largest city in Asia Minor and was "the Vanity Fair of the Ancient World."<sup>4</sup> Ephesus was 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 as well as in the Roman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," 927.

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

<sup>3</sup>See my comments on 1:9.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:71.

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>1</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. Another view is that the "angel" was the pastor or leading elder of this church.<sup>2</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>3</sup>

John described Jesus Christ figuratively, as the One who is in authority over the churches' leaders, including their messengers ("who holds the seven stars"), and the 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).

"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."<sup>4</sup>

"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>5</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Robert P. Lightner, *Angels, Satan, and Demons*, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup>Henry, p. 1971.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:74.

<sup>5</sup>Ramsay, p. 238.

## 2. Commendation 2:2-3

Whereas verses 2 and 3 express commendation for this church, verse 6 does as well.

2:2        The Greek word *oida*, translated "know," reflects full and exact knowledge retained from absolute clearness of vision, and it is always the word used to describe Christ's knowledge in Revelation.<sup>1</sup> The other Greek word for knowledge, *ginosko*, speaks of progress of knowledge in Revelation.

Christ approved of the good "deeds" of these believers: their "labor" (*kopos*, labor to the point of exhaustion) in His service, patient endurance ("perseverance" Gr. *hypomone*) through difficult circumstances, and discipline of "evil people" and false teachers (cf. Acts 20:28-30). The false teachers probably claimed to be functional "apostles" (representatives of Christ; 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>2</sup>

"As to whether the authoritative function of apostles continued after the first century, the apostolic fathers are 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>3</sup>

2:3        This church in Ephesus had remained faithful to Jesus Christ for over 40 years. Particularly commendable was the faithful "perseverance" of this church, which the Lord mentioned twice

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<sup>1</sup>Swete., p. 24

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 434.

(cf. v. 1). These believers had not grown "weary" in well doing (cf. 2 Thess. 3:13).

### 3. Rebuke 2:4

The Ephesians, however, were serving Jesus Christ and maintaining orthodoxy as a habit or tradition rather than out of fervent love for their Savior (cf. Eph. 1:15-16). Some commentators, however, took the "first love" as a reference to the Ephesians' love for God and for one another (cf. Acts 20:35; Eph. 1:15).<sup>1</sup> Yet the emphasis in all these letters, on the congregations' allegiance to Jesus Christ, seems to favor the view that love for Him in particular 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>2</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>3</sup>

"It is only as we love Christ fervently that we can serve Him faithfully."<sup>4</sup>

Ramsay wrote that of all the seven cities mentioned, Ephesus had experienced the most change during its history.<sup>5</sup> Leaving the first love reflects that characteristic.

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 incorruptible love" (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.

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<sup>1</sup>See John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 27; Fanning, pp. 117-18.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, pp. 86-87.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:77.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:572.

<sup>5</sup>Ramsay, pp. 210, 244.

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

2:5 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 (their 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 that they used to do ("did at first") probably refer to the activities that fanned the flame of their love (including observing the Lord's Supper perhaps), as well as their service for Him (v. 2). In order 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, though much archaeological work has been done there, and it is a tourist attraction.

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

2:6 We know little of "the Nicolaitans." They were evidently followers of someone named Nicolas, who was perhaps the proselyte from Antioch who was one of the Seven mentioned in Acts 6:5. Irenaeus, who lived in the late second century, wrote that the Nicolaitans were without restraint in their indulgence of the flesh. According to him they were sexually

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

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

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

immoral, and they ate foods sacrificed to idols.<sup>1</sup> The word "Nicolaitans" is a transliteration of two Greek words, *nikao* and *laos*, 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—really a command—preceded Christ's promise to this church, as it does 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 "the 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. "The one 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,

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<sup>1</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:352. See also Eusebius, 3:29:114-15; 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>Lewis 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.



in all seven letters, and in 21:7, bear this interpretation out. Some interpreters who hold this view, and wish to support it, appeal to 1 John 2:13; 4:4; and 5:4 and 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 and 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> I believe that 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 undesirable (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

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59, 98-99; Ladd, pp. 41, 69; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 151-53; Beale, pp. 234, 269-72; Fanning, p. 121.

<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. 107-11; 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; 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.

redemption, expressed in the language of apocalyptic. In the nature of the case the promises afford inspiration for faith and fortitude in all who may be called to lay down their lives for Christ, and they are intended to do so."<sup>1</sup>

"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 the first works (v. 5) will partake of "the tree of life." Old coins discovered at Ephesus show a date-palm tree, which was sacred to Artemis of the Ephesians, the chief pagan deity who was worshipped in Ephesus, and symbolized her gift of life and fruitfulness.<sup>3</sup> There is a connection between the tree of life and people's rule over the earth. Adam and Eve in their unfallen state had access to this tree, but when they fell, God kept them from it (Gen. 1:26-28; 3:22). In the future believers will have access to it again (cf. 22:14).<sup>4</sup> This promise suggests that overcomers will experience the unhindered 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

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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>E. M. Blaiklock, *Today's Handbook of Bible Characters*, p. 617.

<sup>4</sup>For comments about the tree of life as viewed in ancient civilizations, see J. E. Jennings, "Ancient Near Eastern Religion and Biblical Interpretation," in *Interpreting the Word of God*, pp. 18-19.

*eschatological access to the tree of life in the heavenly paradise, clearly a metaphor for the enjoyment of eternal life."*<sup>1</sup>

"Paradise" is a Persian loan word meaning "a walling around," hence it pictures 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>2</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 Eve, 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>3</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 in order 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, about 40 miles north of Ephesus. Late in the first century it was a large, wealthy city with a

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 152. Paragraph division omitted. See also Fanning, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>See Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Tree of Life in Revelation 2:7," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:618 (April-June 1998):211-26.

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. The word "Smyrna" means "bitter." The Greek word translates the Hebrew *mor*, translated "myrrh," which was 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 "tribulation" (lit. pressures) that these Christians were experiencing as a result of their testimony for Him, which included 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 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 they were not believing Israelites. They came from Satan's camp ("a synagogue of Satan"; cf. Acts 14:19; 17:5-8, 13). The name "Satan" (Gr. *satanas*) means "Adversary."

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

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

"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>1</sup>

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>2</sup>

Jesus Christ had no rebuke for the saints of Smyrna. Evidently they had remained pure in belief and behavior in their trials. 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>3</sup>

### 3. Exhortation 2:10a

These persecuted Christians did not need to "fear" their adversaries or death, because 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>4</sup>

"Behold" signals an oracular declaration (cf. 2:22; 3:8, 9, 20).<sup>5</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 that Satan would use ("you will be tested," Gr. *peirasthete*) to try to entice them to depart from the Lord.

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

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 240. See also Moffatt, 5:307-16, for more on the imperial cult.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:98.

<sup>4</sup>Ramsay, pp. 274-75.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 167.

"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 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. Some interpreters believe that this refers specifically to periods 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).<sup>2</sup> The emperors whom advocates of this view identify are usually Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Hadrian, Septimus Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian.<sup>3</sup> However Ladd claimed that these were not empire-wide persecutions.<sup>4</sup>

Other interpreters view the "ten days" as symbolic, possibly indicating complete tribulation.<sup>5</sup> Some interpret these days as undefined short periods of trial.<sup>6</sup> Others see them as an undefined period of years.<sup>7</sup> Still others take them as some other period of time. Of these, some view the days as a longer period of time.<sup>8</sup> Others interpret them as a short, limited time.<sup>9</sup> Still others see them as simply a limited period of time.<sup>10</sup> John may have 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>11</sup> There is nothing in this text that provides a clue that we should take this number in a

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

<sup>2</sup>E.g., W. A. Spurgeon, *The Conquering Christ*, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 169; and J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:906.

<sup>4</sup>Ladd, pp. 8-10.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup>Beale, p. 243; Aune, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup>William Lee, "The Revelation of St. John," in *The Holy Bible*, 4:481, 520, 532.

<sup>8</sup>Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb*, p. 113; Mounce, p. 94.

<sup>9</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>10</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 935; Fanning, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup>See Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 69.

figurative sense (cf. Dan. 1:12, 14-15). I favor the view that some of the Smyrnians would be tested for 10 literal days.

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

2:10b      The citizens of Smyrna had a reputation for being faithful to the emperor because of their previous acts of fidelity to him.<sup>1</sup>

"The local intensity of feeling upon the Imperial cultus may be gathered from the fact that in 23 A.D. Smyrna had secured 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>2</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. 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>3</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>4</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, 5:354.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, p. 167. See Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, pp. 128-29, 140-51.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:103.

BELIEVERS' CROWNS		
Title	Reason	Reference
An imperishable crown	For leading a disciplined life	1 Cor. 9:25
A crown of pride	For evangelism and discipleship	1 Thess. 2:19
A crown of righteousness	For loving 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

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 received a crown of leaves for their faithfulness to their 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>

2:11 Christians "will not [ever—a double negative in Greek—not in any way) be hurt [Gr. *adikethe*, suffer injury or harm] 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 (the immaterial part of a person from the material part).

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

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



"It [eternal death] is not annihilation, but conscious unending punishment."<sup>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

Historically the church experienced intense persecution during the post-apostolic era until Constantine elevated Christianity to the official religion of the Roman Empire.

### **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. It was inland a few miles from the Aegean coast. The meaning of the name

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

<sup>2</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, p. 119.

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

"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>1</sup> Second, it boasted a university with a large library second only to the one in Alexandria, Egypt. Third, it was the leader and center of the production of parchment, which derived its name from the city.<sup>2</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 kingdom—that of him who needs no other sword than that of his mouth ..."<sup>3</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>4</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:303.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 440. Cf. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>Frederick A. Tatford, *The Patmos Letters*, p. 75.

"Satan's throne" may be an allusion to one or more of the pagan temples in the city, most likely the Aesculapium.<sup>1</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>2</sup> Some have thought that this throne was the altar of Zeus that was very prominent in the town.<sup>3</sup> Another possibility is that "Satan's throne" refers to emperor worship, which was stronger in Pergamum than elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Still another view is that this description simply pictures Pergamum as the most pagan of the seven cities: Satan not only controlled it, but it was the site of his "throne."<sup>5</sup>

"The city was a leader in this form of worship, which was relatively new to the province of Asia ..."<sup>6</sup>

"... in 29 A.D. a temple had been erected to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma, and a special priesthood had been formed. ... Least of all at this cathedral centre of the Imperial cultus could dissent be tolerated."<sup>7</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>8</sup>

Swete referred "Satan's throne" to the rampant paganism of Pergamum that included emperor worship.<sup>9</sup>

"Among the people of the orient, it was traditional to regard the king as an incarnation of the godhead. The conception was also current among the Greeks in such a way that a gifted

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>Charles, 1:60.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 281, footnote 3; Blaiklock, p. 619.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 246; Barclay, 1:110-11.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 104.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 184. Cf. Mounce, p. 96; Ladd, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup>Moffatt, 5:355, 356.

<sup>8</sup>Aune, pp. 183-84.

<sup>9</sup>Swete, pp. 34-35.

person, and especially a successful statesman or soldier, was held to be the revelation of a divine being. This belief was frequently expressed in a myth to the effect that he was of divine descent, or else by canonizing him as a 'hero'.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

### 3. Rebuke 2:14-15

2:14 "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 often accompanied those feasts. By 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 the name "Balaam" in Hebrew can mean "swallow the people," so the ideological connection between the Nicolaitans (conquer the people) and Balaam is clear.<sup>3</sup>

"The best conclusion is that there were two different but similar groups in this church, both of which had disobeyed the decision of the Jerusalem council in regard to idolatrous practices and fornication (cf. Acts 15:20, 29)."<sup>4</sup>

"The main facet of the doctrine of Balaam which is being promulgated in Churches today is the

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, vol. 1, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>2</sup>Ramsay, p. 292.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. A. Johnson, p. 441. Cf. Charles H. Savelle, "Canonical and Extracanonial Portraits of Balaam," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:664 (October-December 2009):387-404.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 193. Cf. Robertson, 6:306.

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>1</sup>

2:15        There were some in the Pergamum church who held "the teaching of the Nicolaitans."

#### **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>2</sup>

They would die by "the sword" proceeding from Christ's "mouth." Balaam 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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Chitwood, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 99.

### 5. Promise 2:17

"The hidden manna" seems to allude to the miraculous manna from heaven that sustained the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness. A sample of the manna 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 and who is "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 may be unknown to others 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, which 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 that is 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.<sup>1</sup>

#### **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 addressed, but it was the one that received the longest letter.

"According to legend, Thyatira was first established as a shrine to the sun god Tyrimnus and named Pelopia [cf. v. 28]."<sup>2</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>3</sup> There were trade guilds for clothiers, bakers, tanners, potters, linen workers, wool merchants, slave traders, shoemakers, dyers, and coppersmiths.<sup>4</sup> Thus it was a business center.

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<sup>1</sup>The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Germany, is filled with information and artifacts about Pergamum, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia (western Turkey). I have visited this museum and found it very enlightening.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 201.

<sup>3</sup>Ramsay, p. 324.

<sup>4</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 piercing and discerning 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>

The title "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 believers 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>

## **3. Rebuke 2:20-23**

2:20 Evidently a "woman" who claimed to be "a prophetess" (cf. Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5) had been influencing some believers in this town to join the local trade guilds, without

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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.



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>1</sup> The woman's name may or may not have been "Jezebel." I think it probably was not.<sup>2</sup> Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans all sought to lead God's people into idolatry ("eat things sacrificed to idols") 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).

"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>3</sup>

"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>

2:21      God had not brought judgment on this woman previously so that she might "repent" (v. 21; 2 Pet. 3:9).

2:22      Since she refused to change her ways ("she does not want to repent"), God would judge her and her followers—unless they did repent of her deeds. She might experience a fatal illness (cf. 2 Kings 1:4; 1 Cor. 11:29-30) and her followers might experience "great tribulation." Some interpreters have taken

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<sup>1</sup>See Beasley-Murray, pp. 89-90.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Newell, p. 54; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 214; Aune, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 1:126.

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

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

this to be a reference to the seven-year Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> But it seems more likely to refer to severe divine discipline similar to what is coming during the Tribulation. Since she advocated lying on beds to "commit adultery," God would cast her on a different kind of bed: "a bed of sickness."

2:23 Death by "plague" (epidemic; cf. 6:8; Ezek. 33:27) would also be the punishment of her followers (v. 23). 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 ("I am He who searches the minds and hearts") is significant because in Jeremiah it is Yahweh who searches the hearts and minds, while here is it 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, which 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>2</sup>

Thus the danger to this church was not as much external as internal.

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

2:24 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

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

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 51.

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>1</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 this Jezebel's teaching.

2:25 Jesus Christ exhorted the faithful in the church to hold fast to their present good conduct (v. 19). He would soon purge the wicked ones from their midst ("hold firmly until I come," v. 25).

"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>2</sup>

This may be 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

2:26 The reward for faithfulness was the privilege of reigning with Christ in His earthly kingdom ("authority over the nations"; 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>3</sup>

As with the promises in the other letters, this one is probably also for all believers. It would have encouraged them to

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

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup>Ramsey, p. 331.

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.

2:27 Overcomers will receive "authority" in heaven from Jesus Christ and will "rule" (v. 27, lit. "shepherd," *poimanei*) 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.

"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>

2:28 John identified "the morning star" 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>

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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.

"To 'grant the morning-star' ... means ... to make the dawn of salvation or of life eternal shine on him after his dark afflictions."<sup>1</sup>

2:29 This letter also concludes with the familiar exhortation to pay attention to "what the Spirit says to the churches."

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 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 prominence of the Virgin Mary, as promoted by the Roman Church, to Jezebel's prominence in Thyatira.<sup>2</sup>

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

Jesus Christ sent this letter in order 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.

##### **1. Destination and description of Christ 3:1a-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>3</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 "like a thief" in the night (v. 3) 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 [B.C.])."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:363.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>See Caird, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 40.

"This year 547 marks also the first contact between Persians and Greeks."<sup>1</sup>

Antiochus the Syrian invaded the city successfully in the same way about 218 B.C.<sup>2</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>3</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 or to the fulness of God's Spirit (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**

3:1c      The Lord gave less praise to this church than to any of the churches except Laodicea, which received none. The only good thing that He said to these Christians was that they had a good reputation ('name'), evidently among the other churches. However they were really a dead church, and their good works were not as impressive as they should have been. 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>4</sup>

3:2b      This tendency of the Sardians to fail to finish what they had begun characterized the city's Christians as well.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>See Barclay, 1:142-45.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 243. Anatolia is the western peninsula of Asia, bounded by the Black, Aegean, and Mediterranean seas, that forms the greater part of modern Turkey.

<sup>4</sup>A. Johnson, p. 447.

"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>1</sup>

"Death was a special preoccupation of the Sardians, as witnessed by the impressive necropolis seven miles from the city."<sup>2</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>3</sup>

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

3:2a These believers needed to wake up from their spiritual slumber ("Be constantly alert"), 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 defenses. The Sardian Christians also needed to "strengthen" the areas of weakness in their church, which was almost dead.

3:3 Like the Ephesians, the Sardians needed to "remember" the rich spiritual heritage of their church, to retain it ("keep it"), and to return to the attitudes and activities that their teachers had taught them ("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.

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<sup>1</sup>Ramsay, p. 375.

<sup>2</sup>A. Johnson, p. 448.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:577.

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

3:4 Jesus Christ held out blessings for the faithful few in the congregation ("a few people in Sardis"), those who had not "soiled their [spiritual] garments," in order to stimulate the rest to repent. First, they would "walk with" Him "in white."

"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>

3:5 "Garments" in Scripture often represent a person's testimony. "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 fabrics.<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

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

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

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



Sardian believers were also to 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, God will never ever ("will not," double negative for emphasis in the Greek text) "erase" their names "from the book of life" (cf. Luke 10:20). The "book of life" is 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 that the recipients could easily understand. Here the idea is that God will never ever doom the overcomer to eternal death.

The Bible speaks of the Book of the Living, namely, the record of 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, which contains the names of the lost and their deeds (Rev. 20:12). There is a Book of the Elect that contains the names of all the saved (Dan. 12:1; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27). A fourth book, the Book of the Faithful, 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

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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; 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.

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>1</sup>

"In Athens, whenever any citizen was sentenced to be executed for a crime, his name was first erased [Gr. *exaleiphetai*] from the roll of citizens (Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 31.84)."<sup>2</sup>

Several reliable Bible scholars 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>3</sup>

The word "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>4</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>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>3</sup>E.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 261; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 82, McGee, 5:915; Wiersbe, 2:577-78.

<sup>4</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*onoma, et al.*," by H. Bietenhard, 5(1967):242-83.

<sup>5</sup>Fuller, p. 304. Cf. Dillow, pp. 482-86; Robert N. Wilkin, "I Will Not Blot Out His Name," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 10:2 (March-April 1995):1-4.

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>1</sup>

We should not infer from this statement that some believers will lose their salvation (John 5:24; 6:35-37, 39; 10:28-29). The litotes here ("I will not [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>2</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>3</sup>

Third, Jesus Christ will acknowledge all overcomers as His own ("I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels"; 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

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<sup>1</sup>Tatford, pp. 116-17. Cf. Aune, p. 225.

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

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 261.

recount the deeds of His followers and present them to His father."<sup>1</sup>

"Faithfulness in trial now is to be rewarded beyond measure in the life to come."<sup>2</sup>

3:6 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). But they needed to listen carefully to all that the Lord had to say to all the churches.

During the period of the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant church had a reputation for being sound, but really it was quite dead. The reformers affected 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, which has fragmented the 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 Reformers discovered anew, but who, at the same time, did not agree with the errors of these leaders.<sup>3</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>4</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 there for their faithfulness in spite of persecution and to encourage them to persevere.

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<sup>1</sup>Tatford, p. 117. Cf. Matt. 10:32; Mark 8:38; Luke 12:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:12.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 114.

<sup>3</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>4</sup>Lenski, p. 136.

### 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 king from Pergamos, Attalus II (159-138 B.C.), founded it. The town received its name from his nickname, Philadelphus (lit. brother lover). This king had a special devotion to his brother, Eumenes II. The city stood in a wine-producing area, and it 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>1</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 (cf. 1:5; 6:10). "The key of David" apparently alludes to Isaiah 22:20 through 23, where Hezekiah's servant, Eliakim, received authority over David's house, which included 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 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 a special opportunity for evangelism (cf. 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). This opportunity would continue because they had "a little power" (spiritual power), though they were evidently few in number. Since there is no article before the word translated "little" in the Greek text, it is possible to understand their "little power" as a reference to their small influence, evidently because of their small number. They had faithfully obeyed God's Word ("have followed My word"), and they had maintained a faithful testimony for the Lord in the past ("have not denied My name"), presumably by word and by deed. They also enjoyed the prospect of an open door into the earthly messianic kingdom because they

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<sup>1</sup>Tatford, p. 119.

had been faithful. This may be the primary reference in view.<sup>1</sup> In its history Philadelphia had been the open door to Hellenism for its neighbors.

### 3. Promise 3:9-12

3:9 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 unsaved Jewish antagonists ("who say they are Jews and are not") would eventually have to acknowledge that the Christians were the true followers of God (cf. 2:9). These foes claimed to be the true followers of God, but they were not (cf. John 8:31-59). The word "Jew" comes from the name "Judah," which means "praise." But these Jews did not truly praise God because they rejected His Son. 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, which will result in the Jews' respectful treatment of Gentile believers, may be in view here (cf. Isa. 45:14; 49:23; Ezek. 36:23; 37:28; Zech. 8:20-23).

3:10 Second, God promised the Christians in this church that they would not go through the Tribulation period (Rev. 6—19).<sup>2</sup> He promised to "keep" them "from the hour of the testing." The combination of the verb and the preposition, in the Greek text in this verse (*tereo ek*), means that He would keep them "out of the hour of the testing" (i.e., the Tribulation; the pretribulation interpretation). It does not mean that He would preserve them through it (the posttribulation interpretation), or remove them during it (the midtribulation interpretation).

The only other New Testament use of the Greek phrase *tereo ek* is in John 17:15, where it is translated "keep them away from the evil one." In John 17:15 Jesus asked that His Father preserve His followers from the evil one while they were in the

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

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1538.

world, rather than taking them out of the world. But we should not conclude that 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 the testing ... which is to come upon the whole world" (i.e., the Tribulation). I believe that in John 17:15 Jesus prayed that His Father would "keep" His disciples, by preservation while in the world, from the allurements of the world. "kept from" is by preservation while "in," whereas in Revelation 3:10 "kept from" is by removal before.<sup>1</sup> Posttribulationist Douglas Moo believed that the meaning is spiritual preservation in both cases.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to keep Christ's "word of perseverance"? "Of perseverance" is probably a subjective genitive in the Greek text, meaning the endurance that Jesus Himself displayed, rather than the endurance that He requires.

What if some in the church did not persevere as Christ did? Would God not keep them "from the hour of the testing"? In other words, will only faithful, watchful Christians experience the Rapture (the partial rapture interpretation)? No, all Christians will experience transformation at the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:51-52). God has promised all Christians deliverance from that outpouring of His wrath (1 Thess. 1:10).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, it is not just "the testing" that God promised to deliver them from but "the hour of the testing," namely, the time in history during

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<sup>1</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; Fanning, pp. 175-78. For the posttribulational interpretation, see Mounce, p. 119; Tenney, p. 65; or Ladd, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Douglas J. Moo, "The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position," in *Three Views on the Rapture*, pp. 196-98.

<sup>3</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.

which these trials will come (cf. John 12:27). Beasley-Murray regarded "the hour of the testing" as a designation of the trial itself, rather than as a period of testing (cf. Mark 14:35).<sup>1</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>2</sup> Henry Alford correctly understood "the hour of the testing" to be "the great time of trouble which shall be before the Lord's second coming."<sup>3</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>4</sup>

The Greek word translated "testing" (*peirasai*) means to test in order to demonstrate the quality of a thing, not to purify it. This "hour of the 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 whole earth, that is, whether they are believers or unbelievers. The term "those who live on the earth" refers to earth-dwellers as contrasted with heaven-dwellers, the unsaved as contrasted with the saved.<sup>5</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 this letter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 290.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:586.

<sup>4</sup>Gleason L. Archer Jr., "The Case for the Mid-Seventieth-Week Rapture Position," in *Three views on the Rapture*, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup>See Thomas D. Ice, "The Meaning of 'Earth Dwellers' in Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166:663 (July-September 2009):350-65.

<sup>6</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.



This verse may appear 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 (rapture) all Christians, faithful and unfaithful, at the same time (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16-17; 5:9).

Since the whole Philadelphian church was faithful (v. 8), this verse is probably not an inducement to remain faithful. It seems instead to refer to a blessing that 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 and 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 that 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 footnoted, 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>

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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 also Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, pp. 176-91.

"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. 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."<sup>1</sup>

"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 (Smith)."<sup>2</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).

3:11 The Lord's third promise to this church was that He promised to come "quickly" (v. 11; Gr. *tachy*; 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 [the Second Coming], 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 289. See also Showers, pp. 208-18.

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>1</sup>

Other meanings of *tachy* ("quickly") are "at any time" or "without delay."

"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 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>2</sup>

Since Jesus Christ's return was imminent, the believers should remain faithful to Him so that their detractors would not rob them of the reward ("crown") that would be theirs for steadfast perseverance (cf. 2 John 8).

3:12 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 (v. 12). He will make them pillars in the spiritual temple of God, the New 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>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Showers, p. 149.

<sup>3</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.

Making a person a pillar in a spiritual temple must mean giving him honor in heaven.

"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* (I 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>1</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 within the city fled to the open spaces.<sup>2</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 place in

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<sup>1</sup>Chitwood, p. 101. Cf. Overstreet, pp. 453-55.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:159.

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

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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.

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>1</sup>

#### **4. Exhortation 3:13**

3:13 This familiar closing charge reminds us once again that the message of each of these seven letters is applicable to all "the churches."

Some 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, meaning "the old fortress"), stood 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>2</sup> The town specialized in banking, producing black woolen cloth, and health care. It had

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 1:174.

suffered a severe earthquake that destroyed it, but its prosperous citizens had 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 in order to preserve their own well-being.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with them, Jesus spoke the truth. The title "Origin of the creation of God" sets forth Jesus' 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* ("Origin") here means Ruler (of God's Creation).<sup>2</sup> This rendering is possible, but most translators have believed that the meaning is origin or source, which some 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.

3:15      The lackadaisical deeds of the Laodicean Christians betrayed their heart attitude. They were "neither cold nor hot" in their love for God, just lukewarm.

"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.

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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.

Nearby Colosse had cool, life-giving water that was refreshing as a beverage (Hemer)."<sup>1</sup>

Drinks are more pleasing when served hot or cold rather than lukewarm.<sup>2</sup> This explanation may account for the Lord's reaction.

3:16 The description of the Lord vomiting His people out of His mouth does not mean that 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.<sup>3</sup> Jesus did not mean that He would rather that we be spiritually "cold" than that we be spiritually "lukewarm." He meant that He would rather that we be spiritually refreshing and/or healthful, like "cold or hot" water are, rather than that we be spiritually bland, like "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 no 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>4</sup>

3:17 The Laodiceans enjoyed material prosperity 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 (have become wealthy and am

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<sup>1</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; Hemer, pp. 432-40.

<sup>2</sup>See Fanning, pp. 186-87.

<sup>3</sup>An anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a deity, angel, animal, or plant.

<sup>4</sup>Ramsay, pp. 422-23.



rich) 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): they were "wretched, miserable, poor, 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>1</sup>

"Self-sufficiency is the fatal danger of a lukewarm [*sic* lukewarm] state ..."<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Exhortation 3:18-19**

3:18 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 that 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>3</sup> Instead of the eye salve that the Laodiceans produced and sold, they should purchase spiritual "eye salve," which is 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 spiritually rich poor church, the church at Laodicea was a spiritually poor rich church.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 428.

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1540.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 127; Aune, p. 259.

<sup>4</sup>Robertson, 6:302.

- 3:19 The Lord reminded His readers that the reason that 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).

#### 4. Promise 3:20-22

- 3:20 In the context we note that God addressed this well-known to Christians.

"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."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

It is the indifferent Christian whom the Lord urged to open his heart's "door" and to invite Jesus Christ in for intimate

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

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

fellowship.<sup>1</sup> Another view, which I do not favor, is that Jesus was knocking on the eschatological door through which He will enter at His Second Coming.<sup>2</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 ("I will dine with him") may anticipate participation in the wedding feast 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 that it is appropriate to use this verse in evangelism.<sup>3</sup> It expresses God's universal desire very graphically—by way of application, not interpretation.

3:21 The privilege of reigning with Christ will be the portion of the overcomer (cf. 5:10; 20:6; 22:5; 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>4</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

<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 321-23.

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

<sup>4</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1496.

Pergamum	Hidden manna and a white stone with a new name	2:17
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 believe that they are the same throne (cf. 22:1).<sup>1</sup> However this verse clearly distinguishes two thrones.<sup>2</sup> The Scriptures consistently present Christ's Davidic throne as on the earth, which throne He will occupy during the Millennium. It presents the Father's throne, which Christ presently shares with the Father, as in heaven.

"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>3</sup>

Here Christ's Davidic throne on the earth, and not the Father's (and Christ's) shared eternal throne in heaven, seems to be in view. Thus sitting with Christ on His throne seems to be the privilege of ruling with Christ in the Millennium.

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<sup>1</sup>See Mounce, p. 130.

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 34. His quotation is from R. C. Trench, *Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, p. 230.

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.

3:22        Again the Lord invited all to listen and respond.

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>1</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.

"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, the true church.

"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'

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<sup>1</sup>Ramsay, pp. 431-33.

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

(Heb. 2:10). And the successive thought in the overcomers' promises in the Book of Revelation is that of Christians 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
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

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

					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
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Each of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3 is applicable to modern Christians and churches, 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."<sup>2</sup>

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

These letters have 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

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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*.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



are the rest of the chapters of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> In saying this I am expressing the "historico-prophetical" interpretation of chapters 2 and 3.<sup>2</sup> Two other views are, first, that these chapters are only prophetic of conditions in the future day of the Lord (the Tribulation and the Millennium), 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>3</sup>

#### The Prophetical View

**Statement:** The seven churches addressed were not in existence in the first century but will come into being in the day of the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

##### Arguments pro

Revelation 1:19 stresses the unity of the book. The whole book is a revelation of things yet future.

The connection of angels with these churches indicates that what is in view is Israel in the day of the Lord rather than the church. Elsewhere in Scripture, God associated angels with Israel (e.g., Dan. 10:21).

##### Responses

This verse may indicate a two or three-fold division of the contents only some of which may be prophetical. Or chapters 2 and 3 are prophetic of the Church Age.

God also associated angels with churches in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:10). Or these angels may be human messengers.

<sup>1</sup>See M. J. Brunk, "The Seven Churches of Revelation Two and Three," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126:503 (July-September 1969):240-46.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, pp. 61-62; Lange, p. 139; and many others held this view.

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

<sup>4</sup>Bullinger, pp. 66-70; Charles H. Welch, *This Prophecy*, pp. 59-61.

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.

### The Historical View

**Statement:** 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>

#### Arguments pro

This is the way we interpret the other New Testament epistles.

The Book of Revelation does not specifically identify the messages to the seven churches as prophetic.

#### Responses

God did not identify the other New Testament epistles as prophetic as He did these (1:19).

That they are prophetic is clear from 1:19 and the contents of chapters 2 and 3. Moreover history has shown that they were prophetic.

### 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

<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.

also reveal the history of the church from the time that 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 that the whole of Revelation is prophetic (1:19), and to exclude chapters 2 and 3 seems unwarranted.	Revelation 1:19 means that the things "after these things" 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 that they were prophetic.
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.

<sup>1</sup>Lange, p. 139; Arno C. Gaebelein, *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. See also Broadbent, p. 281.

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>

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<sup>1</sup>Stanton, p. 116.

There are several reasons to believe that the Rapture can be placed between chapters 3 and 4 of Revelation, which is the pretribulation 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 are revealed 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" (believers) and the "goats" (unbelievers) 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>1</sup> They cannot be the same event. Fifth, the absence of references to Christians and the church on earth in chapters 4 through 18 argues for the pretribulation Rapture. While there will be believers on the earth after the Rapture, John never called them Christians (though they will, of course, be followers of Jesus Christ). And there are no references to the church in this section of the book. 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>2</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.

### III. THE REVELATION OF THE FUTURE 4:1—22:5

John recorded the rest of this book in order to reveal those aspects of the future that God wanted His people to know (cf. 1:19). He revealed the

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<sup>1</sup>See Feinberg, pp. 80-86.

<sup>2</sup>See also Seiss, p. 98; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 251-58.

events in chapters 4 through 18 in order 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 the most sense of the text are those that see them as predicting events yet future. This is called the *futuristic* interpretation.

Other interpretations are the following: The *idealist* (or allegorical) interpretation 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* interpretation 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* interpretation 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 crucial sections of individual passages.

Only the *futuristic* interpretation has resulted in consistency in the interpretation of the major interpretive problems.<sup>2</sup> Though futurist interpreters do not all agree with one another on the details of interpretation, there is more agreement among them on the major interpretive issues than is true of other interpreters. This approach also has the support of 1:19, which promises a revelation of things yet future.

Whereas chapters 4 through 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, and 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 reveal 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 for the first vision). This second vision revealed what will take place in heaven (chs. 4—5) following the Rapture and the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 4:17-18). Jesus gave John this vision in order to enable the readers to view coming earthly events from a heavenly perspective. The theme of overcoming, which is prominent in chapters 2 and 3, thus receives further development in chapters 4 and 5.

God revealed the whole heavenly court scene in chapters 4 and 5 as taking place in a heavenly temple similar in appearance to Israel's Old Testament temple on the earth. The court scene pictures a divine council in session. In this gathering God announces the worthiness of the Lamb to receive a 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

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<sup>1</sup>R. Dean Davis, "The Heavenly Court Scene of Revelation 4—5" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1986).

function regarding the message of the book. It reveals the 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 a seven-sealed scroll to the Lamb in chapter 5. Chapter 5 emphasizes God the Son, the Redeemer, who receives and opens the scroll. 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 over the churches and their messengers on the earth (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 that it occurs in Revelation (cf. 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1).

What John saw in this vision was "a door standing open" [Gr. *eneogmene*] in heaven" (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

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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.



through the door into heaven ("come up here"; cf. 3:8, 20). This is not an invitation for the church to enter heaven at the Rapture, as some have supposed, 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 ("I will show you what must take place after these things"; 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>

The phrase "what must [*dei*] take place" indicates that the events that God was about to reveal will indeed happen. The Greek word *dei* indicates divine necessity here, as it does frequently in the Gospels, especially in 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). What John was about to see would definitely take place, because God had determined to bring these things to pass.

### 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 was seeing something "in heaven." He saw "a throne ... and someone was sitting on the throne" (cf. 1 Kings 22:19; Ps. 47:8; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 11:1, 5).<sup>3</sup>

"In the Spirit" may mean that the Holy Spirit caught John up and placed him in this visionary state. Or it may mean that John was caught up in his human spirit and placed in this visionary state. In the Greek text there is no capitalization, so "Spirit" is an interpretation by the translators. And there is no definite article ("the") in the Greek text.

The word "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

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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).

was undoubtedly God the Father in view of how John proceeded to describe Him (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>1</sup>

John apparently saw a very large room with a throne in the center of it and God the Father 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 as the divine Ruler ready to judge.

"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>2</sup>

This was probably a room in the heavenly temple, since later John also saw a golden altar of incense and an ark 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>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1542.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 84. Dan. 7:13-14; cf. Dan. 7:9; Ezek. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 339-40.

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>1</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>2</sup> This may be reading too much into the text, since it was John himself who 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 is probably due to God's purpose in chapters 4 through 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 through 3, but then none until 22:16. This strongly implies that the church is not on earth during the Tribulation.<sup>3</sup> Evidently the Rapture takes place between chapters 3 and 4.

4:3 In what sense is God the Father like "jasper" and "sardius" (carnelian, NIV) stones?<sup>4</sup> The jasper gem that John saw was evidently a diamond (cf. 21:11), not what we identify as a jasper today.<sup>5</sup> The sardius, named for the town of Sardis where it was discovered, is fiery red. These colored gems probably

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<sup>1</sup>McClain, p. 445.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Gromacki, "Where is 'the Church' in Revelation 4—19?" in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 353-65.

<sup>4</sup>NIV refers to *The Holy Bible: New International Version*.

<sup>5</sup>Charles, 1:114; Beasley-Murray, p. 113; Mounce, p. 134.

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>1</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>2</sup>

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>3</sup> I believe that the comparison is with God and not the throne.

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 apparently 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). The rainbow that God gave Noah was a sign of His mercy. This rainbow may have been various shades of green, suggesting the variegated mercy and grace of God.<sup>4</sup> Another possibility is that the emerald (Gr. *smaragd*) was a green crystal that served as a prism and so yielded a rainbow of colors.<sup>5</sup>

"Usually, a rainbow appears *after* the storm; but here, we see it *before* the storm."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:191.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>See Vacendak, 2:1272.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 68; Alford, 4:596; Bullinger, p. 217; Homer Hailey, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup>Wiersbe, 2:582.

4:4 John saw "24 thrones" surrounding "the [main] throne" in what is obviously a subordinate relationship to it. A 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 people or they are angels. If they are human beings, they may be representatives of Israel, the church, or both groups.<sup>1</sup> If they are angels, they could be angelic representatives of the Old Testament priestly orders (cf. 1 Chron. 24:4-5; 25:9-13), or angelic representatives of the faithful of all ages, or a special group or class of angels.<sup>2</sup>

I think the 24 elders are either 12 human leaders of Israel and 12 human leaders of the church,<sup>3</sup> or a special group of 24 angelic leaders who represent the 12 patriarchs of Israel and the 12 apostles of the church. Some believe that they are Christians who have been raptured,<sup>4</sup> perhaps faithful believers.<sup>5</sup> All that John wrote about them fits angels, and some of what he wrote could fit some humans (cf. 5:9). The words of their song of praise (vv. 8, 11) 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

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</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; Fanning, pp. 200-201. See Aune, pp. 287-92, for a helpful summary of the views.

<sup>3</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:224; Lenski, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 103-4; Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 974; Pentecost, pp. 255-58.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1272.

Testament times (1 Chron. 23:6; 24:7-18).<sup>1</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>2</sup>

"White garments" are the characteristic dress of angels as they are described in Scripture (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).

Fortunately it is not essential that we establish the identity of these elders in order to interpret any major event in Revelation. Suffice it to say that these elders are members of God's heavenly court who have responsibility under Him and who worship Him.

4:5 The "lightning" and "thunder" that John saw were evidently forewarnings of the judgment to come and symbolize God's power to judge (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>3</sup>

The "seven lamps" (or torches, Gr. *lampades*, cf. *lychniai*, lampstands, 1:12, 20) "burning" with "fire" may 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>4</sup> "The seven spirits of God" will carry out this judgment. This may be another allusion to the Holy Spirit in his sevenfold operation

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1543; Ironside, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:200; Beale, p. 322.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 136.

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

(cf. 1:4; 3:1; 5:6).<sup>1</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>2</sup> The vision is of these torches ready to go from God's presence to the earth where they will consume wickedness during the Tribulation.

4:6 The clear crystal-like or glass-like "sea" before the throne may represent the need for cleansing before approaching God. The large basin that was 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. Some interpreters have understood this sea as representing the Word of God, since the Word of God is a cleansing agent.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the sea was glassy ("of glass like crystal") 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>4</sup> They have no more need of cleansing.<sup>5</sup> However the Greek word *hualine*, translated "glass," means "transparent," so the emphasis may be on the transparency of the sea rather than its solidity.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the sea represents the forces opposed to God's will and His people. This is what the sea (ocean) 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>7</sup> The best explanation seems to be that this sea pictures some type of barrier 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>8</sup> Its transparency then may symbolize God's ability to observe His creation.

The "four living creatures" seem to be angelic beings that reflect the attributes of God. John saw that they formed an inner circle and surrounded both the throne and God Himself

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1543.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1505.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 1:2:423; Strauss, *The Book ...*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:224.

<sup>6</sup>See Lenski, p. 179.

<sup>7</sup>A. Johnson, p. 463; W. M. Smith, p. 1505.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 353. See also Alford, 4:598.

(cf. Ezek. 1:12). So they probably represent an exalted order of angelic beings. They appear similar to the seraphim in Isaiah's vision (Isa. 6:2) and even more like the cherubim in Ezekiel's vision (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>1</sup> Richard Lenski interpreted the four creatures as representing "the countless living, earthly agencies of God's providence."<sup>2</sup> The number four in Scripture sometimes suggests completeness, like the four directions: north, south, east, and west (cf. 7:1).

4:7 The four creatures evidently represent four classes of created beings: wild beasts ("a lion"), domesticated animals ("a calf"), human beings ("a man"), and flying creatures ("a flying eagle"). 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 that they represent the wild places of earth, the cultivated places, the towns and cities, and the whole expanse of air and sky.<sup>3</sup>

Each creature also seems to have possessed 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), calves (or oxen) are worker-servants (cf. Heb. 1:14), men have intelligence (cf. Luke 15:10), and eagles are swift (cf. Dan. 9:21). Each creature listed represents its species.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 358-59.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 183.



"The four forms suggest whatever is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in animate nature."<sup>1</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>2</sup> Some commentators have taken this idea 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 that 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>3</sup> Another view is that they represent ministers of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> My preference is exalted angelic beings.

4:8 These creatures seem similar to the seraphim (lit. burning ones) of Isaiah 6:2 and 3 in that they each have "six wings." Their many "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 God "day and night," namely, constantly, though not necessarily without stopping (cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 5:17; 2 Thess. 3:8).<sup>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>See Barclay, 1:202-4.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, p. 105.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 1975.

<sup>5</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.

by creatures in his presence as awesomeness or fearfulness (Ps. 111:9: 'Holy and awesome is his name.')

<sup>1</sup>

The focus of the worship of the four creatures is on the sovereign ("Lord") God's supreme holiness ("Holy, holy, holy"), omnipotence ("the Almighty"), and eternity ("who is and who is to come").

"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>2</sup>

This is the first of 14 doxologies and 20 hymns sung by various heavenly groups in the Book of Revelation.

<sup>3</sup>

### The worship of God 4:9-11

4:9-10 Whenever the four living creatures "give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sit on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever" the 24 elders likewise "fall down before Him" out of reverence and "will worship Him." They glorify and honor Him for His perfections, and they thank Him for His great works.

When the crowned elders prostrate themselves before God and "cast their crowns before the throne" at His feet, they 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>4</sup>

When a victorious athlete returned home from the games and participated in a final celebration, he would ceremoniously

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 463. See D. A. Carson, "Tris-Hagion: Foundation for Worldwide Mission," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66:1 (March 2023):1-10.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1505. See Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 944, for a chart of the doxologies.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, 5:381.

offer the wreath or crown that he had earned to his deity.<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul said that he wanted to make sure that 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).

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 verse 10. Here the 24 elders cast their crowns at the feet of the Father in worship. If a crown is something that 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, which a crown symbolizes, as a gift to God 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 the race set before them faithfully, 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 creatures, but it focuses more on the wonders of God's creation as the evidence of His glory and power ("because of Your will they existed, and were created").<sup>2</sup> The song is also addressed to God directly ("Worthy are You ... You created all things").<sup>3</sup> "Worthy are You" and "our Lord and our God" were phrases that pagans used to worship the emperor in John's day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup>William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, vol. 25 of *The Expositor's Bible*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup>Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible*, p. 108.

"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>1</sup>

"Because of Your will" directs praise to God as the ultimate cause of creation.<sup>2</sup> Probably "they existed, and were created" simply credits God for the existence of all things and then stresses the fact that He is the One who brought them into existence.<sup>3</sup>

According to verse 8, the praise of God that John saw was unceasing day and night. But verses 9 through 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 obvious. The creatures closest to God are continuously bowing before Him and giving Him the honor that He so rightly deserves.<sup>4</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 help us to accept the coming revelation of all that He will do, especially God's judgment 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: the Lamb on the throne. He did this in order to continue to provide background for the judgments to follow on the earth (chs. 6—18). This chapter

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup>Stott, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 368.

<sup>4</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.

continues John's vision of the heavenly throne-room 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 scroll" upon God's opened "right hand." It was in His hand, but He was not grasping it but was about to hand it over. The right hand is a common symbol of power. It suggests God's authority and power to act 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, which is God's sovereign plan for His creation.<sup>2</sup>

This rolled up 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> Usually only one side had writing on it. So this scroll had much to reveal.

Someone, probably God, had "sealed up" 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 important documents.<sup>5</sup> The perfect number (i.e., seven) of seals may also hint at the absolute inviolability of the scroll.<sup>6</sup> That is, it was never to be opened without divine authorization.

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

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 945. Bold type omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 374; Fanning, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup>See Deissmann, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Charles, 1:138.

<sup>5</sup>Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, pp. 182-83.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 1:209; Mounce, p. 142.

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 scroll contained the prophecies that follow in Revelation 6 through 22. This scroll may be the unrevealed part of the book of prophecies that God had instructed Daniel to seal until the end times (Dan. 12:4, 9). So what follows is new revelation, never before made known in Scripture. Daniel and Jesus gave outlines of these events in Daniel 9:24 through 27, Matthew 24 through 25, and Luke 21 (the Olivet Discourse), but Jesus now revealed many more details.

### The opener of the scroll 5:2-5

5:2 The specific identity of the "strong angel" is probably unknowable; John did not reveal it. This angel's "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 to break its seals," revealing the judgments on the world that it contained. Any prophet could have revealed this information, but it took someone with adequate worth to both reveal the events foretold and to execute them.

5:3 No created being "in heaven or on earth or under the earth [i.e., no dead person]" had the authority "to open the scroll" or even "to look into it" in order to learn of God's revelation contained in the scroll (cf. Phil 2:10).

"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 God's people on earth, history still rests in God's hand."<sup>1</sup>

5:4 John's profuse weeping reflected his great sorrow that the revelation of God's plans would remain hidden because no one apparently had sufficient authority ("was found worthy") "to open the scroll or to look into it."

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, pp. 82-83.

"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>1</sup>

"God cannot deliver a message to men unless there be a man fit to receive it."<sup>2</sup>

5:5 "One of the [24] elders" comforted John with the news that Jesus Christ would be able "to open the scroll and its seven seals" (cf. Luke 7:13; 8:52). The elder described Jesus as "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah and the root of David." 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 over Israel and the whole world. This is the only place in the New Testament where these titles occur together. As God's ultimate Anointed One, Jesus alone possessed the authority necessary for these tasks. He had achieved victory over ("has overcome") all of His enemies and therefore had the authority to open the scroll and to break its seals. Christ overcame Satan, sin, and death, so He alone could execute God's plans for the future that this scroll revealed.<sup>3</sup>

### The worship of the Lamb 5:6-14

5:6 As with our dreams, John's visions contained some unusual features. John saw the Messiah as "a Lamb." The diminutive form of *amnos* ("Lamb"), namely *arnion* (little lamb), which occurs here, enhances even more the contrast with "the Lion ... of Judah" (v. 5). The lion is a picture of 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 386.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 1:212.

<sup>3</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.

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, and bearing the marks (wounds, scars) of His death ("as if slaughtered"). His self-sacrifice qualified Him for His present task.

"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 animal 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 John saw the Lamb as the all-powerful Warrior. The Lamb also had "seven eyes," representing the fullness of His divine wisdom and discernment (Zech. 4:10).

What are these "seven spirits of God"? We have met them before in Revelation (cf. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5). Of all the possible interpretations, I believe that they refer to the full energy and operation of God's Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup> It was the Holy Spirit who empowered Christ during His earthly ministry, and it is the same Holy Spirit who continues to empower Him.

The description of the Lamb in this verse was probably intended to convey the idea that the Spirit of God was fully in control of Him and that that Spirit enabled Him to be all powerful ("seven horns," omnipotent) and all knowing ("seven eyes," omniscient). Whereas Christ has all power and

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 1:215; Aune, p. 352.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. *The Nelson ...*, p. 2173.



perception in and of Himself, the Holy Spirit also empowers and enables Him fully.

"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 (God the Son) coming and taking "the scroll" out of the Father's "right hand." This is evidently a dramatic use of the perfect tense of the verb *eilephen* ("took").<sup>2</sup> Clearly this symbolizes a granting of authority by the Father to the Son who, in turn, would reveal the future (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). Not only did the Son receive authority from His Father to reveal the future, but He also received authority to execute the judgments contained in the revelation.

"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 of authority triggered an outpouring of praise and worship for the Lamb. While "the four living creatures and the 24 elders" prostrated themselves in worship "before the Lamb," only the elders had "a harp and golden bowls full of

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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.

incense." 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 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" represent "the prayers of" God's people ("the saints"). The prayers of praise of God's people 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 John saw these elders functioning in a priestly capacity. The Jews believed that angels carried human prayers to God (cf. 8:3).<sup>2</sup> The prayers offered may include those as yet unanswered petitions that people have prayed asking God to judge unrighteousness, including: "Your kingdom come, Your 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 Having received authority from God the Father to reveal and advance His plan of the ages, the Lamb now received the praise of His creatures. The four living creatures and 24 elders now "sang a new [Gr. *kainen*, lit. fresh, distinctive in quality, rather than recent] song" of praise to the Lamb. 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 revelation and the judgment of evildoers about to take place. The Lamb was now going to balance the scales of justice.

"This [i.e., "a new song"] is a well-known expression in the psalms, relating to songs sung

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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.

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 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 received honor as being worthy in view of four things: The first is His death ("You were slaughtered").

The second reason for praise is the purchase (redemption) of a people "for God" by His death ("with Your blood"), including those yet to be saved (cf. 14:2-3; 15:2-4). People 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. Only those who appropriate the benefits of Christ's death by faith in Him will be saved. "Tribe, language, people, and nation" represent divisions of humanity based on lineage, language, race, and location. 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 messianic kingdom over which Christ rules now and will rule forever. Christians are part of Christ's kingdom, and we 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 "reign on the earth." This will take place in the Millennium and in the new earth.

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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.

Some translations render this song in the first person ("You have made us ..." AV).<sup>1</sup> Others put it in the third person ("You have made them ..." NASB, NIV). This variation reflects a difference in the Greek texts that are the bases of these translations. I prefer the text family that was used as a basis for the NASB and NIV translations. These beings in heaven were offering worship to the Lamb for saving people.

- 5:11 An innumerable host of 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>2</sup>

- 5:12 The Lamb deserves to receive all "power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing." All seven qualities belong intrinsically to Christ. But it is the fact that He "was slaughtered" that called forth this praise.

"The angels use seven expressions (the perfect number is probably significant) to indicate the wonder of the Lamb."<sup>3</sup>

The repetition of "and" (Gr. *kai*) between each quality, in the Greek text, brings special emphasis to each one individually. This is a literary device called polysyndeton. It "produces the

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<sup>1</sup>AV refers to *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 403-4. Cf. Lenski, p. 210; Rienecker, p. 825.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 101.

impression of extensiveness and abundance by means of an exhaustive summary."<sup>1</sup>

"Each of the seven prerogatives is a metaphorical application to Christ of qualities that belong properly to God but may be bestowed on the king by God."<sup>2</sup>

5:13 In his vision John saw "every created thing" in every part of the creation 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 and glorify God (cf. 5:10; Phil. 2:8-11). There is much proleptic revelation in Revelation, as will become clear as we proceed on in the book. God often gave John previews of things further ahead in the future than the main future events that he was then considering.

"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>3</sup>

"... that blessing and that thanksgiving are the one gift that we who have nothing can give to Him who possesses all."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, paragraph 460 (3).

<sup>2</sup>Aune, p. 365.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 464.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 1:227.

"In all three doxologies the repeated use of *kai* [and] heaps up the ascriptions like a great tower of praise."<sup>1</sup>

5:14        The worship culminated in John's vision with "the four living creatures" saying "Amen." "The elders ... worshiped" also by prostrating themselves before God's throne (cf. 4:10).<sup>2</sup>

These chapters (4—5) present heaven, God's dwelling place, as a real place. John saw God the Son receiving great honor there surrounded by innumerable worshippers. Even though John saw a vision, it was a vision of something that truly exists. Believers in Jesus 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>3</sup>

In chapters 4 through 20 John proceeded to describe what he had seen in heaven and on earth. The following chart identifies which place was in view in each of the sections that compose these chapters:

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 212.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:341.

**THE FOCUS OF JOHN'S VISIONS IN CHAPTERS 4—20****In Heaven****On Earth**

God the Father on His heavenly throne  
(ch. 4)

The Lamb standing before the throne  
(ch. 5)

The first four seal judgments  
(6:1-8)

The fifth seal judgment (6:9-11)

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)
	Commerce in the Tribulation (ch. 18)
Praise for judging (19:1-10)	
	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 that He had received from His father (5:1). God gave him this information in order to help us who read it understand what will take place in the future (1:19). A preterist interpretation, with which I do not agree, is represented by the following quotation:

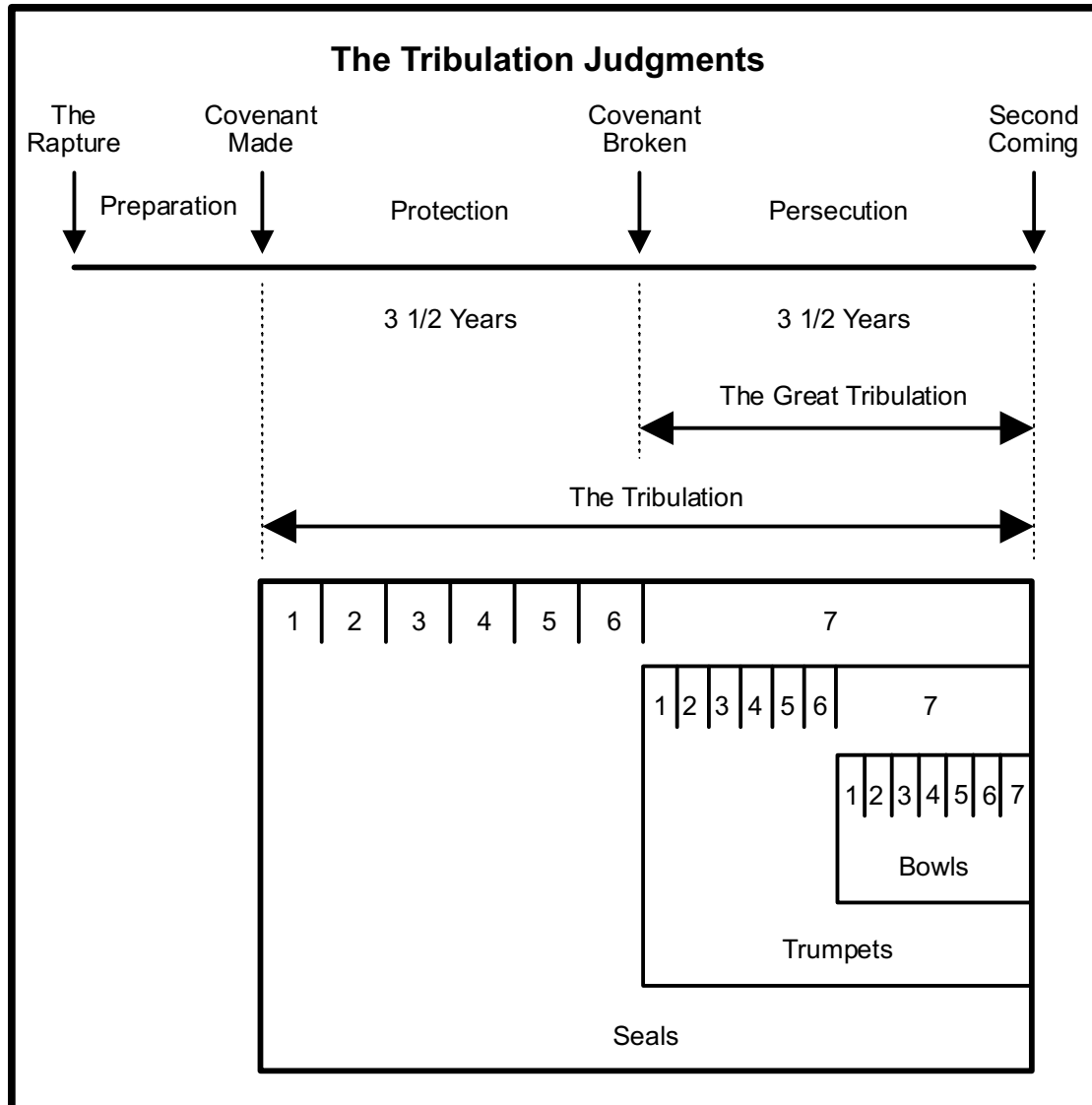
"The next chapters of Revelation do not necessarily describe what is to come, but rather what has already taken place ..."¹

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¹Monty C. Wright, *Rescuing Revelation*, p. 154.



The following diagram places the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, which 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>1</sup> Posttribulationists often understand the Tribulation to be the culminating period of the church's present persecution on earth before

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Ladd, pp. 95-96; A. Johnson, p. 472.

Christ's Second Coming. They believe that the church will go through the Tribulation. One posttribulationist 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 up with Him (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). He will then establish His millennial reign."<sup>1</sup>

Pretribulationist scholars believe that the church will be raptured from the earth prior to the judgments contained in the seals.<sup>2</sup> I favor the pretribulationist 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 in chapter 6. He viewed these as creation crying out for its ultimate redemption, not necessarily in sequential but in simultaneous progression.<sup>3</sup>

The order of events predicted in Revelation 6 is very similar to the order that Jesus predicted in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24—25; Luke 21). That revelation is basic 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>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 122-23; Pentecost, pp. 278-79; Harris, p. 238.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:612-18.

<sup>4</sup>See Ironside, p. 110.

extend over the entire seven-year period.<sup>1</sup> Still others believe that the seal judgments describe the last half of the Tribulation.<sup>2</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
		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 "Then I saw" marks the continuation of what John had seen that chapters 4 and 5 record, but also the commencement of revelation concerning future events on earth. Chapters 1

<sup>1</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:229; Mark Bailey, "The Tribulation," in *The Road to Armageddon*, pp. 71-75.

<sup>2</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.

through 5 introduced this revelation. John was an eyewitness of this revelation that came to him like action scenes in a film, rather than like words from the pages of a book.

When the Lamb broke the first of the seven seals on the scroll that He had taken from God the Father (5:7), "one of the four living creatures" loudly cried out: "Come!" This was probably an invitation to the first horseman (v. 2), 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," probably 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 that the rider was righteous.

"When men wage war they always pretend to be fighting for righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

The first four seal judgments involve riders riding horses of various colors. This imagery recalls Zechariah 1:8 and 6:1 through 8. However, the horses and horsemen in Revelation evidently represent something different from those in Zechariah, as comparison of these texts suggests.

This rider carried "a bow" (cf. Ps. 46:9; Jer. 51:56; Hos. 1:5; Zech. 9:13-14), implying 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

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:340.

<sup>2</sup>D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, p. 58.

peaceful means—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>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

This rider rode out "conquering" his enemies "and to conquer." That is, he was bent on present and 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>4</sup> Messiah, the little horn of Daniel 7:8,<sup>5</sup> and the Antichrist.<sup>6</sup> Others have taken him to represent the Word of God,<sup>7</sup> a personification of judgment, the victorious course of the gospel, warfare in general, triumphant militarism, or the personification of ungodly movements. David

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 423.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:5.

<sup>4</sup>See Moffatt, 5:388-89.

<sup>5</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:226.

<sup>6</sup>Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 535.

<sup>7</sup>Lenski, p. 222.

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>

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>2</sup> The most probable view, I believe, is that this is a prophecy of Antichrist, who will make a covenant with the Jews, but only as a pretense for destroying them (cf. Dan. 9:27; 1 Thess. 5:3).<sup>3</sup> Daniel Wong concluded that the horseman is either Antichrist, or a trend or movement of which he is the chief example.<sup>4</sup>

Several writers have argued that he is Christ.<sup>5</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>6</sup> He viewed these judgments as an overview of the Lord Jesus' judgment on the world that he believed the following chapters reveal in more detail.

## **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 to "come" forward.

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<sup>1</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 395.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 103; Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 422.

<sup>3</sup>See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel K. K. Wong, "The First Horseman of Revelation 6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:610 (April-June 1996):212-26.

<sup>5</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; Jack MacArthur, *Expositional Commentary on Revelation*, p. 137; Vacendak, 2:1276.

<sup>6</sup>Newell, pp. 102-6.

Beale believed that the disasters represented by the opening of each seal are simultaneous throughout the Church Age, not sequential occurrences, designed for either the purification of believers or for the punishment of believers' persecutors.<sup>1</sup> These disasters began, he believed, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and 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 "peace from the earth" and begins war. 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>2</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). Therefore this is probably 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 (i.e., the last half of the Tribulation; cf. Matt. 24:15).

The "large sword" (Gr. *machaira megale*) probably represents authority to kill people.<sup>3</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>4</sup> Lenski believed that not one war but all wars are in view here.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 370-72.

<sup>2</sup>See Merrill F. Unger, *Zechariah*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Robertson, 6:341.

<sup>4</sup>See Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 352; and John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy*, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 301.

### 3. The third seal 6:5-6

6:5 A "black horse" followed, probably symbolizing the destructive effect 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 have been and are a symbol of commerce, indicating his control of commodity prices.

6:6 The "voice" ("something like a voice") "in the center of the four living creatures" probably belonged to God or the Lamb—probably the Lamb, since He is the ultimate executor 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>1</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>2</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 the land of Israel and Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup> "Do not damage" means: Do not tamper with (cf. 7:3). This command reflects the strict control over prices that ungodly rulers under Antichrist's leadership will enforce 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 olive trees (v. 6), whose roots go deeper.<sup>4</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).

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 397.

<sup>2</sup>Cicero, *In Verrem* 3.81.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 6:342.

<sup>4</sup>Beckwith, p. 521.



#### 4. The fourth seal 6:7-8

6:7 "The Lamb broke the fourth seal" and the fourth living creature called the fourth horseman into action.

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>1</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 claims the immaterial part. Perhaps John saw Hades following Death like a man on foot following a mounted warrior grimly gathering in his victims, or he may have seen it like a hearse following a horse. Aune viewed Death as a person and Hades as his kingdom.<sup>2</sup> I think John personified Antichrist as Death with his domain following in his train.

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") and the resulting "famine" and "plague": traditional disasters that follow divine judgment. Attacks by "wild animals" 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>3</sup> These initial calamities would 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 that fall on a fourth of humanity, represent

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 88; Lange, p. 165.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 401.

<sup>3</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>.

"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

The scene shifts now, in John's vision, from events happening on the earth to those happening in heaven.

6:9 "The altar" that John saw in his vision 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 one central magnificent dwelling-place in heaven (cf. Ps. 11:4; 18:6; 29:9-10; Isa. 6:1; Hab. 2:20). In the ancient world, and in Israel, the palace and the temple were often close to one another. 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 God and their faithfulness to 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 that these martyrs are all Christians who die for their faith during the entire Church Age, which, according to their view, are all the believers who will have died from Christ's ascension to His Second Coming.<sup>5</sup>

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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.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:620; Lenski, p. 239; Beale, p. 396.

Preterists view these people as Christians who died in the first century of the church's history.<sup>1</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. *kai*) is again probably ascensive ("even," cf. 1:2, 9). The meaning then is that their fidelity to "the word of God" is what resulted in their deaths.

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 that 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 they had suffered martyrdom for their faith. Some believe that they will be Jewish martyrs.<sup>2</sup> John did not see the resurrected bodies of these martyrs, because God had not yet resurrected them. 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" (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 these martyrs' murderers, the time of God's longsuffering had now ended, and He had begun to pour out His wrath on sinners. "Lord" implies divine might, majesty, power, and authority, and it stresses the absolute power of Christ.<sup>3</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)? The next verse gives the answer. "Holy" and "true" were attributes of Christ earlier (3:7). Some believe that the Father is probably in view here, since He is the ultimate source of the judgments, but it is more likely that the Son is, since the Father has

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 111-12.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:391; Lange, 176.

committed all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). "Those who live on the earth" is almost a technical expression in Revelation that describes 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*) that probably symbolizes 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 for a little while longer"). More people would experience martyrdom before it would be God's time for Jesus Christ to return to the earth and 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>

Another possibility is that, since this was a vision, we should not necessarily draw such a conclusion as that expressed in the quotation above. In visions things do not always appear as they really are.

## **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

<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.

employs, notably Joel 2:10, 30f., Isaiah 13:9ff., 2:10ff., 34:4, Ezekiel 32:7f., Hosea 10:8. These passages depict the concomitants [accompanying parts] of the day of the Lord and supply John with all his pictures."<sup>1</sup>

The eschatological (end times) "day of the Lord" in prophecy includes a time of judgment (the Tribulation) followed by a time of blessing (the Millennium).

6:12-13 John next saw a tremendous "earthquake" that will shake the whole world (cf. Luke 21:11). The darkening 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 of "the whole 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. Fanning believed that this seal judgment describes the final phases of the Great Tribulation (in the last half of the Tribulation).<sup>2</sup>

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>3</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>4</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 through 17.

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, p. 248.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 113-17.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 398. See also Alford, 4:621.

6:14 Evidently "the sky" will appear to "split" and roll back "like a scroll"—in two opposite directions (cf. Isa. 34:4).<sup>1</sup> The universe will seem to be coming apart. Apparently the opening of the sky will give earth-dwellers a glimpse into the throne-room of heaven (in visions? 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: They "hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains." This indicates that the unbelieving people's perception of God and the wrath of the Lamb, in heaven, will be far more terrifying to them than the physical consequences of this judgment on the earth. 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>2</sup>

6:17 This "great day of their [God the Father's and the Lamb's] 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 will turn 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 probably 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>3</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>4</sup> But

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 454.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 456. Cf. Swete, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 423.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Gundry, pp. 91-92.

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 that is unique from all other times of distress that the earth has ever experienced (Jer. 30:7). It will be worldwide and extremely 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 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 through 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

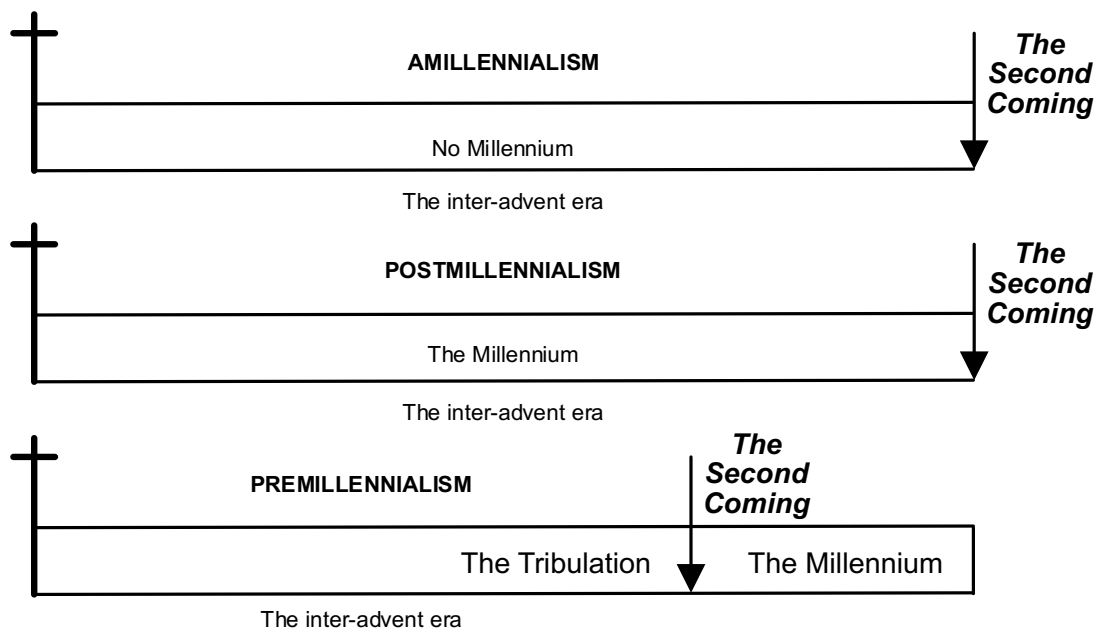
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<sup>1</sup>Showers, p. 70.

<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.

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 that Christians experience during the Tribulation will not come as a result of God's penal judgments but will be persecutions that arise "from 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 birth pains" (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

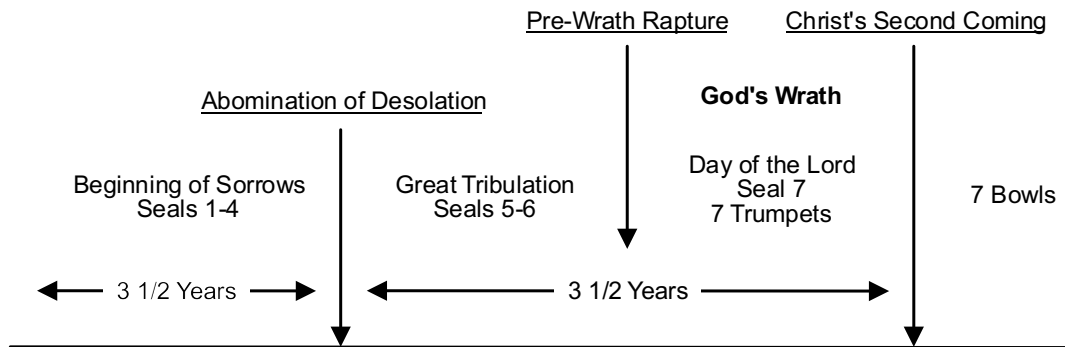
<sup>1</sup>Gundry, p. 51. See Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference*, for a comparison of covenant and dispensational theology. Dispensationalists believe that references to Israel in the New Testament describe the ethnic descendants of Jacob.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church*. See Robert Van Kampen, *The Sign*, for a similar view.



half of Daniel's seventieth week. He further argued, also incorrectly I think, that the seventh seal begins the day of the Lord (Joel 2:1-2), which he said will only be the final quarter of Daniel's seventieth week, namely, the remaining 21 months. He placed the Rapture at the beginning of what he understood to be the day of the Lord (just before the last quarter of the Tribulation), which he believed would be the only period of wrath poured 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>

<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.

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, in order 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. Wiersbe divided chapters 6—7 into three parts: 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 a special group of 144,000 Israelites who will be alive on the earth then, 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 (6:15-17).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this chapter serves as a dramatic literary interlude that delays 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>

According to this view ...

"The 144,000 are *all of God's people*."<sup>4</sup>

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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. Italics his. See also Alford, 4:625.

### 1. The sealing of 144,000 Israelites 7:1-8

What John saw continues to be on the 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 John's visions, as recorded in this book, suggests that the events that he 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.

The "four angels" described here were God's agents (cf. Heb. 1:14). They appear to be different from the four living creatures and the 24 elders (if those elders are angels). These four angels received the task of keeping "the four winds" 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 probably 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"—as well as "the earth"—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 held "the seal of the living God," the title "living God" 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).

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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.

A signet ring typically made a distinctive impression on a seal in John's day.<sup>1</sup> This seal's logo is probably the name of the Lamb and/or 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 bond-servants in view are believers in Jesus Christ (cf. Phil. 1:1, et al.) who are Jews (vv. 4-8).

"... they, like Saul [the apostle Paul], will be set apart to be God's messengers to the Gentiles."<sup>2</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), since the forehead is a very visible part of the body. Some take the seal as a metaphor of salvation.<sup>3</sup> But in view of other references to seals in Revelation, we should probably take this one literally.

"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>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 252.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 410.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 473. Cf. Lange, p. 189.

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 "the sons of Israel" and the names of 12 Israelite tribes (vv. 5-8) strongly suggest that the nation of Israel is in view, rather than the church, and that these are Jewish believers in Christ.<sup>1</sup> Most posttribulationists and amillennialists believe that the 144,000 are members of "spiritual Israel," which is a title that they use—though it is never used in the Bible—to describe the church.<sup>2</sup> Alford called them the "first-fruits of the church."<sup>3</sup> Gundry identified them as "'orthodox' [though unconverted] Jews who will resist the seduction of the Antichrist."<sup>4</sup> He believed that God will supernaturally keep them from dying during the Tribulation. He also believed that 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>5</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

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<sup>1</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>2</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*, 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>3</sup>Alford, 4:684.

<sup>4</sup>Gundry, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., A. Johnson, pp. 463, 481; Ladd, p. 117.

is taken symbolically, no number in the book can be taken literally."<sup>1</sup>

Some premillennialists take 144,000 and 12,000 as round numbers representing completeness:

"To be sure, the focus on 'Israel as a whole' (e.g., the symbolism of the number 144,000 and the emphasis on every tribe) means that the sealing should not be understood as a guarantee that every individual Jewish person who turns to Christ during the tribulation will be physically protected from its judgments. Instead it ensures that a substantial number will be preserved in order to constitute a full regathering of Israel when Christ establishes his millennial reign."<sup>2</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>3</sup>

7:5-8      God will deal with the Jews (Israel) as a nation in the future (cf. Rom. 11). Though a Jew 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 474.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, p. 161.

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" usually appears first in such lists, as it does 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 use 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 as recorded in Old Testament history.

"The tribe of Levi" (v. 7), which was often listed separately in the censuses of the Old Testament, is found here 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 "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. 48:5). Perhaps the reason that Ephraim's name does not appear in this list, though he is assumed in the reference to Joseph, is to avoid the unpleasant connotations of his name.<sup>3</sup>

The tribe of Dan is absent from 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 the following:

"Hippolytus (*Concerning Antichrist* 14) says: 'As the Christ was born from the tribe of Judah, so will

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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.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 481.

the Antichrist be born from the tribe of Dan.' That is why Dan is missed out from this list ..."<sup>1</sup>

References to the tribes of Israel, 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.<sup>2</sup> 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]."<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 largely from their moral purity [14:4-5] and the fact that they were not martyred like many others."<sup>4</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? Perhaps 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, which is a figure that describes the church in the New Testament, 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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:30-31.

<sup>2</sup>See Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*; John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*.

<sup>3</sup>Jeremiah, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 964.

<sup>5</sup>See Showers, *Maranatha ...*, pp. 245-51.



Will the Spirit permanently indwell Tribulation saints as He does Christians now? Probably He will. Spirit indwelling now takes place at the same instant as regeneration (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit's indwelling is probably not unique to the Church Age, as is His baptizing ministry. Probably the Holy Spirit will come upon and influence Tribulation saints as He does Christians now. Interpreters who believe that Christ's messianic kingdom began with His earthly ministry, as I do, believe that the Holy Spirit will permanently indwell believers in the Tribulation as He does now. Some dispensationalists believe that the Holy Spirit will not permanently indwell believers in the Tribulation but will only come on select individuals, as He did in Old Testament times.<sup>1</sup>

The sealing of these 144,000 witnesses probably indicates God's special selection and protection of them during this time of unprecedented global catastrophes.

## **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 of people, even though some scholars have considered the two groups as one viewed from different perspectives.<sup>2</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 language comprise the second group. God prepares 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

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<sup>1</sup>See John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, pp. 151, 230.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 424.

and have now passed into His immediate presence through death [cf. 6:8]."<sup>1</sup>

This pericope (section of text) describes events that John saw in his vision transpiring in heaven. This multitude was "standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (v. 9).

"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 that 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 through 8.

John saw an innumerable "multitude" of people in heaven "standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (cf. chs. 4—5). They came "from every nation, and all the tribes, peoples, and languages" 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 hardly represent Christians who died during the first century, as Aune pointed out.<sup>4</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 through 11 (cf. v. 14). These believers had

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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.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 466-67.

probably died natural or violent deaths during the first half of the Tribulation. Some interpreters believe that they died during the whole seven-year Tribulation.<sup>1</sup> 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). John saw them 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> The reference to their location "before the throne and before the Lamb" seems to tie in with the description of the heavenly multitude described in chapters 4 and 5.

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 the word "save" (Gr. *sozo*) to refer to salvation from sin, and it is questionable whether he ever used the word "salvation" (*soteria*) in this sense either.<sup>4</sup> 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 had 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 "All the angels," besides the four living creatures and the 24 elders, were "standing around the throne" in heaven. The angelic host that was assembled joined these Tribulation saints

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<sup>1</sup>Fanning, pp. 270-71.

<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., Ironside, pp. 128-29; Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:230-31.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 489-90.

in prostrating themselves ("fell on their faces") before "God" in worship (cf. Luke 15:8-10).

- 7:12 This is one of many doxologies in Revelation. "Amen" introduces their praise and emphasizes the truthfulness of what these worshipers said. "Blessing" (or praise, Gr. *eulogia*) is what God deserves because of what He will do for these people (cf. 5:12, 13).

*Eulogia* 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 that is due to 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, Gr. *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 ("forever and ever"). "Amen" again 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

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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.

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 "the ones who come out of the great tribulation." Jesus coined the term "the Great Tribulation" (Matt. 24:15, 21), and He 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 these people departed after the Great Tribulation was complete.<sup>1</sup> This is unacceptable for two reasons: First, the Greek verb *erchomenoi*, translated "come out," 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 (church-age believers) 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 that pictures 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 the robe here represents the believer's garment of salvation or his

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<sup>1</sup>Rosenthal, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 135.

testimony. Scripture uses the robe both ways symbolically 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. Some of them may have died of natural causes.

An amillennial interpretation is that this washing of robes is a 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) ..."²

The Greek *en* ("in" the blood of the Lamb) 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. Some interpreters believe that they will have intermediate bodies until their resurrections (cf. Matt. 17:1-3; Luke 16:19-25; Rev. 6:9-11). This may be the condition of

<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.

Christians who die before the Rapture too (cf. 2 Cor. 5:2-3). Other interpreters believe that there is not sufficient evidence for believing in intermediate bodies.<sup>1</sup> These Tribulation saints will serve God continually ("day and night") in His 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 these saints 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 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 They will no longer experience the hardships and discomforts of their earthly existence (cf. Isa. 49:10, LXX; John 4:14; 6:35; 7:37).

7:17 "The Lamb," whom John saw standing "in the center of the throne" now, will provide for these believers like 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 as well as protect them (cf. Exod. 15:13; Deut. 1:33; Ps. 5:11-12; 85:11; John 16:13). The Lamb will "guide" these "sheep" "to springs of the water of life." "God," who is the Fountain of Life (21:6; 22:1, 17; cf. Ps. 35:10; John 4:12, 14; 7:38-39), will wipe [away] every tear" that 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

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<sup>1</sup>See my discussion of the issue in my note on 2 Corinthians 5:1-3.

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>

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 believers who have died—existing during the Tribulation, after church-age believers have gone to heaven in the Rapture. God will spiritually save and physically deliver 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, but it probably will 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).

To summarize, chapter 7 reveals that God will save many people in the Tribulation in two senses: (1) He will provide *spiritual* salvation for those who believe on Jesus Christ. The 144,000 are called God's "bond-servants" (v. 3), and the great multitude will go into God's presence when they die during the first half of the Tribulation, which indicates that they believed on Jesus Christ. (2) God will provide *physical* deliverance (salvation) for the 144,000 during the Great Tribulation by protecting them, and He will deliver the great multitude of those who die during the first half of the Tribulation from the horrors of the Great Tribulation by removing them from the earth before the Great Tribulation begins.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, p. 504.

<sup>2</sup>Yates, p. 333.



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 that will take place next on earth in order to prepare his readers for these events. Wiersbe believed that chapters 6 through 9 describe what happens in the first half of the Tribulation, chapters 10 through 14 what happens in the middle, and chapters 15 through 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> Many interpreters, including myself, believe that what chapters 8 through 19 describe is the Great Tribulation: the last half of the Tribulation, also called the last half of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week.

<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.

### 1. The first four trumpet judgments ch. 8

Chapter 7 introduced additional information between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals. But with chapter 8 the chronological progression of judgments resumes. The scene that John saw continues to be in heaven.

Verses 1 through 6 introduce the seven trumpets, just as chapters 4 and 5 introduced the seven seals, and as 15:1 through 8 introduces the seven bowls.

#### **The seventh seal 8:1**

"When the Lamb broke the seventh seal" of the scroll (5:1-7), "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 time period, since there are no clues in Revelation that we should interpret time references non-literally. One of the basic principles involved in the interpretation of any literature, including biblical literature, is that the reader should understand what has been written literally unless there are clues in the context that indicate that it should not be taken literally.

Beale interpreted the silence as representing the final judgment, but he said he did not know why it lasts for about a half hour.<sup>1</sup> Alford believed that this half hour symbolizes the rest that the people of God will enjoy (in eternity).<sup>2</sup> But why represent eternal rest as lasting only "about half an hour"?

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>3</sup> Perhaps the silence represents God listening to the prayers of the saints.<sup>4</sup>

The psalmists often asked God "How long?" and then had to wait for Him to respond. The believers martyred so far in the Tribulation asked God to

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 447-54.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:630.

<sup>3</sup>Henry, p. 1977.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 152; Fanning, p. 280. See Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 507-8, for other views.

judge earth-dwellers (6:10) and then had to wait for Him to respond. This silence is the lull before the storm, just like 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>1</sup>

Some Bible teachers have jokingly said that this period of silence in heaven indicates that there will be no women in heaven. Others have opined that there will be no children in heaven.

### 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" who were 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 the seven archangels spoken of 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>2</sup> But there is no support 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 that is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:52 and 1 Thessalonians 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 activity (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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., John McLean, "Chronology and Sequential Structure of John's Revelation," in *When the Trumpet Sounds*, pp. 313-51.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., *ibid.*, p. 509.

history. Here they announce divine judgment in the day of the Lord (cf. Zech. 1:14-16). They declare war on earth-dwellers here.

"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>1</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 a golden incense "altar" in heaven (cf. 6:9). Again, John was describing what he saw in his vision. He was not seeing a literal altar that exists in heaven. The "golden censer, appropriately gold in view of God's presence, contained coals of fire (v. 5). The angel received much "incense" to add "to the prayers of all the saints." Incense is a symbol of prayers elsewhere in Scripture (5:8; Ps. 141:2). This may indicate that the prayers of the Tribulation saints (6:10) combined with those of the rest of God's people who were 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>2</sup> But since he is called an angel I think he was not Christ.

"No saint's prayer is forgotten, but has its effect in due season, in bringing in the Kingdom, that is, our Lord's return!"<sup>3</sup>

"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>4</sup>

8:4 The angel then offered this incense on top of the coals that were on the golden incense altar. "The smoke of the incense"

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<sup>1</sup>Ironside, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 185; Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:230; Ironside, pp. 146-48.

<sup>3</sup>Newell, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

went up before God "with the prayers of the saints."<sup>1</sup> Clearly the incense, while symbolizing prayer (5:8), is distinct from prayer here. However the total impression is that of the prayers of many people commingling as the angel pours more incense on the altar. The angel-priest facilitated these prayers, though Jesus Christ, of course, is the only mediator between God and people (cf. 1 Tim. 2:5). Some believe that it is His prayers of intercession for His own that are added to the prayers of His people.<sup>2</sup>

8:5 Then the angel took fiery coals from the altar, placed them in his "censer," and threw them out onto "the earth." These coals of "fire," symbolic of judgment, produced symbols of catastrophe: "thunder," "lightning," and "an earthquake" (cf. Ezek. 10:2-7). The censer thus became a symbolic instrument of judgment in response to prayer.

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 that follow are what God will send. The storm, therefore, apparently implies the awful calamities that will come in the trumpet and bowl judgments that are ahead.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

8:6 Having described the preparations for the coming trumpet judgments (vv. 1-5), John now announced that the "seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves" to blow them.

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 270.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8—22: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:50.

All the trumpet judgments seem to proceed out of the seventh seal judgment.<sup>1</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 trumpet judgments will follow the seal judgments chronologically.<sup>2</sup> We will see, after the first six trumpet judgments, that seven bowl judgments apparently proceed out of the seventh trumpet judgment in the same way.<sup>3</sup> Some interpreters, however, believe that the trumpet judgments merely restate the seal judgments.<sup>4</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 consummation in which they all meet, under a different aspect."<sup>5</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 execute punitive judgments against hardened unbelievers. But few will repent (9:20-21). Lenski believed that the first four trumpet judgments describe "destructive religious delusions in the whole world."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For proof that the trumpet judgments telescope out from the seventh seal rather than recapitulate the seals judgments, see Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 3-5, 525-43.

<sup>2</sup>See Tenney, p. 71; Ladd, p. 122.

<sup>3</sup>See the chart "The Tribulation Judgments" at the beginning of my discussion of chapter 6 for a visual representation of this relationship.

<sup>4</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; Beale, p. 472.

<sup>5</sup>Jamieson, et al., pp. 1550-51. See also Alford, 4:635.

<sup>6</sup>Lenski, p. 277.

### The first trumpet 8:7

The scene that John saw in his vision 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" (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>1</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 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>2</sup>

Many less literal interpreters believe that the fire represents judgment more generally, and that "a third of the earth" simply means a large portion of humankind. Obviously "a third" does not specify a precise number, but it does signify a large number. Alford held that the "third" indicates that God "spares more than He smites."<sup>3</sup>

This holocaust will destroy "a third of the" earth's "trees" and "all the 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:636.

There are many parallels with the Egyptian plagues in these end times judgments.

"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>1</sup>

### The second trumpet 8:8-9

8:8        Following the blowing of the second trumpet "something like a great mountain" that was "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 sea" becoming "blood." Whether the water became actual blood, or 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. There is not much difference between the chemical composition of sea water and blood. Perhaps this mountain-like mass (a meteor?) will provide what is lacking in the sea water so that it will become blood.

"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>2</sup>

Beale took the mountain figuratively, as representing a kingdom, specifically the Babylon referred to in chapters 11 through 18.<sup>3</sup> Arno Gaebelein also believed it was a kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

"In the eruption of 1573, the sea round Thera [an island close to Patmos] was tinted for twenty

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 951.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 476,

<sup>4</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:231.



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>1</sup>

8:9 "A third of the [living] creatures which were in the sea" died, and "a third of the ships" on the sea "were destroyed."

"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>2</sup>

John was clearly describing supernatural interventions, not natural happenings. Whereas the seal judgments appear to be the result of Antichrist's activity primarily, the trumpet judgments are the result of God's direct activity using nature.

### The third trumpet 8:10-11

8:10 Next "a great star" (perhaps a meteor or comet?) "fell from heaven" on the fresh water sources on earth. Sometimes stars represent angels in the Bible (e.g., 9:1), but here something mineral seems to be in view. This star too was on fire (vv. 7, 8) and was "burning like a torch." The ancients sometimes used the Greek word *lampas*, sometimes translated "torch," to describe a meteor shooting through the sky.<sup>3</sup>

8:11 "Wormwood" means "bitter" (cf. Deut. 29:18, et al.). It was the name of a bitter herb that was not fatally poisonous but harmful.<sup>4</sup> It was also a symbol of divine punishment (Jer. 9:15; 23:15; Lam. 3:15, 19; Amos 5:7). The star poisoned ("made bitter") "a third of the" rivers and springs of "waters, and

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:405. He did not clearly identify the source of his quotations.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:593.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, 2:54.

many people died"—apparently from drinking the poisoned water. The National Geographic Society has listed 100 major rivers in the world.<sup>1</sup>

"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>

This judgment recalls the bitter water that God gave the rebellious Israelites to drink in the wilderness, which, when a tree was thrown in, turned sweet (Exod. 15:23-25). It also recalls the first Egyptian plague (Exod. 7:21).

Another interpretation is that this star represents "some person who claimed authority and who becomes an apostate, whose fall produces the awful results given here."<sup>3</sup>

#### The fourth trumpet 8:12

This time the trumpet blast announced judgment on "a third of the" heavenly bodies: "sun," "moon," and "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>4</sup>

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. 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited by Wiersbe, 2:593.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 521.

<sup>3</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:231. See also Ironside, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 522.

"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

"Then I looked" (Gr. *kai eidon*) signals a new scene in John's vision. John next saw, on earth, "an eagle" that interrupted the angels by "flying" through the sky "in mid-heaven." This eagle 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 gave 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 and cover great distances in a short time. Some people regard them as omens 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 could see this creature.<sup>4</sup> Obviously John was describing things from his vantage point. The eagle's (or angel's) "loud voice" further guaranteed that everyone on the earth would hear its message. The eagle announced 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 the first four trumpet judgments did—as their targets. There are several examples of double woes in Scripture (18:10, 16, 19; Ezek. 16:23), but a triple woe, which this eagle spoke, 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).

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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.

## 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.

"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, the Great Tribulation, comes into view.<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 (vv. 2, 11; cf. 1:20; Job. 38:7; Luke 10:18).<sup>4</sup> Or it may refer to some other fallen angel.<sup>5</sup> If, on the other hand, "fallen" simply describes his condition as having come to earth from heaven, an unfallen (good) angel is probably in view (cf. 20:1). Since this angelic being simply carries out God's instructions

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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.

<sup>5</sup>Alford, 4:643-44.

faithfully, I tend to think that he is an unfallen angel. Or he may be the apostate leader mentioned in 8:10 and 11, if the star there is an apostate leader.<sup>1</sup> Some take the star figuratively as personifying judgment from God.<sup>2</sup>

"To the Jewish mind the stars were divine beings, who by disobedience could become demonic and evil and hostile to God."<sup>3</sup>

"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" (Antichrist; cf. 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). It is from this abyss that this angel was about to release some of the demons—temporarily. This star-angel received "the key to the shaft of the abyss" from a greater authority, probably God Himself.

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 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.

"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 [foul smelling] 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

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<sup>1</sup>Ironside, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 288.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:57.

Thera was believed to be such an aperture of hell."<sup>1</sup>

9:3 What John saw next may have been an unknown but literal kind of "locust" (cf. Exod. 10:12-20).<sup>2</sup> Others have suggested that John saw modern instruments of warfare that looked like locusts. In view of what follows, I think they represent demons.

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 that John saw had the "power" to hurt people to the degree that "scorpions" can, which is an ability that normal locusts do not have. They also had a leader (v. 11), which normal locusts do not have (Prov. 30:27). Probably these are demons who demonstrate some of the characteristics of locusts.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively they may be demon-possessed locusts.<sup>4</sup> Spirit (demonic) beings later appear as frogs in Revelation (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>5</sup> Another writer described them as "evil teachings."<sup>6</sup> Still others take these locusts, and the other creatures that follow in this part of the vision, as representing God's curses on the earth.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:406.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 129-32. Cf. Joel 1:6; 2:4-10.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:406; Mounce, p. 194; Ladd, p. 131; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 527.

<sup>4</sup>Paul L. Tan, *Jesus Is Coming*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup>Swete, pp. 116, 118.

<sup>6</sup>Ironsides, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 290.

"Should we assume the prophet saw something like a motion picture of the future in his vision and 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 that John saw locusts.<sup>2</sup>

9:4 God commissioned these creatures to inflict severe pain 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 were "not permitted" by God "to kill" people (cf. Job 2:6), and their mission lasted only "five months." That is the normal lifespan of locusts.<sup>3</sup> The wound they caused would be very painful, like the torment caused by "a scorpion when it stings a person."

"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>Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>3</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 that these locusts inflict is spiritual rather than physical.<sup>2</sup> This seems unlikely in view of the next verse.

9:6 Since 4:1 John had been reporting what he saw, but now he spoke as a prophet and predicted 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 as well as apocalyptic in genre.

Because of the influence of these scorpion-like locusts, people "will seek death" and "long to die," but they will not be able to escape their pain by dying. They will long for death rather than repenting.

### The characteristics of the locusts 9:7-11

9:7 John proceeded to describe the creatures that he saw from head to tail. Some interpreters view these beings as natural "locusts" while others believe that they represent an army of people. Still others interpret them as demons. Locusts resemble "horses" when viewed up close. 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 humans ("their faces were like human faces")

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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 ordinary people (cf. vv. 3-4).

- 9:8 The antennae of normal locusts are not "hair." While they have hair on their legs, the comparison 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 their ability to consume their prey.

- 9:9 Iron-like "breastplates," which covered both the chest and the back in John's day, gave these creatures the appearance of invulnerability (cf. v. 17).<sup>2</sup> "The sound of their wings" will be terrifying, "like the sound of chariots" and "of many horses rushing into 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 hurt people with stings from the stingers in their "tails" also suggest abnormal characteristics. This verse restates 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, as their leader's name implies, is to destroy people. God grants this king creature permission, here in this judgment, to carry out his objective against

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:364.

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 (v. 3; 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 of this verse, though John seems to be the more likely of the two (8:6). "After these things" indicates that the woes (not just the visions) are consecutive, not simultaneous and recapitulatory.

### **The sixth trumpet (second woe) 9:13-21**

As will become obvious, the severity of these judgments increases as the final trumpets (woes) unfold. Some futurist interpreters believe that this judgment describes events toward the middle of the Tribulation, and others believe that they describe events at its end. My opinion is that they occur

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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.

near the middle of the Great Tribulation (the middle of the last 3 and one-half years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week).

### **A deadly attack 9:13-19**

9:13        Someone near "the four horns [symbolic of power] of the golden altar which is before God" 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 immediately (cf. v. 1), John now heard something first: "a voice."

9:14        This angel instructed "the sixth angel who had the trumpet" to "release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 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 that the Romans could not and did not defeat after repeated attempts.

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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.

- 9:15 "The four angels" were "prepared" by God, and were being kept ready for a specific assignment at a specific "hour and day 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

The task of these angels was to "kill a third of mankind." 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). Now a third of the people who are still alive 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. Blaiklock claimed that the total population of Asia at the end of the first century did not amount to 200 million.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 539.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 953.

<sup>4</sup>Blaiklock, p. 627.

combined number of Allied and Axis forces at their peak in World War II totaled about 70 million.<sup>1</sup> But angelic "armies" of 200 million demons are easier to imagine.<sup>2</sup>

9:17 Now John saw what these "horses" and their "riders" looked like. Horses were swift implements of war in ancient times. Colorful "breastplates" covered both horses and riders. This was apparently their only armor, and it is defensive armor. "Fire" is red, the "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 and smoke and brimstone" (the same colors as their breastplates) from "their mouths." These may be metaphors describing their pronouncements of judgment (cf. 11:5-6). This verse suggests that these horses and riders are probably something other than a human army of cavalry, probably an evil 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 (cf. Gen. 19:24, 28), so He may use them again. Or they may represent other agents of destruction. These plagues recall 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*) ("the fire, the smoke, and the brimstone") 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" supports the conclusion that they represent angelic instruments of divine judgment

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Almanac*, 1971, p. 355.

<sup>2</sup> Recall J. R. R. Tolkien's huge army of Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 167; Hendriksen, p. 148.

other than natural horses. Some interpreters have suggested that what they represent are modern weapons that shoot both forward ("their mouths") and backward ("their tails"), 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). Not only can they kill with their mouths, but they could also kill with their tails, which John described as "like serpents" in that they too could inflict deadly wounds.

### 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), which harmonizes with what John recorded here. Ironically these earth-dwellers will refuse to stop worshipping demons who are apparently responsible for their misery under this sixth trumpet judgment.

In John's day people fashioned idol images out of the materials that he mentioned here: "gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood."

<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.

Today objects that people venerate that are made of these same materials can be bought in stores, and materialists idolize them. John reminded his readers of the powerlessness of these idols (cf. Deut. 4:28; Ps. 115:5-7; 135:15-17; Isa. 44:12-20; Dan. 5:23).<sup>1</sup>

9:21 These unrepentant people will also continue in their sins of "murders," "witchcraft," "sexual immorality," and "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 "witchcraft" (*pharmakon*) implies the use of drugs. The English word "pharmacy" comes from it. The Greek word can refer to poisons, amulets, charms, magic spells, sorcery, 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). Thus witchcraft 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>2</sup>

These trumpet judgments, like 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. However 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.

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<sup>1</sup>See Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, for insight into modern idolatry.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 174. See J. Kirby Anderson, *Moral Dilemmas*, ch. 8: "Drug Abuse."

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 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. Even though we may not be able to understand exactly how God will bring judgment on this world, we do know that He will.

**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 that will be happening at approximately the same time. This interruption 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>

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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 comments on chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 311.



### 1. The appearance of the mighty angel 10:1-4

10:1 A few commentators have identified this "strong angel" as Jesus Christ.<sup>1</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 him as Gabriel or Michael (cf. Dan. 8:16; 12:7).<sup>2</sup> But this is only guessing. He is probably not the same "strong angel" that John saw before (5:2), since there are many strong angels (cf. 18:21). John saw him descending "from heaven" as a messenger from God (cf. 20:1) and "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 "like the sun," reflecting the glory and majesty of God. "His feet" (and probably his legs) were like "fiery pillars," which are reminiscent of the pillar of fire in the wilderness that was a manifestation of God's holiness, mercy, and judgment.<sup>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 224; Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:233; Ironside, p. 172; Wiersbe, 2:597; Beale, p. 522.

<sup>2</sup>Charles, 1:258-59; J. B. Smith, pp. 153-54; Swete, p. 177; Mounce, p. 207; A. Johnson, p. 496; Beasley-Murray, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 556-57, for parallels between this angel and the Colossus of Rhodes.

anticipation and accentuates the solemnity of the apocalyptic events to follow."<sup>1</sup>

- 10:2 The "little scroll" in this angel's 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*). Nevertheless some interpreters believe that the scroll mentioned previously is also the one in view here.<sup>2</sup> The tense of the Greek verb translated "was open" (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 "sea" and the "land," 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 his message,<sup>3</sup> or that he was defying the sea's instability.<sup>4</sup>
- 10:3 This angel's "loud" cry produced "seven peals [claps] 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 threatens more judgments to come. But, unlike normal thunder, 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 that these seven thunders announced (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-4). This indicates clearly that God has not revealed in Scripture all the judgments that will take place on the earth during the Great Tribulation.<sup>5</sup>

"First, in a document filled with revelations, a refusal to reveal some possibly important detail

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Fanning, p. 313.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 137.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 127.

<sup>5</sup>Newell, p. 142.

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>1</sup>

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 strong angel (v. 1) took an oath ("raised his right hand to heaven") "and swore by" God ("Him who lives forever and ever," v. 6) seems to confirm that this angel is not God or Christ. Lifting the "right hand" toward God ("to heaven") was and is a customary gesture when someone makes 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 (v. 2).

10:6 The oath emphasized the truthfulness and inevitability of what this angel 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" in the outpouring of God's wrath (cf. 8:1). This announcement also implied that God would no longer give people extra time to repent.

The Greek word used here, *chronos*, (translated "delay") commonly means "time," but that is obviously not what the angel intended here (cf. v. 7). He did not mean that time would cease. 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

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 563.

(11:15).<sup>1</sup> Verse 7 explains this affirmation further (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, which will give earth-dwellers time to repent (6:15-17; 9:20-21). But the bowl judgments will come very quickly in succession and will allow little or no time for repentance (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1-9).

10:7 In contrast to ("but," Gr. *all'*) delay, when the seventh trumpet angel spoke, God would fully finish His "mystery." "The mystery of God" probably refers to previously unrevealed details of God's plans for humanity that He was about to make known.<sup>2</sup> Specifically it refers to what will take place to ensure that the kingdoms of the world become the kingdom of Christ (11:15). The mystery "is finished" (the aorist passive of *teleo*, or is brought to completion) 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 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 Probably God or Christ ("the voice which I heard from heaven," cf. v. 4) then commanded John to "take the scroll" (Gr. *biblion*) from the strong "angel" (v. 1) with authority over the whole planet (v. 5; cf. 5:7-8).

"... God's revelation is never forced on any man;  
he must take it. God's messenger must be in the

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:652; Swete, pp. 126-27; Charles, 1:263-64; Beckwith, p. 582; Robertson, 6:372.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 229.

end a willing messenger, not a conscript, but one who has put out his hand to the task."<sup>1</sup>

- 10:9 Evidently "the little scroll" symbolizes God's revelation that John was about to set forth.<sup>2</sup> It is the revelation that the remainder of the Book of Revelation, or at least part of it, contains. Some believe that it is the same book that the Lamb took from God (5:1-7).<sup>3</sup> Eating is a universal figure of speech for receiving knowledge (cf. Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 3:1-3). The angel told John that this revelation would make his "stomach bitter" but that it would taste as "sweet as honey" in his mouth. This order probably suggests that what was coming next was more judgment, but that John would find satisfaction in knowing these things. Some amillennialists take the content of the scroll to be the gospel message rather than additional revelation.<sup>4</sup>
- 10:10 John may have literally eaten the little book.<sup>5</sup> Or he may have only devoured its contents metaphorically.<sup>6</sup> This revelation was pleasant at first because it was a revelation from God (cf. Ps. 19:9-10; 119:103). But as John meditated on it (digested its contents) and comprehended the fearful judgments that it predicted, he became distressed, and the revelation turned "bitter" in his "stomach." The reason for reversing the order of these effects, compared with verse 9, may be to place the bitterness closer to the judgments that follow.<sup>7</sup> Or John may have changed the order simply for literary variety. "The little scroll" may have contained the revelation in 11:1 through 13.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:68-69.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:654.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 323.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74; Mounce, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup>Fanning, p. 318.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74.

<sup>8</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.

Or it may have contained more (perhaps chs. 11—19), or all of what follows in Revelation.<sup>1</sup>

10:11 "They" may refer to God or Jesus Christ (vv. 4, 8) and the strong angel (v. 9). Some interpreters, however, believe that 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>2</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 ("prophesy") the new revelation contained in the little scroll that he had just consumed. The new prophecies concerned many different "peoples, nations, language groups, and kings" (rulers; cf. 5:9). The specific mention of "kings" reflects God's sovereignty and anticipates the judgments in 16:14; 17:10; and 17:12.

This renewed commission stresses that what follows would be more burdensome than what John had prophesied so far. It would make him uncomfortable ("bitter" in his "stomach") because of the severity of the judgments that God will send that follow in Revelation.

#### F. SUPPLEMENTARY REVELATION OF THE TWO WITNESSES IN THE GREAT TRIBULATION 11:1-14

John recorded this supplementary revelation that deals with the two witnesses in order to inform his readers of the ministries of these important individuals during the Great Tribulation.<sup>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 74.

<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</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.

fate of the church during the six trumpet judgments.<sup>1</sup> Alford regarded it as a summary of the more detailed prophecy that follows.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The temple in Jerusalem 11:1-2

11:1 "Then" (Gr. *kai*) ties this chapter closely to the previous one. John's first prophetic assignment, after receiving his fresh commission (10:8-11), was to reveal the new information that was in the little scroll.

John continued to be 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 rod and the instructions was probably the strong angel just referred to in chapter 10. 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 "the temple" probably signifies that the temple is God's possession and that He was assuming possession of it. One carefully measures what is one's own personal property (cf. 2 Sam. 8:2; Ezek. 40:3—42:20).

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>3</sup> But this can hardly be the connotation here in view of the context (v. 2). However, since John received instruction not to measure the areas that were open to Gentiles (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

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<sup>1</sup>See Lenski, p. 326; Alford, 4:657.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 4:656.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:81.

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>1</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 (the first three and a half years) of Daniel's seventieth week, which is the Tribulation (cf. v. 8; 13:14-15; Dan. 9:26-27; 12:11; Matt. 24:15-16; 2 Thess. 2:4).<sup>2</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 counting) the worshippers too. This probably means that God will know them, and/or perhaps preserve them.<sup>3</sup> These worshippers evidently represent godly Jews who will worship God in this Tribulation temple (cf. Ezek. 14:22; Rom. 11:4-5, 26). Aune believed that they will be the 144,000.<sup>4</sup> But the text simply calls them worshippers.

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, both amillennialists and premillennialists, take the temple as a reference to the church (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>2</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; Fanning, p. 328. 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.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 604.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 598.



6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5).<sup>1</sup> Lenski held that the sanctuary, the altar, and the worshippers together represent the whole church (all believers).<sup>2</sup>

"The church will be protected in the coming disaster."<sup>3</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 (v. 2)? I take the temple to be a literal temple on earth rather than a figure for the church (believers).

11:2 "Leave out" (Gr. *ekballo*, lit. "throw out") implies removal from divine favor (cf. Matt. 22:13; 25:30; 3 John 10). "The courtyard ... outside the temple" corresponds to the Court of the Gentiles in Israel's former temples, to which Gentiles had access, and which lay outside the court into which only Jews could come. The Tribulation temple will evidently have similar courtyards. Not measuring ("do not measure") signifies exclusion from God's favor, whereas measuring signifies enjoying His favor (cf. v. 1).

"The nations" are the Gentiles, specifically hostile unbelieving Gentiles (cf. v. 18; 14:8; 19:15; 20:3). These Gentiles will oppress ("trample") "the holy city," which is earthly Jerusalem (cf. v. 8; 21:22; Luke 21:24). Some view the reference to "the holy city" as alluding to the Jewish people rather than Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> But if the city is people, then who are the people in the city? Some say that they are believing Israelites.<sup>5</sup> Others believe that the holy city is heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Still others believe that it is the professing church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979; Swete, p. 132; Barclay, 2:83; A. Johnson, pp. 499-502; Mounce, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 147. See also Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 603.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Beckwith, p. 588; Ladd, pp. 152-53.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 568.

<sup>7</sup>Alford, 4:661-62.

"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 restored."<sup>1</sup>

The "42 months" (three and one-half years) are the last half of the Tribulation, since this will be the time when Gentile hostility to the Jews will be most intense (cf. Dan. 9:27). The Gentiles "will trample" the outer court of the temple and the rest of Jerusalem for 42 months. Anti-Semitism will reach its 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>2</sup> or the 42 encampments of Israel in the wilderness,<sup>3</sup> or a period of "measurable duration,"<sup>4</sup> or "a divinely restricted period of time,"<sup>5</sup> or "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24).<sup>6</sup> A foreshadowing of this time was Antiochus Epiphanes' desecration of the Jerusalem temple from June 168 B.C. to December 165 B.C.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. The ministry of the two witnesses 11:3-6**

Even though believing Jews will suffer persecution during this time, God will still get His message out. "Two witnesses" will be especially significant. Valid testimony required at least two witnesses under the Old Covenant (Deut. 19:15), and both Jesus and the early church sent out witnesses in pairs (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:2; Acts 13:2; 15:39-40). Some, incorrectly I think,

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1510; J. N. D[arby], *Studies on the Book of Daniel*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1556; Beale, p. 565.

<sup>4</sup>Morris, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 609.

<sup>6</sup>Lenski, p. 331. Beale, pp. 557-59, explained five major interpretations of verses 1 and 2.

<sup>7</sup>Barclay, 2:84-85.

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 and 2 who also speaks here for God (cf. v. 8).

God did not reveal the identity of His "two witnesses." Many commentators believe that they will be Moses and Elijah restored to life, since these men were prophets and performed the kinds of miracles that these witnesses will perform (v. 6).<sup>2</sup> Others believe that they will be resurrected Enoch and Elijah, since God took these men to heaven without dying.<sup>3</sup> Another reason that some believe that one of these witnesses will be Elijah is Malachi 4:5, which predicts that Elijah will return before Messiah returns.<sup>4</sup> Some preterist interpreters have identified the witnesses as James and Peter, or two lesser known apostles, or faithful Roman Christians during the Roman invasion of Israel, or a small body of Christians who remained in Jerusalem during the invasion.<sup>5</sup>

Other less literal interpreters think that the two witnesses may represent, not two individuals, but the faithful witness of the church throughout its persecutions,<sup>6</sup> or the witnessing Jewish remnant as a whole.<sup>7</sup> I agree with those who believe that they

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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.

<sup>6</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.

<sup>7</sup>Ironside, p. 192.

will be now unknown individuals who will be living at that time rather than former prophets brought back to earth for this ministry (cf. Matt. 11:14).<sup>1</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>2</sup>

These witnesses "will prophesy," namely, communicate messages from God, not necessarily predict the future. 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).<sup>3</sup>

"Hebrew months were alternately 30 and 29 days long. Their year, shorter than ours, had 354 days. Therefore, about every 3 years (7 times in 19 years) an extra 29-day month, Veadar, was added between Adar [February-March] and Nisan [March-April]."<sup>4</sup>

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), which is the focus of John's vision

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<sup>1</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; Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Two Witnesses in Revelation 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):344-54; Fanning, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 134. See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 87-89, for a good summary of the arguments pro and con for three popular views.

<sup>3</sup>The Jews counted 30 days as one month.

<sup>4</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 318.

in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> Some interpreters, including the early church fathers Victorinus, Hippolytus, and Augustine, believed that the two witnesses would minister in the first half of the Tribulation.<sup>2</sup> However the context strongly favors the last half of the Tribulation.

The two witnesses will wear "sackcloth" (or the equivalent), 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 of the earth"—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 their power from Him (cf. 1:4). They will be God's anointed servants who will bear, like the lampstand in the temple, the light of His truth. They will undoubtedly be dependent on the Spirit, and they will speak for God, who controls the whole earth.
- 11:5 These two witnesses will be able to protect themselves by announcing judgment from God on their enemies who try to harm them, like 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 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 will be the same as the drought that

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 131; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup>T. F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John*, p. 70; Ironside, p. 191; Newell, pp. 159-60; A. Johnson, p. 502; Wiersbe, 2:598; McGee, 5:981; *The Nelson ...*, p. 2181; Vacendak, 2:1288 also held this view.

God sent during Elijah's day, namely, three and a half years. Their ministry will also be for the same purpose, namely, to punish people for their sins and to lead others to repentance. However the two witnesses will be able to exercise their power whenever they wish ("as often as they desire"), 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 time of Moses and Joshua, (2) the time of Elijah and Elisha, (3) the time of Daniel and his three friends, and (4) the time 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 testimony" 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 residence in "the abyss," which is 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 inflict on a person in biblical times (cf. Ps. 79:2-3). The word "spiritually" (Gr. *pneumatikos*) here indicates a comparative rather than a literal meaning: The "great 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 156.

The place of Jesus Christ's crucifixion ("where ... their [the two witnesses'] Lord was crucified") identifies "the great city" as Jerusalem (cf. Jer. 22:8). Other views are that it is (1) every city that has opposed 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 that way. But He did not.

11:9 Evidently people from all over the world will be able to view the corpses, probably by whatever is the latest means of communication. Alternatively, people from all the groups mentioned (cf. 5:9; 7:9) may 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. Again, precise time periods in Revelation argue for a literal interpretation of these numbers.

11:10 This is the only instance of rejoicing during the Tribulation that is 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 from these witnesses. This will be the world's last great Mardi Gras (lit. Fat Tuesday) type of 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 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

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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.

prophetic present tense in the Greek verbs in this verse pictures what is future as fact.

- 11:12 The witnesses, and probably those beholding them before they ascend, will hear "a loud voice from heaven." It probably belongs to Jesus Christ (cf. 4:1). "The cloud" evidently refers to the shekinah (glory cloud) in which Jesus Christ ascended into heaven (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 that 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 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 that it represents "a minor completeness of destruction and wreck" since the number 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 become believers, though some have concluded that they will.<sup>5</sup> But at least they will acknowledge God's hand in these events.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps they will only give glory to God in the way that the demons did who

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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; J. B. Smith, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 183; Newell, p. 157.



gave glory to Jesus when He confronted them during His earthly ministry.

### **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 it 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 this in order to give supplementary, encouraging information to John and his readers. 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 ANNOUNCED 11:15-19**

John's revelation continued to unfold future events as God revealed these to him in his vision. The scene that John saw next was in heaven. The seventh trumpet judgment did not begin immediately (cf. 8:1-5). 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—before the beginning of the Great Tribulation. Furthermore there is no exegetical basis for identifying these trumpets with the trumpet that will sound at the Rapture, which Buswell did. That is, Scripture does not indicate that they are identical but instead separates them.

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: it represents Christ's earthly reign as already in existence before it actually

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<sup>1</sup>J. Oliver Buswell Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2:397.

begins.<sup>1</sup> His reign will begin after the seventh trumpet judgment has run its course.<sup>2</sup> The "loud voices" probably belong to the whole multitude in heaven. "Our Lord" (Sovereign) here refers to God the Father in contrast to "His Christ" (Anointed One).

"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 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>3</sup>

The pronoun "He" probably refers to God generally. 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). But Jesus Christ will continue to reign beyond the Millennium "forever and ever."

- 11:16 The 24 elders' (4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:13-14) response to this announcement was to fall "on their faces" before "God" in worship. Worship in heaven contrasts, during the Tribulation period, with rebellion on earth.
- 11:17 The elders will thank God for taking His "great power" in hand and finally beginning "to reign" on the earth. This is the only use of *eucharisteo*, translated "We give You thanks," in Revelation. In the vision God was about to do this. The title "Lord God, the Almighty" stresses God's irresistible power and sovereignty, which will now become evident. "The One who is and who was" 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 on planet earth.

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<sup>1</sup>Düsterdieck, pp. 328-29; Robertson, 6:384.

<sup>2</sup>Charles, 1:294; Kiddle, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 106.

The elders' statement has led some interpreters to conclude that it signals the beginning of Jesus Christ's reign.<sup>1</sup> Premillennialists understand this reign to be on the earth, but amillennialists understand it to be in heaven. In view of the events that seem to follow this one, and those that precede the beginning of His reign in chapter 20, an earthly reign is preferable. It seems better to regard the elders' statement as anticipating the inauguration of that reign.

"The event is so certain that throughout this section it is repeatedly spoken of as already having taken place."<sup>2</sup>

Preterist Chilton believed that this reign was consummated in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> This seems very unlikely.

11:18 The elders continue to anticipate the beginning of Messiah's rule on earth by foreseeing the coming 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 anticipate the judgment of "the dead" and the rewarding of believers. They not only give thanks that Christ will reign supremely (v. 17) but that He will judge the wicked and reward the righteous (v. 18).

"Although rewards are all of grace (Rom. 4:4), they vary according to what each has done (1 Cor 3:8)."<sup>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Ironside, pp. 197-98; Beale, p. 609; Swete, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup>Chilton, *The Days ...*, pp. 290-91.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 232.

distinguish future judgments from each other (cf. Mark 4:29; John 5:25, 28-29; Acts 17:31; 24:21)."<sup>1</sup>

The elders did distinguish two groups of believers: the Old Testament and New Testament "prophets" who communicated divine revelation, and "the saints," namely, other believers.<sup>2</sup> They further described these saints as "those who fear Your name," both "the small and the great" (i.e., all kinds; cf. 13:16; 19:5, 18; 20:12).

The elders also anticipated the destruction of the wicked "who destroy the earth," that is, those 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 of God ... in heaven" "opened" (cf. Heb. 9:23). This chapter opened with the measuring of the temple, and it 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>3</sup> The opening of the heavenly temple probably pictures the immediate fellowship with God that believers will enjoy following these judgments.

In the temple John viewed "the ark of His [God's] covenant," which was 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 that it perished either (1) in Shishak's invasion, during Manasseh's apostasy, (2) when Nebuchadnezzar burned the temple in 586 B.C., or (3) 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 110-11.

<sup>2</sup>See Stanton, *Kept from ...*, pp. 65-69.

<sup>3</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 331.

the ark in a cave on Mt. Sinai (2 Macc. 2:4-8). There was no ark in the second temple.<sup>1</sup> "The second temple" refers to the temple that the Jews built following their return to their land from Babylonian captivity, which Herod the Great renovated, 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 ("in heaven"; cf. Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:1-5; 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. We should not conclude that there is a physical ark of the covenant in heaven any more than we should conclude that there is a physical temple in heaven. What John saw he saw in a vision.

As elsewhere, God revealed His presence (cf. 4:5; 16:18; Exod. 19:16-19) and wrathful judgment (cf. 8:5; 10:3; 16:18) as a storm with "flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder, and an earthquake, and a great hailstorm." This was a theophany: a visible manifestation of God to humankind.

"The seventh trumpet brings us to the very end of the tribulation and to the beginning of the millennial reign."<sup>2</sup>

J. Dwight Pentecost believed that the seventh trumpet is the second advent of Jesus Christ to this earth.<sup>3</sup> Others believe that it concludes the first half of the Tribulation.<sup>4</sup> I believe that it occurs at the approximate middle of the Great Tribulation.

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. Prolepsis is the representation of a thing as existing before it actually does.

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<sup>1</sup>Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 5:219:5.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:237. See also Moo, pp. 198-99.

<sup>3</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 300.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1290-91.

This verse is transitional; it concludes the present pericope and introduces what follows.

There is no revelation in verses 15 through 19 of the judgment that is 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 are a revelation of the seventh trumpet judgment.<sup>1</sup> Consequently the revelation in chapters 12 through 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.

#### 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 in the Great Tribulation so that he could understand the bowl judgments, which the seventh trumpet judgment contained.

##### 1. The activity of Satan himself ch. 12

Most premillennialists believe that God gave John revelation of Satan's special activity during the Great Tribulation in this chapter. Many amillennialists say that this activity occurs throughout the New Testament era of the church.<sup>2</sup> God gave John this information 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 Great Tribulation.

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Bullinger, pp. 368-69; Ladd, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 361.

throughout history since Satan's fall. This prepares the way for all that is anti-Christian to enter the world at 13:1."<sup>1</sup>

Many ancient civilizations had myths that resemble this revelation.<sup>2</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. It is a kind of historical review of Satan's hostility toward the Jews.

12:1 John saw a "sign," which is 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*).

"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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup>See Beasley-Murray, pp. 192-97.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 510.

This sign was "in heaven," not the earth's sky or atmosphere but the heavenly scene that John had been viewing, in contrast with what he saw happening on earth.

What this "woman" signifies has puzzled all interpreters. Some have felt that John was alluding to something that his original readers knew about, namely, the "mother of the gods" who was represented on Roman coins.<sup>1</sup> Others see her as standing for "the believing covenant-messianic community," including the church.<sup>2</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, claimed that she was this woman.<sup>3</sup> Might she be a symbol of Mary, the mother of Jesus?<sup>4</sup> This seems unlikely since this woman will be the object of persecution during the Great 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 Mother and the Child spread to the ends of the earth."<sup>6</sup>

In view of Old Testament imagery (cf. Isa. 54:1-6; Jer. 3:20; Ezek. 16:8-14; Hos. 2:19-20), and for the following reasons, the "woman" seems to symbolize the nation of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Her identification as God's people throughout all of the ages, therefore, seems incorrect.<sup>8</sup> She wears "a crown" (Gr. *stephanos*) with "12 stars" and is "clothed with the sun, and the moon," as God pictured Israel in one of the nation's early

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<sup>1</sup>See Stauffer, pp. 151-52.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979; Alford, 4:667; Seiss, p. 280; Lenski, p. 363; A. Johnson, p. 514; Beale, p. 627; Swete, p. 148; Mounce, p. 237; Ladd, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health, With Key to the Scriptures*, pp. 560-61.

<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.

<sup>6</sup>Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:238; Ironside, p. 210; Newell, pp. 170-71; Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 285-90; Morris, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup>This was Jamieson, et al., p. 1560, and Barclay's view, 2:93.



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>1</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 and 10, the sun corresponds to Jacob, the moon to Rachel, and the 12 stars to Jacob'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, being in labor pain and in pain." Evidently this represents Israel's national spiritual pain before Jesus Christ's appearing at His first coming.<sup>2</sup> Another view is that it represents "the emerging nation of Israel in its sufferings prior to the second coming of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

12:3 The second "sign" that John saw was a "red dragon," whom God identified in verses 9 and 20:2 as "Satan." "Dragon" (Gr. *drakon*) occurs 12 times in the New Testament but 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 a powerful, aggressive, deadly foe. Its red color suggests bloodshed.<sup>4</sup> Its "seven heads and ten horns" probably represent seven nations (powers) and ten rulers (cf. 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, p. 1979.

<sup>2</sup>Kiddle, p. 220; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 188; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 958.

<sup>4</sup>Newell, p. 172; Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, p. 621; Lange, p. 246; Scott, p. 337.

A less literal interpretation regards the ten horns as simply symbolic of the dragon's mighty strength.<sup>1</sup> Some interpreters viewed the dragon as pagan Rome—in spite of verse 9.<sup>2</sup>

- 12:4 The "third of the stars of heaven" in this verse probably represent the angels that Satan led in rebellion against God (cf. vv. 8-9; 9:1; Dan. 8:10; Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4).<sup>3</sup> Satan has extensive authority, which this description reflects. John saw that God "hurled" Satan and these angels out of heaven to the earth.<sup>4</sup> That is, they no longer had access to God's presence, though they presently do (cf. Job 1—2). The fact that Satan "stood before the woman who was about to give birth" probably means that 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>5</sup> Another view is that "her Child" represents all true believers.<sup>6</sup>

"All Satanic activities are carried on under the double motive of *ambition to rule and be worshipped*, and, *hatred toward the One whom God has chosen* to take the kingdom Satan has usurped."<sup>7</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 ("all the nations") with a shepherd's "rod," but it will be a "rod of iron" (Ps. 2). The emphases in this whole review of Satan's opposition to Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:668; Seiss, p. 290; Lenski, p. 365.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1979.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, p. 289; Lenski, p. 356; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Govett, 2:21-23; William H. Simcox, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 126; Charles, 1:320.

<sup>5</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 958.

<sup>6</sup>Seiss, p. 297.

<sup>7</sup>Newell, p. 174.

are Jesus' victory and Satan's continuing antagonism. If Jesus Christ is the child, as even some amillennialists believe,<sup>1</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," v. 5), he will turn his attention to Israel (the mother, "woman"). 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>2</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 (cf. Matt. 25:34-40). Some preterists believe that 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>3</sup> But most futurists believe that this reference is to an event still future.

### The dragon's expulsion from heaven 12:7-12

- 12:7 "Michael" the archangel (Jude 9) is a leader of God's angelic army. He is apparently 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 "and his angels waging war with the dragon [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 Great Tribulation.
- 12:8 In John's vision Satan's forces proved weaker, and God threw them out of heaven. As a result of this battle Satan will no

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:668.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 646.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 152; Alford, 4:673.

longer have access to heaven (cf. 20:11; Job 1—2; Dan. 2:35; Zech. 10:10). This probably means that God will no longer hear Satan's accusations against believers (cf. v. 10).

- 12:9 God identified the dragon as "Satan." 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 (cf. v. 10).

"This name ["devil"] 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>

The Greek word *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 determined and humiliating fate of Satan and his angels.

Satan is active throughout the heavens now, and 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 Great Tribulation. This conclusion harmonizes with the evidence of unusual Satanic activity on earth throughout history and most of the Tribulation, including heart hardening, which is 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, namely, anticipating what will follow the expulsion of

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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. God's "salvation" (victory), the manifestation of His "power," and His "kingdom" (in both the millennial and eternal phases of it), will "have come" even closer when this happens. Likewise the manifestation of "the authority of His Christ" (Anointed One) 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 malicious work of accusing believers unrelentingly ("day and night") "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 presently 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 that began in verse 10. "They" refers to believers whom Satan formerly accused before God. "Him" refers to Satan. 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 part of the Great 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 will consent to die rather than being 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 of the martyrs' praise. Heaven-dwellers can "rejoice" in view of Satan's punishment

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 517.

(cf. Ps. 96:11; Isa. 49:13). He will no longer be attacking them. However everyone living on the earth, especially believers, must then beware, because he will move among them more antagonistically than ever ("with great wrath"). He will know that his "time" is "short" before God confines him in the lake of fire forever (20:10). Satan knows how the future will unfold, because he knows all that God has revealed in the Bible, but he continues to oppose God anyway.

### **The dragon's vengeance on the woman 12:13-17**

The revelation of Satan's activity in the Great Tribulation, 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 harm Christ (vv. 4-5) or accuse believers (v. 10) any longer. The Israelites will flee from Satan ("he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child," v. 5) in the future like they fled from Pharaoh in the past (v. 14; 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 that 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 God's favor.

12:14 The Israelites will receive divine assistance in fleeing from the dragon. God said that He 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" in this verse to be metaphorical. It is probably a way of describing how God will save them, namely, with strength 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 pleases, and an earth-bound "serpent" (vv. 5, 15) implies the superior protection of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:105.

Evidently many Israelites will flee from Jerusalem into desolate places ("the wilderness") in order to escape Satan's persecution (cf. Zech. 14:1-8; Matt. 24:16; Mark 13:14). Some commentators have felt that mountainous area around 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 like He fed the Israelites miraculously 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, which can be translated: "at the end of times, 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>1</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).

12:15 Perhaps Satan will use literal "water" to try to drown this group of Israelites.<sup>2</sup> If they take refuge in a place such as Petra, this might seem to be a possibility. The topography of Israel does not lend itself to such a flood. Another possibility is that Satan

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 959.

<sup>2</sup>Düsterdieck, pp. 353-54; Bullinger, p. 416; J. B. Smith, pp. 190-91.

will pursue these Jews with a "flood" of soldiers (cf. Jer. 46:7-8; 47:2-3).<sup>1</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 (cf. Exod. 14:13-29; 25:4-13) who will have congregated in the land of Israel after Antichrist makes his covenant with them at the beginning of the Tribulation. He may seek to wipe them out with deceptive false teaching, since the "water" comes "out of his mouth" (v. 16).<sup>2</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. *ge*) will assist the Israelites ("the woman") in escaping from "the dragon." 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 in order to preserve the fleeing Jews in the future.

Two thirds of these Israelites will die in the Great Tribulation, 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 ("the dragon") will proceed to concentrate his attack on a special group of them, namely, those who obey God's "commandments" and believe in "Jesus" Christ. This group seems to be, or perhaps includes,

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<sup>1</sup>Govett, 2:62-64.

<sup>2</sup>Ironside, p. 217; Beale, p. 673.



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 that "the rest" of the woman's 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 Great Tribulation. He recorded this information in order 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; 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 John saw "the dragon" standing on "the seashore." The AV and NKJV rendering "I stood" does not have as good textual support, I believe, as the NASB and NIV translation "the dragon stood."<sup>3</sup> John then saw "a beast coming up out of the sea" (cf. Dan. 7:2, 3, 7, 8, 19-27; Job 40—41).

"... 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>4</sup>

The implication is that the dragon summoned the beast out of the sea.<sup>5</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>NKJV refers to *The Holy Bible: New King James Version*.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 682. Cf. Moffatt, 5:429; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 733.

<sup>5</sup>A. Johnson, p. 523; Mounce, p. 248.

social life, out of which the great historical movements of the world arise; cf. Isa. xvii. 12 ..."¹

"Without exception the imagery of the sea monster is used throughout the OT to represent evil kingdoms who persecute God's people ..."²

"The sea" probably represents the mass of humanity (cf. 17:15; Dan. 7:2-3). A literal sea is impossible since this beast is a person, as we will see (v. 6). The ancient world often associated evil with the sea and used the sea as a figure for the abyss (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).³ 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, these characteristics also correspond to the features of the fourth kingdom that Daniel saw in his vision of four beasts (cf. Dan. 7:7-8). In Daniel's vision the 10 horns represented 10 rulers (Dan. 7:24). Here in Revelation the beast with "10 horns" has authority over 10 rulers (cf. Rev. 17). The view that this beast is a real person who will rule the world during the Great Tribulation (Dan. 7:25) dates back to the early church fathers.⁴ Other views are that this beast is the personification of evil, or the sum total of world power,⁵ or the revived Roman Empire,⁶ or the threat of heresy, or Nero revived (based on the Nero *redivivus* [i.e., "living again"] legend),⁷ or false prophets collectively.⁸

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¹Swete, p. 161. See also Seiss, p. 322.

²Beale, p. 683.

³Swete, p. 158; Mounce, pp. 249-50; Morris, p. 165.

⁴See A. Johnson, pp. 521-25, 530.

⁵Alford, 4:675; Jamieson, et al., p. 1564.

⁶Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252.

⁷See 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.

⁸See also Andy M. Woods, "The First Beast of Revelation 13 Has Not Yet Appeared in World History: A Comparison of the Preterist and Futurist Views" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002).

"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 dragon"), the beast had "seven heads" (cf. 12:3), which apparently represent the remaining seven rulers of nations after three of them disappear (Dan. 7:8). The "10 [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 antagonism to God (cf. vv. 5-6; 2 Thess. 2:4).

This beast is evidently the Antichrist who will be the leader 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 personification and 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 reigned

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<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; A. 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.

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> This 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 crowns (cf. 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 crowns (diadems) in chapter 17.

13:2 This "beast" possessed qualities of ("was like") three animals. They are perhaps the leopard's swiftness, agility, vigilance, craftiness, and fierce cruelty; the bear's brutality; and the lion's strength and majesty. 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 that 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>See also Moffatt, 5:429.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 154. Cf. Scott, p. 270; J. B. Smith, p. 193.

absolute autocratic royal dominion (Babylon), that the Gentiles have ever known."<sup>1</sup>

Antichrist will derive his "power," "throne," and "great authority" from Satan, "the dragon" (cf. 2 Thess. 2:9). In contrast, Jesus Christ will receive these things from God the Father.

"If race or class war divides us into hostile camps, changing political argument into blind hate, one side or the other may overturn the hustings [the proceedings at an election] with the rule of the sword. If our economy of freedom fails to distribute wealth as ably as it has created it, the road to dictatorship will be open to any man who can persuasively promise security to all; and a martial government under whatever charming phrases, will engulf the democratic world."<sup>2</sup>

- 13:3 Since the beast's "heads" represent the heads of nations, this verse seems to be saying that one of the rulers under Satan's authority appeared to be "fatally wounded," but then he revived. Perhaps this leader will receive a wound that would normally be fatal, but he will recover.<sup>3</sup> Another possibility is that the beast himself will die, and then experience resurrection.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Wuest believed that Antichrist will be Judas Iscariot raised to life.<sup>5</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>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Will and Ariel Durant, *The Lessons of History*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 960.

<sup>4</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>5</sup>Wuest, 3:2:68.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:115-19. See F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, p. 166, for more about this belief.

The apparent resurrection of this "head" (person) will be so amazing to the world, that many people ("the whole earth") will give their allegiance and their worship to "the beast," Antichrist (cf. vv. 8, 12; 14:9, 11; 20:4).

- 13:4 They will also worship Satan, "the dragon," who will be enabling the beast. Antichrist's ability to revive will make him appear invincible. The expression, "Who is like the beast?" 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 with 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).

Moffatt explained his preterist understanding of this wounded head 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)."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</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, who was 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 Satan to enable the beast to act as he will, including "speaking arrogant words and blasphemies," during the Great

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:430.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Tribulation, the last three and a half years ("42 months") of the Tribulation.

- 13:6 The beast 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 in Greek, which describes a continuing action.<sup>1</sup> The phrase "he opened his mouth" often indicates the beginning of a prolonged discourse (cf. Matt. 5:2; Acts 8:35). Antichrist will repeatedly 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, believers who will be residing in heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:22).<sup>2</sup>

Apparently the beast will share the dragon's antagonism toward God and His angels for having cast the dragon out of heaven (12:7-9, 12). Caligula demonstrated his antagonism to Israel's God 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>3</sup>

- 13:7 Antichrist will make war with believers ("with the saints") on earth and will "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.

"Incidentally this shows that something more than the Neronic persecution is in mind, for that was not world-wide."<sup>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:401.

<sup>2</sup>McClain, p. 467.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:123.

<sup>4</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.



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>1</sup>

- 13:8 Unbelievers around the world will not only serve Antichrist but they will "worship" him. "The book of life of the Lamb" evidently 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.

### **The response of believers to the beast 13:9-10**

- 13:9 God and John called on the readers of this book to "hear" (pay attention). Particularly those living at this time in the future will need to 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 whom He has "destined for captivity" (i.e., Antichrist, his followers, and some of the saints) will eventually end up as captives (cf. Jer. 15:2; 43:11). Those who kill people violently (v. 7) will themselves die violently (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>2</sup> The whole verse is an encouragement for

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 168; Moffatt, 5:431; Robertson, 6:402.

believers to submit to the sovereignty of God, realizing that He has permitted Antichrist's activity, but that they themselves are secure. It also assures them of divine retribution and urges them to persevere faithfully.

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 earthly 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 (vv. 1-10) as an individual man also see the second beast (vv. 11-18) 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 (emperor worship).<sup>5</sup> However, it seems best to take these beasts as representing individuals.

13:11 "Then I saw" (Gr. *kai eidon*) 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>

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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. Italics added.

It is probably not valid to see a reference to the land of Israel in this reference to the earth.

"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>

Many interpreters, however, have believed that the first beast will be a Jew.<sup>2</sup> Others have believed that he will be a Gentile.

"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>3</sup>

If the sea represents the abyss (cf. 11:7-8; 12:1), 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, who had ten horns (cf. v. 1; 5:6).<sup>4</sup> Another view is that they represent two philosophies opposed to God: naturalism and heretical supernaturalism.<sup>5</sup> Probably in his external conduct this second beast will be peaceful, "like a lamb," but he will speak like "a dragon." His words will prove to be satanic (cf. Matt. 7:15). His speech will reveal his true loyalty. He is also called "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>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 205. See also Fanning, p. 375.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 963.

<sup>4</sup>Stuart, p. 646.

<sup>5</sup>Seiss, p. 335.

<sup>6</sup>Ladd, p. 183.

Barclay understood the second beast to be the organization of Caesar worship.<sup>1</sup>

- 13:12 The second beast will exercise "all the authority of the first beast" by acting as his prophet (19:20; 20:10; cf. Exod. 7:1). Compare the ministries of Moses and Aaron (Exod. 4:16; 7:9), and the Lord and Elijah (1 Kings 17:1). This false prophet will be Antichrist's effective agent in directing the persecution of believers. He will lead earth-dwellers 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 leading people to worship 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 the power to perform supernatural miracles (cf. Exod. 7:11, 22; 8:7).<sup>2</sup> These will be genuinely "great signs" and wonders, not just tricks (16:13-14; 19:20; Matt. 24:4-5, 11, 24-25; 2 Thess. 2:9).<sup>3</sup> Like Elijah and the two witnesses, he will even be able to call down "fire" from "the sky to the earth." 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 (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;

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:115.

<sup>2</sup>See Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today*, pp. 75-96.

<sup>3</sup>See Gregory H. Harris, "Satan's Deceptive Miracles in the Tribulation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156:623 (July-September 1999):308-24.

20:4), perhaps an apparently living statue or robot (cf. Dan. 3:4-6).

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 with a miraculous recovery from the "fatal wound" (v. 12). The first beast apparently will come back to life after being considered dead—an apparent resurrection.

13:15 This verse may mean that the second beast will "give breath to" (Gr. *pneuma*, i.e., cause to live) an inanimate object ("the image of the [first] beast"), 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 it will cause those who do not worship it ("the image of the [first] beast") to be killed (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 believer will die at this time (i.e., during the Great Tribulation; cf. 12:13-16; 13:17-18; Matt. 25:31-46).

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, "The Revelation ...," 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.

13:16 The second beast will also implement the marking or branding of beast-worshippers with the "mark" of the beast. We should probably interpret "all" to mean all classes, rather than all individuals, since John mentioned six classes of people: two social, two economic, and two cultural groups. However taken together these three groups represent people from 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 allow them to buy and sell (v. 17). Beale viewed it as "figurative of the ways in which the state keeps check on whether people submit to compulsory idol worship."<sup>4</sup> Some modern speculators believe that the mark will be an implanted microchip that can be used to track billions of people worldwide.

This branding connects with ancient customs. Domestic slave-owners sometimes branded their slaves with their logo.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes Roman soldiers branded themselves with the mark of their general, if they were particularly fond of him.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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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. Cf. Barclay, 2:129.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 715.

<sup>5</sup>Plutarch, *Pericles*, 26. Cf. Herodotus, 2.113, 7.233.

<sup>6</sup>Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 59.

Those bearing the mark of the beast will show by their mark that they are Antichrist's followers. Individuals devoted to the beast will show their submission and loyalty by accepting his brand on their hand or forehead (cf. Exod. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18).

A less literal view understands the mark of the beast, not as a physical mark, but as "John's way of symbolically describing authentic ownership and loyalty."<sup>1</sup>

Some Christians today worry that they might somehow have the mark of the beast put on them. This should not concern Christians. We believe that the sequence of coming events will be the Rapture, then the appearance of Antichrist, and then the marking of Antichrist's followers.

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 by other means (cf. 1 Kings 17:5-6).

Earth-dwellers (unbelievers) who choose to worship the beast will also accept Antichrist's 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 it enabled him "to buy or to sell."<sup>2</sup> The mark of the beast will be similar to such a certificate of worship in function if not in actual appearance.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 532.

<sup>2</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 "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 Great 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 and speculation 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, which is 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>A. Johnson, p. 534. See Charles R. Swindoll, *Come before Winter*, "Witch Hunting," pp. 191-93.

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 godhead, etc.). Consequently 777 would indicate something authenticated as divine.

However 666 would appear as representing something supremely (since 6 is repeated three times) deficient to someone who believed in 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 may be 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> The number 666 may have identified Nero to John's original

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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.

audience—not that Nero was the Antichrist, but that the number identified the coming Antichrist as someone very much like Nero.<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

Amillennialist Lenski believed the first beast is "the whole antichristian power in the whole world and nothing less," and he saw the second beast as "the whole antichristian propaganda in the whole world."<sup>3</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>4</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>5</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,<sup>6</sup> the world will get worse and worse before Jesus Christ's second coming (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-9). As we see world events shaping up for this scenario, we should be motivated to redeem the time, before the

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<sup>1</sup>Fanning, pp. 379-81.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1005. Cf. Phil. 3:10.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 413. Italics omitted.

<sup>4</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>5</sup>See Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, pp. 302-9, for further helpful discussion of the beast and the false prophet.

<sup>6</sup>See A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1008.

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).

**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 recorded 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 Great 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 that 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.

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<sup>1</sup>For a study of the many parallels between chapters 14 and 15 and Exodus 19 through 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>A. Johnson, p. 537. Paragraph division omitted.

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 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 "Then 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 in Revelation but in 19:11 through 21. John only saw a preview of it—as if it happened 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 is 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 188-89. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 88; J. B. Smith, p. 208; Wiersbe, 2:607.

Jerusalem that God will bring down to earth from heaven (21:1—22:5).<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</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>3</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>4</sup> I think that 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>5</sup>

Apparently the sealing of the 144,000 (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/or safety.<sup>6</sup> Some of the witnesses may die as martyrs (13:15).<sup>7</sup> Many interpreters, however, believe that none of the 144,000 will die during the

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Ladd, pp. 189-90; Mounce, p. 267; Beale, p. 735.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>See Newell, p. 209; McGee, 5:1006.

<sup>5</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup>Barclay, 2:134-35.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 192, 194.

Great Tribulation.<sup>1</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 corresponds with the Mind of God, and the consecration of life to His service."<sup>2</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). That the voice is not that of the 144,000 seems clear since John saw them on earth, but the voice came from heaven. John described the "voice" as pleasant ("like the sound of many waters"), powerful ("like the sound of loud thunder"), and beautiful ("like the sound of harpist playing on their harps").

14:3 These angels ("they") "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>3</sup>

The song that this group sang in heaven ("before the four living creatures and the elders") 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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:402.

(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>1</sup>

14:4 Three occurrences of the word "these" (Gr. *houtoi*) in this verse identify the 144,000 as worthy of special honor: First, "with women" (emphatic by position in the Greek text) they had not been "defiled," because they were "celibate" (Gr. *parthenoi*, virgins). Should we understand this word literally or figuratively? Literally the text would mean that these males had had no sexual relations with women.

"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>2</sup>

Figuratively "celibate" 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>3</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>4</sup>

I think the balance of evidence is slightly in favor of the literal interpretation. 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Archer, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 195. Cf. Alford, 4:685-86; Moffatt, 5:436; Newell, pp. 215-16; Wiersbe, 2:607.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1568; Seiss, p. 352; W. M. Smith, p. 1513; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 848; Vacendak, 2:1300.

<sup>4</sup>A. Johnson, p. 539. Cf. Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216; Ladd, p. 191; Beale, p. 739.



The world "celibate" seems to me to be too strong to use if they will simply be faithful to their spouses or faithful to the Lord. Of course, both a literal and a figurative meaning may be in view: they may be both unmarried and faithful.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the 144,000 will receive special commendation because they will "follow the Lamb" faithfully "wherever He goes" during their lives. This will be especially difficult due to the time in which they will live: the Great Tribulation.

Third, they will receive honor because they were "purchased from mankind as first fruits to God and the Lamb." Some view this as expressing the idea that they will be the first of others who will follow, specifically believers who will enter the Millennium as living believers.<sup>2</sup> However there will be no others that follow who are just like the 144,000. They will be unique, the best. 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>3</sup>

14:5 In addition to the three commendations of verse 4, the witnesses will speak the truth even though deception will abound in the Tribulation (13:14; cf. Isa. 53:9; Zeph. 3:13; John 8:44; 1 Pet. 2:22). In short, they will be "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" (v. 6; 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.

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1008. Cf. Henry, p. 1980.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 216; Ryrie, *Revelation*, p. 89; J. B. Smith, pp. 210-11.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 198.

### 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 probably another one 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). This angel was flying "in midheaven," so nothing hindered people on earth from hearing his words.

"... this is the earliest reference in Jewish or Christian literature to an angel [apart from cherubim and seraphim] *flying*."<sup>1</sup>

This angel had "an eternal gospel to preach to" the worldwide population. "Gospel" means good news. What this good news is becomes clear in the next verse. It is "eternal" because it has eternal significance.

- 14:7 The angel spoke loudly, thus 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), that is, to acknowledge their accountability to Him (cf. Rom. 1:32). To "give Him glory" means to glorify Him by repenting, 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" (v. 6)

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 824.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 182.

is the witness of natural revelation that has gone out since Creation.<sup>1</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," "earth," "sea," and "springs of waters" (all the rivers, lakes, and streams). The first four bowl judgments will affect each of these four aspects of creation (16:2-9).

### **The fall of Babylon 14:8**

The fact that separate and successive angels ("another angel") 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. It was given as though the event had already happened, even though it was yet to happen. It anticipates that actual event that John recorded happening later (ch. 18; cf. 11:7 and 13:1-8).<sup>2</sup> The repetition of the word "fallen" is for emphasis, and the aorist tense of the Greek verb stresses the imminence of Babylon's fall (i.e., it could happen at any time).

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>3</sup> That use apparently also occurs in 1 Peter 5:13.<sup>4</sup>

Another view is that the name "Babylon" refers to the literal city of Babylon on the Euphrates River. In defense of this second option, 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," which was Nebuchadnezzar's description of Babylon (cf. Dan. 4:30), always modifies the literal Babylon elsewhere in Revelation.

A third view is that "Babylon" refers to the idolatrous enemy of God's people that has existed in all generations since the Tower of Babel. Possibly John's original readers identified Rome as the epitome of Babylonianism in

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Wiersbe, 2:607.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 235.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1981; Moffatt, 5:437; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 829; Vacendak 2:1301.

<sup>4</sup>See Barclay, 2:145, for some uses of it in this way in the apocryphal literature.

their day (view one), and subsequent readers have seen various other manifestations of it throughout history (view three).

Viewing this place as the literal city of Babylon does not exclude further implications of the religious and political systems that have arisen from that city, which become the focus of the revelation in chapters 17 and 18.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, "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 the name "Hollywood" represents both a literal city and what it is famous for (entertainment), so the name "Babylon" represents the anti-God world system while also being the name of a particular city.

"John uses 'Babylon' here and later in Revelation not to refer literally to the city in Mesopotamia but as a typology of evil drawn from the ancient and prominent imperial enemy of God's people in the Old testament that destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and exiled its population. Ancient Babylonia was a cardinal example of a pagan empire that opposed God and his people ..."<sup>2</sup>

The angel personified Babylon as a temptress who gives "wine" to "all the nations" in order to seduce them to commit "sexual immorality" (cf. 17:2, 4). The nations would not choose to drink this "wine" without her influence.<sup>3</sup> However, what these nations 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 intoxicating drink not only leads all who drink it to commit sexual immorality but also every kind of excess that expresses unfaithfulness to God (cf. 17:1, 2, 5, 15, 16; 18:3, 9; 19:2).<sup>4</sup> Lenski described Babylon as "the antichristian world city or empire."<sup>5</sup>

My view is that this is a proleptic view of the fall of the whole anti-God system, which has characterized the unbelieving world since the Tower of Babel, that is further described in chapters 17 and 18.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 207; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, p. 393.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Wall, *Revelation*, p. 185.

<sup>4</sup>Hughes, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 432. Italics omitted.

**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 purpose of this warning is to alert potential beast-worshippers to their doom if they worship "the beast and his image" and to encourage believers to remain faithful to God (cf. Matt. 10:28).<sup>1</sup>

14:10 The beast will kill people who do not follow him (13:15), but those who worship the beast will receive worse judgment from God. Contrast the blessing of the faithful in 14:1 through 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" in order to dilute it in John's day, but God will not weaken His punishment 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 it will be "in the presence of the holy angels 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, where they will be 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>2</sup>

14:11 An endless trail of ascending "smoke" will be the constant reminder of the permanent "torment" and 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;

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 211.

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 who are 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>

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>5</sup> Obedience to God's "commandments" and continuing trust ("faith") "in Jesus" constitute 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.

<sup>5</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.

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>1</sup>

### **The blessedness of those who die in Christ 14:13**

This "voice from heaven" was probably the Lamb's voice (1:10-11, 19; *cf.* 10:4, 8; 11:12; 14:2; 18:4; 21:3). The voice told John to "Write" that it would be a blessing for the believers who live during the Great Tribulation to "die" as martyrs. They will receive a unique blessing reserved for no one else.<sup>2</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>3</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 there can be no separation between what a man is and what he does."<sup>4</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 alive and 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

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:435.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 5:439.

<sup>3</sup>Beckwith, p. 422.

<sup>4</sup>Mounce, p. 278.

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* [judgment] seat of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

This is a positive incentive to remain faithful that balances the negative warning previously given in verses 9 through 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. What John saw was again 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 of the more detailed account of the same in chapters 15-20 ..."<sup>2</sup>

14:14 "Then I looked" (Gr. *kai idou*) again introduces a new scene and an advance to another important subject. What follows is very similar to Daniel's prophecy of Messiah's second coming (Dan. 7:13-14). The "white cloud" probably represents the glory of God, the shekinah.<sup>3</sup> The person that John saw was evidently Jesus Christ ("one like a son of man"), though some commentators think that he was an angel, in view of verse 15.<sup>4</sup> That this person was Jesus 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

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1011.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>The shekinah is the English transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning dwelling or setting, and it denotes the dwelling or setting of the divine presence of God.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 849.



do the work of judging (cf. Mark 4:29). Since the sickle is sharp, the Reaper can do His work swiftly and completely.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

14:15 "Another angel" (cf. v. 9) came out of the heavenly "temple" (cf. 11:19; 15:5) and announced that the time 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 that judgment without delay ("Put in your sickle and reap"), because "the harvest" was "ripe" (Gr. *exeranthe*). Some scholars take this Greek word as describing an overly 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). Some believe that this is a judgment of believers.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

14:16 The Judge, described as "He who sat on the cloud" (v. 14; cf. John 5:27), then judged those on the earth. This judgment will occur at the end of the Great Tribulation (19:17-21). Posttribulationist Moo believed that this verse refers to the

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 445.

<sup>2</sup>Archer, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Alford, 4:691-92; et al.

<sup>4</sup>A. Johnson, p. 543.

Rapture and the judgment just before the Second Coming.<sup>1</sup> But this is probably a proleptic description of the things that the Book of Revelation will describe further in its sequential unfolding of events.<sup>2</sup>

"The brevity of the statement dramatizes the suddenness of the judgment."<sup>3</sup>

14:17 The fifth "angel" in this group of angels came out of the heavenly "temple" ready to assist in the judgment (cf. Matt. 13:30, 39-42, 49-50). In verses 14 through 17 it is sometimes difficult to tell whether Christ ("the one like the son of man," v. 14) is judging or whether an angel is judging. I take it that angels will assist Christ in this judgment.

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 send punishment. It seems clear from verse 19 that this angel was addressing the fifth angel: 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).<sup>4</sup> Perhaps two reapings signify the certainty of this judgment, since repetition often signifies certainty in Scripture. Another view is that the first harvest pictures the bowl judgments, and the second harvest the battle of Armageddon.<sup>5</sup>

"Following the pattern of Joel 3:13, the scene furnishes two pictures of the same judgment for

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<sup>1</sup>Moo, pp. 199-200.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:415.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup>Fanning, p. 398.

<sup>5</sup>Vacendak, 2:1302.

the same reason that Joel does, i.e., to emphasize the terror of it."<sup>1</sup>

"The vine of the earth" may represent Israel. The vine was a common symbol of Israel, and it still is today among the Jews. Or it may refer to unbelievers who have brought forth bad fruit (overly ripe grapes) and are therefore fit for judgment.

14:19 The earth had yielded a crop of unbelievers, which now, at the end of the Tribulation, would come into judgment. "The angel" gathered them from "the earth" to undergo judgment in God's "great 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>2</sup>

14:20 Since "the city" in view escapes this judgment, Babylon is evidently not the city that is meant. It is instead probably 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 temple mount; 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' bridles" (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.

"What this affirms is a tremendous bloodletting in which blood is spattered as high as the bridles of horses."<sup>3</sup>

John saw that "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 the land of Israel at this time, not just in the

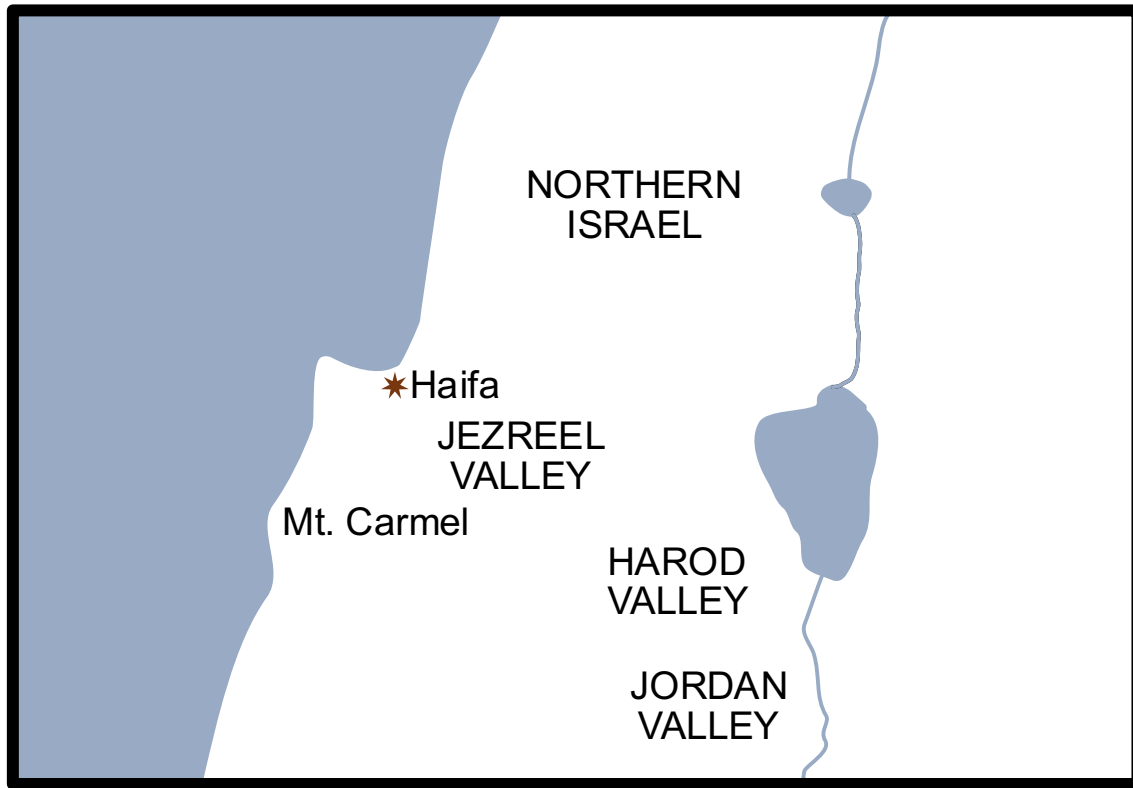
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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 220. Cf. Isa. 34:1-3, 6; 63:1-6.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 282. Cf. Robertson, 6:416; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 232.

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 965.

Valley of Jehoshaphat.<sup>1</sup> Much of this action will take place in the Valley of Jezreel, which is 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 is pictured as draining out of the Jezreel Valley for a distance of 180 miles, probably flowing eastward down the Harod Valley to the Jordan Valley, and south all the way to the Dead Sea.



"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>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:153.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, p. 365.

Many interpreters, including some dispensationalists, believe that what we read in this verse is simply a symbolic and hyperbolic way of picturing a terrible judgment.<sup>1</sup> Some amillennial interpreters take this description as picturing a worldwide judgment.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter contains a prophetic preview of the major events yet future from John's perspective in his vision. Specifically 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 about 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.

"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>3</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>4</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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:442; Alford, 4:693; Lenski, p. 451; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 849; Wiersbe, 2:608; Fanning, p. 400. Hyperbole is overstatement for the sake of the effect, not meant to be taken literally.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 782.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 231. Cf. Isa. 51:17, 22.

the previous revelation rather than introducing what follows.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars disagree.

"Then I saw" (Gr. *kai idou*) again introduces a new scene that John saw in his vision, this time "in heaven" (cf. 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:2, 5). The "sign" (symbolic forewarning) that John saw here signified, announced, and introduced God's last judgments on earth-dwellers during the Tribulation (cf. 12:1, 3). The previous signs were the woman (12:1) and the dragon (12:3).

"They [the signs] point beyond themselves and disclose the theological meaning of history."<sup>2</sup>

This "sign," however, was 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 had seven plagues." As with the seal and trumpet judgments, angels will be God's agents in pouring out His wrath in this series of judgments. John saw that these seven angels were now ready to do their duty (cf. Ps. 103:20). In the rest of Revelation 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, 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 judgments that follow have many similarities to the plagues that God sent on Egypt, as we will see. All seven of these bowl judgments repeat the plagues of Egypt in varied ways. These similarities suggest that God's purpose in both series of judgments is the same: to punish godless idolaters on earth and to liberate the godly on earth for future blessing and service.

Some interpreters believe that the bowl judgments are the same as the seal and trumpet judgments, as noted previously. One advocate of this position wrote as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, pp. 137-40.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 285.

"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>

Beale 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.<sup>3</sup> The differences in these sets of judgments, and their places in the generally chronological unfolding of future events in the book, inclines me away from this view.

### The praise of the Tribulation martyrs 15:2-4

15:2 John again "saw something" in heaven in his vision (cf. vv. 1, 5). This time what he saw looked "like a sea of glass," which was apparently similar to crystal (4:6; cf. Exod. 24:10; Ezek. 1:22), though it also had "fire" in it. The "sea" most likely represents chaotic evil (cf. 4:6). The "fire" suggests the judgment that was 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 will be a lake of fire (cf. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8). Those who had been "victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name," who were "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>5</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.

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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.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Ironside, p. 271.

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, like 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" connote dedication to the worship and service of God (1 Chron. 16:42; cf. Rev. 5:8; 14:2).

15:3 John referred to two songs that the martyrs sang, 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. This song may be the one that follows in verses 3 and 4. In the case of both songs, the Greek genitive translated "of" is probably subjective, meaning that Moses and the Lamb were the sources of these songs, not the subjects of them.

"Moses celebrated a deliverance by the Lord which adumbrated [foreshadowed] 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 [put together] than the promised land of Israel is to be equated with the kingdom of God. 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>

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 235.



The song that follows seems to be one that combines the sentiments expressed in the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.<sup>1</sup> As Moses' song glorified God for His deliverance of the Israelites, so the Lamb's song glorifies God for His deliverance of these overcomers. The first part of the song extols God's "works" and "ways." Specifically, God's "great and marvelous ... works" in judging His enemies are in view. His might makes His judgment possible. His "righteous and true ... ways" of judging are just and faithful. His sovereignty makes His judgment necessary and certain. The title "King of the nations" stresses God's universal sovereignty.

- 15:4 It is inevitable that everyone will "fear" God and "glorify" 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 alone are holy"). Everyone ("all the nations") "will come and worship" God when Christ returns, because He will have purged the earth. God 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, or to a new scene in the 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 a way out from God's presence (v. 6). God 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-dwellers had constantly disregarded. God was now going to hold them to it and judge them by it.

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<sup>1</sup>See Fanning, p 406; Alford. 4:694.

- 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, not as seven literal plagues.<sup>1</sup> The angels' "clean" "linen" garments represent holiness and righteousness (cf. 19:8, 14), and their "golden sashes" identify them as important agents (cf. 1:13). Their clothing befits their purpose, which is to purify the earth.<sup>2</sup>
- 15:7 "One of the four living creatures" (cf. 4:6) gave each angel a "golden" bowl "full of the wrath of God." It is interesting that God also described the prayers of the saints as being held in "golden bowls" (5:8). Those prayers are thus 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 golden 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 in the heavenly "temple" until He had finished judging the earth-dwellers. This is another indication of the climactic nature of these judgments.

This chapter is really more of a prelude to chapter 16 than a conclusion to chapters 12 through 14. Chapters 12 through 14 record prophetically 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, 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 full of the wrath of God" (15:7) in order 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.

### 1. The commencement of the bowl judgments 16:1

The "loud voice" that John heard coming "from the temple [in heaven]" was evidently either an overseeing angel's voice or God's voice (cf. 9:13; 15:8; 16:17). The fact that this voice told all "seven angels" to "pour out on the earth" their "bowls of the wrath of God" 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 through 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 comparison reveals.<sup>1</sup> However the differences make it most difficult to conclude that they are identical judgments.<sup>2</sup>

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<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.

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 constitute the seventh trumpet, like 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.

"After almost a century of insipid [bland] 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 the human environment, rather than on people themselves, but the first bowl judgment will fall directly on "people." This plague results in some "harmful and painful sore" breaking

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1022.

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*, translated "sore," occurs in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament passages just listed.

Beale believed that the bowls are figurative, so the sores are figurative and simply represent afflictions.<sup>1</sup> However the plague of boils in Exodus was literal, so it seems that this plague will be literal too.<sup>2</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, possibly 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. The "sore" afflicted only "the people who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image."

"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>3</sup>

In recent years we have seen that the Covid 19 pandemic has caused worldwide suffering. In the past other epidemics have killed thousands of people. So it is not hard to see how this judgment could have global effects.

### **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,

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 814. Gaebelin, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:248-51, also favored a symbolic interpretation of these judgments.

<sup>2</sup>Seiss, pp. 374, 376.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:609-10.

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 [purging agent] 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 ("the rivers and the springs of water") 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 the revelation of the outpouring of the bowls of wrath.

16:5 "The angel of the waters" evidently refers to the angel responsible for the seas 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 ("the One who is and who was") for judging in kind and degree, namely, giving back to earth-dwellers what they had given to others (cf. v. 6; 15:3-4; Gal. 6:7). The "holy" and "righteous" God can judge humanity according to the *lex talionis* (lit. law of retaliation, matching the punishment to the crime) principle because of who He is.

16:6 Specifically, God "poured out" "blood" 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).

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:1023.

"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)."<sup>1</sup>

The "saints" probably 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 killing the saints and the 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's judgments are consistent with His character, which these martyrs describe as being "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 increases the sun's intensity. There is a definite article "the" before "people" in the Greek text. The people in 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.
- 16:9 Evidently climatic changes will take place that will result in the sun's "heat" becoming "fierce" (Gr. *megales*): much hotter than normal (cf. Deut. 32:24; Isa. 24:6; 42:25; Mal. 4:1). Might this be caused by the destruction of the ozone layer? Nevertheless, instead of repenting, the beast-worshippers blaspheme "the name of God" (cf. vv. 11, 21). They will recognize His sovereignty, but they will refuse to honor Him as

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:610.

sovereign ("did not repent so as to give Him glory"; cf. Rom. 1:28; 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1; James 2:7). Deserved judgment can harden a callous heart even more, as it did Pharaoh's heart.<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. Evidently light will diminish (cf. Exod. 10:21-23; Isa. 60:2; Joel 2:1-2, 31; Mark 13:24).

"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."<sup>3</sup>

"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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ford, p. 262; Robertson, 6:422.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup>Immanuel Velikovski, *Worlds in Collision*, pp. 138.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 139.



Another possibility is that this may be a figurative darkening in which God somehow complicates the rule of the beast.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

Alan 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>3</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, like the Israelites did earlier in Egypt (cf. Exod. 10:23).

This judgment of worldwide darkness, in addition, inflicts excruciating pain on the beast-worshippers. Just how darkness will cause so much pain ("they gnawed their tongues because of pain") is hard to imagine, but the chaos that darkness caused in Egypt may suggest some ways.

16:11      The earth-dwellers will still fail to repent and will 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 evidently overlap, one right after

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<sup>1</sup>Kiddle, pp. 321-22; Hughes, p. 175; Caird, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, p. 824.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 550.

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 major 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 consequence, 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 that God promised to Abraham's descendants (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 1:7; 11:24; Josh. 1:4). The Bible often calls the Euphrates River (cf. Gen. 2:14) "the great river," and it calls the Mediterranean Sea, which is the western border of the Promised Land, "the great sea."

Now God dries up this river, which had previously turned into blood (v. 4), so that "the kings from the east" can cross it with their armies (cf. Dan. 11:44; Isa. 11:15).

"As the largest river in the [*sic*] southwest Asia, the Euphrates was *never* known to dry up, unlike most of the rivers in the Near East."<sup>3</sup>

God much earlier had dried up the Red Sea so 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 890-91.

Elijah too parted the waters of the Jordan (2 Kings 2:8). Cyrus may have conquered Babylon by redirecting the waters of the Euphrates and marching into the city over the dry riverbed (cf. Jer. 50:38; 51:36).<sup>1</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>2</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>3</sup> Still another view is that the drying up of the Euphrates figuratively represents the removal of opposition so that Israel's enemies can attack her.<sup>4</sup>

Some interpreters believe that this is a prophecy of an Oriental invasion of the literal city of Babylon in the future that will be similar to Cyrus' invasion of it in the past.<sup>5</sup> But these are probably the Oriental armies that will assemble in Israel for the Battle of Armageddon that are referred to in verses 13 through 16.<sup>6</sup> The drying up of the Euphrates, according to this view, will be an immediate help to these armies from farther east, but it will set them up for defeat, as was true of Pharaoh's army.

"... 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>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Herodotus, 1:191. But see Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:191.

<sup>2</sup>See Beale, p. 828.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1572.

<sup>4</sup>Fanning, p. 420.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Swete, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 236. See also Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 340-58.

<sup>7</sup>Morris, p. 197.

"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>1</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—if this prophecy will be fulfilled literally—even artificial light will end in that region.

16:13 Verses 13 through 16 give further comments on the sixth bowl judgment. They are not an interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls (except for 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," "the beast," and "the false prophet" will evidently join in making a proclamation that will mobilize the armies of the world to converge on the land of Israel. Something proceeding "out of 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 on the earth. What he urges them to do (i.e., take the beast's mark, worship the beast, and assemble in the land of Israel), supposedly for their advantage, will result in their destruction eventually.

The "three unclean spirits" that proceed from the mouths of this diabolical trio are demonic (fallen angels, v. 14; cf. Matt. 10:1; Mark 1:23-24; 3:11; 5:2, 13; Acts 5:16; 8:7).<sup>2</sup> They resemble "frogs," in that they are unclean and loathsome (cf. Lev. 11:10-11, 41). The second Egyptian plague involved

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 263. Cf. Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, p. 903.

<sup>2</sup>See Unger, *Demons in ...*, pp. 101-21.

actual frogs (Exod. 8:5), but these demonic spirits are only "like frogs."

- 16:14 Here John identified the spirits as "spirits of demons." These spirits perform "signs" and "go out to the kings of the entire world" deceiving them into assembling their armies in the land of Israel for the Battle of Armageddon ("the war of the great day of God," cf. v. 16). 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 spirits 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>1</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 the land of Israel 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), these soldiers 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, "the Almighty" (v. 14). 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 through 16.

Gundry believed that the day of the Lord includes the Battle of Armageddon but not the Tribulation.<sup>2</sup> Most premillennial interpreters believe that 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>Moffatt, 5:447.

<sup>2</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 like 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 ("stays awake") and pure ("keeps his clothes"; cf. Matt. 25:1-30).<sup>1</sup> The alternative is embarrassment ("walk about naked ... 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 it is 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 both the Rapture and the Second Coming.

"Each guard [unit—each night in the temple in Jesus' day—] consisted of ten men; so that in all

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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.

two hundred and forty Levites and thirty priests 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. *kai*) resumes the exposition of the sixth bowl judgment from verse 14. The demonic spirits ("they") will assemble the kings of the earth and their armies. They will go "to the place which 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 geography in the land of Israel (cf. 9:11).

"Har'Magedon" may refer to the small hill on the south-central edge of the Jezreel (Esdraelon) Valley in northern Israel 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 company of 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 that Mt. 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Edersheim, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 260.

"The plain of Megiddo is admittedly not large enough to contain armies from all over the world, 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 out the contents of "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: "It is done." This statement is proleptic, since it anticipates the completion of the seventh bowl judgment (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>

16:18 "Lightning," "thunder," and the greatest "earthquake" that 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 (cf. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; Hag. 2:6; Heb. 12:26-27). It heralds the seventh bowl judgment as well as 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).<sup>2</sup> Some believe it refers to Rome.<sup>3</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>4</sup> Probably Jerusalem is in view.<sup>5</sup> Jerusalem contrasts with "the cities of the nations," and the phrase "the great" was used earlier to specifically identify Jerusalem (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>6</sup>

Evidently this greatest earthquake of all time will destroy virtually all of the cities of the world ("the cities of the nations fell"). "Babylon the great" on the Euphrates is the most significant of these cities (14:8). It is the special object of God's wrath, which "the cup of ... wine" that she receives

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup>J. Paul Tanner, *Daniel*, p. 719.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:703; Mounce, p. 304; Aune, *Revelation 6—16*, pp. 900-901.

<sup>4</sup>Ladd, p. 218; Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 696..

<sup>5</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>6</sup>Lee, 4:727, believed this would be a division into three groups of people.

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 in the process of rebuilding the city of Babylon.<sup>2</sup> Literal interpreters have differed on the question of whether the city of Babylon will be completely rebuilt or not. Some believe that Iraq (or whatever country may occupy this area at the time of fulfillment) 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 that this has not yet taken place.<sup>3</sup> Others hold that Scripture does not require the rebuilding of Babylon. They believe that God has already fulfilled these prophecies.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that a literal city is in view in Revelation in some texts, but that what the city has stood for throughout human history is also and primarily in view.

16:20      The earthquake (v. 18) will produce other effects. It will level "mountains" and cause "islands" to disappear. Just 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.

during Messiah's reign on the earth. 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> Some interpreters understand these descriptions to be hyperbole.<sup>2</sup> Another view is that the earthquake will only produce political turmoil.<sup>3</sup>

16:21      The accompanying storm will drop "huge hailstones" that will fall on the earth and crush 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, like 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 and blaspheme Him. 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>4</sup>

Henry believed that this verse describes what happened when Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70 (a preterist view):

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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Beasley-Murray, p. 247.

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

<sup>3</sup>Caird, p. 209.

<sup>4</sup>Newell, p. 259.

that they blasphemed that God who thus punished them."<sup>1</sup>

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 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."<sup>2</sup>

"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>3</sup>

It seems to me that the 45-day period may be the time of preparation for the beginning of the Millennium that will follow Christ's return. It seems unnatural to describe the return of the Lord as taking this long to happen

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, p. 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom ...*, p. 301.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

(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>1</sup>

Thomas viewed the description of the seventh bowl as extending through 22:5.<sup>2</sup> He saw all that follows, up to 22:5, as being part of this final, climactic, seventh bowl judgment. Other students of Revelation, however, have seen the description of the seventh bowl as limited to 16:17 through 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**

Before recording the Jesus' second coming, in chapter 19, God led John to record more revelation concerning the fate of Babylon, 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>3</sup>

Beale took 17:1 through 19:10 as an interpretive review of the sixth and seventh bowls.<sup>4</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 the empire in view as referring to Rome (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Alford understood it to be "Rome,

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<sup>1</sup>See John F. Walvoord and John E. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East*, for more "stage settings."

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 567-85. See Chilton, *The Days ...*, p. 418, for a similar view.

<sup>3</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1516.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, p. 847.

pagan and papal, but principally papal."<sup>1</sup> Daniel saw Babylon as the gold head of an image that represented Gentile world power (Dan. 2).

The focus of attention in chapter 17 is on the religious system that God identified with Babylon in Scripture. Chapter 18 focuses on the commercial system that He identified with it. Tenney described chapter 17 as the heavenly viewpoint and chapter 18 as the earthly viewpoint on Babylon's destruction.<sup>2</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 the entertainment industry associated with that town.

Amillennialists generally see Babylon as only a symbol of evil, as the following two quotations illustrate. Some of them see chapter 17 describing the demise of evil and chapter 18 the song celebrating that demise.

"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>

Many premillennialists also see Babylon as a symbol of the world system:

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:705. See also 4:688.

<sup>2</sup>Tenney, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>L. Morris, pp. 202-3.

<sup>4</sup>Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 539.

world apart from God, while the divine system is depicted by the New Jerusalem. Rome is simply one manifestation of the total system."<sup>1</sup>

Some premillennialists see a literal city of Babylon rebuilt and destroyed and cite Isaiah 13 and 14 and Jeremiah 50 and 51 as unfulfilled prophecies of Babylon's destruction.<sup>2</sup>

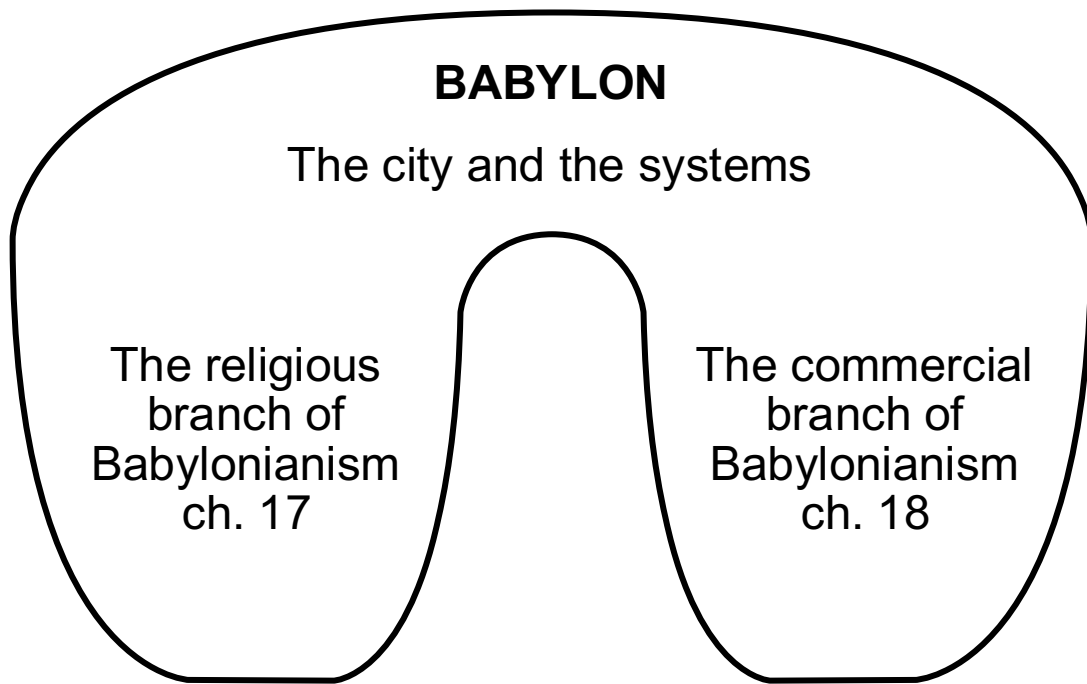
Unquestionably "Babylon" is a symbol here, as the text itself makes clear. It is probably used this way also in 1 Peter 5:13, namely, as a symbol of all that the city of Rome stood for.<sup>3</sup> Those who say that the city will not be rebuilt believe that the Old Testament passages present a symbolic 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 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 rebuilt city in the Tribulation. I do not think that the Old Testament prophecies require this however. I think it is helpful to think of Babylon as a yoke having two parts.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 554. See also Fanning, pp. 440-41.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 397-403.

<sup>3</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252.



### 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, which goes all the way back to the Tower of Babel, in order to enable the readers to understand God's plans for this system more exactly.

#### **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 this part of his vision. This is the only instance in which an angel interprets the significance of aspects of John's vision. In this verse and the next one, the angel told John what he was going to show him.

"The great prostitute" (Gr. *pornes tes megales*) is later identified as "Babylon the great" (v. 5), though some believe that "Babylon" is a code name for Rome (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1310.



connection between Babylon and sexual immorality (v. 2, Gr. *porneia*) was evident as early as 14:8. "Babylon" 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>1</sup> This Babylon, "the mother of prostitutes" (v. 5) is like a harlot in that she prostituted herself with many devils and allured many people to godlessness and immorality.<sup>2</sup>

"In OT prophetic discourse the imagery of the harlot is commonly used to denote religious apostasy."<sup>3</sup>

It is probably better to translate the Greek word *epi* as "beside," rather than "on" many waters, since the prostitute sits astride the beast (v. 3). Sitting, in contexts like this one, indicates enthronement.<sup>4</sup> Evidently the beast (v. 3) 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 by sitting on the beast (Antichrist) beside many waters (peoples; cf. Jer. 51:7). Literal Babylon stood beside many waters. It was built with a network of canals (Jer. 51:13).

"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>5</sup>

Though false religion seems to be in view, it is probable that this kind of spiritual fornication was the result of political

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<sup>1</sup>Ford, *Revelation*, p. 277; Wall, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:185.

<sup>3</sup>Mounce, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 930.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 282-83. Cf. Seiss, pp. 387-90; Jamieson, et al., p. 1573.

alliances.<sup>1</sup> Solomon's political alliances, which involved marrying many women, led to spiritual unfaithfulness.

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>2</sup>

17:2 "The kings of the earth" are world leaders who personify kingdoms (16:14; et al.). They "committed acts of sexual immorality" with Babylon by uniting with the system that 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>3</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 prostitute 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 (v. 1) "carried" John "away in the Spirit into a wilderness" (cf. 1:10; 4:1; 21:10). This wilderness may refer to the desert of Saudi Arabia near literal Babylon.<sup>4</sup> But remember that John was seeing a vision. Or it may anticipate the desolate condition of the harlot.<sup>5</sup> Wildernesses were traditional places where God met with people and gave them revelations (cf. Exod. 3:1; 1 Kings 19:4; Luke 1:80). There in the wilderness John "saw a woman," the prostitute of verse 1, "sitting on a scarlet beast." Contrast this scene with the

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 931.

<sup>2</sup>Lee, 4:735; Wall, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 284.

<sup>4</sup>Robertson, 6:429.

<sup>5</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 429; Lee, 4:737.

description of the rider on the white horse (Christ) in 19:8, 11, and 14.

The description of this "beast" is exactly the same as the one of Antichrist in 13:1 ("full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns"), except that it is "scarlet" here, perhaps symbolizing luxury and splendor (cf. 14:8-11; Isa. 1:18; Matt. 27:28-29). Or the beast may be scarlet because it is covered with the blood of those whom it has killed. John saw the harlot woman sitting 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>1</sup> Some believe that the woman is the papal system and the beast is the revived Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

17:4 The woman's clothing was "purple," symbolic of royalty, and "scarlet," representing luxury or blood (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 "sexual immorality." The prostitute wore expensive, attractive garments and accessories that made her externally appealing, but she was a counterfeit beauty. What was inside her was unclean.

"Any institution or facet of culture that is characterized by pride ..., economic overabundance, persecution, and idolatry is part of Babylon."<sup>3</sup>

17:5 "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>Barclay, 2:179.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:252-53.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 856.

were the signs and trade-marks and identification marks of the Roman prostitutes."<sup>1</sup>

The harlot's "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 Babylon is what John revealed here, especially the new revelation about its evil character and judgment (vv. 17-18).<sup>2</sup> The harlot represents "Babylon the great," which is "the mother of prostitutes"—not just one harlot by herself but the source from which other prostitutes (those who lead others into sin) have come. Babylon the great is also the source (mother) of "the abominations of the earth," namely, all that is abominable to God (cf. Gen. 10:9-10; 11:1-9).<sup>3</sup>

"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 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>4</sup>

Many writers have traced the religiously apostate system of worship that began in Babylon and carried on throughout church history to Roman Catholicism and the modern Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:178. Cf. Rev. 7:3; 9:4; 13:16-18; 14:1; Jer. 3:3. See also Swete, p. 214.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 496.

<sup>3</sup>See Alford, 4:707; Scott, p. 342.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:1033.

ecumenical movement.<sup>1</sup> However, the Scripture's description here of Babylonianism encompasses all forms of paganism, including perversions of orthodox Christianity and non-Christian religions.<sup>2</sup> But some interpreters believe that what is in view here, as well as in chapter 18, is the literal rebuilt city of Babylon.<sup>3</sup>

17:6 The Mother of Harlots had drunk (and was "drunk with") "the blood of" believers: "the saints" generally, and "the witnesses of Jesus" specifically (cf. 11:10; 13:7, 15). This system had destroyed true believers and rejoiced in their deaths. This revelation amazed John; He "wondered greatly" at it. A system purporting to honor God was killing His faithful followers!

Alternatively, John may have "wondered" why God allowed her to live, or was perplexed because he did not understand the meaning of what he saw, or was 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 primarily as Jews who died in the Jewish revolt against Rome, in A.D. 66-70.<sup>4</sup>

#### Further revelation about the beast 17:7-14

17:7 "The angel" (v. 1) promised to interpret this revelation that was so baffling to John, particularly "the mystery" concerning "the woman and ... the beast." More information about the beast follows in verses 7 through 14, and more about the woman in verses 15 through 18. The beast supplied the woman's power and purpose ("carries her"). He had "the seven heads and the 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 ("was, and is not,

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<sup>1</sup>See Hislop for an extended treatment, or Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 970-71, for a brief one. Ironside, pp. 287-95, is also helpful here.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. W. M. Smith, p. 1517.

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise ...*, p. 162. See also pp. 167-69.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:452.

and is about to come up"; 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 "is about to come out of the abyss," which is the home of Satan (11:7) and the hold of his demons (9:1-2, 11), when he miraculously revives. This verse suggests that when the beast revives, 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. But finally Jesus Christ will punish the Antichrist ("is about to ... go to destruction") along with the false prophet and Satan forever (19:20; 20:2-3).

The beast's "resurrection" will greatly impress unbelievers ("those who live on the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world"; cf. 13:3. 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 Verses 9 through 11 clarify verse 8. The angel prefaced his identification of the beast's "seven heads" with the 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 Roman emperors,<sup>3</sup> the seven hills of Rome,<sup>4</sup> and various non-literal views, such as the following two:

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 293.

<sup>3</sup>Beckwith, pp. 699, 704-11; Swete, pp. 220-21. For refutation of this view, see Ladd, pp. 228-29.

<sup>4</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.

The text is always its own best interpreter. "The seven heads are [or represent] seven mountains." 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). Some interpreters have believed that the seven mountains are the seven literal hills on which Rome was built. But their identification with "seven kings" in verse 10 seems to rule this view out. Other views follow:

"These seven *mountain heads* of the beast appear to be *the high, proud, imposing thoughts, plans, designs of the antichristian power ...*"<sup>1</sup>

"By his use of seven, he [John] 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>2</sup>

"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>3</sup>

John saw the woman sitting over the seven governments or kingdoms ("mountains"), but she was not one of them. She exercised authority over them.

17:10 "The seven heads are [or represent]" also "seven kings." The seven kings are rulers over seven kingdoms. They are the heads and personifications of their seven nations (cf. Dan. 7:17, 23). The prominent kingdom in John's day—the one that "is"—was certainly the Roman Empire. The five most prominent world powers preceding Rome—which had "fallen"—were probably Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece.<sup>4</sup> Some believe that the Old Babylonian Empire may have been the first (Gen. 10:8-10). The seventh kingdom—that was yet

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 504.

<sup>2</sup>A. Johnson, p. 559.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 296.

<sup>4</sup>Seiss, p. 393; cf. Ladd, p. 229; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 251; Alford, 4:710-11.

to come and would "remain a little while"—is the beast's kingdom (13:3; 17:8).<sup>1</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. Other writers have interpreted the seven kingdoms as figuratively representing various kings throughout history.<sup>2</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* (brought back to life), namely, Domitian, who, he believed, anticipated Antichrist.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

Fanning suggested that the first six kings might be Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian.<sup>5</sup> Bruce took them to be Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, Nero, and Vespasian.<sup>6</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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 298; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 254; Kelly, pp. 364-68.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Mounce, p. 315; Beckwith, pp. 704-8; Beale, p. 871.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:181-83.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:183-84.

<sup>5</sup>Fanning, p. 445.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce, *The Spreading ...*, p. 166.



emperors (who were generally called 'kings' in the eastern provinces)."<sup>1</sup>

Others take these kings as personifications of the dominating thoughts, plans, and designs of the anti-Christian world, and they take the horns as the sum of the powers that strike to overthrow the church.<sup>2</sup>

17:11 Evidently the beast is one of the seven in the sense that his first kingdom is on a par with the seven major empires just mentioned. Possibly the idea is that his kingdom is just as bad as the former seven kingdoms. He is the "eighth" in that he establishes an eighth major empire with a worldwide government, having received supernatural powers from Satan. This explanation views the beast's kingdom before his "resurrection" as the seventh kingdom and his kingdom after his "resurrection" as the eighth.<sup>3</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>4</sup> Still another possibility is that this "revived Roman empire is an amalgamation of parts of the previous world empires and is the beast's eighth kingdom. The preceding ones are absorbed by the last, the Roman Empire."<sup>5</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?

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 505.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, p. 299.

<sup>4</sup>Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:241.

The mixed iron-and-clay consistency of the feet in Nebuchadnezzar's dream probably represents 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 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 superior 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 that describe Parthian satraps, or Roman provinces, or Rome's allies.<sup>4</sup> I believe that 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 ("kings") will evidently 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, possibly one literal hour, during the Great Tribulation (cf. 18:10, 17, 19). Evidently their short

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 875. Cf. A. Johnson, pp. 560-61.

<sup>2</sup>See Moffatt, 5:453. 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>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.

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 believed that they were Roman emperors, 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 [these 10 kings] 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 kings is to rule the world (v. 14). The 10 rulers will submit to the Antichrist's 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). But the Lamb "will overcome them" and will prove to be "Lord of lords and King of kings" (19:16), which is the very title that Antichrist will seek 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

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, 2:184.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 2:191-92. Cf. Alford, 4:711.

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 saved (cf. Eph. 1:4-5). They are also the faithful: the same ones who then respond to 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 (cf. 19:14).

### **The judgment of the harlot 17:15-18**

17:15 The angel next helped John understand the identity of "the waters" that the prostitute sat beside (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. It will be the worship of Antichrist.

17:16 "The beast" (Antichrist) and his allies ("the ten horns") 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"), like 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 with fire"), like 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, which is the sure sign that it cannot endure (cf. Mark 3:23-26).<sup>1</sup> Moffatt

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<sup>1</sup>Wilcock, p. 165.

believed that the burning of Rome by Nero and his allies in A.D. 64 is in view.<sup>1</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. 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 (Ezek. 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>2</sup>

The "common purpose" in view in this verse is world domination (v. 13). The allied kings will submit to the beast's leadership because they will think that this will help them achieve their goal of attaining universal power and resisting God. This situation will continue 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

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:454.

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, pp. 319-20.

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 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."<sup>1</sup>

"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>2</sup>

Presently we see many manifestations of an anti-God spirit at work in the world, and they seem to be increasing every year.

## **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 that 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

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revival of ...," p. 326.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

dirge over the city in the style of the doom-songs of Old Testament prophets."<sup>1</sup>

"The chapter as a whole consists of a series of voices either rejoicing or lamenting over Babylon's resulting devastation and reflecting on why this came upon her."<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 of 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 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 through 21. The belief that salvation is by works is the bedrock of religious Babylon (cf. Gen. 11:4). The desire to glorify self rather than God is the foundation of commercial/economic Babylon (cf. Gen. 11:4).

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>3</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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 262. Cf. Beale, p. 890.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, p. 457.

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Dyer, "The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17—18," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:575 (January-March 1987):311.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 313-14.

Alan Johnson did not believe that 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>1</sup>

The literal city of Babylon may be rebuilt, and it may suffer a final destruction at the end of the Tribulation. However, 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 self-centered humanism. Harris preferred the view that a literal city is in view, but he did not know what city.<sup>2</sup>

There are many allusions to Jeremiah's prophecies of Babylon's destruction, and at least one allusion to Isaiah's prophecy, in this chapter.<sup>3</sup>

### The first angelic announcement of judgment 18:1-3

18:1 John next saw another scene on "the 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 in order to carry out 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 that he announced. What John wrote about this angel ("the earth was illumined from his glory") has led some interpreters to conclude that he is Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> But 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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A. 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.

<sup>2</sup>Harris, p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 983, for his chart of these prophecies.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., M. Robert Mulholland, *Revelation, Holy Living in an Unholy World*, p. 284; and Chilton, *The Days ...*, pp. 445-46.

<sup>5</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 442; Beckwith, p. 712.



Evidently his task required great authority.<sup>1</sup> His great glory, with which he "illuminated" 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 this angel described a future action as already having happened. The prophetic aorist tense of the Greek verb makes this clear.

"It is the prophetic way of declaring that the great purpose of God in triumphing over evil is a *fait accompli* [fact accomplished]."<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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>5</sup>

Babylon will become "a prison of every unclean spirit" and a place of demons—a place where they are safe but confined against their wills (cf. Isa. 13:21-22; 34:11-17; Jer. 51:37).

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

<sup>2</sup>Mounce, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup>Kiddle, pp. 359-60; Wilcock, p. 168; Bullinger, p. 553.

<sup>4</sup>Caird, p. 227; Sweet, p. 267; Mounce, p. 323.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 317.

"A prison for every unclean and hateful bird" is a figure of desolation (cf. Isa. 34:11, 13; Jer. 50:39). Babylon will become utterly godforsaken.

18:3 This verse is very similar to 17:2. However it seems that in view of the description that 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 has influenced "all the nations" that have acted immorally and grown "rich" at the expense of and in defiance of others. Babylon's 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 so that they would avoid participating "in her sins" and getting caught in her judgment ("plagues"). The being who spoke these words 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 ("my people") to leave Babylon (cf. Gen.

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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.

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 Babylon's "sins" they will be hurt by the judgment that is 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, who hankered after another worldly city (Sodom) that God destroyed (cf. Gen. 19:26; Luke 17:32).

"This is a sobering word about divine judgment and the instability of all the things apart from God that humans depend on for their security."<sup>1</sup>

18:5 Another reason for abandoning Babylon and Babylonianism is that God will be about to judge her. "Her sins," like the bricks used to build the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:3-4), have accumulated so that they finally have "piled up as high as heaven." Babylon has exhausted God's patience (cf. Jer. 51:9). He has noticed and "remembered her offences," and because He is righteous He must judge them.

18:6 The angel called on God to "pay" Babylon "back" for all the wicked things that she had been responsible for (cf. 17:16-17; Jer. 50:29; 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>2</sup> Babylon had persecuted and murdered the saints (v. 24; 19:2). "The cup" that she had used to seduce others will become the instrument of her own punishment (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

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<sup>1</sup>Fanning, p. 470.

<sup>2</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.

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>1</sup>

- 18:7 Luxurious living provides another reason for Babylon's judgment. Her selfishness ("lived luxuriously"), self-glorification ("I sit as a queen"), and self-sufficiency ("am not a widow, and will never see mourning") recall characteristics 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" when Babylon will fall 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 Babylon's burning literally (cf. Isa. 47:14). 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 previously mentioned (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 to make it happen (cf. 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>2</sup>

- 18:9 World government leaders ("the kings of the earth") will "weep and mourn" when they see the collapse of the system that has sustained them and enabled them to live luxuriously. Committing "acts of sexual immorality" with Babylon is a way of expressing the union of these leaders with Babylonianism

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 322-23. Cf. Kiddle, pp. 366-67; Hughes, p. 190.

<sup>2</sup>See Barclay, 2:200-13, for a summary of the excessive wealth and materialism of ancient Rome.

(cf. Ezek. 26:16; 27:30-35).<sup>1</sup> Evidently fire ("burning") will be the main cause of Babylon's destruction (cf. vv. 8, 18; 14:11; 17:16; 19:3). "The smoke of her burning," namely, the evidence of her judgment, 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 will have lost their power suddenly. These rulers must be different from the 10 kings who will evidently play a part in the destruction of Babylon (17:16). Their woes are an exclamation of sorrow, whereas the earlier woes in the book are announcements of doom (8:13; 12:12).<sup>2</sup> Doubling the woes ("Woe, woe") increases the perception of the strength of the sorrow (cf. v. 6). Babylon 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>3</sup>

"There is a weird charm in a burning city."<sup>4</sup>

18:11 "The merchants of the earth" also lament over the destruction of this system because of the resulting death to their businesses. 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 Babylon itself is a treasure that they also regret losing (cf. Ezek. 27:25-31).<sup>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 567.

<sup>2</sup>Lee, 4:770.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 997.

<sup>4</sup>Robertson, 6:440.

<sup>5</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 267; Wall, p. 216.

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 in these verses 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.

These categories are (1) precious metals and gems ("gold, and silver, and precious stones, and pearls"), (2) clothing ("fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet"), (3) furnishings ("citron wood, every article of ivory, and every article made from very valuable wood, bronze, iron, and marble"), (4) spices ("cinnamon, spice, incense, perfume, frankincense"), (5) food ("wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat"), (6) animals ("cattle, sheep," and "horses"), (7) implements ("carriages"), and (8) people ("slaves, and human lives"). Note that they were even buying and selling other human beings.

"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 that is practiced in the world today is tied to illegal firearms dealing, forced labor, and sexual exploitation. It was reportedly the second most lucrative crime, globally, surpassed only by the drug trade in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Since then it has become much more widespread. It could become even more widespread than ever before in history in the Tribulation period.

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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.

- 18:14 "The fruit" (Gr. *opora*, lit. ripe autumn fruit) that these merchants so badly desire is no longer available (cf. Jer. 40:10, 12; Jude 12). The words "luxurious" and "splendid" refer to food and clothing respectively.<sup>1</sup> The merchants will also lose their luxurious possessions. People will not be able to "find" the treasures that they once collected. The Greek construction of the last clause in this verse indicates that these things will never ever return.<sup>2</sup> There are two double (extra strong) negatives in the Greek text (*ouketi ou me*).
- 18:15 Again John recorded that "the merchants" will bewail their fate. Selfishness and greed characterize these individuals. They too, like the politicians, "stand at a distance" viewing the destruction of Babylon (cf. vv. 10, 17).
- 18:16 The description of "the great city" here is very similar to the destruction 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 "kings" in verse 10 did. However the merchants bewail the city's lost opulence and splendor, whereas the political leaders 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 ship captains and other ship crew officers: "shipmaster" (Gr. *kybrnetes*), "passenger" (*pas ho epi topon pleon*), "sailor" (*nautai*), "and all who make their living by the sea" (*ten thalassan ergazontai*) such as fishermen and divers for treasure.<sup>3</sup> This group of people also "stood at a distance" and watched the city burn. Perhaps these ocean travelers were of special interest in John's day because they were the main shippers and distributors of goods.

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 235; Charles, 2:108.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 6:442.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 339.

- 18:18 These distributors will also lament greatly because of the collapse of this great commercial empire. Their question "What city is like the great city?" echoes the question about Tyre in Ezekiel 27:32.<sup>1</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 tradesmen also echo the laments and repeat the behavior of the politicians ("kings," 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>2</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 through 5 may be their response to the invitation in this verse. "Heaven" (those in heaven) will rejoice over the fall of Babylon too (Jer. 51:48-49).<sup>3</sup> What causes bitter mourning on earth will produce great joy to heaven.

The speaker is evidently the angel of verse 4 (cf. 12:12). "Saints" are all believers. "Apostles 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 will have "pronounced" a verdict in their favor. He will have vindicated them by punishing their oppressors (cf. 19:2-3). This justice view seems much more

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<sup>1</sup>Lee, 4:774; Wall, p. 217.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1041. Paragraph divisions omitted.

<sup>3</sup>Hughes, p. 194.



likely than the interpretation that they should rejoice because God was punishing their enemies in kind (taking revenge).

Spirit-filled 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 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).

### The third announcement of judgment 18:21-24

18:21 The angelic act of throwing the "great 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 it is certain that the economic system that has driven this world throughout almost all of 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 sound of harpists, musicians, flute players, and trumpeters"), the work of producers of goods ("craftsman of any craft"), the use of their tools ("a mill"), the light that their activities produced (literally and figuratively, "a lamp"), and the happiness that resulted ("the voice of the groom and bride"). 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*, translated "because," appears twice in verse 23, though the English word appears only once. Each time it introduces a reason. The Greek construction is a bit complex, but the sense is as follows. First, men whom the world regards as great ("the powerful people

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 568. Cf. Robertson, 6:444.

of the earth") have enriched themselves and lifted themselves up in pride because of ("for") Babylon's influence (cf. Isa. 23:8). Second, as a result of the first reason ("because"), Babylon has seduced all nations. She deceived all the nations into thinking that joy, security, honor, power, and meaning in life (i.e., success) come through the accumulation of material wealth. She had used "witchcraft" (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-alls), witch-doctors, professional faith-healers, medicine-men in Africa. True medical science has had a hard fight to shake off chicanery [trickery] and charlatanry [false claims]."<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 who were 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 ancient Babylon killed many believing Israelites. Through her influence and example Babylon, which is 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

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 6:445.

murderers. The destruction of Babylon answers to that punishment."<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, it seems that the Babylon that John described in this chapter is the selfishly motivated commercial system of buying and selling goods to make a profit and thus glorify self. As religious Babylon (ch. 17) includes all forms of religion (non-Christian as well as apostate Christian religions), so economic Babylon (ch. 18) includes all types of economies (capitalism, socialism, communism, etc.). This global economic system will have its headquarters (at least symbolically, if not also literally) in Babylon on the Euphrates River during the Tribulation, and it will burn up. Self-interest is at the root of this system. In Old Testament times the city of Babylon was the epitome 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, selfishness. Possession of wealth is not the problem so much as the selfish, arrogant use of it.<sup>2</sup>

This system has become so much a part of our daily experience 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 that we are 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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 347. Cf. Gen. 4:10.

<sup>2</sup>Sweet, p. 264.

<sup>3</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,"

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.

One might argue that the climax of Revelation is the new heavens and the new earth. It is in that it is the culminating revelation that John received. But the vindication of Jesus Christ, which will occur when He returns to the earth and reigns here, is what all of the preceding revelation in this book has been preparing the reader for, specifically what will happen on the earth preceding Christ's return and reign on the earth.

## 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).

### 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, the ultimate King of Babylon, and the ultimate 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 through 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).

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*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.

<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.

The four songs in verses 1 through 5 look back to the judgment of Babylon, and the song in verses 9 and 10 looks forward to the wedding feast of the Lamb. The prostitute dies, but the bride begins to enjoy new life.<sup>1</sup>

- 19:1 This first song praises God for judging "the great prostitute" (v. 2). 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>2</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 all "salvation" (cf. 7:10; 12:10), "glory" (cf. 15:8), and "power" (cf. 4:11; 7:12; 12:10; 1 Chron. 29:11) "belong to" Him.

"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, reverence, trust—these are the constituent elements of real praise."<sup>3</sup>

- 19:2 This "great multitude in heaven" (v. 1) praises God because of His "true" (fair) and "righteous" (just) "judgments" (cf. 15:3; 16:7) especially upon "the great prostitute" Babylon. It is only right that Babylon, which brought moral ruin on 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 355.

<sup>2</sup>Ford C. Ottman, *The Unfolding of the Ages*, p. 402.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, 2:218.

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>1</sup>

The angels were anticipating God's judgment of the harlot, but 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 sexual immorality" (cf. 14:8; 17:2; 18:3). By destroying Babylon God will avenge "the blood" of believers who died as a result of Babylon's influences (cf. 18:24; Deut. 32:42-43; 2 Kings 9:7).

The outpouring of God's wrath on the earth-dwellers will come in part as a result of believers' petitions (cf. 5:8; 6:9-11; 8:3-5; 9:13; 10:6; 14:18; 16:7; 19:2).<sup>2</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. Gen. 19:28; Isa. 34:10).<sup>3</sup> The "smoke" represents the effects of the fire that will destroy Babylon (cf. 17:16; 18:8, 9, 18). The punishment of God's enemies will be everlasting ("forever and ever"; 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 "bond-servants" (cf. Ps. 113:1; 115:13).

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, pp. 357-58.

<sup>2</sup>Idem, "The Imprecatory ...," pp. 123-31; and idem, *Revelation 1—7*, pp. 517-24.

<sup>3</sup>Hughes, p. 197.

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 the prophets (cf. 18:14, 20; 19:2). The angel referred to the "fear" of God, since judgment is in view. The call extends to creatures of all classes (cf. Ps. 115:13).

19:6 The praise in this verse followed the call to praise in verse 5, and it 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 the earth and the beginning of His earthly reign.<sup>1</sup> Here He receives the title "the Lord our God, the Almighty." This praise is appropriately great ("like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder") because Messiah's earthly reign is the climax of human history. Thus John heard a voice that sounded like "a great multitude" of people that announced 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 "give glory to" God (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>2</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 *gynē*, translated "bride," as "wife," here the context clearly shows that a "marriage" is in view. *Gynē* describes a "bride" in other contexts too (e.g., Gen. 29:21; Deut. 22:24 [both in the

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<sup>1</sup>Beckwith, p. 726; Robertson, 6:449; Ladd, p. 246.

<sup>2</sup>Hughes, p. 201; Sweet, p. 279.

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, by the way, the third of three metaphors in Revelation that describe women: the woman (mother) in chapter 12 is Israel, the prostitute 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>1</sup>

Why is it the marriage 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>2</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>3</sup> He did so in order to show the future relationship between God and the faithful Jewish remnant.<sup>4</sup>

Israel (as distinguished from the church) cannot be this bride, or even part of this bride, because this bride comes to earth with Christ when He returns. Old Testament saints will not experience resurrection until after Christ returns to the earth (Dan. 12:1-2). The fact that the bride includes Israel later in 21:12 and 14 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

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 428.

<sup>2</sup>See Jeremiah, p. 203.

<sup>3</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.

<sup>4</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.



theologians see no real distinction between Israel and the church at this time (or at any other time).<sup>1</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>2</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>3</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 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). Then the couple were married.

Third, the groom provided a feast for his bride and his friends at his home that lasted several days. This will take place in heaven either at the beginning of the Millennium,<sup>4</sup> throughout the Millennium,<sup>5</sup> or beginning with the Millennium and continuing throughout eternity (cf. 21:2, 9).<sup>6</sup> I favor the first view.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Ladd, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 246; Lee, 4:731; Robertson, 6:449.

<sup>3</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*.

<sup>4</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 618.

<sup>5</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, pp. 227-28; McGee, 5:1048.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 365.

This verse describes the wedding proper, after 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" (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 prostitute, 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 marriage feast. God graciously enabled 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>1</sup> "Clean" reflects purity (cf. 21:18, 21). These wedding garments are appropriate for God's presence. "Fine linen" represents the bride's "righteous acts," as this verse explains (cf. 14:13). These represent the works of the saints rather than their positional standing before God. Their good deeds, which God's 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>2</sup>

- 19:9 The person who now spoke to John ("he") 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 he was to write another beatitude (cf. 14:3). This blessing will give the

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<sup>1</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*lampo, et al.*," by A. Oepke, 4(1967):16-28.

<sup>2</sup> A. Johnson, p. 571.

Tribulation saints an additional motivation to remain faithful. Those "invited" to the Lamb's "wedding feast" include His friends, not just the bride (cf. 3:20). This is in keeping with marriage customs in John's day. This implies the presence of other believers besides church saints at this celebration.

Those invited to the feast 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>1</sup> though some believe it will be on earth.<sup>2</sup> Some believe that this marriage feast is synonymous with the millennial kingdom,<sup>3</sup> but most believe that it is an event at the beginning of that kingdom.

The angel concluded with the final sentence: "These are the 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>4</sup> But since 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>5</sup>

19:10      The wonder of this revelation, and the assurance of its fulfillment (v. 9), seem to have overwhelmed John. He "fell" down at the "feet" of the angel "to worship him," 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

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>See Walvoord, "Revelation," p. 975.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1318.

<sup>4</sup>Hughes, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup>Düsterdieck, p. 454; Alford, 4:725.

divine, he could not have 'knelt' to the angel without detracting from God's glory."<sup>1</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 "the testimony" borne by "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>2</sup>

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). In order to emphasize the centrality of Jesus Christ in this revelation, and to encourage the worship of God, the angel said that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

This last clause of the verse is capable of various interpretations. (A) Some take the Greek genitive translated "of Jesus" as objective, which yields two possible understandings: (1) Perhaps the angel meant that testimony about Jesus is the common substance or underlying theme of all prophecy: that all prophecy ultimately reveals Him (cf. 6:9; 11:7; 12:11; 17:6).<sup>3</sup> Alternatively (2) the angel could have meant that the true spirit of prophecy always manifests itself in specifically pointing to or bearing witness to Jesus. By implication, prophecy that does not bear witness to Him is false prophecy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin, 1:12:3.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 248.

<sup>3</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>4</sup>L. Morris, p. 228.

(B) If the genitive is subjective the angel meant that the testimony that Jesus has given is the essence of prophetic proclamation.<sup>1</sup> This last view seems preferable to me since it provides 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 ("the testimony of Jesus") 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>2</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>3</sup>

"This paragraph has always seemed to me almost too overwhelmingly glorious for exposition."<sup>4</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 hand, 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 judgment, and the new heavens and earth including the New Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> These events are in chronological sequence as will become clear. The view that they are non-sequential rests on similarities between Ezekiel 38 and 39 and Revelation 19 through 22.<sup>6</sup> But this view fails to account for the differences. The chronological progression of events on earth resumes from 16:21. Thomas viewed the second coming of Christ,

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 342; Beasley-Murray, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Barclay, 2:228.

<sup>3</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1046.

<sup>4</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1518.

<sup>5</sup>See David J. MacLeod, *The Seven Last Things*.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, p. 195; and Wall, pp. 227-28.

plus everything else through 22:5, as part of the seventh bowl judgment.<sup>1</sup> Most 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>2</sup>

"Those who believe in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must also look for his return."<sup>3</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. Conquerors rode white horses in Roman victory processions (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, in contrast to the Antichrist; 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 in order to judge the beast and to "wage war" with him on earth (cf. Isa. 11:3-5).

19:12 Jesus Christ's "eyes" looked like "a flame of fire," which suggests His piercing and all-knowing judgment of sin that takes everything into account (cf. 1:14; 2:18). His "many

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 381, 567-85.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, pp. 252-53. See Fanning, pp. 567-75, for a summary of the theology of Revelation.

<sup>3</sup>Lilje, p. 244.

crowns" (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 "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>

19:13      The "blood" on Christ's "robe" probably represents the blood of His enemies, in view of the context (cf. Isa. 63:2-3). John

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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>L. Morris, p. 230.

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 statements 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). But as the title is used here in Revelation, "the 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 accompany and follow Christ when He returns to the earth.

"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 riders on these 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. See also Fanning, p. 488.



"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 represents (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 press of the fierce wrath of God," that is, He will execute the severe wrath of Almighty God (cf. v. 13; 14:8, 10, 19-20; 16:19; Isa. 63:1-6). He will judge both the unsaved Jews who are living when He returns (Ezek. 20:33-38) and the unsaved Gentiles who are living then (Matt. 25:31-46).

19:16 The "robe" is a symbol of majesty, and the "thigh" suggests power. Evidently Christ's name appeared to John on the part of His 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," which specifies 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>

"Monarchy seems to be the most natural kind of government, since it applies to the group the authority of the father in a family or of the chieftain in a warrior band. If we were to judge forms of government from their prevalence and duration in history we should have to give the

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¹Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 387.

²Barclay, 2:235-36.

³Moffatt, 5:468-69; Wall, p. 229.

palm to monarchy; democracies, by contrast, have been hectic interludes."<sup>1</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; Psalm 2; Isaiah 63:1 through 6; Daniel 2:44 and 45; 7:13 and 14; Matthew 24 and 25; Mark 13; Luke 21; Acts 1:11; Romans 11:26; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:1 through 4; 2 Thessalonians 1:7 through 2:12; 2 Peter 2:1 through 3:17; Jude 14 and 15; and Revelation 1:7; and 19:11 through 21.<sup>2</sup> What a contrast this coming is with the Lord Jesus' first coming as a baby in humility and obscurity, and His riding a donkey into Jerusalem rather than a horse, and His 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, His human enemies of all ages, sin, and death.<sup>3</sup>

19:17 John saw next "an angel standing in the sun," which was a conspicuous position in which "all the birds" could see him. He shouted loudly for "all the birds that fly in midheaven" (between heaven and earth) to "assemble" (cf. Ezek. 39:4, 17). Jesus referred to the same scene and mentioned vultures (or eagles, Gr. *aetoi*) being present (Matt. 24:28; Luke 17:37). After the coming battle that the angel proceeded to announce (v. 19), the site will provide a "great feast" for birds (cf. Ezek. 39:4, 17-20). This is the Battle of Armageddon (16:16). This picture of it stresses the greatness of God's victory over His enemies.<sup>4</sup> "The great feast of God" is not the same event as the wedding feast of the Lamb (v. 9). The wedding feast of

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<sup>1</sup>Durant, pp. 68-69.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Vacendak, 2:1321.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, pp. 255-56; Hughes, p. 207.

the Lamb will be a scene of great joy, but the great feast of God will be a scene of great sorrow.

"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 ..."¹

19:18 The angel's graphic invitation to the birds (v. 17) indicates how devastating the destruction of Christ's enemies will be when He returns. Some experts have estimated that close to one 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, the land of Israel. Commentators who prefer a less literal interpretation see these descriptions only as a way of saying that the Lord's judgement will be extremely destructive.

Jesus Christ will destroy all who resist Him, namely, people from all classes of society and from every status in life (cf. 6:15; 13:16). The indignity of having their bodies unburied—the birds will eat them (vv. 17-18)—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 shameful 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" and his allies will assemble "to make war" (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 to determine world leadership. Just before Jesus Christ returns, the beast's allies, who will have been

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¹Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 394.

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 through 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 as he "who performed the signs ... by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image" vindicates his punishment. This satanic duo will still be in the lake of fire 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 (cf. Matt. 16:18; Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27), which is the temporary abode of dead unbelievers, where they are held awaiting their resurrection and eternal punishment.

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 some evil 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

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 349.

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 sulfurous 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>

19:21 "The rest" of Jesus Christ's enemies, namely, the Antichrist's allies 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 results from a word 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>3</sup>

"I cannot help believing that this battle is to be taken literally ..."<sup>4</sup>

Some interpreters have seen the Rapture occurring at the same time as the Second Coming (i.e., posttribulationists). However none of the events

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 398.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 258.

<sup>3</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>4</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1518.

that John recorded in 19:11 through 21 correspond to the events predicted to take place at the Rapture (cf. 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>1</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. First, some have seen the Tribulation as a revival of the dispensation of the law. They believe that the dispensation of grace ends at the Rapture.<sup>2</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 that occurs after the dispensation of grace. Advocates of this view say that the dispensation of grace ends with the Rapture, and the dispensation of the kingdom begins with Christ's second coming.<sup>3</sup> Critics of this view point out 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: the rules they are to live by.

A third view is that the Tribulation occurs within, and at the end of, the dispensation of grace.<sup>4</sup> All other dispensations also end with human failure and divine judgment. The Tribulation is seen as 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.

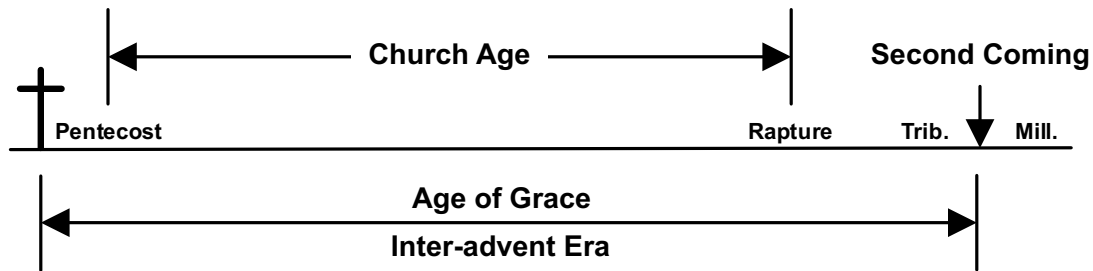
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<sup>1</sup>See Feinberg, pp. 80-86.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lewis S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., William Evans, *Outline Study of the Bible*, pp. 30-37.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Seiss, p. 475; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 56-57; idem, *Dispensationalism*, p. 56.



### 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>1</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>2</sup>

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>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1084.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, "The Theological Significance of Revelation 20:1-6," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>Idem, *Major Bible Prophecies*, pp. 15-16.

It seems clear that chapter 20 describes what will follow chapter 19 in chronological sequence.<sup>1</sup> Many amillennialists view 20:1 through 10 as a recapitulation of 19:11 through 21.<sup>2</sup> Most amillennialists believe that 20:1 through 6 describes the course of the Church Age.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

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>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Harold W. Hoehner, "Evidence from Revelation 20," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, pp. 235-62; and Charles E. Powell, "Progression versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:649 (January-March 2006):94-109.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>E.g., Beale, p. 972.

<sup>4</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1089.

<sup>5</sup>A. 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.



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>1</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. This is the panmillennial position.<sup>2</sup>

"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, "Then," supports the idea of chronological sequence. It implies a continuation from the things that John had just revealed, namely, Armageddon and the Second Coming (cf. 19:11, 17, 19; 20:4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22). Amillennial interpreters disagree.<sup>4</sup>

"John says nothing to place this chapter in the time sequence."<sup>5</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 (v. 2). 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

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 359. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>2</sup>See Daniel Wiley, "A Biblical and Theological Evaluation of Panmillennialism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178:711 (July-September 2021):309-31.

<sup>3</sup>Wright, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup>Beale, pp. 974-83.

<sup>5</sup>L. 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.

allowed him to create havoc on the earth (12:12). This angel had already been given "the key 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 "great 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>1</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>2</sup> All the other numbers in Revelation make sense and are consistent with other parallel biblical prophecies if we interpret them literally, and this one does too. It is impossible to prove that any number in Revelation is only symbolic.<sup>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:257.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 568-90.

<sup>3</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 269; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 295; Hoehner, p. 249.

Testament prophecy goes on the same view (cf. Isa. 4:3; 11:9; 35:8)."<sup>1</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>2</sup>

Barclay made the mistake of assuming that because this number was used in a nonliteral way in those passages we should take it in a nonliteral 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 [10] 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>3</sup>

Morris acknowledged that God will release Satan at the end of this period (v. 8).<sup>4</sup> To him the thousand-year reign is a reign of martyrs in heaven that has no relation to the Second Advent.<sup>5</sup> However there is no reason in the text or context to assume that we should interpret "a thousand years" 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

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1584.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:245.

<sup>3</sup>L. 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>4</sup>L. Morris, p. 236.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 234, 237.

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>1</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>2</sup>

Amillennialist Lenski believed that the binding of Satan took place when Jesus died on the cross.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

Since the cross, Lenski believed, Satan has been confined and restricted.<sup>5</sup> But he also believed that "The Messiah will return in glory and usher in this millennial period of glory."<sup>6</sup> So, it seems, he believed in two millennia: 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 in order 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 he will be confined in the abyss (9:1-2; 11:7; 13:4, 7; 17:8) throughout the Millennium. His confinement will preclude his

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 269. See also McClain, pp. 493-95.

<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 980-81.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 574-75.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 568.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 571.

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 thousand-year period, will likely constitute the unbelievers whom Satan will lead in rebellion at the end of the Millennium (vv. 8-9). God will release Satan, out of divine necessity (Gr. *dei*, "he must be released"), "for a short time" 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 for the historical-grammatical, yet non-literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1 through 3.<sup>2</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

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 446.

<sup>2</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.

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>1</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>2</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>3</sup>

20:4 "Then" 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). Probably those sitting on them are the resurrected Tribulation saints that are the subject of this pericope (vv. 4-6).<sup>4</sup> Another view is that they are some of the faithful raptured saints who have returned with Christ to the earth (19:7-8, 14, 19; cf. 2:26-28; 3:12, 21).<sup>5</sup> Some interpreters view them as either the 24 elders seen as representatives of the church,<sup>6</sup> or the apostles (cf. Matt. 19:28), or some other saints.<sup>7</sup> They will receive authority from

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1583.

<sup>3</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.

<sup>4</sup>Charles, 2:182-83; Caird, p. 252.

<sup>5</sup>Seiss, pp. 457-58; Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 414.

<sup>6</sup>J. B. Smith, p. 270; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, p. 296.

<sup>7</sup>Swete, p. 261; Beasley-Murray, p. 293; Beale, p. 991.

God to take charge of the earth, which had been the beast's domain, under Christ's rule.

John also saw "the souls" of some people not yet resurrected "who had been beheaded" and 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>1</sup> They had refused to take "the mark" of the beast or to worship "his image," and they 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>2</sup> As a reward for their faithfulness 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), and it ties this reign to Old Testament expectations of God's future 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>3</sup>

Posttribulationist Moo wrote the following summarizing his study of this verse:

"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>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ladd, p. 263; Herman Hoeksema, "The Reign of the Saints," *The Researcher* 20:4 (Winter 1990):20-21.

<sup>2</sup>See Richard S. Yates, "The Resurrection of the Tribulation Saints," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163:652 (October-December 2006):453-66.

<sup>3</sup>A. Johnson, p. 582.

<sup>4</sup>Moo, p. 201.

Many amillennialists believe that 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.

There are four good reasons why Jesus Christ's reign will be physical and earthly reign rather than spiritual and heavenly: 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>1</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>2</sup> John Hannah wrote a clear, concise history of the doctrine of the end times as it developed through church history.<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 of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for

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<sup>1</sup>H. Wayne House, "Premillennialism in the Ante-Nicene Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:675 (July-September 2012):271.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1089.

<sup>3</sup>John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 303-37.



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 (thousand-year rule of Christ) 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 refer 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 that John spoke of in this verse's context (vv. 4-6, 12). This "first resurrection" 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 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 general resurrection at the end of history, which view 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 at the end of the thousand years (cf. vv. 12-13).

The idea that the resurrection of believers takes place at various times also finds support in 1 Corinthians 15:23. Some 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>

Amillennialists have usually taken "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.<sup>3</sup> 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; Newell, p. 330; Fanning, p. 506.

<sup>3</sup>See Hodge, 3:837-44.

"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 [*sic*]. 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 (the 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 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 that Christians receive from the Lord at His 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.

### What Happens to a Person after He or She Dies?

An Old Testament Saint	<pre> graph LR     Death --&gt; Immaterial     Death --&gt; Material     Immaterial --&gt; Resurrection     Material --&gt; Resurrection     Resurrection --&gt; Judgment     Judgment --&gt; Heaven     </pre>
A Christian	<pre> graph LR     Death --&gt; Immaterial     Death --&gt; Material     Immaterial --&gt; Resurrection     Material --&gt; Resurrection     Resurrection --&gt; Judgment     Judgment --&gt; Heaven     </pre>
A Tribulation Saint	<pre> graph LR     Death --&gt; Immaterial     Death --&gt; Material     Immaterial --&gt; Resurrection     Material --&gt; Resurrection     Resurrection --&gt; Judgment     Judgment --&gt; Heaven     </pre>
A Millennial Saint	<pre> graph LR     Death --&gt; Immaterial     Death --&gt; Material     Immaterial --&gt; Resurrection     Material --&gt; Resurrection     Resurrection --&gt; Judgment     Judgment --&gt; Heaven     </pre>
All Unbelievers	<pre> graph LR     Death --&gt; Immaterial     Death --&gt; Material     Immaterial --&gt; Resurrection     Material --&gt; Resurrection     Resurrection --&gt; Judgment     Judgment --&gt; Hell     </pre>

The phrase "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, which is 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.

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>1</sup> Since Jesus Christ will be personally present on earth during the Millennium, He will probably give additional revelation then. The main point here seems to be that the Millennium will directly follow Jesus Christ's second coming, which is the main event in the Book of Revelation.

To summarize, there are three major schools of interpretation that deal with millennial prophecies: First, amillennialists interpret the Millennium figuratively and believe that 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 the future messianic kingdom is a perfect state. Therefore, according to Lewis, the Millennium of chapter 20 cannot be the future messianic kingdom, but it is the present age. He equated the kingdom age with the Eternal State of chapters 21 and 22.<sup>2</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>3</sup>

Postmillennialists, who comprise the second school, hold that Christ will return after the Millennium. Some of them believe that we should interpret the 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

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<sup>1</sup>See idem, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 296-323, for a full discussion of government, spiritual life, social, economic, and physical aspects of the Millennium.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, p. 307.

future. Postmillennialism has not been as 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 Old Testament 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. Among premillennialists there are two main groups: Historic premillennialists (also called 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."<sup>2</sup>

Belief in the imminent return of Christ and His establishment of His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years, with His headquarters in Jerusalem, was widespread in the second through the fifth centuries A.D. among the Montanists.<sup>3</sup>

"Their doctrine of the second advent was based on a literal interpretation of the millennium mentioned in the book of Revelation ..."<sup>4</sup>

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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.

<sup>3</sup>See Latourette, pp. 128-29; Earle. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce, *The Spreading ...*, p. 220.

Montanism had a long history in the early church, and many Montanist beliefs were erroneous, but most of them did believe in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth.

Jesus Christ's earthly reign will be the fulfillment of many prophecies in the Old Testament that predicted 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 world and 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 his successors ruled on the earth, the coming fulfillment of Davidic kingdom promises will take place on the earth.

Many dispensationalists 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 present heavenly and future earthly 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.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Christ's messianic kingdom began when Jesus inaugurated His earthly ministry. Presently He rules from heaven from His Father's throne, but when He returns at the Second Coming He will rule on earth from David's throne, and throughout eternity God the Father will rule over the new earth and the new heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28).

### **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 following verses: to demonstrate the incorrigibility of

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<sup>1</sup>See Fanning, pp. 508-14, for an excursus on the nature and purpose of the Millennium; and Showers, *There Really ...*, ch. 14: "The Kingdom of God Concept in the Scriptures," pp. 155-67.



Satan, and to demonstrate the depravity of humanity.<sup>1</sup> God may use an angelic agent to release Satan (cf. vv. 1-3).

20:8 The devil will then resume his former work of deceiving "the nations" (v. 3) into thinking that they will be better off submitting to his authority than to Jesus Christ's authority (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). He will eventually gather innumerable soldiers 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 finally admit the truth [that they hate Him] and rebel against the King!"<sup>2</sup>

"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>3</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

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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.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:620.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

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" evidently refers to the world's rulers and nations in rebellion against God.<sup>1</sup> "Gog," the ruler, and "Magog," his land, probably have symbolic significance as well as a literal meaning, 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 that is 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, which record the destruction of Babylon, allude to Isaiah 21 and Jeremiah 51, which record both future and eschatological destructions of Babylon. In view of its description in Ezekiel, Gog's invasion of the Promised Land finds fulfillment in two events: (1) In Revelation 20 we see a worldwide rebellion at the end of the Millennium. (2) 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>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Fanning, p. 514.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1058. Paragraph division omitted.

Amillennialist Meredith Klein argued that "Har-Magedon" (16:16) is Mount Zion, that the battle in 20:7 through 10 is the one described in Ezekiel 38 and 39, and that the Battle of Gog and Magog is the same as the Battle of Armageddon in 16:12 through 16.<sup>1</sup>

20:9 The rebels will occupy "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). The rebels will also surround the dwelling place ("the camp") of believers, even the earthly city of Jerusalem ("the beloved city"). 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), and in that sense it will be 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). John described the destiny of these mortal rebels in verses 12 through 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>2</sup>

20:10 Then God, perhaps using an unnamed agent, will cast Satan, the deceiver, "into the lake of fire and brimstone" 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, after a thousand years (19:20), shows that this is a place of conscious torment, not annihilation.<sup>3</sup> Death and Hades are cast into this lake (v. 14), so it cannot be a literal lake. "The lake of fire" is a figure of speech for judgment, not a literal burning body of water, which is an oxymoron.<sup>4</sup> Water cannot burn.

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Swete, pp. 268-69; and Beale, pp. 1025-28.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Aune, *Revelation* 17-22, p. 1100.

<sup>4</sup>See Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, p. 185. An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction.

"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 proportion to the guilt of those who have sinned (Luke 12:47-48) ..."¹

#### **4. The judgment of the wicked 20:11-15**

20:11 This "Then I saw" introduces something else that 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 "Then" to introduce new information. Most verses in this chapter begin with "Then" or "And."

The "great white throne" that John saw seems to be different from the thrones that 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).

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¹Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 426. See also Pache, *The Future ...*, ch. 15: "Hell," pp. 279-325.

The One sitting on this throne is probably the Lamb, since God the Father has committed all judgment to His Son (John 5:22). Or this may be a general reference to both the Father and to Jesus Christ, since both of them are described as judging (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 God's 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. "No place was found for them" indicates the total end of them. 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>1</sup> Others believe that He will renovate the present heavens and earth.

"He [John] does not pay attention to the process by which this 'newness' comes but focuses instead on the result: a new, transformed world instead of the old disordered one."<sup>2</sup>

20:12 "The dead" "before this throne" are 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 "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, whom He will raise to face this judgment, based on their works, specifically their failure to believe in Jesus Christ (John 6:29). Or, if they never heard of Jesus Christ, they will be condemned because they did not seek God in response to the revelation of Himself that He has given in nature (Rom. 1). Since He will evaluate their deeds,

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<sup>1</sup>Walvoord, "Revelation," pp. 982, 983.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, p. 529.

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 will judge 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 though unrevealed (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 death (cf. v. 6), whereas the previous one (v. 4) resulted in life.

God will resurrect the bodies of all unbelievers and will 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>2</sup> "Death and Hades" probably refer to the state of death and the place of death (cf. 1:18; 6:8).<sup>3</sup> Hades is the temporary abode of unbelievers' spirits until the Great White Throne judgment.

"Hades" is the unseen place where the spirits of all unbelievers who have died will reside until their resurrection (cf. 2 Cor.

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 365. Cf. Ps. 62:12; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:17.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 433.

5:8). Apparently Hades has two compartments: it includes Paradise (Luke 23:43), also called Abraham's bosom (Luke 23:43), and Gehenna (Luke 12:5), the place of torment and anguish (Luke 16:22-28). It is a place of conscious torment for unbelievers (Luke 16:23) but a place of rest for Old Testament saints. The spirits of believers who live in the Church Age who die go immediately into Christ's presence (2 Cor. 5:6, 8; Phil. 1:23). "Hades" is the New Testament word for this place, and "Sheol" is the Old Testament word.

Another reference to judgment on the basis of "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>1</sup>

20:14 From this point on (the end of the Millennium) 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>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:621.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 273.

Probably the phrase "Death and Hades" refers to all those people who have died and are in Hades.<sup>1</sup> "The second death" is eternal separation from God in the "lake of fire" (cf. 19:20; 21:8). Evidently the wicked, as well as the righteous, will receive resurrection bodies that are different from their former mortal bodies, because they will be indestructible.<sup>2</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, [*sic* life (] ver. 10; Matt. xxv. 41)."<sup>3</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>4</sup>

Eternal punishment is a doctrine that is becoming increasingly unpopular. Notice that Jesus Christ, the Judge, spoke very plainly when He affirmed it (vv. 14-15; 20:10; 19:20; 14:10; Matt. 18:8; 23:15, 33; 25:41, 46; Mark 9:46).<sup>5</sup>

"If we once saw sin as God sees it, we would understand why a place such as hell exists."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 1103.

<sup>2</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>3</sup>Alford, 4:735-36.

<sup>4</sup>A. Johnson, p. 590. Cf. Robertson, 6:465; and Ladd, p. 258. See Berkouwer, pp. 387-423, for a very good discussion of eternal punishment.

<sup>5</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>6</sup>Wiersbe, 2:621.



### N. THE ETERNAL STATE 21:1—22:5

The next scenes in John's vision proved to be of conditions that will exist after the Millennium. He recorded this insight in order to reveal the final home of believers.<sup>1</sup> There are many allusions to Isaiah 60 and 65, and to Ezekiel 40 through 48, in this section of Revelation. The final two chapters of Revelation also tie up strands of revelation from every major previous section of the book. This section is a picture of new beginnings and is a sharp contrast with the lake of fire, which is another final end that John saw in the previous chapter.

Beale believed that 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 he believed in a literal destruction of the old cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

Note some contrasts between the former creation and the future creation:<sup>3</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)
The curse announced (3:14-17)	No more curse (22:3)
Death enters history (3:19)	No more death (21:4)

<sup>1</sup>See also Pache, *The Future ...*, ch. 16: "Heaven," pp. 329-76.

<sup>2</sup>Beale, pp. 1039-40.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from Wiersbe, 2:621.

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). "A new heaven and a new earth" 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 the Eternal State but only a renovated earth and heavens.<sup>1</sup>

The reason that God will destroy the present ("first") 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 that He originally intended for 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 thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Baxter, *Explore the ...*, 6:346-47.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 275.

Is this a creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), like the creation of the first heaven and earth (Gen. 1)?<sup>1</sup> Or is it a thorough renovation of the present heaven and earth?<sup>2</sup> Time will tell. 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 they are the same since the terms that describe them are almost identical. However the descriptions of these places vary somewhat. Isaiah wrote that people will die in the new earth (Isa. 65:17-20), but John said that 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), though he did refer to months (22:2), which are now determined by the moon. 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). This is possible since even in the Millennium the world will experience renovation.

I believe that John, in the progress of revelation, distinguished these two aspects of the end times 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 sometimes did not distinguish His first coming from His second coming. Later revelation clarified that there would be two comings. This is in harmony with how God has revealed many things in His Word: first generally, then more specifically (e.g., the biblical covenant promises).

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<sup>1</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>2</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. Svigel, "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.

By "the first heaven and the first earth," John quite obviously meant planet earth and the heavens (the atmosphere and the solar system, the sky) above it (cf. Gen. 1:1). He did not mean the abode of God, which Scripture also calls heaven elsewhere, specifically the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2; cf. Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14).

The new earth will have no "sea." Some interpreters take this to mean oceans, but others understand the sea as a symbol of evil and/or chaos (cf. Gen. 1:2). In the Millennium there will be both oceans (Ps. 72:8; Jer. 31:9-10; Ezek. 47:8-20; 48:28; Zech. 9:10; 14:8) and evil. 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, crying, pain, night, and any curse (vv. 4, 25; 22:3, 5). The sea is an evil in the sense that it opposes humankind (cf. 13:1; Dan. 7:2-6). 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 would 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," whether literal or metaphorical, is the chief characteristic of the new earth as John described it.

## **2. John's first vision of the New Jerusalem 21:2-8**

This pericope contains the record of John's experience of seeing the New Jerusalem descending, in his vision, and of an angel's announcement following that revelation (vv. 2-4), and God's announcement following that revelation (vv. 5-8).

### **The descent of the city and the angelic announcement 21:2-4**

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, correctly I think, that John saw the city descending from heaven above to the earth below. But some believe that "coming down out of heaven from God" simply

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 275.

means that God is its architect and builder (Heb. 11:10).<sup>1</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 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>2</sup>

As the old Jerusalem will be Jesus Christ's capital during the Millennium, so the "new 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 "her husband" (vv. 9-10; cf. 3:12). As we will see, quite a bit of symbolism is present in the descriptions of the new Jerusalem.<sup>3</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>4</sup>

The use of the bride figure 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>5</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

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Vacendak, 2:1327.

<sup>2</sup>W. M. Smith, p. 1522. Bold highlighting omitted.

<sup>3</sup>See Ironside, p. 350; Tan, *The Interpretation ...*, pp. 285-92.

<sup>4</sup>David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1—22:5," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 276.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 558; Lilje, p. 259; Vacendak, 2:1328.

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. Each one has a special relationship to God, like a bride has to her bridegroom.

However this city, the new Jerusalem, now evidently encompasses two previous brides of Christ: Israel and the church (cf. vv. 12, 14). The city 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 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 of peace. The contrasts between Babylon and the new Jerusalem will become more evident as the vision unfolds.

The city contains people (v. 3), 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> Again, the new Jerusalem seems to be a visionary representation of the final home of all believers that Jesus told His disciples He was going to prepare for them where they would dwell with Him forever (John 14:2-3).

"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>

"Babylon" was the name of the city that grew up where the Tower of Babel (lit. Confusion, Chaos) earlier stood. The builders of the Tower of Babel said, "Come, let's build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let's make a name for ourselves" (Gen. 11:4). Thus they

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<sup>1</sup>See Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1122.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 315.

demonstrated two evils: trying to reach heaven by their own works (works salvation) and self-glorification (glorifying the creature rather than the Creator). These evils persisted and characterized Babylon ever since and are seen in the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's statement, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan. 4:30).

In contrast to Babylon, "Jerusalem" (lit. City of Peace) was a gift from God to His people Israel. God told Moses that, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, He would give them a place where He would dwell among them. This proved to be old Jerusalem, where King Solomon (lit. Peaceable) built his temple. When God asked Solomon what he wanted from Him, at the beginning of his reign, Solomon asked for wisdom to serve His people well and thus glorify God. He also glorified God for His grace in making him king. These two things are the very opposite of the attitudes that Nebuchadnezzar expressed.

As the description of the new Jerusalem unfolds, we will see many contrasts between it and Babylon. God seems to have been giving John a vision of believers' eternal home that shows how vastly superior that place will be to all that the self-glorifying, works salvation approach to life that Babylon and Babylonianism has symbolized throughout history.

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. I do not think that this is the best interpretation.

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>1</sup> This explanation seems too literal. Rather the new Jerusalem seems to be a visionary representation of a real place.

Some believe that the new Jerusalem will be within the new earth.<sup>2</sup> But this seems to contradict the statement that it came down out of the new heaven. The text does not say that the new Jerusalem will come down to the new earth. It only says that John saw it coming down out of heaven from God (cf. v. 10).

I think that God intended John and his readers to conclude that the new Jerusalem will be a "holy," pure ("as a bride adorned for her husband"), and peaceful ("Jerusalem," the city of peace) habitation that He would provide for His people.

21:3 For the last of 20 times in his visions John 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," His dwelling place, was now "among the people." Finally the relationship between God and humankind, which 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: endless existence in the very presence of "God Himself" (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 during His earthly ministry (John 1:14). It exists today as God inhabits

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<sup>1</sup>Pentecost, *Things to ...*, p. 580.

<sup>2</sup>McGee, 5:1068-72.



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>

Since later we read that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem (v. 22), this tabernacle is probably not a literal building but a symbol of God's dwelling place among His people in the new Jerusalem.

The word "people" occurs twice in this verse. But in the second occurrence it is plural (peoples) in the Greek text. This 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 every tear" at the inception of the Eternal State rather than at some time after it begins. 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

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 443. Cf. Erdman, p. 167.

compassion for His people. "Death," "mourning," "crying," and "pain" will all end. This is a final reversal of the curse that God gave in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3). All these former experiences ("the first [former] 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 some reward and feel ashamed (1 Cor. 3:15; cf. 1 John 2:28).

"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>1</sup>

### **The divine announcement 21:5-8**

21:5 John now turned from describing the new Jerusalem, briefly, to describing some of God's ("He who sits on the throne") utterances (cf. 1:8; 20:11). "Behold" again introduces a special pronouncement, namely, that God will bring a new creation into existence ("I am making all things new"). The description of the new creation in the preceding verses was proleptic. Perhaps an angel subsequently instructed John to write down what God had said because His "words" were "faithful and true," not because they were incredible (cf. 22:6).<sup>2</sup> But probably it was God Himself who uttered this second statement.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the vision so enthralled John that he had 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 ("It is done"), and He had made all things new (cf. v. 5). The One on the throne again referred to Himself as the eternal, sovereign God ("the Alpha and the

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<sup>1</sup>A. Johnson, p. 593.

<sup>2</sup>Lee, 4:818.

<sup>3</sup>Swete, p. 279; Barclay, 2:261.

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 ("water") for "the one who thirsts" is metaphorical. It symbolizes His ability to meet the deepest needs of His people (7:17; cf. Isa. 55:1; John 4:13-14; 7:37-39).<sup>1</sup> This is an invitation and a promise to anyone, including believers, to come to God in order to receive what is essential and truly satisfying from Him "without cost." It is a beautiful gospel invitation (cf. 3:20; 22:17).<sup>2</sup> Contrast "the spring of the water of life" with the cup from which the harlot drank (17:4; 18:3).

21:7      The overcomer (i.e., every believer) "will inherit these things" (i.e., the blessings of the new creation just mentioned). This promise completes and summarizes the other seven promises to overcomers in chapters 2 and 3. The promise of 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 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>3</sup>

Paul used the two Greek words *huiioi*, "sons," and *tekna*, "children," synonymously, but John distinguished their two meanings whenever he used them: mature sons capable of inheriting 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

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<sup>1</sup>David L. Mathewson, "The Holy Spirit in the New Creation of Revelation 21:1—22:5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 67:1 (March 2024):113-24, took this reference to water, and the one in 22:1, as references to the Holy Spirit.

<sup>2</sup>See Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit*, pp. 108-28.

<sup>3</sup>Dillow, p. 472.

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 that burns with fire and brimstone, 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. It will probably exist separately from the new heaven and new earth and the new Jerusalem.<sup>1</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 no sin, 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 17:1 through 19:10 expounded on the announcement of Babylon's fall in 16:19. This second description of the new Jerusalem also reminds us of the second description of creation in Genesis 2:4 through 25. In both Genesis 1:1 through 2:3 and Revelation 21:2 through 8 we have a general overview. In both Genesis 2:4 through 25 and Revelation 21:9 through 22:5 we have more detail, specifically concerning the bride of Adam (in Genesis) and concerning the bride of the Lamb (in Revelation).

As noted above, the chronological progression of the revelation in 19:11 through 22:5 locates the new Jerusalem in the new creation, not in the Millennium.

"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>2</sup>

That is, in Isaiah the Jerusalem in the Millennium is called the new Jerusalem, and in Revelation the Jerusalem in the Eternal State is called the new Jerusalem. I believe that in the former case it is the present city of

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<sup>1</sup>See Peterson, "Does the ...," pp. 25-26.

<sup>2</sup>Ryrie, *Biblical Theology ...*, p. 362.

Jerusalem under Messiah's earthly rule that is in view, whereas in the second case it is the symbolic representation of the eternal home of believers that is in view.

### John's guide to the city 21:9

"One of the seven angels who had" poured out one of "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 hints that a comparison of these two cities will follow.

"It is impossible to dwell both in Babylon and in the new Jerusalem."<sup>1</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 that John saw in his vision was a city. It was not just a person or a single group of people, such as Christians exclusively. Some have identified it as the church.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that it corresponds to the new universe.<sup>3</sup>

This is the first of seven references to "the Lamb" in this section of Revelation (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>4</sup>

### The physical features of the city 21:10-22

21:10 John entered a fresh state of prophetic ecstasy and now saw another new vision (cf. 1:10; 4:1; 17:3). The angel (v. 9) took him to a high vantage point ("a great and high mountain"), from which he could see the new Jerusalem descending "out of heaven from God" (cf. v. 2; Ezek. 40:2). John was receiving here a fresh revelation that expanded on something that he

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<sup>1</sup>L. Morris, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Robert Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People," *Novum Testamentum* 29:3 (July 1987):256.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Moffatt, 5:482.

<sup>4</sup>"Immanuel's Land" by Anne Ross Cousin.

had already witnessed in an earlier scene (vv. 2-8; cf. 16:19; 17:1; Gen. 1:1—2:3 and 2:4-25).

"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>

21:11 This city obviously appeared extremely impressive to John. 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).

A most important characteristic that John noted was its radiant glow ("brilliance"). John compared the glory of the city to that of a beautiful gem ("a very valuable 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 new Jerusalem.

21:12 The city's "great and high wall" with its "12 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 gates (gate-towers, Gr. *pylon*, cf. Luke 16:20) stood three on each side of the walls (v. 13). The gates provided access into the city. The many gates also suggest great freedom of access. The eternal dwelling place of believers will not be a prison.

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 378.

The 12 angelic guards also present a picture of great security (cf. Gen. 3:24; Isa. 62:6). The Israelite tribal "names" were apparently on the gates, not on the angels stationed beside them (cf. Ezek. 48:31-34). Ezekiel 48:31 through 34 describes Jerusalem in the Millennium, not in the new earth. The fact that each gate bore 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). But, of course, John was describing what he saw in a vision. Which names will be on which gates remains to be seen. The placement of the tribes around Israel's 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 "foundation stones" may have been one on top of each other in layers, but perhaps each section of the wall, between the gates, had its own foundation.<sup>3</sup> As the walls and gates represent protection, so the foundations speak of permanence. Who ever heard of a city built of one foundation, let alone 12 foundations? Houses have foundations, but a city with foundations creates a picture of supreme stability and permanence.

Christians who make up the church, represented by "the 12 apostles" (cf. Eph. 2:20), will be in the new Jerusalem, as will believing Israelites (v. 12). However assigning the "name" of

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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.

each apostle to a particular foundation stone is as impossible 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. The point is that believers in the church will be identifiable as such as well as believers in Israel. Note this 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 to play, and an identity separate from 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 is not just another name for the people of God but is a group separate from Israel in His plans and purposes.

"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 gates and walls (cf. Ezek. 40:3). Again, the temple that Ezekiel described being measured, in Ezekiel 40 through 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, which suggests the exceedingly great value of the city.

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<sup>1</sup>Scott, pp. 433-34; Walvoord, *The Revelation ...*, pp. 322-23; A. Johnson, p. 596.

<sup>2</sup>L. Morris, p. 250.



21:16 John described the shape and then the size of the city. Its base was "square," ironically the same basic shape as ancient Babylon and Nineveh.<sup>1</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—and Boston to Miami—is about 1,500 miles.)

Beasley-Murray wrote that the reader should not translate this measurement into miles because "it represents the ordinary unit of distance (the furlong) multiplied by the number of God's people (twelve) and extended indefinitely."<sup>2</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 in his view).<sup>3</sup>

Such interpretations as the above are very subjective and amount to guessing. What is clear is that this city will be extremely large (cf. John 14:2).

I believe that the 1,500-mile sides of the city are meant to contrast with the 15-mile sides of ancient Babylon. By showing John the immense size of this visionary city God wanted John to see how vastly superior the final dwelling place of believers will be compared to self-serving Babylon and all that it represents.

"Such dimensions defy imagination, and are permissible only in the language of symbolism."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:473.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 322.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 1074.

<sup>4</sup>Swete, p. 289.

This verse's description could allow for either a cube<sup>1</sup> or a pyramid<sup>2</sup> shape, the latter being the shape of a Babylonian ziggurat. Perhaps this shape was also designed to impress John with the superior dwelling place of the true God in contrast with the puny temple that the Babylonians had built. The Egyptian pyramids were structures to house the dead, but this pyramid (if what John saw was a pyramid) will house the living.

The fact that the holy of holies was a cube in shape has tempted some to conclude that the new Jerusalem that John saw was cubical.

"The cube was an ancient symbol of perfection."<sup>3</sup>

Some who see the city as a cube believe that it symbolizes what the holy of holies in Israel (also a cube) anticipated, namely, a perfect environment in which God dwells. Others hold that it symbolizes the fulfillment of all God's promises.<sup>4</sup>

"... a city described as a cube structure is likely to be a figurative rather than literal depiction, especially with a height of approximately 1500 miles."<sup>5</sup>

21:17 The city wall was "144 cubits" (about 216 feet or 72 yards) thick (cf. Ezek. 40:5; 42:20). An American football field is 100 yards long. A city with walls this thick would be impregnable and hence completely secure, and the security of this dwelling place seems to be the point of this description.

John explained that even though an angel was doing the measuring he was using human units of measurement. These

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<sup>1</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>2</sup>Lilje, p. 267; William Hoste, *The Visions of John the Divine*, p. 178; W. M. Smith, p. 1523; Ironside, p. 357.

<sup>3</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2200.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., A. Johnson, p. 596.

<sup>5</sup>Fanning, p. 542.

measurements meant the same to John as they would have meant if something else in his day was being measured.

- 21:18 The walls of the city appeared to be glistening (cf. v. 11; 4:3). The word "material" (Gr. *endomesis*) means "building in," and it suggests that the material *on* the wall was "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 like an object 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 looked like to John. "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 quite clearly describing the new Jerusalem by using similes and metaphors in order to artfully communicate its inexpressible 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 ("decorated") 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.

"Our God is a God of beauty, and He will lavish His beauty on the city He is preparing for His people."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mounce, p. 381.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 4:742.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, 5:484.

<sup>4</sup>Wiersbe, 2:623.

The Israelite high priest carried 12 gems, which represented each of the twelve tribes, on his breastpiece (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 that the heavenly Jerusalem represents 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 Perhaps each gate that John saw (vv. 12-13) had been carved out of one huge ("a single") pearl (cf. Isa. 54:11-12).<sup>1</sup> Or it may have been a whole pearl.

"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>2</sup>

John further described "the street" or pavement of the city. He was probably referring to all the streets since all of them would be connected. This pavement was "pure gold," as pure as "transparent glass" (cf. v. 18). Old Testament priests who ministered in Solomon's temple walked on a gold floor originally (1 Kings 6:30).

Most of the streets in John's day were dirt. The Romans paved a few of the major highways, but by far most streets were dirt. To imagine a city with streets of gold is to imagine one in which that which is normally worth nothing is priceless. This is another way in which God impressed John with the glory, beauty, and worth of the place where believers will one day live.

- 21:22 Unlike old Jerusalem, there will be "no temple" in the new city, because "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" will be there and will be "its temple." The whole city, infused with the glory and presence of Almighty God and the Lamb, will therefore be a virtual temple.<sup>3</sup> This heavenly perfection of the

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<sup>1</sup>Swete, p. 294.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 473. Cf. Barclay, 2:275.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Overstreet, pp. 460-62.

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 temple along with Almighty God. The earthly tabernacle and temple were mainly symbols of the presence of God with people, but in the new Jerusalem that presence will be 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 through 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      The new Jerusalem needed no "sun" or "moon" (or stars?) in the new heaven because God's glory "illuminated" the whole city (cf. Isa. 60:19). Actually the text does not say that there will be no sun or moon in the eternal state, but that the light of the sun and moon was not needed. Some believe that there will be a sun and moon in the new heaven.<sup>3</sup> But the need for created light sources will apparently end when the glorious 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 a source of glory (Heb. 1:3), and the Father is also a source of light (22:5).

"It truly will be the Jesus Christ Light and Power Company then."<sup>4</sup>

21:24      The city is so bright that it provides light for the whole new creation. The identity of "the nations" and "the kings of the earth" mentioned is difficult to determine. The most probable

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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.

explanation seems to be that the nations are groups of believers viewed according to their old-creation nationalities, which they will apparently retain in the new creation. The kings (rulers) probably are believing national leaders who ruled over nations 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 at all times (cf. Isa. 60:11). John said that the city gates will never ever be closed (double negative, 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 will illuminate everything (cf. 22:5). Night has symbolic overtones and has connotations of evil in Scripture and in literature generally (cf. John 3:19).

21:26 The gates will admit these leaders ("they," "the kings of the earth," v. 24) who "will bring the glory and the honor of the nations" to God by 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 (double negative, 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

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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.

way to gain entrance into this holy heavenly city is to have one's name recorded "in the Lamb's book of life" (cf. 20:15).

Evidently in his vision John saw the new Jerusalem on the new earth. The city is a representation of the home of all the redeemed throughout eternity, but they will not be restricted to the city. The city has open gates that permit egress and entrance. But unbelievers will have no access to the city.

"Eternity shall be at once a great eye-opener and a great mouth-shutter."<sup>1</sup>

Are we to understand the lake of fire to be on the new earth? Since lakes are features of the earth, that may seem to be a legitimate inference. However, the lake of fire was spoken of earlier as a figure of eternal death. So we should probably not press these illustrations into one harmonious whole and conclude that the lake of fire will be on the new earth.

### 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). Yet what he described far outshines the paradise that Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden, much less Nebuchadnezzar's Hanging Gardens in Babylon. Having viewed the splendor of the new Jerusalem, John now saw what will nourish and enrich the lives of God's people in their heavenly home.

"So far the description has been of the exterior of the holy city; but now the scene moves to the interior."<sup>2</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>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jim Elliot, quoted in Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, 2:281.

<sup>3</sup>McGee, 5:1075.

22:1 "And he showed me" signals new aspects of the city that John's angel-guide proceeded to point out to him. The "clear as crystal" "river of the water of life" 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). Some believe that, like the city itself, it may at the same time represent a literal river (cf. Gen. 2:10, 14). We should not confuse this river with the one that will flow from the Jerusalem temple during the Millennium (Ezek. 47:1, 9, 12; Zech. 14:8). John described the river that he saw as bright or clear as a crystal. It was a shimmering, sparkling stream of unpolluted water.<sup>1</sup> The Euphrates River, which flowed through Babylon, in contrast, was not clear.

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 up 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" (v. 2) 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 of life" (v. 2). 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 source]. The symbolism of a river of life is a common one in biblical thought [cf. Gen. 3:22, 24; Ps. 46:4; Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8; John 4:10, 14]."<sup>2</sup>

"The point of the passage is to teach that in the eternal state God's people will live at the source

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 6:479.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 286.



of the life-giving stream, the very presence of God Himself ..."<sup>1</sup>

22:2 John also saw "the tree of life." Several commentators took the reference to this tree (singular) as generic. They believed that John really saw many trees.<sup>2</sup> I think it is better to interpret the reference as one tree, since this is the normal meaning of the singular noun used here. 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 "every month" of the year. Probably "every month" means perpetually. 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 (continually) will typify eternal 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, namely, to sustain immortality. "Healing" really means "health-giving" (Gr. *therapeian*). Since there will be no sickness or death to be healed from in the new earth (21:4), this tree's leaves will evidently promote well-being and sustain eternal life.<sup>3</sup> They will provide healing from the other negative conditions of the old creation, like 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).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 482. See Mounce, p. 386.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 484).

<sup>3</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."

"To eat of the tree of life was, in the popular religious phraseology of the age, to possess immortality."<sup>1</sup>

"It seems possible therefore to understand participation in the tree of life as a regular experience of fellowship with God, i.e., eating of this monthly fruit."<sup>2</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>3</sup>

22:3 "There will no longer be any curse" because God will eliminate it. 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.

22:4 God's bond-servants will "see His face." Believers 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, 5:487.

<sup>2</sup>Dillow, p. 474.

<sup>3</sup>Seiss, p. 506.

"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 ...)."<sup>1</sup>

When the pharaoh of the Exodus had seen enough of Moses, he said, "Do not see my face again" (Exod. 10:28). This was a way of saying that all contact and fellowship between the two was over.

As believers we will bear God's "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 that John stressed was the intensely bright glory of God that will illuminate 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 (21:23), 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 and ever," not just in the millennial kingdom (20:4, 6). This is the fulfillment of God's desire and command that humankind should rule over His creation (Gen. 1:26).<sup>2</sup> Evidently faithful believers will have more authority in the new 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 1179.

<sup>2</sup>Beckwith, p. 767; Wall, pp. 257-58.

"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 will take place after 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>

Since what John saw was a vision, is the new Jerusalem only an imaginary place, or is it a real place? In other visions that other prophets saw, what they saw were real people, places, and objects. Therefore I conclude that the new Jerusalem represents a real place and is not just a symbol of something such as eternal bliss. But are the streets really paved with gold? I think not. This seems to be one of the comparisons that John used to describe the great glory of the heavenly home of believers that is otherwise beyond description.

Many commentators believed that the new Jerusalem is the place that Jesus referred to when He told His disciples that He was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:2). However, He may have been emphasizing that where He was going (to His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension) constituted His preparatory work for their position of salvation in Him.

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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 term "Eternal State" has led some to conclude that time as we know it, which marks events in sequence, will end when God destroys 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. But there is no indication in the text that the new creation will introduce a timeless form of existence. In fact, the phrase "forever and ever" (20:10; 21:5) 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

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<sup>1</sup>David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, pp. 106-7. JB refers to *The Jerusalem Bible*, and NEB refers to *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha*. 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.

theological theme of the book is the glory that God is to 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. When reading this section of Revelation it is important to remember that it is not visionary. The visions that John received are over. He was now addressing the churches that he addressed in chapters 1 through 3.

"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

<sup>1</sup>Beale, pp. 1119-20. Paragraph division and italics omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 493.

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
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 also 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)

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<sup>1</sup>Tenney, p. 97.

### A. THE TESTIMONY OF THE ANGEL 22:6-7

These verses are very similar in form and content to 1:1 through 3. These two sections function as bookends (a frame, an *inclusio*) for the chapters that they enclose.<sup>1</sup>

22:6 The angel who had been revealing the new creation to John, namely, one of the angels who had the seven bowls (21:9), continued to speak to him.<sup>2</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>3</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>4</sup>

The angel proceeded to explain why these words are faithful and true. It was "the Lord, the God" who inspired "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 [messenger]"—evidently Christ, in view of verse 7 (cf. 1:5)—to reveal these things to His bond-servant John, who was one of these prophets, and to his fellow bond-servants (other believers). Specifically, He had revealed things that must happen "soon" (cf. "the time is near," 1:3).

The purpose of this verse is to stress the authenticity of this revelation and to encourage anticipation of its fulfillment. Another view is that an angel relayed these words of Christ (cf. vv. 12-13) to John (cf. 16:15), rather than Jesus speaking them directly to him.

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<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1188. An *inclusio* is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing, bookending, or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a section.

<sup>2</sup>Swete, p. 302; Beckwith, p. 772; Robertson, 6:481; Beasley-Murray, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:746; Swete, p. 302; Lee, 4:837; Beckwith, p. 772; Robertson, 6:481.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 495.



This verse reinforces a futuristic interpretation of Revelation. The book deals with events yet future ("things which must soon take place"). This verse 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.

How could the angel say that the things revealed must take place "soon" since approximately 2,000 years have passed and they still have not happened? As mentioned previously, the idea behind the Greek words translated "soon" (*en tachei*) is probably that the events to be revealed could happen at any time, without delay.

22:7 Jesus Christ promised to return "quickly" (cf. vv. 12, 20; 3:11). Reconstructionism (also called dominion theology) and preterism interpret this promise as having been fulfilled at the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.<sup>1</sup>

The Greek word translated "quickly" (*tachy*) means at any time. Some believe that since the Second Coming is the great climactic event in view through most of this prophecy, it is probably in view here. But the Second Coming must be preceded by other prophesied events. So it is not imminent. Others believe that the Rapture is in view.<sup>2</sup> Since Jesus was addressing John and the churches in this epilogue section of Revelation, He was probably referring to the Rapture.

"... it is quite evident that He would have us live in the constant expectation of His advent being imminent."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Jesus Christ has not come yet may seem to contradict this promise. But "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord

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<sup>1</sup>See Chilton, *The Days ...*, p. 575; and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell*, pp. 142-45.

<sup>2</sup>See Thomas, *Revelation 8—22*, p. 489.

<sup>3</sup>W. Lincoln, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation*, p. 241. See also Stanton's discussion of imminence 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.

is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

C. S. Lewis was right when he wrote that Aslan, the lion (who represents Christ in *The Chronicles of Narnia*), said to Lucy:

"Do not look so sad. We shall meet soon again.'  
Please, Aslan,' said Lucy, 'what do you call soon?'  
'I call all times soon,' said Aslan ..."<sup>1</sup>

The Book of Revelation closes as it opened: with a special blessing for those who pay close attention and respond appropriately to what it teaches (1:3; cf. 16:5).

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 Bible book. Everyone should continue to study it even though some of it is difficult to understand. Like most prophecy, it will only become completely clear after what it predicts has come to pass.

## **B. THE TESTIMONY OF JOHN 22:8-11**

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 the 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>2</sup>

John confessed that when he had heard and seen these things he had reacted by worshipping "the angel" who revealed them to him. It was the revelation of the new creation that evidently had moved John to respond this way a second time (cf.

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Book 5, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17—22*, p. 1185.

19:10). John's strong reaction further attests to 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. People should "Worship God," not His servants (cf. Heb. 1:14). The angel presented himself as "a fellow servant" of John's. They both served God. He said that he also served the other prophets besides John ("your brothers the prophets") as well as all believers who pay attention to and take to heart what God has revealed in 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 Some scholars have regarded only verses 10 through 20 as an epilogue because they are similar to 1:1 through 8, which is a prologue.<sup>2</sup>

John received instruction from the angel to leave his book open. He was not to "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 his prophecy, evidently because there was more prophecy to come that needed to be added to it (Dan. 8:26; 12:4, 9-10; cf. Rev. 10:4). Like an artist covers his or her 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 was 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

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<sup>1</sup>Beale, p. 1129.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, pp. 1195, 1236.

change their destiny. What they are then they will remain forever. People should not expect some second chance in the future but should make the decision about worshipping 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 who are 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

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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.

within the lifetime of the first century Christians. 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 ("each one as his work deserves"). This is a reward that He possesses and will give. This prospect strengthens the warning in verse 11. Jesus Christ will 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 opportunity (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

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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.

21:6 and Christ in Hebrews 12:2. It means that He finishes what He begins.<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 by turning to Christ for salvation (cf. 7:14; 21:27). The robe that 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 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 forever).

- 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 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 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; A. 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 as His eternal capital. 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 great Descendant. 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 (often the planet Venus) heralds the dawn of each new day on earth, so Christ at His 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 as a new day dawns. 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 here, 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

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:625.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 492.

week], why did they command Him in a way that implied that He could come at any moment?"<sup>1</sup>

Now Jesus turned the invitation around. He invited the thirsty to come to Him and "take the water of life" freely ("without cost"; 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 the eternal life that is in Him. 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 for refreshment (cf. Matt. 5:6; John 4:10).

"The one who desires" 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. It costs us nothing, but it cost Jesus Christ His life.

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).

Adding material to (or deleting material from, v. 19) the prophecies contained in this book will result in punishment from God.

"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>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Showers, *Maranatha ...*, p. 142. See also his brief history of belief in the imminent coming of Christ on pp. 142-47.

<sup>2</sup>Ladd, p. 295. Cf. Swete, p. 313.



Some of the cults have elevated the writings of their founders to a level equal with that of Scripture.

Specifically, God will visit the offender with "the plagues that are written in this book." Some readers may infer that anyone who does this will either lose his or her salvation or was not a believer in the first place. A better 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 but not loss of salvation.

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 that 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 statement similar to this verse 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 holy city" does not mean the person will lose his or her salvation either.

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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.

If the person who corrupts Revelation is an unbeliever, he or she will have no part at all in the blessings of the new creation. If he or she is a believer, the part 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 that a true child of God would never tamper with these Scriptures is simply naive. "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 through 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" (at any time, cf. 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."<sup>1</sup>

"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

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<sup>1</sup>Seiss, p. 523.

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).

John added his "Amen" affirming his belief that Jesus would indeed 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 thy 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>2</sup>

The following chart compares the first creation in Genesis 1 through 3 with the final creation in Revelation 21 and 22:<sup>3</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

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Gaebelein, *The Annotated ...*, 4:2:284.

<sup>3</sup>From Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 169.

<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
<b>Human spiritual state</b>	Banished from God	God with humans
<b>Sanctification</b>	Seventh day	Universal
<b>God</b>	Invisible	Visible
<b>Son of God</b>	Concealed	Revealed
<b>Water</b>	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 of 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

<sup>1</sup>Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, p. 1238.

<sup>2</sup>Beasley-Murray, p. 350. Bold highlighting omitted.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, p. 1156.

merely the message of judgment upon unbelievers—can be found in this book."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nelson ...*, p. 2202.

## Appendix 1

### Schools of Interpretation of Revelation

Name	Viewpoint	History	Theology	Writers <sup>1</sup>
Idealist	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.
Preterist	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. 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, B. M. Fanning, et al.

## 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 the land of Israel (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>	
<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>2</sup>	
<b>Domitian</b> (A.D. 81-96)		John (A.D. 85-95)

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<sup>1</sup>See Josephus, *The Wars . . .*, books 3 and 4.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., books 3-7.

		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)		

## 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 three unclean spirits (16:13) are spirits of demons (16:14).
16. The waters (17:1) are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (17:15).
17. 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).
18. The seven heads (17:9) are seven mountains (17:9) which are seven kings (17:10).
19. The beast (17:11) is the eighth king (17:11).
20. The ten horns (17:12) are ten kings (17:12).
21. The fine linen (19:8) is the righteous acts of the saints (19:8).

22. The faithful souls come to life (20:4) is the first resurrection (20:5).
23. The lake of fire (20:14) is the second death (20:14).
24. The Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb (21:22) are the temple in Jerusalem (21:22).

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