

# **The Apocalypse of John**

by

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## **Preface**

The Revelation of John is often enough the first New Testament (NT) book that people wish to know about and the last one they actually need to know about. This problem is not so much due to the book's lack of significance in the NT canon as it is to the vulgar curiosity that humans often exhibit in their desire to predict the future. For too many, interpreting the Revelation has become the Christian way of legitimizing unbridled speculation—of indulging a captivating obsession for the cryptic that leads non-Christians toward such things as astrology and the occult. Precisely because the Revelation is filled with esoteric language and symbolism, it has become a happy hunting ground for self-proclaimed authorities to put forth their dogmatic opinions. Too often, the more obscure the passage, the more the dogmatism. This state of affairs is unfortunate, because in the effort to avoid the undisciplined excesses of the ill-equipped, the Revelation has sometimes been shunned by those with a healthier respect for its apocalyptic genre. Many people need to hear clearly that God stands in judgment over a power-hungry world, and the Revelation asserts this truth in graphic terms. Others need to be assured of God's ability to preserve them in the darkest hour of helplessness before a threatening world system. All of us need to be reminded that God is in control of history and shall conclude it according to his own sovereign will.

## The Apocalypse of John

Some rather extensive introduction is called for before one actually examines the first passages in the Book of Revelation. This is partly due to the chaotic plethora of interpretations in existence already and partly because the Revelation was written in a style of literature which is not characteristic of most of the NT. We shall seek to be humble in our approach to this great book while at the same time offering information that helps us understand it better. We emphatically do not propose to give the final word on this strange but exciting document.

### The Nature of Apocalyptic Literature

The Bible is not only a book; it is also a collection of books which exhibit different literary forms. It contains poetry, allegory, history, theology, correspondence, dirge and so forth, not to mention a variety of idiomatic and poetic figures of speech. Therefore, it is improper to read the Bible like so many sections in a newspaper. To fail to appreciate literary style is to distort and misunderstand what God intends to tell us.

One important literary form is apocalyptic, and it is especially significant for the study of the Revelation, which claims to be apocalyptic in the opening phrase: “The *apocalypse* (= revelation or unveiling) of Jesus Christ....” (1:1). The general character of apocalyptic literature was well established long before the writing of Revelation, since it thrived in Judaism during the intertestamental period and on into the early Christian era.”<sup>1</sup> To study the Revelation without some knowledge of apocalyptic is like trying to read *Animal Farm* without any knowledge of allegory.

### Primary Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

The basic pattern of apocalyptic literature involves several primary features, all of which are to be found in the Book of Revelation.

### Special Disclosures

The writers of apocalyptic provide answers to the secrets of the hidden world by dreams, visions and/or heavenly journeys with angelic guides (Cf. 1:10-11; 4:1-2;

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<sup>1</sup> D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 36ff. For the actual texts of apocalyptic writings, see: R. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1963) or J. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983-85).



6:1-2; 17:1; 19:9-10; 22:1, 6, 8-10).<sup>2</sup> While the revelations may cover a variety of subject matter, they often describe the end time and how the age will close (6:12-14; 11:15-18; 15:1-2; 19:11-12; 21:1). The revelations are esoteric, that is, they are cryptic and intended to be understood only by those who understand the symbolism involved (1:12-13, 19-20; 13:18; 17:5).<sup>3</sup>

### **A Dualism of Powers and the Triumph of God**

Apocalyptic is usually a form of theodicy and depicts the universe as locked in combat between two personified forces of good and evil, Yahweh and Satan (6:2-6; 9:1-3, 11; 12:7-9; 13:5-6; 16:13-14; 19:11, 14).<sup>4</sup> In Jewish apocalyptic, Satan is clearly inferior to God and is destined for defeat (1:18; 11:15; 12:12; 13:9-11; 14:19-20; 16:10; 17:1; 19:11--20:3, 7-10). In the present age he is the arch opponent of God and the persecutor of God's people (2:10; 6:9-11; 11:7; 12:4, 10, 13, 15, 17; 13:7). However, God has set limits to his powers, and although the conflict presently rages, it will soon end (7:3; 9:4; 12:6, 14, 16). God will intervene powerfully to establish his perfect kingdom on the earth (1:7; 22:7, 12, 20).<sup>5</sup>

### **A Dualism of Ages**

There is a marked concept of two ages in apocalyptic, a present age dominated by evil and a future age of perfection. In general, apocalyptic literature arises during times of extreme duress as a sort of "tract for bad times." The righteous people of God face oppression, persecution and martyrdom. The present age seems almost hopelessly given over to the powers of evil. However, God's people are not to abandon hope in God, because he will intervene to close the present age, to put down evil once and for all, and to inaugurate a new age of blessedness. Frequently, the old age and the old earth are to be replaced by a newly created earth and/or the descent of a heavenly city (21:1-5).<sup>6</sup>

### **Symbolism**

In keeping with the esoteric nature of apocalyptic, the literature is replete with symbolic language, a language that is sometimes unintelligible to modern readers and hence has made the Revelation the object of unusual speculations. Animal symbolism is especially prominent, exhibiting bizarre features (4:6-8; 5:5-6; 9:3, 7-10, 17-19; 12:3; 13:1-3, 11; 17:3). Numerology is also characteristic with the numbers 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12 and their multiples especially important (1:4, 12, 16; 2:10; 4:4, 5, 6; 5:1, 6; 7:1, 4; 8:2;

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<sup>2</sup> G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 79-83.

<sup>3</sup> L. Morris, *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> M. Rist, "Apocalypticism," *IDB* (1962) 1.158.

<sup>5</sup> Russell, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Ladd, 87-93; Morris, 49-52; Rist, 158

9:14, 16; 10:3; 11:2-3, 9, 11, 13; 12:1, 3, 6, 14; 13:1, 5, 18; 14:1; 15:1; 17:3; 20:2,4-5; 21:12, 14, 16, 17; 22:2). Sometimes the numbers are specifically named, as above, and at other times they are implicit in the scheme of the writing (4:8; 5:12, 13; 8:13; 9:12).<sup>7</sup>

### **Cosmic Disturbances**

Apocalyptic imagery often describes the end of the world in cataclysmic terms, including the disintegration of society and even the universe (6:3, 5, 7-8, 12-14; 9:15, 18; 16:20-21). The earth's foundations are shaken, the doors of Sheol are opened (9:1-11), the oceans roar and there are natural disasters upon the earth (6:6; 7:1-3; 8:7-12; 11:13; 16:2-4, 8-12, 18-19). The heavenly bodies are disturbed and there is universal calamity and woe.<sup>8</sup>

### **Angelology and Demonology**

Apocalyptic is frequently marked by the activity of angels and demons, with the angels on God's side and the demons opposing them (7:1; 8:2, 6ff.; 20; 10:1; 12:7-9; 14:6, 8, 9; 15, 17; 15:1; 16:1, 13-14).<sup>9</sup> The concept of seven archangels, for instance, comes from 1 Enoch 20:1-8. Sometimes angels are depicted as guardians of nations. Demons are traced to fallen angels (9:11; 12:7-9).<sup>10</sup>

### **A Messiah Figure and a Messianic Age**

In some apocalypses, there is a messiah figure who stands in opposition to an anti-messiah figure, each on the side of God and Satan respectively (9:11; 11:7; 12:4-5; 13:1-2, 6; 19:11-16). An important title in this respect is "Son of Man", a heavenly figure who has been hidden by God since the creation in order to be revealed at the last to judge the world, to put down evil, and to save the righteous people of God (Da. 7:13; Re. 1:13; 14:14).<sup>11</sup> Though the relationship between the titles messiah and Son of Man is not always clear, the messiah figure stands in balance with the anti-messiah figure.<sup>12</sup> The anti-messiah figure, found under a variety of names, sometimes is depicted as a human being and at other times as a mythological monster or the incarnation of a demon (13:1-2).<sup>13</sup> When the anti-messiah and the powers of evil are destroyed at the close of the present age, some apocalypses envision an interim messianic era prior to the new age

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<sup>7</sup> Ladd, 87-93; Morris, 49-52; Rist, 158

<sup>8</sup> Russell, 271-276.

<sup>9</sup> Rist, 160

<sup>10</sup> Russell, 235-262

<sup>11</sup> Russell, 324-331.

<sup>12</sup> Rist, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Russell, 276-280.

(20:1-4)<sup>14</sup>

## **Secondary Characteristics of Apocalyptic not in the Revelation**

A variety of other features emerge in apocalyptic literature which help define the genre, but these are not characteristic of the Revelation.

### **Pseudonymity**

Apocalyptic was often written under the name(s) of a well-known person(s) in the Old or New Testaments. Jewish apocalyptic authors wrote under such names as Enoch, Elijah, Solomon, Moses, Isaiah and Abraham. Christian apocalyptic authors wrote under names such as Paul and Peter. The Revelation is different, for the author gives his own name as simply John (1:1, 4, 9).<sup>15</sup> If he has been someone using a pseudonym, he would hardly have missed the opportunity to add to his name the important title “apostle.”

### **Unmitigated Pessimism**

Apocalyptic literature generally depicts the present age as so overwhelmed with evil that it is beyond remedy. God seems distant, and while he observes evil, he does not restrain it.<sup>16</sup> The Revelation, on the other hand, sees God as active in the present age. To be sure, the present age is the battleground between good and evil, and certainly the age to come is the scene of final triumph, but God already has won a great triumph in the present age through the Lamb who was slain (5:6-14). Furthermore, the Revelation frequently insists on moral considerations for the present age, an emphasis not generally found in apocalyptic (2:1-3:22; 7:13-14; 9:20-21; 14:4-5,6-7, 9-10, 12; 16:11, 15; 18:4-5; 22:11-12, 14-15).<sup>17</sup>

### **Pseudo-Prophecy**

Apocalyptic writers often retrace history and put it in the mouths of their pseudonymous namesakes as prophecies.<sup>18</sup> The Revelation, to the contrary, takes its position in its own time and looks to the future.

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<sup>14</sup> Rist, 159

<sup>15</sup> L. Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ladd, 95-98

<sup>17</sup> Ladd, 99-101

<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 57; Ladd, 85

## Introductory Matters

### Authorship

The Revelation was written by John, a Christian seer who tells us nothing about himself other than his name. From the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century on, he was believed to have been the Apostle John, but there is no way to verify this tradition with certainty, and the jury is still out.<sup>19</sup>

### Date

Two dates have suggested themselves, both are related to periods of intense persecution of Christians. The early date is at the end of Caesar Nero's reign (about AD 68), and the later is at the end of Domitian's reign (about AD 95). The tradition of the post-apostolic church strongly favors the later date.<sup>20</sup>

### Sources

In addition to his knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, John drew heavily on the Old Testament and on the imagery of the apocalyptic literature which preceded him. The references to the Old Testament text are almost too many to count. One scholar calculated that of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 contain references to the Old Testament.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, however, it is difficult to distinguish between a quotation and an allusion, since quotations by New Testament writers were generally quite free. In any case the Revelation is inundated with the Old Testament. Another source, perhaps not so well recognized, is the hymnody of the early church. The hymnbook of the early Christians was the Old Testament Psalter, and John makes use of the Psalter in constructing hymns found in the Revelation.<sup>22</sup> It is quite possible that the hymns of Revelation, which are introduced by phrases such as "singing" and "they never ceased to sing", reflect the hymnody used in the worship services of early Christian congregations.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For an extensive discussion of authorship, see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd. ed. (Downers Grove, L:IVP, 1970) 934-949.

<sup>20</sup> See discussion in W. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 17th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) 466-469.

<sup>21</sup> H. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (1907), cxl as cited in E. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 461.

<sup>22</sup> R. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 42.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, 45

## Form

In the opening verse of the Revelation, John employs three different terms for his composition, one of which we have examined in some depth. They are apocalypse, prophecy and epistle (1:1, 3, 4). The book takes its unique character from the combination of all of these forms. Apocalyptic we have covered. A brief look at the other two are in order.

### As a Letter

New Testament letters were intended to be read during worship services (cf. Col. 4:16) and the Revelation was written for the same purpose. The Greek verb *anaginosko* (= to read) in 1:3 means to read aloud in public as is evident in the phrase “blessed is the one who reads ...and blessed are those who hear it” (cf. 22:18).<sup>24</sup> Revelation was addressed to seven local congregations in Asia Minor (1:11)

### As a Prophecy

John’s adoption of the style of apocalyptic in no way hinders him from thinking as a prophet. He claims that his message is “the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 19:10; 22:16). The designations “testimony” or “testimony of Jesus” or “Word of God and testimony” which occur several times in the book seem to be rough synonyms for the gospel. Prophecy includes both what God himself purposes to do and also what God wills humans to do.<sup>25</sup> As such, the Revelation contains both prediction and ethical admonition.

## Methods of Interpretation

Although the various details of the Revelation bear innumerable potential interpretations, there are five general approaches that usually are employed, and most interpretive schemes fall under them. Of course, if one knew precisely how the original readers interpreted the book, it would make matters much more simple. However, all that is known for certain is that in the post-apostolic church, the early Fathers expected that the Christian community would see the whole complex of events described in Revelation, including the anti-Christ, the tribulation and the return of Jesus to judge the world. They understood the book to predict the end of the world and the suffering of the church at the hands of anti-Christ before that end.<sup>26</sup> In this brief overview, we shall

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<sup>24</sup> BAG, 51.

<sup>25</sup> A Lamorte and G. Hawthorne, “Prophecy, Prophet,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 887.

<sup>26</sup> G. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 19-31.

survey the interpretive approaches that have developed since the post-apostolic period.

## **Idealism**

The idealist leaves the symbolism of Revelation in the most general of terms and largely separates it from any particular historical situation. Idealism sees the book as describing the spiritual conflict between God's people and the powers of evil. The Satanic activities in the book do not refer to any particular outbreak against the church as much as they describe any and every such outbreak in a sort of timeless way. As such, the book is concerned with ideas and principles, not with events and historical figures. It is poetic in the most abstract sense of the word.<sup>27</sup> A form of idealism dominated the medieval period when the allegorical method of interpretation was in vogue.<sup>28</sup> Since that time, the idealist approach has had greater or lesser degrees of popularity, though at present, it is less popular than the others.

The greatest advantage of idealism is at the same time its greatest liability. Though the rejection of any specific historical content saves the interpreter from quibbling over details, it also prevents him/her from treating seriously the apocalyptic character of the book. Apocalyptic is especially concerned with the events which lead to the end of the age in the context of concrete events of contemporary history that threaten to overwhelm God's people.<sup>29</sup>

## **Historicism**

Historicism is the view that the symbols of Revelation refer to major events in the history of Christian Europe. The historicist generally sees the book as addressing the interval between Christ's first coming and his second coming. The beast of chapter 13, for instance, has been identified, according to the interpreter's own time, with Mohammed, the Pope, Martin Luther, Napoleon and Hitler.<sup>30</sup> Particularly in the Protestant Reformation, the historicist view became increasingly concerned with identifying the symbolism of the book with the anti-papal struggles of the Reformers. The beast was the papacy and the false prophet was the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, this view became so widely held by Protestants that for a long time it was simply called "the Protestant view."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the historicists held that the Revelation described

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<sup>27</sup> Two evangelical idealist approaches to Revelation may be found in W. Milligan, *The Book of Revelation [The Expositor's Bible]* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909); M. Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 28-45; J. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966) 16.

<sup>29</sup> G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 622.

<sup>30</sup> A. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament*, 3rd. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 194.

<sup>31</sup> G. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 11.

the struggle between true and false religion in the western world.<sup>32</sup>

Historicism's first weakness is that it ends up being largely irrelevant to its first readers. It is difficult to see why a group of churches in Asia Minor should be informed of events a thousand years away and in another part of the globe. Second, it almost completely ignores the nature of apocalyptic, preferring instead to devise its interpretations without reference to the normative elements of apocalyptic literature. Finally, it suffers from subjectivism and major disagreements between those who propound it. Adam Clarke, a historicist and a colleague of John Wesley, said it well:<sup>33</sup>

*My readers will naturally expect that I should either give a decided preference to some one of the opinions stated above, or produce one of my own; I can do neither, nor can I pretend to understand this book: I do not understand it; and in the things which concern so sublime and awful a subject, I dare not, as my predecessors, indulge in conjectures.*

Of course, Clarke did precisely what he said he would not do—he indulged in conjecture.

## Preterism

Preterism is the prevailing interpretation of modern critical scholars.<sup>34</sup> They see the Revelation as especially addressed to the early churches who were facing overwhelming opposition from imperial Rome. The beast was one of the Roman Emperors, and the false prophet was the cult of emperor-worship.<sup>35</sup> Revelation, like other apocalyptic writings, was a “tract for bad times”. It was written for a concrete historical situation at the end of the first century, not as a prediction of far-flung history. It assured the church that her present tribulation would be short, that God was in control, and that he would soon intervene to vindicate his people.<sup>36</sup> The major weakness of the preterist view is that it does not take seriously that Revelation is *both* apocalyptic and prophetic. While Preterism recognizes the importance of treating the apocalyptic genre as relevant to the present historical situation of its first readers, it ignores the prophetic element or else devalues it as a speculation which failed to materialize.

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<sup>32</sup> Two proponents of the historicist view may be seen in M. Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.) VI.1118ff.; A. Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d.), VI.958ff. Though not a commentary on Revelation, the popular *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W. Forbush (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1926) often becomes a favorite source for historicist interpretation.

<sup>33</sup> Clarke, 965.

<sup>34</sup> A very readable example of preterist interpretation is W. Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976)

<sup>35</sup> Ladd, *Theology*, 621.

<sup>36</sup> R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971) 185-189

## Dispensationalism

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there occurred a revival of futurism or, as it is sometimes called, millenarianism.<sup>37</sup> If allegoricalism dominated the Medieval Period and historicism dominated the Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods, futurism came to dominate conservative Protestantism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, a particular kind of futurism, now called dispensationalism, began to develop in the 1830s within the Plymouth Brethren movement. Especially through the Scofield Reference Bible, this approach gained ascendancy to the point of domination among conservative Protestants.<sup>38</sup> Dispensationalism requires a literal method of interpretation,<sup>39</sup> a radical distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church,<sup>40</sup> and a pretribulation rapture.<sup>41</sup> It sometimes sees the letters to the seven churches as a symbolic representation of the church's future history (chap. 1-3)<sup>42</sup> and the bulk of the book (chap. 4-18) as describing the struggle between the Jews and the anti-Christ after the church has been removed from the world by the rapture.<sup>43</sup>

The major weakness of dispensationalism is that while it takes seriously the prophetic character of the Revelation, it does not do justice to the apocalyptic character. If the Revelation is primarily about the struggle between the Jews and the anti-Christ in a century far removed from the early church, it is hard to see why such a passage would have been written to seven local congregations in Asia Minor. A not uncommon approach among dispensationalists is to interpret passages from the Revelation quite specifically in terms of current political events or trends,<sup>44</sup> and when this is done, it too often results in subjectivism and the manipulation of Scripture to fit a particular theory.

## Historic Premillennialism

For those who wish to retain both the prophetic and apocalyptic character of the

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<sup>37</sup> E. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

<sup>38</sup> A brief survey of the origins of dispensationalism may be found in M. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 111-115. A more thorough examination is to be found in C. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960) and Sandeen, *Roots*.

<sup>39</sup> D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 1-64.

<sup>40</sup> C. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, n.d.) 5-12; C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 132-155.

<sup>41</sup> Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1957).

<sup>42</sup> L. Talbot, *An Exposition on the Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1937) 39-61.

<sup>43</sup> Two representative examples of dispensational treatments of the Revelation are M. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) and L. Strauss, *The Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1964)

<sup>44</sup> Examples are in the identifying of Re. 16:12 as referring to Red China, cf. H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 81-87, in identifying the beast with the European Economic Common Market, and in identifying the harlot with the ecumenical movement, cf. L. Strauss, *God's Plan for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965) 27-33.



Revelation, thus making it relevant to the first congregations who read it as well as to the church at large which awaits Christ's return, there remains a middle ground between preterism and dispensationalism. This position seeks to return to the general position of the post-apostolic church (hence, "historic"),<sup>45</sup> that is premillennial and post-tribulational. It sees the Revelation to be a double entendre, that is, as describing the struggle between the church and the powers of Rome in the early church and also the struggle between the church and the powers of evil at the end of the age. It agrees with the futuristic position that the Revelation primarily describes the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the end of the age.

It is to be conceded that there is probably some truth in all these systems, and it is increasingly the practice to draw from each of them. This study shall do the same, though the greatest affinity will be with the historic premillennial position.

## **The Basic Theology of the Revelation**

The theology of the Revelation has been succinctly summarized by the armchair theologian as simply, "God's people win!" While this is surely an oversimplification, the statement is nevertheless the essence of what the book is about. One may describe the fundamental thrust of the book in three parts:<sup>46</sup>

### **The Problem of Evil**

The Revelation, like the predictions of Jesus and Paul (Mt. 24:15-31; II Th. 2:3-12), anticipates a brief period of terrible evil at the end of the age. Society will be overwhelmed by satanically inspired agents who will openly defy God and seek to divert all worship to Satan, themselves and the state (Re. 13). Terrible martyrdom will result for any who do not conform (Re. 6:9-11; 13:15; 20:4). With unrelenting enmity, the powers of evil will be unleashed upon the people of God (Re. 12:12-17; 13:7).

### **Divine Wrath**

Not only will the powers of evil in society be unleashed, the cosmos also shall be thrown into violent upheaval (Re. 6, 8, 16). Much, if not all, of this cosmic upheaval will be in the form of God's wrath (8:2; 16:1). There is more than an incidental parallel here with the Old Testament account of the exodus. The redemption of Israel from

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<sup>45</sup>R. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977) 13. It may be noted that modern major evangelicals who currently espouse this position are G. Beasley-Murray, F. Bruce, G. Ladd, L. Morris, and R. Mounce, cf. A. Johnson, "Revelation," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) XII.410, Note 25.

<sup>46</sup>Ladd, *Theology*, 624-632.

Egyptian bondage “with a mighty hand” (Dt. 7:8) parallels the redemption of God’s people from the end time powers of evil (19:lff.). Just as Pharaoh set himself against Yahweh (Ex. 5:1-2, 7:13; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:20, 27; 11:9-10), so the Beast and his kingdom set themselves against God Almighty (Re. 9:20-21; 13:5-6; 16:10, 12-16; 19:19). Just as Yahweh sent plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 3:18-20), so God shall send plagues upon the evil kingdom of the Beast (14:9-13; 16:10). Just as Israel was protected from the plagues upon Egypt (Ex. 8:22; 9:4, 26; 10:23; 12:12-13), so God shall protect his people from the outpourings of his wrath (Re. 3:10; 7:1-3; 12:14-16). Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt by Moses amidst the upheaval of one final effort to destroy them (Ex. 14:5-9), so the people of God will be delivered by the awe-inspiring figure of Jesus Christ in his glory and power (Re. 16:12-16; 17:12-14; 19:11-21). The victors will sing the Song of Moses and of the Lamb (Ex. 15:1; Re. 15:2-3)

## **The Consummate Coming of the Kingdom of God**

The New Testament idea of “kingdom” is primarily that of sovereignty, reign and rule rather than of domain.<sup>47</sup> The Revelation depicts a startling contrast between the temporal rulerships of earthly kings and the eternal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. While there is the grasping after power among earthly kings (Re. 17:2, 9-13, 18; 18:3, 9), ultimate sovereignty belongs to Jesus Christ (Re. 1:5) and his people (Re. 1:6; 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5). Though the kingdom of God may seem to be encroached upon by the kingdom of evil (Re. 1:9), the kingdom of God shall triumph in the end (Re. 11:15, 17; 12:10; 16:10, 14-16; 17:12-14; 19:16-21; 20:4-6; 21:24)

## **The Structure and Content of the Revelation**

As the last stage of introduction to the Apocalypse of John, it will be well to consider at a glance how the book is set up and what events are described.

### **Outline of the Book<sup>48</sup>**

1:1-8	Prologue
1:9-20	The Call of John to Prophecy (the vision of the glorified Christ)
2:1-3:22	The Letters to the Churches of Asia Minor
4:1-5:14	The Vision of Heaven (the throne of God, the Lamb, the heavenly attendants)

<sup>47</sup> D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981) 409.

<sup>48</sup> Adapted from G. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 32.

6:1-8:5	The Judgments of the Seven Seals (chap. 7 interlude: the sealing of 144,000 and the triumph of the countless multitude)
8:6-11:19	The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets (10:1-11:16 interlude: the angel and the little scroll, the two witnesses)
12:1-13:18	The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast, the False Prophet
14:1-20	The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, the Harvest of the Earth
15:1-16:21	The Judgments of the Seven Bowl-Cups
17:1-19:10	The Reign and Ruin of Babylon
19:11-22:5	The Revelation of Jesus Christ and the City of God
22:6-21	Epilogue

## Structure of the Book

One of the most fundamental problems of the Revelation is that the reader seemingly must know everything before he/she can know anything. This is acutely felt as one attempts to analyze the structure of the book. A most crucial issue is whether one is to approach the book chronologically, as though the events occur in succession, or whether there is the visionary recapitulation of events which double back on themselves. Most interpreters see at least some form of recapitulation (much like what happens in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7). Following are two of the major approaches for such:

### Simple Recapitulation<sup>49</sup>

This view sees the three septets of judgments (i.e., seals, trumpets, bowl-cups) as parallel to each other. Each seems to conclude the age (8:1; 11:15; 16:17). Especially in the judgments of the trumpets and bowl-cups, one can see strong parallels in content.

### Intensifying Recapitulation<sup>50</sup>

This view (followed here) sees the three septets of judgment as an intensification of the larger prediction of judgment. As such, the seventh seal becomes the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet becomes the seven bowl-cups.

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<sup>49</sup> Writers supporting this view are Beasley-Murray, 29-31; Morris, 92-93, 119, 187; E. Fiorenza, "Revelation," *Hebrews, James, and Peter, Jude, Revelation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 103

<sup>50</sup> Writers supporting this view are Ladd, *Revelation*, 122-123; Walvoord, 150-151; W. Scroggie, *The Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: The Book Stall, 1920) 167.

## Commentary on The Apocalypse

### The Prologue: Re. 1:1-8

The prologue to the Revelation is brief but thorough. It gives the origin and destination of the work. Though short, the opening paragraphs are very significant in that they provide the perspective from which one is to read the book.

### The Source (1:1-3)

The apocalypse (= revelation) is “of” Jesus Christ, and this is probably to be taken as being “by” Jesus Christ rather than “about” Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup> The things which John will be shown are to occur in the near future. In one sense, this points toward the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire, but in a larger sense it points to the end of the age inasmuch as for Christians the end of the age is always impending (cf. Mk. 13: 32-37; Re. 22:7,10,12,20).

John’s word to the church is visionary—something he “saw” -- and it was intended to be read publicly to the congregations.<sup>52</sup>

### The Readers (1:4-8)

The seven churches in the province of Asia were to be the recipients of the document.<sup>53</sup> The number seven has special significance for John and probably indicates fullness in the sense that there is a basic unity in spite of some diversity. Seven is not necessarily a sacred or godly number (the Beast will have seven heads!), but it does seem to indicate completeness. If so, then what is addressed to the seven churches is also to be heard by the church universal.

The phrase “who is<sup>54</sup> and who was and who is to come” refers to God the Father and it speaks of his eternal character.

The seven spirits might refer to the seven archangels of the intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 90:21; Tobit 12:15), but more probably, the reference is a way of speaking about the Holy Spirit in his fullness (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). As such, the better

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<sup>51</sup> The Greek phrase is probably to be taken as a subjective genitive rather than an objective genitive due to the context.

<sup>52</sup> The verb *anaginosko* (= to read aloud) here indicates a public, audible reading of the document, cf. F. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965) 12.

<sup>53</sup> For an extensive description of these cities, see W. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>54</sup> The Greek here is idiomatic and difficult to render in English. It is derived from the LXX translation of the phrase “I AM that I AM” in Ex. 3:14.

translation would be “Sevenfold Spirit,” especially as the reference lies between that of God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, the Son (cf. Zec. 4:10b). Christ is shown to be sovereign over all political powers, a fact that a persecuted church needed to bear in mind!

Jesus’ sacrificial death bought freedom for his people, and he made them to be a kingdom composed of priests. This is the first of several references in the Revelation to the Jewish/Christian question, “Who are the true Israelites?” John has taken a phrase that originally applied to Old Testament Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:6) and has transferred over it to the church. In a similar way, he will take the seven-branched candelabrum, the symbol of the remnant of Israel in the post-exilic period (cf. Zec. 4:2),<sup>55</sup> and he will transfer that symbolism to the representative seven churches of Asia. On the other hand, he will later allude to those who claim to be of Israel but are not truly so (2:9; 3:9). Finally, he shall describe the true Israel in an unusual listing of tribes (7:4-8). All these references may be John’s way of saying that the true Israel is not necessarily to be defined in ordinary Jewish terms (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 4:11; Ga. 3:29; 6:16; Phil. 3:3), and it is probable that he means to say that the true Israel is made up of those who have come to faith in Christ.

### **The Theme (1:7)**

This verse, describing the return of Christ, is a foretaste of the book’s climax.

### **Alphabetic Symbolism**

The prologue concludes with a cryptic description of God’s all-encompassing power over history. The use of “alpha and omega,” the first and final letters of the Greek alphabet, is comparable to saying, “I am the A and the Z.” The use of alphabetic letters to express theoretical concepts was not unknown in the ancient world. One particular example may help to explain what appears here. The mysterious SATOR ROTAS square of Latin words has been found inscribed (presumably by Christians) on walls in places as far apart as England, Pompeii and Mesopotamia and as early as a generation before the Revelation was even written.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> J. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1972) 124.

<sup>56</sup> See discussion in C. Hemer, “Archaeological Light on Earliest Christianity,” *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. T. Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 55; Beasley-Murray, 59-63.

S	A	T	O	R	=	The sower
A	R	E	P	O	=	Arepo
T	E	N	E	T	=	holds
O	P	E	R	A	=	with care
R	O	T	A	S	=	the wheels

The letters of this square, jumbled up, contain the Latin words PATOR NOSTER (= Our Father) together with a double set of letters alpha and omega. Rearranged, the letters form a cross and a cryptic reference to God in the letters alpha and omega.

A  
  
P  
  
A  
  
T  
  
E  
  
R  
  
A P A T E R N O S T E R O  
  
O  
  
S  
  
T  
  
E  
  
R  
  
  
O

## John's Call to Prophecy: Re. 1:9-20

John's prophetic call came while he was on Patmos, a rocky and volcanic island to which he had been exiled because of his Christian faith.<sup>57</sup> His exile made him a fellow-sufferer with the other believers of Asia in the tribulation of the kingdom of God (cf. Jn. 16:33; Mt. 24:13). On the "Lord's Day", an early Christian way of referring to the first day of the week because it was Jesus' resurrection day,<sup>58</sup> John was caught up in

<sup>57</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 111.18.1; 111.20.8-9, says that John was banished by Domitian in AD 95 and released under Nerva 18 months later.

<sup>58</sup> Though some interpreters have thought this to refer to the Old Testament Day of Yahweh, the use of the phrase in the

an ecstatic trance. He was duly commissioned to prophesy.

### **The Seven Churches<sup>59</sup>**

The order of the naming of the seven churches probably reflects the route which the courier would take to make his delivery. He would land at Ephesus, follow the road north through Smyrna to Pergamum, then take the imperial post road to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodocia, thus returning to Ephesus. Since there was no state postal service for private individuals or groups, early Christians were obliged to provide their own letter-carriers.

The seven churches were by no means the only ones in Asia, so they must have been selected as representatives of the larger Christian community. They were probably postal districts from which Christian communications could be disseminated throughout the other various churches of the area. Their representative status, however, seems to extend beyond merely Roman Asia, as indicated by the symbolism of the seven stars and the seven-branched candelabrum, a symbolism transferred from Israel to the churches. The significance of the number seven would seem to indicate that these churches represent the church universal. Each local congregation has an angel which represents it in heaven.<sup>60</sup>

### **One Like the Son of Man**

When John turned to see his commissioner, he confronted the glorified figure of Jesus Christ. The title “Son of Man,” originating in Da. 7:13, had become a fixed messianic expression among Jewry, and it described a heavenly figure who would establish the kingdom of God.<sup>61</sup> Jesus was “like” a man but infinitely more!

It is more than coincidental that John’s poetic vision of the glorified Jesus is very similar to Daniel’s description of the Ancient of Days (7:9-10). This similarity points toward not only the preexistence of Christ but also to the fact that he shares the attributes of God the Father. The full effect of this stylized vision is one of overwhelming power. This is no longer the gentle, submissive Jesus of Pilate’s judgment hall. It is the living, sovereign Lord who was victorious over death and stands as the final judge of all worldly powers.

In Greek thought Hades was the intermediate state of the dead and equivalent to the Old Testament *sheol*. Keys in Jewish thought were symbols of authority (Mt. 16:19;

early Christian writings clearly points toward Sunday, cf. Martin, 78-79.

<sup>59</sup> See extensive discussion in Ramsay, 23-34, 171-198.

<sup>60</sup> If the word *angelos* is taken to be “messenger”, then it might alternately refer to the letter-couriers who would distribute the letters. Others regard them as pastors or bishops of the churches. The precise interpretation of the angels is uncertain.

<sup>61</sup> Guthrie, 270-291.

Re. 3:7). Here the idea is that Christ is sovereign over the realms of death.

## **The Letters to the Seven Churches: 2:1-3:22**

The letters to the seven churches have received an unusual amount of attention among dispensationalists, who frequently see them as a symbolic representation of seven church ages.<sup>62</sup> This is all the more strange inasmuch as dispensationalists usually pride themselves on their literalism. Other interpretive schools bypass the dispensational scheme and treat the churches in their first century historic setting in Asia Minor.

### **Literary Pattern of the Church Letters**

All of the seven letters follow a common literary pattern. They begin with an address to the “angel” of each church followed by a title of the risen Christ taken from the original vision in chapter 1. To each congregation, Christ says, “I know,” and this is followed by a word of praise, except in the case of Laodecia, where no praise is given. Then follows a criticism, except in the cases of Smyrna and Philadelphia. Each letter concludes with a warning, an exhortation to hear the message of the Spirit, and a promise of reward to the overcomer.

Of the above elements in the letters, it will be well to briefly address two of them in more detail:

### **The Warnings**

When Christ warns the various churches, “I will remove your lampstand”, “you are about to suffer”, “I will soon come to you and fight”, “I will strike her children dead”, “I will come like a thief”, “I will keep you from the hour of trial”, and “I am about to spit you out of my mouth”, his warnings point toward historical events of judgment. Like the prophets in the Old Testament, the judgment of God on his people

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<sup>62</sup> The dispensational interpretive scheme places great emphasis on the denotative meaning of the various church names. Since this interpretation is popular among some evangelicals, it will be appropriate to list the scheme here:

EPHESUS = “desired” (the apostolic church/Pentecost to about AD 100)

SMYRNA = “myrrh” (the persecuted church/AD 100 to about AD 300)

PERGAMUM = “thoroughly married” (the worldly church/AD 300 to about AD 800)

THYATIRA “continual sacrifice” (the church of the Dark Ages/AD 800 to AD 1517)

SARDIS = “those escaping” (the Reformation church/AD 1517 to the last days)

PHILADELPHIA = “brotherly love” (the true church of the last days/often interpreted in light of the present century)

LAODECIA = “people ruling” (the apostate church of the last days/usually interpreted to refer to modernism)

This scheme is to be found in many of the older dispensational treatments of the Revelation, cf. *New Scofield Reference Bible*, loc. cit.; Pentecost, 150-153; Strauss, 33ff.; Talbot, 39ff.; Walvoord, 52-53. It is less popular with newer dispensationalists



comes in history. In some cases, he promises protection, in others cases he predicts affliction, and in still other cases he vows punishment.

### **The Rewards**

Much speculation has been offered as to the precise meaning of the rewards promised to the overcomers. Some rewards, like the tree of life (2:7), the crown of life (2:10), and the book of life (3:5), simply point toward the believer's eternal union with God. Others, like the authority over the nations (2:26), the right to sit with Christ on his throne (3:21), and the privilege of being spared the second death (2:11), point toward elements explained elsewhere in the book (cf. 20:4).

The rewards of the white stone with a new name and the hidden manna (2:17) as well as the pillar imagery (3:12) are more difficult. Stones had a variety of uses in the ancient world. They were tickets of entry into public festivals and royal assemblies, and they represented acquittal by a jury.<sup>63</sup> Hidden manna may be an allusion to the true bread from heaven, that is, to Jesus Christ in contrast to the manna in the desert (cf. Jn. 6:31ff.). The pillar imagery probably points toward entrance into heaven. Consistently in the Revelation, God is described as dwelling in the heavenly temple (7:15; 11:19; 14:15; 15:5; 16:1). However, in the final picture, there will be no temple (21:22). This probably indicates that when the believers' are finally united with God, they will no longer need a sacred place of mediation, but they themselves, in their eternal union with God, will function as the temple. Such temple imagery is not unlike that of Paul (cf. Ep. 2:20-22).

### **The Situations of the Seven Churches**

It will be helpful to discuss each church, particularly in terms of the spiritual and cultural situations that are described.

#### **Ephesus**

The situation of the Ephesian church was a tension between correct theology and a love for others. The church had been careful to defend the faith against imposters who falsely claimed apostleship. They resolutely opposed the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:15).<sup>64</sup> In the process of their defense of the Christian faith, however, they had ceased to love. A concern for doctrinal purity is important, but it must be balanced with love. Too many modern churches, like Ephesus, have become harsh, suspicious, inflexible and intolerant

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<sup>63</sup> Beasley-Murray, 88; Ladd, *Revelation*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> We do not have any specific information about this group except that the early church fathers identified it as being associated with a Nicolaus of Antioch (cf. Ac. 6:5) and said that its members shared wives among themselves in a communal type of lifestyle, D. Beck, "Nicolaitans," *IDB* (1962) 111.547-548.

in their dogmatic-stances. The true mark of Christianity is love (Jn.-13:34-35)

### **Smyrna**

The believers at Smyrna were facing heavy-attacks from the Jewish community. It is to be remembered that Jesus predicted as much (Mt. 10:17). Besides the persecution mentioned in the New Testament, we know that James was killed in the 60s. In the 70s, the Jewish leaders included within their synagogue liturgy the *birkat ha-minim*, a curse upon Jewish Christians which in effect drove them from the synagogue.<sup>65</sup> When Christians were forced out of the synagogue, they lost their status as a sect of Judaism, which was a *religio licita* (= legal religion) in the Roman Empire. It would be very easy for Jews to expose their Christian neighbors to government authorities. For John, then, the Jewish community was not truly Jewish, that is, though they claimed the true worship of God, they had rejected God's messiah and thus were not the true Israel. Rather, it was the Christian community that was truly Jewish (of. Ro. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:2-3).

It is probably worth pointing out that the Smyrna congregation was just the opposite from the Laodecian congregation. Whereas Laodecia was materially rich and spiritually poor (3:17), Smyrna was materially poor and spiritually rich.

### **Pergamum**

Pergamum was a center for the cult of Asclepius, a mystery religion, and the first city in Asia to have a temple dedicated to Augustus and Rome.<sup>66</sup> John bluntly describes Pergamum as "Satan's throne." One believer, Antipas, already had been martyred for his Christian faith. Apparently in fear of this opposition, some Christians were compromising their Christian stance. They were beginning to eat at pagan feasts in pagan temples, and like Balaam (Nu. 22-25; 31:15-16), they advocated a syncretism of Christianity and pagan religion. This might very well have entailed the acceptance of sacred prostitution, which was well known among the ancient Greco-Roman religions.

Christianity is an exclusive faith, not an eclectic one. Whereas the church at Ephesus had sacrificed love for the sake of doctrinal purity, the church at Pergamum had sacrificed Christian distinctiveness on the altar of tolerance.

### **Thyatira**

Thyatira, like Pergamum, was locked in a struggle with paganism. The imagery

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<sup>65</sup> R. Brown, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 48.

<sup>66</sup> Ramsay, 291-299; Beasley-Murray, 84. The cult of Asclepius claimed to produce physical healings when visionary snakes would lick the wounds of the worshipers while they were sleeping in the shrine, H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982)173-176. Emperor worship, of course, became the fundamental reason behind many of the governmental persecutions of the Christians. Christians refused to claim Caesar as Lord.

that represents pagan syncretism is the figure of Jezebel, who had sought to displace Yahwehism with Baalism in Israel (cf. 1 Ki. 16:29-33; 18:13; 19:1-2; 21:25-26). Like the Old Testament prophets, John views syncretistic religion as a sort of spiritual harlotry (cf. 17:5)

### **Sardis**

The exact situation in Sardis is perhaps the most difficult to discover of all the seven churches. Apparently, the Christians there were not facing stiff opposition from the Jews or from the government, and they were not forced to defend themselves against any encroaching heresy. Instead, they were being lulled into a spiritual lethargy by an apathetic attitude. They were nominally Christian, but not much more. The character of their Christianity smacked of mediocrity instead of vitality.

### **Philadelphia**

Evidently the congregation at Philadelphia had experienced problems with their Jewish opponents as had Smyrna. The reference to Jesus Christ holding the “key of David,” especially since it does not appear in the original christological description of chapter 1, probably indicates that the true entrance into the kingdom of God was through Jesus rather than through Judaism. Just as Eliakim had replaced the egotistical Shebna (Is. 22:15-24), so Christ had replaced the proud Jewish constituency as the true way to God. The open door into the house of David speaks of the church’s access into the kingdom of God.

The promise of protection from the time of great distress (cf. Da. 12:1; Mk. 13:14-20; II Th. 2:1-12) may be taken either as preservation “through” the distress or prevention “from” facing the distress. The Greek is inconclusive.<sup>67</sup> In light of the rest of the book, however, it is probably better to take it as being kept “through” the time of distress.

### **Laodecia**

Laodecia has the distinction of being the church that received the “lost” letter of Paul (cf. Col. 4:15-16). It was one of the richest commercial centers in the empire with interests in banking and textiles.<sup>68</sup> Laodecia’s material prosperity had diluted her Christian commitment to the point of mediocrity. Her Christian testimony was like tepid water. Christ counseled her to find eye-salve to cure her spiritual blindness, an allusion,

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<sup>67</sup> Dispensationalists, by tying together the church ages scheme with this verse, often assert that the Greek must be taken to mean “out of” in the sense of a rapture before the tribulation. This puts more weight on the preposition *ek* than it can bear. Such is a possible interpretation, but by no means is it a necessary one. Jn. 17:15, for instance, uses the same preposition, and it is abundantly clear that it refers to a being kept “through” rather than an escaping “from” a trial.

<sup>68</sup> M. Mellink, “Laodecia,” *IDB* (1962) 111.70-71.

no doubt, to the “Phrygian powder” used in Laodecia’s medical school to make eye-salve.<sup>69</sup>

## **The Vision of Heaven: 4:1--5:14**

From the seven churches on earth, John switches to the scene in heaven. This vision has a single theme: the God of creation is also the God of redemption, and his redemptive work is accomplished through the death of Jesus who was crucified. The central focus of these chapters is upon the five hymns of praise that build into a crescendo in the following order:

1. Praise to *God* who is eternal (4:8)
2. Praise to *God* who is the Creator (4:11)
3. Praise to *the Lamb* who is the Redeemer (5:9-10)
4. Praise to *the Lamb* who was slain (5:12)
5. Praise to *the Lamb* and to God forever (5:13)

## **The Throne of God (4:1-11)**

There are some similarities in the way John describes the throne of God and the way in which Ezekiel describes it. Both mention the four living creatures (Eze. 1:5-24), and Ezekiel specifically calls them cherubim (10:15). Both refer to the dazzling character of God’s throne and the rainbow-like brilliance surrounding it (Eze. 1:26-28). Such poetic descriptions are in the tradition of Hebrew poetry, even to the concept of God’s throne as being built upon the waters in the heavens, here described as a sea of glass (cf. Ps. 104:1-4)

## **The Elders**

The elders here possibly represent a superior order of angels, much as does the similar reference in Isaiah (24:23). There well may be a deliberate priestly inference drawn here from the memory of the 24 priestly orders organized by David (1 Chr. 24:4; 25:9-31). An alternative interpretation is that they symbolically represent the elders of the people of God in terms of the twelve apostles of the Lamb and the twelve children of Jacob, both brought together later in the book (21:12-14). However they are to be conceived, they perform the priestly function of offering as incense the prayers of God’s people (5:8). Also, it is to be noted that if they are to be identified as symbols of God’s people, they should not be equated with any particular persons, since they clearly

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<sup>69</sup> Ladd, 66.

separate themselves from those who are redeemed.<sup>70</sup> As such, they might indeed be representative angels who stand for the tribes of Israel and the church's apostles.

### **The Worshiping Community in Heaven**

It is worth pointing out that John's vision of a continually worshiping community in heaven accords not only with Ezekiel's vision, mentioned earlier, but also Isaiah's vision (6:1-7). It is from here that John has drawn his triple "Holy, holy, holy," a doxology that is traditionally associated with praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though such an interpretation is not explicit. Also, the redemptive motif in Isaiah's vision (6:6-7) is carried over into John's vision (5:9)

### **The Seven Sealed Scroll (5:1-14)**

In the hand of God John saw a seven-sealed scroll. The fact that it was a scroll and not a "book" is important inasmuch as unlike a book, a scroll could not be opened until the last seal was broken.<sup>71</sup> The scroll was an opisthograph, that is, a scroll written on both sides. Such a document goes back to the Mesopotamian practice of inscribing a sealed contract-deed in which the deed itself was written on the inside while a brief description of the contents was written on the outside.<sup>72</sup> John's description recalls a similar scroll which contained words of lament, mourning and woe (Eze. 2:9-10). It also recalls the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase which Jeremiah deposited in a clay jar after buying property from his nephew (Je. 32:6-14). It would seem, then, that the seven-sealed scroll represents the title deed of the world. God intends to reclaim the world as the final act of his redemptive plan, and this includes not only the final redemption of his own people but also the judgment and overthrow of evil (cf. 11:15). This is the goal of history as embodied in our Lord's prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

### **The Lamb Prevails to Open the Scroll**

John apparently understood well the significance of the scroll, for he was grieved that no one could open its seals. However, he was informed that the Lion of Judah had triumphed. The redemptive ability of Jesus Christ to open the scroll rested, as in ancient times, on his qualifications. He was both willing and able, and he was a close relative who was descended from Judah and David. Most important, he was the Redeemer of the people of God.

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<sup>70</sup> The KJV rendering of 5:9, "...thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God," is based on a variant Greek text which most scholars consider defective, cf. Johnson, 470. Much to be preferred is the NIV "...you purchased men for God..."

<sup>71</sup> Johnson, 465.

<sup>72</sup> Beasley-Murray, 120-121

## The Lion and the Lamb

The two striking images of the Lion and the Lamb are significant. The Lion imagery comes from Jacob's ancient prophecy of Judah (Ge. 49:9-10), and it points toward kingship. The Root of David allusion points toward Christ as the fulfillment of the restoration of David's fallen dynasty (Is. 11:1; cf. Am. 9:11; Ac. 15:13-18).

The Lamb imagery derives from the Exodus motif mentioned in the introduction, that is, Jesus is the Passover Lamb whose blood protects his people from the judgments about to fall upon the world. The Lamb had already conquered (through the cross and resurrection), and he was ready to consummate his work in reclaiming the world.

## The Character of the Lamb

The description of the Lamb suggests several things. First, it is pictured with its throat cut, an image pointing back to the cross (of. 1 Pe. 1:18-19). Second, it has seven eyes and seven horns. The seven eyes are defined as representing the seven-fold Spirit of God, and as such, there is an identity between the Lamb and the Holy Spirit (Zec. 4:10; cf. 2 Co. 3:17). Furthermore, the Lamb is said to stand "in the center of the throne," and as such there is an identity between the Lamb and God himself. The image of the horn is a frequent Old Testament symbol for strength (Dt. 33:17; Ps. 18:2; 112:9; I Ki. 22:11; Zec. 1:18-21; Lk. 1:69). The fact that the Lamb has seven horns indicates his complete and full strength.

## The Judgments of the Seven Seals: 6:1--8:5

The first series of apocalyptic judgments which John surveys proceed from the sequential opening of the seven seals which seal the scroll of the world's title deed. The judgments are precursors of the world's reclamation for the kingdom of God. This idea that divine judgment must fall on the evil of the world before the consummation of God's kingdom is strongly rooted in Old Testament thought (Am. 5:18-20; Is. 2:12-21; Jl. 1:15; 2:1-11, 30-32; Zep. 1:7-18; Zec. 14:1-5). It was further characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic and is found in the teaching of Jesus as well (Mk. 13; Mt. 24; Lk. 21). In fact, there is to be observed an amazing parallel between Revelation 6 and Mark 13:

	<i>Mark 13</i>	<i>Revelation 6</i>
War	v. 8	v. 2,4,8
Famine	v. 13b	v. 5-6,8
Martyrdom	v. 9-13	v. 9-11
Cataclysms	v. 8, 24-25	v. 12-14

It should not be thought that the disasters pictured in the seven seals begin at some particular point in history. Rather, they are generally characteristic of all history, and in fact, as Mark's Gospel makes clear, they are not so much "signs of the end" as they are "signs of this present age." The parnetic phrases in Mk. 13:5, 7, 8, 9, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35, 37 all aim at preventing the reader from interpreting these intermediate events as though they were final ones. The reader should understand the parallel descriptions of Revelation 6 in a similar way, that is, as being characteristic of this present age, but also, as escalating toward the end of the age as it draws near. The sixth seal, as will be shown, brings the reader to the brink of the end.

### **The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)**

The famous horsemen of the Apocalypse are patterned after the visions in Zechariah. However, there is an irony in this allusion. In Zechariah's first vision, the horses represent a world that is at peace (1:8-11), not because of righteousness, but because of injustice (1:15). In his second vision, the chariots represent God's storm troops which are ready to report on the earth.<sup>73</sup> John's use of the horsemen (this time without chariots) goes beyond merely the function of reporting. Rather, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse go forth to shatter the peace of the earth.

### **The White Horse and Horseman**

There are two interpretations of the first horseman that, although popular, we shall here reject. First, some see the first horseman as representing Christ, or perhaps Christ's kingdom, because of the color of the horse.<sup>74</sup> However, this interpretation seems to fit awkwardly in the context of the other horsemen. Others, particularly dispensationalists, see the first horseman as representing the ultimate Antichrist.<sup>75</sup> This fits better, but it is unnecessary to be so specific.

The famed horsemen of the ancient world were the Parthian bowmen who rode white horses.<sup>76</sup> It seems feasible that the first horse is to be taken in the more general sense of militarism and conquest, something that has certainly characterized the course of the present age.

### **The Red Horse and Horseman**

The second horseman rather obviously represents warfare and bloodshed, again,

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<sup>73</sup> See the discussion in Baldwin, 93-96, 130-132.

<sup>74</sup> Ladd, *Revelation*, 97-100.

<sup>75</sup> Walvoord, 126-127; Johnson, 474; Strauss, 155-157.

<sup>76</sup> Even the modern idiom "Parthian shot" is reminiscent of these warriors whose long-range, deadly accuracy was famous in the ancient world, cf. Barclay, 11.4.

a common characteristic of human history.

### **The Black Horse and Horseman**

The third horseman represents famine or scarcity. A denarius was a normal day's wage for a working man and a quart of grain was his average daily consumption. Barley, generally cheaper than wheat, was the poor man's staple, and yet it would take all he could earn to simply supply a three member family with the cheapest of food. Oil and wine were other staples of the day, and these also would be very precious.

### **The Pale Horse and Horseman**

The fourth horseman, either pale or perhaps yellowish green (such as the pallor of a diseased person),<sup>77</sup> represents the pestilence of war, famine, plague and wild animals (cf. Eze. 14:21). These afflictions will bring death to humans, and death is succeeded by Hades, the resting place of the dead. The idea of the "fourth part of the earth" should not be pressed too literally. The use of such fractional numbers probably means that the pestilence or plague is limited rather than universal (cf. 8:7-12; 9:15, 18; 11:13)

### **The Martyrs (6:9-11)**

The persecution and martyrdom of God's people are central themes of the Revelation. Jesus clearly promised that his disciples would suffer for their faith (Jn. 15:18-22; 16:2-4, 33; 17:14-15; Lk. 21:12-19), and John identified himself with this suffering community (Rev. 1:9). Christians within the seven churches of Asia also had suffered, some to the point of death (2:3, 9-10, 13; 3:10). This theme of martyrdom later resurfaces in the Revelation (12:11, 17; 13:6-7, 15; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4).

The souls of the martyrs were under the altar, an allusion to the Old Testament practice of pouring the ritual blood of sacrificial victims at the base of the altar (Le. 4:7). The idea of martyrdom as a sort of sacrificial offering was not uncommon in the New Testament (2 Ti. 4:6; Phil. 2:17)

It is probably wise not to try to define the time or circumstances of these martyrs too closely. They are clearly martyred for their Christian testimony (cf. 1:2, 9; 12:11; 12:17; 19:10), and all the martyrs of the church may well be pictured here in a collective way.

### **The Cosmic Disasters (6:12-17)**

The kinds of things that John views here are typical of the Old Testament and

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<sup>77</sup> Gingrich, 236.



apocalyptic imagery for the end of the world (cf. Is. 13:9-10; 24:18b-23; 34:1-4; Je. 4:23-29; Eze. 32:7-8; Jl. 2:10-11,30-31; 3:14-16; Hag. 2:6-7). Jesus used this same imagery to describe the close of the age (Mt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24-25; Lk. 21:25-26). Such poetic imagery is reminiscent of Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:16-25), and the primary impression is one of overwhelming power and catastrophe. John has stitched together various phrases from Old Testament books so as to depict the consummation of all the prophecies of cosmic doom. Virtually every phrase in this section has an Old Testament precedent taken from the passages named above.

We might expect John to immediately describe the end, but he does not. Instead, he brings the reader to the very threshold of the end, and then, as it were, steps back to amplify the final events in even greater detail.

## **The Two Great Companies of God's People (7:1-17)**

Between the breaking of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> seal, there is an interlude in which are pictured two great multitudes of God's people. (A similar interlude shall occur between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet.) The "beginning of birth pains" (Mt. 24:8), which characterize the general course of the age, have escalated to the point in time for the breaking of the final seal. This end will be a complex of events which involve the people of God as well as the unleashed powers of evil, and finally, it shall culminate with the salvation of God's people, with the defeat of Satan and his minions, and with the consummation of the kingdom of God—the redemption of the earth. The final verse in chapter 6 heralds the arrival of the great tribulation, the day of God's wrath.

The two multitudes that are to be described in the interlude are pictured in two striking images. The first is a company of 144,000 believers, 12,000 from each tribe of Israel. The second is a vast throng from the nations of the earth. That both represent the people of God in some sense is clear from the context.

### **The 144,000 (7:1-8)**

The commencement of God's wrath on the earth, here pictured as four avenging angels, comes in the metaphor of four mighty winds. The sirocco (the whirlwind) is an Old Testament metaphor for judgment (Ps. 83:13; Is. 66:15; Je. 4:11-17; 23:19; 30:23; 49:36-38; Da. 7:22; Ho. 13:15; Am. 1:14; Na. 1:3), and the four winds are used metaphorically for disaster in apocalyptic literature as well (Apocalypse of Pseudo-John 15). For ancient peoples, winds that blew straight (N S E W) were not harmful, but winds that blew diagonally from the corners of the earth were destructive (1 Enoch 76).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 165-166; Barclay, 19.

The angels controlling the four destructive winds were prohibited from destroying anything until God's slaves (*douloi*) had been marked for preservation.

### *The Sealing*

The metaphor of the seal as a mark of preservation is borrowed from Eze. 9, where a man with a scribal writing kit was to mark a Hebrew *taw* (in oldest script, an "X") in the forehead of those to be saved.<sup>79</sup> In the Revelation, both the people of God and the enemies of God receive identifying marks. God's people are marked by the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father (9:4; 14:1; 22:4). God's enemies are sealed with the mark of the beast (13:16; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). It is unlikely that we are to take these marks literally. Rather, they are metaphors which affirm that God knows those who are his and those who are not (cf. 2 Ti. 2:19).

### *The Identity*

While a simple reading might suggest that the 144,000 are Israelites or Jews, two things give us pause. First, we have already seen that true Jewishness in the Revelation is probably not to be connected with bloodlines but with faith in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:6, 20; 2:9; 3:7, 9). Second, the listing of the twelve tribes is unusual in that it has no parallel in all the Bible (compare it with the lists in Ge. 49 and Eze. 48, for instance). In the Revelation, Dan and Ephraim are missing though the list includes both Joseph and his son Manasseh. This also seems to suggest that we are not to take the twelve tribes as a face-value listing.<sup>80</sup> Thus, if the 144,000 represent something other than Jewish bloodlines, what is it?

The most consistent answer, in view of the fact that the imagery of Israel is transferred over to the Christian congregations elsewhere in the Revelation, is that the picture represents the church. If there is an Israel "according to the flesh" (I Co. 10:18), we have a reasonable basis for assuming an Israel "according to the Spirit", and indeed the New Testament references which tend in this direction are numerous (see comments on 1:6). James, for instance, addresses the dispersed church as "the twelve tribes" (Ja. 1:1).

### *The Number*

The number 144,000, like many numbers in the Revelation, has symbolic significance. As the square of the number twelve times the square of the number ten, it probably denotes the fullness or completeness of God's people. Twelve is the number of both the tribes of Israel and the apostles who stand at the head of the new Israel. Ten

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<sup>79</sup> M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 176.

<sup>80</sup> Dispensationalists (cf. Strauss, 173) sometimes suggest that Dan is eliminated because the Anti-christ will come from his tribe, but Dan is listed in the eschatological picture of Israel in Ezekiel 48, and in any case, the nationality of the Anti-christ is a moot question.

and its multiples occur frequently in the book as a symbol of completeness (2:10; 5:11; 9:16; 13:1; 17:12; 20:2-4).

### **The Vast Throng from Among the Nations (7:9-17)**

If the previous vision describes the church from one perspective, the succeeding vision describes it from another. Together, the two visions define the curious but wonderful paradox of the people of God. In the first sense, they are the true Israel, but in the second sense, they come from all the nations. In the first sense, they are particular in number for God definitely knows his own. In the second sense they are innumerable, just as God's promise to Abraham was that his progeny would be innumerable. The first vision pictures the church on the brink of the great tribulation; the second vision pictures the church as victorious during the great tribulation.

For the church of John's day, which was facing tremendous opposition from the Roman government and which might well have assumed that they were themselves entering the great tribulation, the knowledge that God had sealed them beforehand as well as the promise that he would guarantee their perseverance were two stabilizing forces!

The question may be entertained as to whether the great throng represents martyrs. There is nothing to indicate a clear answer one way or another. The point being made is that they are victorious. Neither the sealing of the 144,000 (the picture of the church entering the great tribulation) nor the victory of the great throng (the picture of the church emerging from the great tribulation) prohibits martyrdom. The people of God are shielded from the wrath of God, but they may very well endure the wrath of God's enemies (cf. Re. 12:11, 17; 13:7; 17:6). On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that all of God's people to the last person will be annihilated by the powers of evil. Jesus seemed to indicate that there would be non-martyred survivors precisely because the time of the tribulation would be short (Mt. 24:21-22).

### **The Seventh Seal (8:1-5)**

With the preparation of God's people for the tribulation and the assurance that they would be preserved by God, the 7<sup>th</sup> seal was opened. The silence in heaven was like the lull before the storm, for out of the 7<sup>th</sup> seal would proceed the second septet of judgments in the imagery of the seven angels with seven trumpets. (The imagery of seven angels comes from Tobit 12:15 and the apocalyptic book of 1 Enoch 20:7).

The vision of the incense being cast into the earth gathers together two pictures previously given. First, the incense consists of the prayers of the people of God which are offered in worship by the twenty-four elders (5:8). Second, the prayers of the saints are specifically said to be prayers for vindication (6:9-11). The call for God to vindicate the righteous and to avenge the wicked is a frequent petition in the Psalms (cf. Ps.

109:6-15; 137:8-9). Jesus himself promised speedy justice for his praying, oppressed people (Lk. 18:7-8). Thus, when the prayers and incense were collected in the censer and hurled onto the earth, the imagery forcefully indicates that God is now ready to answer the prayers of his people for vindication.

## **The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets: 8:6--11:19**

When the seventh seal had been broken, seven angels with seven trumpets appeared, ready to sound. The symbolism of trumpets was deeply rooted in Israel's history as a call to war (Jg. 3:27; 7:17-22; Ne. 4:18; Eze. 33:1-4; Jl. 2:1; Zep. 1:15-16), as a call for the redemptive gathering of God's people (Zec. 9:14), and as the coronation of God as the King over the earth (Ps. 47:5-9; 98:4-9). With each trumpet, a plague representing divine retribution is poured out in the world. The plagues are not merely retributive but also evangelistic (9:20-21). God's people, though they might suffer at the hands of their enemies, certainly would not suffer from God's wrath (9:14). The trumpets serve both as a sound of judgment for God's enemies and also as a sound of victory for God's people.

### **The First Four Trumpets (8:7-12)**

Like the first four seals, the first four trumpets are closely related in that together they affect the natural elements of *land*, *sea*, *rivers* and *sky*. The exodus motif of the judgments comes through unmistakably.

<u>Exodus Plagues</u>		<u>Trumpet Plagues</u>	
Hail & Lightning	Ex. 9:22-26	Hail & Fire	Re. 8:7
Water into Blood	Ex. 7:19-22	Sea into Blood	Re. 8:8
Darkness	Ex. 10:21-23	Darkness	Re. 8:12

As in Egypt, the saints are under fierce opposition from the anti-Christ, and the wrath of God upon the enemy's land heralds the release of God's elect.

The reader should probably not tax him/herself with the logistics of sorting out how that if a third of the sun and moon are darkened there will be light for only a third of the day or night. The symbolism of thirds primarily suggests that the judgments are preliminary not final. The imagery of wormwood apparently comes from Jeremiah's prediction of doom on the disobedient and the false prophets of Israel (9:15; 23:15).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The NIV rendering "bitter food" is derived from the word for the bitter plant wormwood.

### **The Trumpet Woes (8:13--9:21)**

Whereas the first four trumpet judgments primarily affect the natural elements and only secondarily affect humans, the last three trumpet judgments are directed toward the rebellious human population. They are called “woes” (8:13; 9:12).

### **The Demons of the Abyss (9:1-11)**

The plague of the fifth trumpet (the first woe) is precipitated by a personage symbolized first as a fallen star (9:1) and later described as the Angel of the Abyss or the Destroyer (9:11). While he is not identified further, many interpreters see him as Satan himself, the fallen Lucifer (cf. Is. 14:12-15; Lk. 10:18; Jn. 10:10), and later, the imagery of falling stars is applied to the minions of the Great Dragon (12:4).

However he is to be identified, he unlocks the Abyss in order to unleash demon-hordes upon the earth. The imagery of the demon-hordes is taken from Joel’s locust prophecy (Jl. 1:4; 2:1-11, 25). The cumulative effect of the invasion is one of horror and relentless torment.

### **The Army of Mounted Troops (9:13-19)**

The plague of the sixth trumpet (the second woe) involves the release of four angels from the Euphrates River who were to slay a third of the human race. The significance of the Euphrates River is that it formed the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Though Rome, representing earthly political powers, was persecuting the church, Rome would herself be judged by God. Neither the angels nor the 200,000,000 mounted troops are identified directly. The combination of fire, smoke and sulphur, however, certainly suggest a hellish origin (cf. 9:2; 14:10; 19:20; 20:10; 21:8). If so, then this incredible and grotesque cavalry, like the locusts in the previous trumpet judgment, would be demonic.

A word should here be said about the popular dispensational interpretation that this army is from Communist China.<sup>82</sup> Completely apart from the fact that there is nothing in the imagery in and of itself to suggest China, it should be noted that the Euphrates River is a minimal barrier for modern China—far less a barrier than the mountain ranges which separate China from the Middle East (cf. 16:12). The assumption that anything east of the Euphrates River must automatically mean China is unfounded. Further, the assertion that the phrase “kings from the rising of the sun” (*basileon ton apo anatoles heliou*, 16:12) must be a clear designation for China completely misunderstands the Greek idiom which only means somewhere to the east in a general way (cf. Mt. 2:1; 8:11; 7:2; 21:13). The most questionable aspect regarding this interpretation is the happy confidence with which it is propounded and defended as

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<sup>82</sup> Lindsey, 81-87; Walvoord, 166

though it were a plain statement in the Bible.

### **The Angel and the Little Scroll (10:1-11)**

Just as there was an interlude between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> seals, so now there is an interlude between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet judgments. In the first interlude there were two scenes, the vision of the 144,000 and the vision of the innumerable multitude. Here there are also two scenes, the vision of the angel with the little scroll and the vision regarding the two witnesses. The effect of these interludes is to set off as especially important the final action of God in the series of judgments.

The scene is set with the description of a mighty angel who descends from heaven holding an open scroll. At his loud shout, seven thunders respond, though John was forbidden to record their utterances. The sealing up of the utterances of the seven thunders suggests that the future is still to some degree hidden but that there is a premonition of judgment to come. Thunder is associated in the apocalypse with the coming of judgment, just as in nature it heralds an approaching storm (4:5; 6:1; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; 19:6).

### **The Proclamation of No More Delay**

A solemn announcement is made by the mighty angel with his hand upraised as the visible symbol of oath-taking (cf. Dt. 32:40)<sup>83</sup>. The announcement indicates that the cry of the martyrs is about to be answered with finality. They had called for vengeance and had asked, “How long?” (6:10). At that time, they were told to wait a little longer. Now their waiting is over; there will be no more delay.<sup>84</sup> When the seventh angel shall blow the trumpet, the redemptive plan of God will reach its climax with the salvation of God’s people, the consummation of the kingdom of God and the judgment of his enemies (cf. 11:15-18).

Some have associated the “7<sup>th</sup> trumpet” and the phrase “mystery of God” with Paul’s “last trump” and “mystery” of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52. This association would be attractive were it not for the severe anachronism it produces. Having Paul allude to something in John’s revelation before it was even written could hardly have made sense to the Corinthian readers of the letter. It is probably best to take the phrase “mystery of God” in the sense of God’s secret redemptive purpose which was made known through Christ Jesus (cf. Ro. 16:25-26)

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<sup>83</sup> The Hebrew expression for swearing an oath is *nasa 'ti et-yadi* (=I have lifted my hand), cf. Ex. 6:8; Eze. 20:5.

<sup>84</sup> The KJV translation “there should be time no longer” has given rise to the mistaken interpretation that this verse demarcates time from eternity. The point is not that time ceases, but that the delay in answering the martyrs’ call is over.

## The Prophetic Reconfirmation

The little scroll in the angel's hand becomes food for the prophet. This idea is borrowed from the prophetic call of Ezekiel (3:1-4), but like the prophetic word of Jeremiah, this word would be not only sweet but bitter (Jer. 15:16-18). The sweetness of prophetic revelation often contrasts paradoxically with the bitterness of the content. It is thus reaffirmed that John's prophetic task is not yet complete. Yet there is a difference in that while in his original call he was ordained to deliver a message to the seven churches of Asia Minor (1:4, 11), here John is commissioned with a message that is universal.<sup>85</sup>

One probably should not identify this little scroll with the seven-sealed scroll mentioned earlier (5:1) inasmuch as John uses a different Greek word (*biblion* as opposed to *biblaridion*).

## The Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

This next section of the Apocalypse has yielded about as wide a range of views as any other section of the book. Without pausing to review them, the interpretation adopted here is that the vision picks up in earnest the theme of the reversal of Jewish and Gentile categories. To adequately understand the passage, one must take careful note that there is a geographical motif which underlies the entire symbolic picture, a motif grounded in the Old Testament imagery of Jerusalem and Zion as the center of the earth (cf. Eze. 5:5; 38:12) and of the temple as the residence of God *par excellence* (Ps. 46:1-7; 125:1-2; 133:3; 146:10).<sup>86</sup> In Jewish thought, the inner court of the temple was exclusively for Jewish worshipers, while the court of the Gentiles, which was open for foreigners, was posted with an inscription warning foreigners to go no further at the risk of death. Beyond the temple was the city of Jerusalem itself, the Old Testament city of God, and beyond Jerusalem was the pagan world. In Jewish thought, the temple and the city of Jerusalem were sacrosanct areas that rightly belonged only to themselves as the people of God. Whenever foreigners invaded these precincts, the Gentile presence was regarded as a sacrilege.

In the Apocalypse, however, the temple sanctuary is no longer the exclusive possession of the Jews; rather, the temple sanctuary becomes a symbol representing Christian worship by Gentile believers (3:12; 7:15). The priesthood is now the church made up of believers from among the nations (1:6). The golden candelabra, which once represented the nation Israel, now represents the church. The altar, once reserved for only the Jewish priesthood, is now the resting place of the Christian martyrs (5:9). The

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<sup>85</sup> The dative preposition *epi* may be rendered as "about" or "against."

<sup>86</sup> See the extensive discussion of Zion as the cosmic mountain, J. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (New York: Seabury, 1985) 111-176.

claim that true Jewishness is based on bloodlines is a false claim (2:9; 3:9).

Here, the temple and its worshipers bear much the same meaning. The worshipers in the temple represent the Christian community. As for the outer court of the Gentiles, it is now associated with the city of Jerusalem which is trampled under Gentile power (cf. Lk. 21:20-24).

A complete reversal of Jewish and Gentile categories has occurred. The Jewish community cannot claim an exclusive relationship to God inasmuch as the true Israel is the Israel of faith, regardless of nationality. Instead, the Jewish community which has rejected Christ is represented as a city under judgment, trampled by the pagans (11:2). Instead of being the residence of God, Jerusalem, representing the unbelieving Jewish and pagan community, has become Sodom and Egypt (11:8). The heritage of Moses and Elijah and the promises of the remnant community, which once belonged exclusively to Israel, now belong to the church (11:3-6). It is only as the Jewish community recognizes that their system is under judgment that a remnant will be saved (11:13).

The above interpretation would have had much relevance for the early Christian community which had been expelled from the synagogues (see comment on 2:9).

### **The End of the Jewish System**

The trampling of the holy city alludes to a motif of Gentile domination over Jewry that is first described in the Book of Daniel. The sacrilege of Antiochus Epiphanes (168 BC) was described by Daniel as a “trampling under foot” of the Jews (Dan. 8:12-13). Later, Jesus used the same phraseology, but this time it was applied to the Jewish dispersion after the wars in AD 70 (Lk. 21:20-24). In the Apocalypse, the same language is once more employed, but this time the reference is to the final period of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week. The vision indicates that the desolation of the Jewish system will extend even until the end of the age. The “holy city,” then, refers not merely to Jerusalem, but symbolically to the Jewish system as it adopts the unbelieving stance of the pagan world in its rejection of Jesus Christ.

### **The Closing Period of the Age**

In 11:2-3 the reader encounters a reference to a three and a half year period of time (based on the lunar year). It is alternately described as 42 months, 1260 days and “times, time and half a time (12:6, 14; 13:5). Virtually all interpreters agree that this period is derived from the last half of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> week (Da. 9:25-27), the period of unrestrained evil which Jesus seemed to associate with the end of the age (Mt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14). As such, the two witnesses shall perform their ministries during this lawless era.



## **The Two Witnesses**

There is little question but that the two witnesses are patterned after Moses and Elijah, given the kinds of powers that they are said to possess (11:5-6). They are obviously not to be taken as Moses and Elijah *redivivus*, however, since they are also identified with the two olive trees and the two lampstands, a clear reference to the vision of Zechariah in which the figures represent Zerubbabel and Joshua in the post-exilic community (Zec. 4:2-14). It must be remembered that John has already taken the imagery of the lampstands from Zechariah and transferred it over to the church (1:20). In keeping with his consistent practice of transferring the symbols of the Old Israel over to the New Israel, John is describing the witness of the church in the final period of the great affliction. The imagery of Moses and Elijah as well as that of Zerubbabel and Joshua properly belong to the church, for it is the church that inherits the law and the prophets, and it is the church that exists as the true remnant community. The symbolism of the “two” witnesses indicates that the testimony of the church is valid (Dt. 19:15).

## **The Wrath of the Beast**

Though the reader has not yet been introduced to the beast, he is given a foretaste of what will be described in detail later. The two witnesses, representing the people of God, will be attacked and martyred by the beast from the Abyss (cf. 13:5-7, 15).

## **Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt**

Jerusalem, which once represented Israel as the people of God, now represents the world system. John has created a play on the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel who described Jerusalem and Israel as Sodom, the ancient epitome of pagan culture (Is. 1:10; Eze. 16:44-48). While there is no Old Testament identification of Israel as Egypt, John adds this as the greatest of bitter ironies. The nation which was delivered from Egypt has become Egypt herself!

## **Resurrection and Ascension**

Although the beast shall slay the two witnesses that represent the people of God, and although the powers of evil shall rejoice, their evil satisfaction will be short-lived. The people of God shall be resurrected and caught up to God (cf. 1 Co. 15:51-57; 1 Th. 4:13-18).

## **A City Under Judgment**

Jerusalem, now no longer representing God’s people but the Jewish and worldly system allied in their rejection of Jesus Christ, will suffer under the judgment of God. The effect of this awesome display of justice will cause many to repent and glorify God.

## **The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)**

When John finishes with this, the second of his interludes, he resumes his description of the series of trumpet judgments. Only the seventh, also called the third woe, is left. It is well to remember that the seventh trumpet introduces the period of the end rather than the end itself (10:7).

When the seventh angel sounds, no immediate woe is described. This is not surprising if the seventh trumpet actually consists of the bowl-cups of wrath to be described later. At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, great voices are heard which declare that the period of the end has arrived.

## **The Reign of God**

The kingdom or the reign of God began in the earthly life of Jesus (Mk. 1:14-15; 10:14-15; Mt. 12:28; 13:18-23; Lk. 10:9; 17:20-21), but while it was a present reality inaugurated in the ministry of the Lord, it was only present in a hidden and partial way (Mk. 4:26-29; Mt. 13). A consummation of the kingdom of God was anticipated at the end of the age (Mt. 6:10; 25:1-13, 34; Lk. 13:28-30; 19:11-27; 1 Co. 15:24-26). John announces the time of this consummation at the seventh trumpet. He had himself suffered in behalf of the kingdom of God (1:9), and now the triumph of God's kingdom would be completed.

## **The Judgment of God**

The consummation of the kingdom of God is, by its very nature, associated with the great judgment at the end of the age. The language in 11:15, 18 is drawn from Ps. 2:1-2. There is an important difference between the description of God Almighty in 11:17 than previously. Earlier, God was described as "the one who is, and who was, and who is coming" (1:4), and now he is pictured as only "the one who is and who was." The subtle point, of course, is that he has already come! At his coming, the dead will be resurrected for judgment (Jn. 5:28-29; Ac. 10:42; 2 Ti. 4:1; 1 Pe. 4:5). Reward and punishment will be meted out.

## **The Ark of God<sup>87</sup>**

The scene closes with an announcement that the temple was opened. This passage is probably a deliberate parallel to the rending of the temple veil at the death of

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<sup>87</sup> The history of the original Ark of God presumably came to an end in 586 BC when the Babylonians burned the first temple (2 Ki. 25:9; Je. 3:16) if it had not already been removed earlier to Egypt by Shishak (1 Ki. 14:25-26) or to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 24:13). A Jewish tradition asserts that it was moved and hidden, along with the original Tent of Meeting and the Altar of Incense, in a cave on Mt. Sinai by Jeremiah (2 Mac. 2:4-8), though this account is probably legendary.

Jesus (Mt. 27:51; Mk. 15:38; Lk. 23:45), which symbolized that the way into God's presence was made clear for all (cf. He. 10:19-22). Here, not only spiritual access to God but immediate access to God through resurrection is described. However, it may be noted that the ark of God is not only the symbol of God's presence, it is also an emblem of war (Nu. 10:33-36). As such, the pyrotechnics associated with the ark point toward God's power to destroy his enemies.

## **The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet: 12:1--13:18**

The next four chapters (12-15) form another kind of interlude before John again addresses the judgments of the end in the form of the bowl-cups of wrath. In these four chapters, the focus is upon the opposition of the anti-God forces to the people of God who face them. John already has alluded to the fact that the close of the age will see an intense persecution of the people of God (6:11; 7:13-14; 11:7-10). Now he takes up this theme in detail to describe just how this persecution shall arise.

Chapters 12 and 13 are dominated by four figures, the woman, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Here the Revelation reaches the height of the apocalyptic genre, for the visions describe the deadly struggle between the people of God and the powers of Satan. The early church would have seen in these visions reflections of their own struggle against imperial Rome which for them epitomized the forces of evil. Yet the vision is put forth in the imagery of the end of the age, and this sort of imagery is, as we have noted, quite characteristic of apocalyptic.

### **The Woman (12:1-2)**

Chapter 12 uses an internationally known symbol of the ancient world to depict the struggle between the people of God and the powers of evil. An almost universally known myth in the ancient world was the picture of a dragon prepared to harm the soon-to-be-born son of a pregnant woman. It is to be found in the mythology of Greece, and even further back, in the mythology of Mesopotamia and Egypt.<sup>88</sup> Two things should be noted in this regard.

First, though John's imagery parallels the ancient myths, it would be going too far to say that he approved of the ancient cultures or religions in which these myths arose. Rather, as a creative writer he made use of an international symbol in order to communicate effectively, much like today one might refer to an "Achilles heel" or a "Trojan horse" without necessarily embracing or even approving of the ancient Greek myths.

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<sup>88</sup> Beasley-Murray, 191-197.

Second, John's primary source is doubtless the Old Testament itself which also draws from the common mythological symbolism of the ancient world. It is the Old Testament that pictures the people of God as a pregnant woman struggling to give birth to the messianic people and the messianic age (Is. 26:17-18; 66:7-13; Mic. 5:2-4). For Israel, the exile was like a woman in birthing labor who longed for freedom and release (Mic. 4:10-12). The barrenness of God's people in exile would be reversed when, like a wife returned to her husband, they would give birth to the messianic community (Is. 54). Furthermore, it is the Old Testament which develops the symbolism of the dragon as the arch opponent of God. At the dawn of creation and at the Red Sea, Yahweh subdued the primeval dragon-monster (Ps. 74:12-14; 89:9-10; Is. 51:9-10; Job 9:13; 26:12). It shall be Yahweh who will utterly defeat the dragon in the end of the world (Is. 27:1).

It is against this background that John paints the vision of the woman, the child and the dragon. To make her identity unmistakable, John alludes to the dream of Joseph (Ge. 37:9; cf. Testament of Naphtali 5:1ff.) by describing her as associated with the sun, moon and stars, the imagery of the chosen people of God. The woman is the mother of Messiah, and this being so, some interpreters have thought her to represent either Mary, Israel or the Church. The interpretation that she is Mary fits awkwardly with the remainder of the passage (12:6, 13-16). The interpretations that she is Israel or the Church are plausible so long as one does not use the nomenclature to bifurcate the people of God into two alien groups. If it is Israel, it is the true Israel which includes all the people of faith, not merely the Jews of the Old Testament. If it is the Church, it is to be understood in the broadest sense so that the woman embraces all the people of God, including the Old Testament people of God. There is every reason to see a firm continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament.<sup>89</sup>

### **The Dragon (12:3-4)**

John uses the dragon imagery to represent the powers of evil which sought to devour the Messiah as soon as he was to be born. Such opposition to Christ was clearly known by the early Christians (Mt. 2:16-18; Ac. 4:25-27). Later, John will clarify that the powers of evil represented by the dragon are Satanic(12:9).

The dragon is pictured with seven crowned heads and ten horns, and this description helps to solidify the direct connection between the dragon and the beast to be described later (13:1). If the number seven has its usual symbolic meaning of fullness, then the seven crowned heads represent the fullness of evil political power in the world system. In the ancient Babylonian myth, Leviathan the dragon-monster is

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<sup>89</sup> F. Bruce, *New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 51-67.

described as a “tyrant with seven heads” and as “the slippery serpent.”<sup>90</sup> Psalm 74:14 also represents Leviathan as multi-headed. John shall later address the crowned heads in more detail as they relate specifically to the beast (17:9-11).

Horns represent centers of power, especially political power (Zec. 1:18-21). Sometimes they may refer to nations, sometimes to individual rulers and sometimes to both, moving fluidly from one to the other. This imagery of ten horns draws from the visions of Daniel as he surveyed the future of world history. In Daniel’s vision, the ten horns represented ten kings. John does not here pause to give any additional information about the identity of the ten horns, but later he shall address them further (17:12-14)

The dragon’s tail swept the sky, flinging a third of the stars to the earth. This picture, also, draws from Babylonian mythology in which Tiamat, the seven-headed monster of the sea, threatened the gods and threw down a third of the stars of heaven in a frightful flexing of his muscles.<sup>91</sup> It is from this passage that the notion is derived that a third of the angels joined Satan’s rebellion against God in the beginning and fell with him. However, it is not at all clear that this passage refers to the fall of Satan, and in apocalyptic imagery, the reference to throwing down stars may be nothing more than an addition to the frightening description of the dragon-monster, or if it is drawing from Daniel’s prophecy, it may even refer to the dragon’s attempt to destroy the people of God (Da. 8:10-12).

The stated goal of the dragon-monster is to destroy the Messianic child from birth.

### **The Messianic Child (12:5)**

The woman gave birth to a son who would rule the nations. The description is drawn from Ps. 2:7-9, where the King of Zion is given the nations of the world for an inheritance so that he might rule them with a rod of iron. John has used this imagery previously in asserting that God’s people will share in the ruling privileges of Jesus the Messiah (2:27; cf. 3:21). In his description of the Messianic Son, John only includes the beginning and ending points of Jesus earthly existence, his birth and ascension, but these events effectively include the entirety of Jesus’ life which the early Christians would have known well.

### **The Flight of the Woman (12:6)**

The flight of the woman into the desert after the ascension of Christ describes the period of the tribulation. The whole age of the church is not envisioned, and there is no

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<sup>90</sup> Beasley-Murray, 193.

<sup>91</sup> Beasley-Murray, 192.

reason to believe that John even conceived of it stretching ahead for hundreds of years. Rather, John moves immediately to the next known event in the purpose of God for his people, the period of great tribulation just prior to the end of the age. The time period described here coincides exactly with the prophecy of the two witnesses, who represent the people of God in their final testimony to the world (11:3). The woman, who also represents the people of God, shall be protected during this terrible period (7:3-4; 9:4; 11:5-6), though at the end of it, the powers of evil shall temporarily prevail (6:11; 11:7-10; 13:7-10, 15; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2).

The flight into the desert draws from the memory of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, where she was protected by God until her final entry into the land of promise (Dt. 8:2-5). In 12:13ff. John shall further elaborate on the wilderness experience of the church in the tribulation.

### **The War in Heaven (12:7-12)**

There are several ways in which the heavenly war is interpreted by scholars. Some refer it back to the very beginning of time and regard it as a cosmic battle shortly after the fall of Satan.<sup>92</sup> Others see it as a symbolic battle representing Christ's victory in the cross and the resurrection (cf. Jn. 12:31). Still others see it as a sort of "last ditch effort" on the part of Satan at the end of the world, a conflict of which there is a hint in Daniel 12:1. Finally, there are those who feel that it should be kept free from time considerations altogether and kept within the realm of the symbolic and the mythological (cf. Lk. 10:18). Any of these views are sensible, and the biblical information is scant enough to prohibit a firm opinion. Probably, the fact of the conflict is more important than the time of the conflict. In any case, the point which John derives from the heavenly war is particularly that the devil and his minions will attempt to wreak their vengeance upon the people of God (12:12-13). John is setting the stage for the massive persecution of the church.

Before John describes this terrible persecution, however, he pauses to announce the victory of God's people and the triumph of God's kingdom. This announcement is proleptic and anticipates the impending final consummation. In the announcement, which is poetic and probably hymnic, John again draws from the opening lines of Psalm 2 in referring to "God... and his Christ" (cf. 11:15). His description of the dragon is taken from the Old Testament imagery of the accuser (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5; Zec. 3:1). The salvation of God's people, here meaning their victory, is accomplished through the shed blood of Jesus and their faithfulness to the Christian gospel. The overthrow of Satan, however, is not his final destruction. He still wields great power in the earth. Only those

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<sup>92</sup> Of this view, however, it may be said that those who prefer it seem to derive more from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* than from the Bible.

who are already in heaven are completely safe from his evil intent.

### **The Dragon Pursues the Woman (12:13--13:1a):**

John has now set the stage for his description of the terrible persecution of the church. The dragon shall seek to vent his anger upon God's people, but they shall be protected by God in the desert for three and a half years, as mentioned earlier (12:6). The imagery of the flight into the desert recalls the exodus from Egypt in which God bore Israel through the desert "on eagles' wings" (Ex. 19:4). The desert itself recalls the wilderness experience of Israel. The torrent of water designed to destroy the woman draws upon the memory of the Red Sea and the mythological dragon-monster which God subdued there (Is. 51:9-10).

Due to the kind of imagery employed, it is probably unwise to ask specific questions, such as, "Where is the desert," or "What historical event does the flood represent," and so forth. The apocalyptic imagery is intended to denote God's protection of his people in a symbolic way, not to provide details of places and methods (cf. 11:5-6). Finally, the dragon stood upon the shore of the sea so as to call forth the terrible instrument of his revenge upon the church.

### **The Beast (13:1-10):**

The relationship of the beast to the dragon is immediately apparent in that both have seven heads and ten horns, though in the case of the beast it is the horns that are crowned instead of the heads. This difference is not highly significant, however, since both the heads and the horns represent political powers (17:9, 12). The beast arose from the sea, a figure that later seems to bear the meaning of the nations of the world (17:1, 15; cf. Is. 57:20), though some interpreters point out that in the ancient mythologies, the sea represents the abyss.

### **The Beast As Related to Daniel's Vision**

The description of the beast is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel's vision (Da. 7), and as such, it had characteristics of a lion, a bear, a leopard and a ten-horned monster.<sup>93</sup> The beast displays the concentrated character of the totalitarian world

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<sup>93</sup> A great deal of discussion has accompanied the interpretation of the four beasts in Daniel 7. It would be too much to attempt to solve the enigmas of both Daniel and the Apocalypse here, so let it suffice to merely list the two major sequential interpretations:

LION	Babylon	Babylon
BEAR	Media	Media-Persia
LEOPARD	Persia	Greece
MONSTER	Greece	Rome

empires. The power behind the beast was Satan.

### **The Beast As Anti-Christ**

There seems to be a deliberate parallel drawn by John between the beast and Jesus Christ:

- ... Both have diadems (13:1; 19:12)
- ... Both have representative names (13:1; 19:11, 12, 16)
- ... Both are worshiped (13:4, 14-15; 5:12-13, etc.)
- ... Both are wounded but live (13:3, 12, 14; 1:18; 4:6)
- ... Both have power, a throne and authority (13:2; 5:12-13; 12:5, 10)

The imagery of the beast also contains striking parallelisms with other biblical passages. Paul's description of the coming man of lawlessness who will do the work of Satan and who will exalt himself against God (II Th. 2:3-4, 8-12) as well as Daniel's vision of the little horn (Da. 7:8, 11, 21-22, 24-26) are obvious precedents to John's description of the beast. The actual term anti-Christ is not in the Book of Revelation (it comes from 1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3), but the personified forces of evil which John describes are surely worthy of the name. Unprecedented persecution will be leveled against God's people (cf. Mk. 13:14-23; Mt. 24:15-25). Such persecution calls for tenacious faithfulness by God's saints.

### **The Recurring Pattern of the Beast**

We should pause to note that the imagery of the beast who blasphemes God and who persecutes God's people is a recurring historical phenomenon. From the Book of Daniel, an early instance may be seen in Antiochus Epiphanes, when he defiled the temple (Da. 8); later, Titus' destruction of Jerusalem and the temple evidenced a recurrence (Lk. 21:20-24). Still later, the rise of emperor worship in Rome and the persecution of Christians because of their loyalty to Christ demonstrated yet another striking parallel. Finally, the rise of anti-Christ in the end of the age becomes the consummation of this recurring pattern.

It would have been unmistakable for the first readers of the Apocalypse to see the beast and beast-worship in the emperor cult along with the deadly persecutions issuing

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For the sequence ending with Greece, see L. Hartman and A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 212-214. For the sequence ending with Rome, see J. Baldwin, *Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1978) 161-162.



from a failure to acknowledge Domitian as Lord and God. To recognize this does not exhaust the apocalyptic-prophetic genre, however. Just as Antiochus Epiphanes was in a sense “revived” in Titus, so the imperial Caesars will be “revived” in the Anti-christ. This is the most probable meaning of the beast’s head which had the fatal wound but still lived.<sup>94</sup>

### **The False Prophet (13:11-18)**

The second beast is a counterpart to the first one. This imagery of two monstrous beasts, the one from the sea and the other from the land, draws from other apocalyptic literature which describes Leviathan, the monster from the ocean, and Behemoth, the monster from the land (1 Enoch 60:7ff.; 4 Ezra 6:49ff.; 2 Baruch 29:4).<sup>95</sup>

The second beast is a parody of Christ. He appears like a lamb (i.e., in imitation of Christ), but the content of his words betrays his allegiance to the dragon. His primary task is to direct the worship of the world toward the first beast, much like Christ directs worship toward God, the Father. For this reason he later is called the “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). He performs miracles and wonders, as Jesus and Paul predicted (Mk. 13:22; 2 Th. 2:9). In his efforts to deify the first beast, he creates an idolatrous image of the beast and commands all to worship it.

He causes the image to speak and to breathe (probably an allusion to sorcery such as was common in the ancient religions in which idols were sometimes thought to speak).<sup>96</sup>

The end of chapter 13 describes the second mark in the Apocalypse. The first was the seal upon the 144,000 believers (chap. 7). Now John describes a counter-mark, the mark of the beast. Thus, there are two sorts of people in the earth, those sealed for God and those marked for the beast. Much effort has gone into the attempt at a precise identification of the mark of the beast and the meaning of the number 666.<sup>97</sup> It may be said at the outset that the word *charagma* (= mark) was normally used to refer to engravings such as appear on coinage, stamps such as those used for documents, or

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<sup>94</sup> In the fatally wounded head there is more than likely an allusion to the popular myth of *Nero redivivus*, that is, the widespread notion that Nero, who had committed suicide in AD 68, would return from the dead to lead his armies against Rome. In Christian apocalyptic, a triumphant Nero is pictured as the anti-Christ (Ascension of Isaiah 4:1-14; Sibylline Oracles 4:119; 5:363; 8:70). John’s allusion, however, need not be taken as an approval of this myth so much as a drawing from the mythological imagery of resurrection inherent in the myth. John’s point is that a figure like Nero (and like Antiochus Epiphanes and like Titus and like all the other despots) would arise again in the earth to attempt to crush God’s people

<sup>95</sup> It is possible that the two figures of Leviathan and Behemoth in Job 40:15--41:34 are also mythological monsters of chaos, cf. M. Pope, *Job* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) xxii, 320-346.

<sup>96</sup> Mounce, 261. In the *Recognitions of Clement* III:xlvi, Simon Magus of Ac. 8:9ff. was said to have “made statues to move” and “animated lifeless things.”

<sup>97</sup> Some manuscripts list the number as 616, but the evidence strongly favors the traditional 666, cf. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: UBS, 1971) 749-750.

brands such as the ones used on animals. We also may note that the mark joins together the religious and economic spheres so that the mark would become compulsory for survival.

In attempting to decipher the meaning of the number, scholars have noted that the mark is both a name and a number. This identification is possible in that in both Hebrew and Greek cardinal numbers are written as letters of the alphabet (**א** or  $\alpha = 1$ ; **ב** or  $\beta = 2$ ; **ג** or  $\gamma = 3$ ; etc.).<sup>98</sup> Even in ancient times, this procedure for identification yielded a variety of results. Irenaeus calculated that the number could mean *Euanthus*, but he gives no clue as to whom he thought Euanthus was. He also suggested the name *Titus*, the family name of the emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian and the name *Lateinos* (= Latin or Roman Empire).<sup>99</sup> The word *arnoume* (= I deny), representing the demand to recant, was another early proposal.<sup>100</sup> Since then, depending upon the hermeneutic in vogue at the time, the number has been taken to represent the Pope, John Knox, Martin Luther, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini and even John F. Kennedy. If the *Nero redivivus* legend is at all relevant, the number represents Nero (*Neron* in Latin) in the following way:

<b>N</b>	=	<b>50</b>
<b>E</b>	=	<b>6</b>
<b>R</b>	=	<b>500</b>
<b>O</b>	=	<b>60</b>
<b>N</b>	=	<b>50</b>

If the final “N” is dropped, one has the 616 of the textual variant. If the full name *Neron Kaisar* (Nero Caesar) is put into Hebrew, the equivalent is 666. This latter solution is the generally accepted conclusion of most scholars.

Unfortunately, the abundance of possibilities makes certainty almost impossible. One may assume that the first readers of the book knew precisely what was meant. Today one should avoid dogmatism.

## **The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages and the Harvest of**

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<sup>98</sup> A scribble on a wall in Pompei reads, “I love her whose name is 545.” Other ancient examples of such plays on the numerical meaning of words and names are also known, cf. Beasley-Murray, 219-220. The name “Jesus” is given in the Greek of the *Sibylline Oracles* 1:324ff. as 888.

<sup>99</sup> *Against Heresies*, 30.

<sup>100</sup> Barclay, 101.

## **the Earth (14:1-20)**

Chapter 14 concludes the interlude between the seven trumpets of judgment and the seven bowl-cups of wrath. It has a special continuity with chapters 12 and 13. Whereas chapters 12 and 13 describe the terrible power of evil as it is displayed in antagonism toward the people of God, chapter 14 provides assurance to God's people that the powers of evil will be judged by Almighty God and that God's people will themselves emerge from their crucible in triumphant glory.

### **The Victory of God's People (14:1-5)**

Earlier, there was given a proleptic declaration that God's people would be triumphant through the Lamb's blood and their faithful witness (12:10-11). Here John recalls that promise and returns to his imagery of the Lamb and the 144,000. Several significant points should be made:

#### **The Geography**

The Lamb standing on the mountain creates a sharp contrast to the two beasts which arose from the land and the sea. Symbolically, this imagery shows the superiority of the Lamb and the people of God over the powers of evil and the followers of the unholy trinity.

Mt. Zion carries with it an extensive array of ideas arising from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a shift in emphasis from Sinai to Zion in the history of Israel which is represented by Yahweh's trek from Sinai to Zion (Ps. 68:7-18). Zion, which became the shrine-center of Yahweh's people, was considered to be impregnable (Ps. 46:1-7; 48:8-14; 125:1-2).

However, the loss of Zion in the exile devastated the Israelites (Ps. 74:1-11; 137:1-9). Out of this exile arose the hope for Zion's full restoration (Is. 66:18-21). However, while the first flush of excitement was intense in the return of the remnant (Ps. 126:1-6), the harsh realities of trying to rebuild a culture and a center of worship made it a hope deferred (Ezra 3:10-13; Zec. 6:12-13b, 15; 8:1-3). Within the New Testament, the deferred hope of Zion's restoration was seen by the early Christians to be fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth and the new community of faith (Ro. 9:33; 1 Pe. 2:6-8). The kingdom of God is spiritual Zion (He. 12:18-24, 28-29). The triumph of God's people on Mt. Zion, then, is the spiritual fulfillment of the prophetic promise in the Old Testament (Jl. 2:30-32; Is. 24:18b-23; Mic. 4:6-8).

Once more, the observant reader will pick up the overtones of an exodus motif. Just as Israel made her journey through the wilderness to the land of promise and Mt. Zion where Yahweh dwelt, so the people of God, pictured as a woman in the desert, has made her way to Mt. Zion, the place of final triumph.

## **Marked With the Father's Name**

In the original vision of the 144,000, the reader was informed that God's people were sealed in their foreheads (7:3). Here the seal is defined as the Lamb's name and the Father's name (cf. 3:12; 22:4). As such, the mark of God's people with God's name contrasts the mark of the beast's followers that bear his name (13:16-17).

## **The Song of Redemption**

The harpists who sing the song of redemption are not identified, though they are distinguished from the four living creatures and the 24 elders. It is not unlikely that they represent angelic hosts. In any case, no one could grasp the meaning of the redemption song except those who had been redeemed.

## **The Purity of God's People**

The idea of purity pictured as abstinence from sexual intercourse arises from the Old Testament injunctions for purity in things having to do with religious ritual or holy war (Ex. 19:15; Lv. 15:16-24; Dt. 23:9-11; 1 Sa. 21:5; 2 Sa. 11:11). The point being made is not that celibacy is praiseworthy, but that God's people are pure. The picture is wholly symbolic, and it finds its ultimate meaning in the refusal of God's people to have any relations with the great whore, Babylon (17:1-2, 4-5; 18:3-5). This imagery of purity is reinforced by their abstinence from lying and their devoted following of the Lamb.

## **The Firstfruits**

As the metaphor changes, the people of God are described as a firstfruits offering, that is, a praise offering to God (cf. Ex. 23:16, 19). This may well be in anticipation of the harvest scene to be described in 14:14ff. in which the wicked of the earth are reaped in judgment.

## **The Angel Messages (14:6-13)**

Three angel messages are now described, each consisting of a theme extremely pertinent to the close of the age.

## **A Call to Repentance**

An "eternal gospel" is announced to all the earth. It is a call to repentance and worship. It is probably best not to become overly technical with the term "gospel" in this passage. It is anarthrous in the Greek text (i.e., it has no definite article) and should probably be taken in the general sense of an announcement rather than in the more specific sense of the full Christian message.

## The Fall of Babylon

Just as the reader was casually introduced to the beast before it was described (11:7), so the reader here is introduced to Babylon before it is described. A full extension of the metaphor of Babylon will be given in chapters 17 and 18. Here, however, the angel merely announces the fall of the great city representing blasphemous civilization.

## The Doom of the Beast and His Followers

The entire retinue of the beast will be punished by God. The idea of wine representing God's undiminished fury is graphically described as *kekerasmenou akratou* (= having been mixed undiluted). The notion is that the wine is mixed with spices to make it all the more potent, and unlike normal household beverages, it is not diluted with water.<sup>101</sup> Once more, the patience of the saints is enjoined (cf. 13:10) so that while God's people will be under severe duress, they may rest assured that God will judge evil in the end. The accompanying beatitude, while it bears particular meaning for Christian martyrs, also bears a general meaning for all Christians for whom death holds no terrors.

## The Harvest (14:14-20)

In these final verses of the interlude, John uses two metaphors for harvesting, the first depicting an apparent grain harvest and the second depicting an explicit grape harvest.

### The Grain Harvest

There is a similarity between this harvest scene and that described by Jesus in his parable of the dandelion and wheat (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43). While grain is not specified in John's metaphor, the differentiation from the grape harvest to follow suggests that the reader is to understand the first one to be a grain harvest. Interpreters are divided as to the meaning of this first harvest vision. If the reaper is to be identified as Jesus Christ, as the title "Son of Man", the golden crown and the seat on a white cloud suggest, then the harvest represents the coming of Christ for his people. It is the gathering of God's good grain to himself.<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, if the reaper is not Jesus Christ (based on the fact that he is commanded by an angel to reap, a command that might not seem appropriate in view of the lordship of Christ), then the harvest of grain is to be taken as synonymous

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<sup>101</sup> In the ancient Near East, wine was mixed with spices, which made it particularly intoxicating. Wine as a household beverage was used much more extensively than in modern times due to the scarcity and pollution of water. In this everyday usage, it was often diluted with water, cf. J. Ross, "Wine", *IDB* (1962) IV.849-851.

<sup>102</sup> Ladd, 198-200; Beasley-Murray, 229.

with the harvest of grapes, that is, the gathering of the wicked for judgment.<sup>103</sup>

On the whole, it is difficult to decide between the two, though the title “Son of Man” by this point in Christian history is especially difficult to associate with anyone besides Jesus Christ.

### **The Grape Harvest**

The grape harvest is associated with an angel who had charge of the fire from the altar, and this immediately recalls the martyrs’ cry for vengeance (6:9-11; 8:3-5). The meaning of the grape harvest is easier to interpret than the previous grain harvest inasmuch as its imagery is clearly attested in the Old Testament as a symbol of God’s judgment, particularly his eschatological judgment (cf. Jl. 3:12-13; Is. 63:1-6; La. 1:15). The imagery of heavily flowing blood outside the city has parallels in 1 Enoch 100:3, where it says that in the eschatological battle the blood would flow to the horses’ chests, and in 2 Esdras 15:35f., where the blood would flow to the horses’ chests and the camels’ knees.<sup>104</sup> The extent of the carnage, 1600 stadia (about 180 miles) may be an intended hyperbole, such as one finds in the Jewish Talmud where it describes the Emperor Hadrian’s unrestrained blood-bath as being “till a horse sank to its nostrils in blood”.<sup>105</sup> On the other hand, if it is to be taken literally, the distance is approximately the length of the Holy Land. The name of the city is not mentioned, but the particular names cited elsewhere in the Apocalypse are Jerusalem, Sodom, Egypt, Babylon and by implication Rome, all of which represent the same thing, the unbelieving, blaspheming civilization which rejects God and his Christ (11:8; 14:8; 17:9, 18).

### **The Judgments of the Seven Bowl-Cups (15:1--16:21)**

John now proceeds to describe the third septet of judgments, though this time there is a mark of finality about them in that they are specifically labeled the “seven last plagues.” The interlude which describes the struggle between the people of God and the hordes of the beast has been concluded. As in the earlier plagues, it is to be noted that the wrath of God is poured out only upon those who bear the mark of the beast (16:2), just as the plagues in Egypt were poured out only upon those who were not God’s people. The time for the final great exodus of God’s people is now at hand. Just as of old, God will bring his people out “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders” (Dt. 26:8-9).

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<sup>103</sup> Morris, 183-184.

<sup>104</sup> Beasley-Murray, 230; Mounce, 282.

<sup>105</sup> Beasley-Murray, 230.

## **The Assurance to the Church (15:1-8)**

As is by now familiar to the reader, John takes the time to assure the church that she will be victorious over the forces of evil arrayed against her. The same technique was employed in chapter 5 as a prelude to the seven seal judgments. Again, the technique was used in chapter 7 as a prelude to the seven trumpet judgments. Here John gives a proleptic vision of assurance to God's people that they will indeed be saved in the end.

### **The Final Exodus**

John has mentioned the sea of glass previously in connection with God's throne (4:6). Now he described it further as being mixed with fire, possibly a double-edged symbol representing both the coming wrath of God on the wicked and the traumatic affliction through which the people of God had passed in the great tribulation. The imagery is drawn from the exodus once more, where the Israelites stood on the east bank of the Red Sea and surveyed the scene of their deliverance (Ex. 14:29-31). The connection between the "Song of Moses" and the "Song of the Lamb" is unmistakable. Just as Moses, the servant of Yahweh, led his people from Egypt, the Lamb shall lead his people from Babylon and save them from the clutches, not of Pharaoh, but of the beast and his cohorts. The victory celebration on the east bank of the Red Sea, epitomized in the poetic composition called the "Song of Moses" (Ex. 15:1-18), has its apocalyptic counterpart, though the celebrants in the Apocalypse have harps instead of tambourines (cf. Ex. 15:20-21). The same themes arise in both songs:

- ♦ The mighty acts of God's justice (Ex. 15:2-10; Rev. 15 : 3)
- ♦ The wonder and awe of God's power (Ex. 15:11-12; Rev. 15:4a)
- ♦ The universal effect of God's saving deeds (Ex. 15:13-18; Rev. 15:4b)

### **The Seven Angels (15:5-8)**

Earlier, at the sounding of the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet, John viewed the opening of heaven's temple accompanied by ominous pyrotechnics and a view of the ark, the symbol of holy war. Here John continues that allusion by showing that the seven angels with the last plagues are coming forth from the opened temple. It is to be noted that the descriptive phrase for the temple in heaven is the tent of witness (or, tabernacle of testimony). This description comes from the LXX translation of *skene tou marturiou* (= the tent of meeting, Ex. 40:34). As such, it would seem that John wants the reader to discern an allusion back to the desert sojourn of Israel prior to her entrance into the land of promise.

The angels are given seven bowl-cups full of God's wrath. This imagery is familiar Old Testament fare in which the wrath of God is pictured as a potent wine

made up of calamities, ruin and destruction (Is. 51:17-23; Ps. 75:8; Je. 25:15-29; 49:12-13; Eze. 23:31-34; Hab. 2:16). Inside the temple, the smoke of God's awesome glory was so heavy that, just as in the days of Solomon (I Ki. 8:10-11), no one could enter.

### **The Bowl-Cups of God's Wrath (16:1-21)**

At a celestial command, the seven angels of vengeance began to pour out the cups of wrath. As in the trumpet judgments, there is striking similarity between the bowl-cup plagues and the plagues of the exodus.

<u>Exodus Plagues</u>		<u>Bowl-Cup Plagues</u>	
<b>Boils</b>	<b>Ex. 9:8-11</b>	<b>Sores</b>	<b>Rv. 16:2</b>
<b>Water turned to blood</b>	<b>Ex. 7:19-22</b>	<b>Water turned to blood</b>	<b>Rv. 16:3-4</b>
<b>Darkness</b>	<b>Ex. 10:21-23</b>	<b>Darkness</b>	<b>Rv. 16:10-11</b>
<b>Frogs from the river</b>	<b>Ex. 8:5-6</b>	<b>Frogs from the river</b>	<b>Rv. 16:13</b>
<b>Hail, thunder and lightning</b>	<b>Ex. 9:22-26</b>	<b>Hail, thunder and lightning</b>	<b>Rv. 16:18-21</b>

It is to be observed that the bowl-cup judgments are more extensive than the trumpet judgments. The trumpet judgments were partial (only affecting a third of the earth, cf. 8:7-12), while no such restriction is made upon the bowl-cup judgments. This, also, gives a note of finality to these last plagues. However, the common themes between the trumpet judgments and the bowl-cup judgments should not be missed:

<u>Trumpet Judgments</u>	<u>Bowl-Cup Judgments</u>
<b>Affects the earth (8:7)</b>	<b>Affects the earth (16:2)</b>
<b>Affects the sea (8:8-9)</b>	<b>Affects the sea (16:3)</b>
<b>Affects rivers and springs (8:10-11)</b>	<b>Affects rivers and springs (16:4)</b>
<b>Affects the sun (8:12)</b>	<b>Affects the sun (16:8)</b>
<b>Affects the air with smoky darkness (9:2)</b>	<b>Causes darkness (16:10)</b>
<b>Affects the Euphrates (9:14)</b>	<b>Affects the Euphrates (16:12)</b>
<b>Voices, thunder, earthquake, lightning and hail (11:15,19)</b>	<b>Voices, thunder, earthquake, lightning and hail (16:17-21)</b>

One final word: the plagues, however severe, have an evangelistic motive. Still, they are not successful in turning the followers of the beast toward Christ (16:9, 11, 21).

### **The Hymn of Divine Justice (16:5-7)**

The call for divine justice is raised rather frequently in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 7:6-9; 17:10-13; 35:1-28; 69:19-28). The hymn of divine justice assesses the plagues which God sends as appropriate punishment for the sins of his enemies.



## **Armageddon (16:13-16)**

The demonic spirits which proceed from the unholy trinity go out to gather the kings of the world to the battle of Almighty God, a place called Armageddon. The gathering of the eastern kings (16:12) may be an allusion to the *Nero redivivus* myth in which Nero was expected to rally the eastern kings into an army after his resurrection so as to invade Rome (*Sibylline Oracles* 4:115-139).<sup>106</sup> What was mythological to the Romans would become reality in the end of the age during the time of the beast. The scene of this great battle is called by a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *har-Megiddo* (= mountain of Megiddo). It is doubtful if John intended his readers to take this as some specific geographical location. In Palestine's Valley of Esdraelon, there is a plain called Megiddo, but it is not a mountain. It seems that John has combined two sorts of images to produce a full effect. From the plain of Megiddo in Esdraelon, he recalls the renowned ancient battles between God's Old Testament people and their Canaanite enemies, especially the battle involving Deborah and Sisera (Jg. 5:19). The imagery of the mountain is perhaps drawn from the eschatological references in Ezekiel to the scene of the final conflict upon the mountains of Israel (Eze.38:8, 21; 39:2,4,17).

Associated with the preparation for the great eschatological battle is a warning which echoes the parable of Jesus about his second coming (Mt. 24:42-44), the same metaphor being repeated by other New Testament authors (1 Th. 5:1-2; 2 Pe. 3:10).

## **The Final Plague**

The final plague is accompanied by a voice proclaiming the finish. The earthquake was so severe that the great city (cf. 14:20) was destroyed. The great city goes by various names in the Apocalypse: Jerusalem, Sodom, Egypt, Babylon and Rome by implication. However, the reader is not to understand this designation as exhausted in any particular city. Rather, it is a symbol of the evil system in the world opposing God, and it is in this way that the fall of the city is tied to the fall of the "cities of the nations" (16:19). The great city that falls is the counterpart to the city of God that is eternal. The apocalyptic earthquake which destroys the city is an image drawn from the Old Testament (Is. 13:13; 24:18a-20; Jl. 2:10; 3:16; Hg. 23:6; of. He. 12:26-27).

## **The Reign and Ruin of Babylon (17:1-19:10)**

After describing the seven final plagues, John introduces a new figure with a lengthy description. While the imagery of Babylon has been alluded to previously (14:8, 20; 16:19), John as yet has made no comment upon what the image means except that in each allusion he has made clear that the "city" would be destroyed by God's holy wrath. Here he gives an extended description, not only of the meaning of the city but of its

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<sup>106</sup> Morris, 197-198; Mounce, 298.

destruction by God. Unfortunately for the reader, his description is only partly enlightening, for while it provides more information by which to identify the figure, it still is a good deal less than a simple explanation.

## **Babylon, the Prostitute (17:1-6)**

In order to properly assess the figure of the prostitute, it will be well at this point to call attention to some overriding contrasts which John draws within his book, contrasts that must not be lost in the maze of particular visions and symbols. John has been developing the theme of a great polarization in the world. He begins this polarization in his letters to the seven churches as he sets the true church over against false Jews, synagogues of Satan, the Nicolaitans, Jezebel, Balaam, the throne of Satan, the deep secrets of Satan and the spirit of apathy. As the book progresses, he introduces images which, although similar, depict striking opposites. Major antitheses are:

### **The Two Peoples**

#### *For God*

The people of God, variously represented as the 144,000, the multitude in white robes, the two witnesses, the woman and her offspring, the saints, those who hold to the testimony of Jesus and the souls who had been slain for the Word of God.

#### *Against God*

The people rebelling against God, represented as kings, princes, generals, the rich, the mighty, slaves, free persons, people without the seal of God, mankind, peoples, tribes, languages, nations, inhabitants of the earth and followers of the beast.

### **The Two Seals**

#### *Beast's Mark*

The mark of the Beast (the name and number 666).

#### *God's Seal*

The seal of the living God (God's name).

### **The Two Kinds of Animals**

#### *Evil*

Evil beasts, represented by the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, locusts from the Abyss, frogs from the mouth of the dragon and horses

with heads like lions and tails like snakes.

*Good*

Good creatures, represented by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the four living creatures and the lion of Judah.

**The Two Drinks**

*Grapes of Wrath*

The wine of adultery and the cup of God's wrath.

*River of Life*

The river of the water of life.

**The Two Cities (or countries)**

*City of Evil*

The city (or country) of evil, represented as Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, Jerusalem, Rome, the kingdom of the beast and the kingdom of the world.

*City of God*

The city (or country) of God, represented as the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, Mt. Zion and the New Jerusalem.

**The Two Women**

*Whore*

The great prostitute

*Bride*

The woman, clothed with the sun, and the bride, the Lamb's wife.

This extensive polarization sets before the reader a parting of the ways. He or she must identify with one or the other. The call is made for God's people to "come out" from Babylon (18:4), a clear allusion to the ancient return from exile in the post-exilic period, and the message is equally clear that in the conflict between these two great opposing forces, there will be casualties, even though ultimate victory is assured to the people of God.

**The Metaphor of Whoredom**

In the Old Testament, the metaphor of sexual promiscuity is frequently employed to describe Israel as God's unfaithful wife (cf. Is. 1:21; Je. 2:20; 3:1, 6-10; Eze. 16:15, 32-35; 23:1-21; Ho. 2:5;3:1) and the nations as insolent world powers (Isa. 23:17; Na.

3:1-7). Furthermore, sacred prostitution was rampant in the ancient world of both the Old and New Testaments. Even the Roman empress Messalina, the wife of Claudius, left the imperial palace at night to work incognito in a Roman brothel as a prostitute.<sup>107</sup> John combines these metaphors to depict Babylon as the worldly system arrayed against God.

### **The Prostitute Described**

John employs several images to describe the prostitute. While the images may at times conflict (such as her seat upon many waters and her seat upon the beast), the reader is not expected to press for harmony but for the deeper significance of the images.

As a prostitute, the woman represents the incessant worldly seeking of pleasure and luxury (18:3, 7, 9, 11-15, 19). As one who sits upon many waters, John has taken the Old Testament judgment of the city of Babylon, through which the Euphrates River passed, and reused it to refer to the eschatological Babylon, which sits upon many waters (Is. 51:11-13). The waters of eschatological Babylon represent the nations of the world (17:15)

Changing the metaphor, John views the woman in the desert, sitting upon the back of a scarlet beast. This beast is clearly identified with the red dragon and the beast from the sea by the multiple horns and heads and by the reddish color. The beast is covered with blasphemous names (cf. 13:1b, 5), a description that may allude to the titles of deity conferred upon Roman emperors, such as “divine,” “savior” and “lord,” titles that only properly belong to Jesus Christ. Certainly Paul’s description of the eschatological person of lawlessness is one of blasphemy (2 Th. 2:4). The woman is arrayed in rich and glamorous clothing that glitters with ornamentation, a deliberate contrast with the clothing of God’s people, which is plain white linen. Like Babylon of old, she is associated with a cup that makes the nations drunk with carnal satisfaction (Jer. 51:7-8).

Like the prostitutes in Rome who wore a headband with their names,<sup>108</sup> this prostitute also displays her name, a title of mystery that indicates that what old Babylon was to the ancient world, this woman is to the modern world. She was drunk with martyrs’ blood.

### **The Explanation of the Beast (17:6b-18):**

Following his description of Babylon, John embarks on a rather lengthy

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<sup>107</sup> Juvenal, *Satire 6*: 114-132

<sup>108</sup> Mounce, 310.

explanation, not only of the scarlet gowned prostitute, but also of the beast from the sea. While his explanation was no doubt the key to the riddle for his first readers, in modern times it has become one of the most debated passages in the entire book. John's explanation falls into four parts: an explanation of the demise and reappearance of the beast, an explanation of the seven heads, an explanation of the ten horns, and an explanation of the worldly system turning against itself.

### **The Demise and Reappearance of the Beast**

John describes the beast by the cryptic phrases, "which once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss." In poetic terms, this description is a parody of the Lamb who was slain but who lives forever. In mythological terms, the description recalls the *Nero redivivus* myth (see comments on 13:1-10). The intense persecution against God's people had been seen in Antiochus Epiphanes, in Titus, in the imperial Caesars and would arise again in the eschatological the anti-Christ. Though there was evidently a current respite from persecution, the church should not assume that persecution was over. Once more, the arch-enemy of God's people would arise from the Abyss and make war with the saints, though ultimately he would be destroyed.

It is possible that in the deadly wound of one of the beast's heads and its revival there is an allusion to the victory of Christ over Satan at the cross (Jn. 12:31-33; 14:30; 16:11). Such an allusion might help explain the beast that reappears to confront God's people.<sup>109</sup>

### **The Seven Heads of the Beast:**

In interpreting the seven heads of the beast, John puts forth a double meaning. The seven heads represent seven hills, and they also represent seven kings.

#### *Seven Hills*

Hills in apocalyptic and prophetic literature often are symbols of power and/or rulership (Cf. Da. 2:35; Je. 51:24-26). If this is the sense that John intends, then the meaning of his two interpretations are identical. The seven hills and the seven kings are one and the same. However, the use of a double verb in the Greek text seems to suggest a double interpretation, not necessarily synonymous. A familiar expression in the ancient world in John's time for the city of Rome was "the city of seven hills."<sup>110</sup> Rome thus epitomized all the opposition shown toward God's people. The interpreter should not confine the interpretation to Rome, however, because as John has already pointed

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<sup>109</sup> This interpretation is argued by Johnson, 526.

<sup>110</sup> Mounce notes that this expression is to be found in Virgil (*Aen* vi.782), Martial (iv.64) and Cicero (*Att.* vi.5) as well as others, 314.

out, “the city” is at once Rome, Babylon, Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt, not to mention the nations of the world (11:8, 13; 14:20; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18-19).

### *Seven Kings*

There are at least three primary interpretations possible for the seven kings. If one wishes to relate them specifically to the imperial Caesars, then the following scheme is possible as long as one eliminates the short tenures of the rebel emperors Galba, Otho and Vitellius.

Augustus	(27 BC – AD 14)
Tiberius	(AD 14-37)
Caligula	(AD 37-41)
Claudius	(AD 41-54)
Nero	(AD 54-68)
Vespasian	(AD 69-79)
Titus	(AD 79-81)

Chronology is a serious problem, however, for the evidence is strong that John wrote the Apocalypse in the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96), and under the above scheme, the sixth king, Vespasian, would have been in power at the time of the writing (17:10).

Another possibility is that the term king is fluid enough to refer to a kingdom rather than merely a person (a precedent for such usage seems to be found in Da. 2:36-39; 7:17). If this is so, then the seven heads could represent seven major empires in the world:

*Egypt*

*Assyria*

*Babylon*

*Medo-Persia*

*Greece*

*Rome*

*Final kingdom of anti-Christ*

This schematic has the advantage that it explains the five fallen heads, the one that now is (Rome), and the one that is yet to arise, the final one being the kingdom of anti-Christ.

A third major interpretation takes its cue from the number seven which denotes completeness. As such, John is not pointing out any particular empires or potentates at

all. Rather, he is using the apocalyptic value of the number seven to describe the totality of evil political powers, whenever and however they arise. The difficulty with this interpretation is that it leaves the reader wondering why such specific details are provided (five kings are fallen, one is, the other has not yet come) if they are superfluous.<sup>111</sup>

The second or third interpretations seem to be the most satisfactory and have the fewest drawbacks. The beast himself, though not one of the heads, qualifies as belonging to them by his rebellious and blasphemous nature. It is in this sense that he is the eighth but belongs to the seven.

### **The Ten Horns**

The apocalyptic imagery of ten horns is drawn from Daniel where the prophet viewed the eschatological antagonist against God as a coalition of ten kings (Da. 2:40-44; 7:7, 20-27). If one is to understand this symbolically (where the number ten would denote fullness), then the horns represent the totality of the nations of the world which are allied with the anti-Christ. This is by far the safest interpretation. It should at least be mentioned, however, that an extremely popular dispensational interpretation is that the ten kings refer to the European Union, a view especially popularized by the best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*.<sup>112</sup> The serious interpreter would do well to be reserved about such views given their sketchy exegesis, manipulation of historical data, sensational character and tendentiousness. It is to be remembered that other attempts at specific interpretive schemes (such as the one occurring in the time of Napoleon, for instance) have long since fallen.<sup>113</sup>

The alliance between the rebellious nations of the world and the beast will be destroyed at the second advent of Christ at the end of the age. When Christ returns, he will be accompanied by his retinue of faithful followers (cf. Jude 14-15).

### **The Destruction of the Prostitute**

One might assume that the forces of evil would maintain an inner cohesiveness for the sake of survival (cf. Mk. 3:23-26). John shows that this is not so. Like the mixture of iron and baked clay in Nebuchadnezzar's vision (Da. 2:41-43), the alliance between Babylon and the beast will be shattered. The fall of Babylon, under the sovereign control of God, is accomplished by a rebellious society turning in upon itself. The driving force behind evil is always a selfish consumption, even if it means

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<sup>111</sup> On the basis of similar schemes in 1 Enoch 91:12-17; 93:1-10 and 2 Esdras 14:11, Mounce has provided a rationale for the symbolic interpretation, 315-316.

<sup>112</sup> Lindsey, 88-97. A more sophisticated approach to this same interpretation may be found in J. Walvoord, *Daniel, the Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 72-76, 175; Walvoord, *Revelation*, 254-255; Pentecost, 318-326.

<sup>113</sup> R. Wallace, *The Lord is King* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 130-131.

consuming one's allies, as Screwtape says to Wormwood, "I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why, yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on." And later he signs off with, "Most truly do I sign myself ...Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle, Screwtape."<sup>114</sup>

The final sentence in chapter 17 identifies the woman with Rome, even as the beast himself has been so identified earlier (17:9). While some have attempted to distinguish between the prostitute and the beast as the alliance between false religion and international politics, respectively, the reader probably should not attempt to make such a precise delineation since both figures represent the same thing in different metaphors.

### **The Fall of Babylon (18:1-24)**

Drawing upon his previous references to the fall of Babylon (14:8, 20; 16:19; 17:16), John now addresses the fall of the worldly system in a detailed dirge. The Old Testament inspiration for his dirge comes from passages like Isaiah 13:1-22; 14:3-23; 21:1-10 and Jeremiah 50:1-51:58 in which many of the phrases of Revelation 18 have their counterpart. Those who had profited from the worldly system lament her destruction from a distance, even though they themselves were instrumental in her fall (17:16).

### **The Announcement (18:1-3)**

The announcement of Babylon's fall is taken from Is. 21:9, while the references to Babylon's desolation and haunting by detestable birds and demons is drawn from Is. 13:21-22; 14:23; Je. 50:39; 51:37.

### **The Call to God's People (18:4-8)**

The call to the people of God to exit Babylon is paralleled in the Old Testament call for Israel to return from exile (Je. 51:6, 45). The piling up of Babylon's sins are like a judgment that reaches the skies (Je. 51:9, 53). The vengeful repayment of Babylon is an echo of the Old Testament call for retribution (Je. 50:29; 51:24, 35, 56). The boasting of Babylon recalls the boasting of her ancient counterpart (Is. 57:5-8), and the sudden destruction of eschatological Babylon has an ancient precedent as well (Is. 57:9-11).

### **The Lament of the World (18:9-20)**

The lust for power and wealth that dominates the worldly system will be sorely missed by those for whom it is life's ultimate value. The destruction of Babylon is

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<sup>114</sup> C. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Bantam, 1982) 91, 93.



abrupt and final, poetically epitomized in the repetition of the phrase “one hour” (18:10, 17, 19). Yet while the world mourns the loss of the great whore, the church rejoices, her apostles, prophets and saints joining in the mighty anthem of triumph to be described later (19:1-8). The rejoicing of the church juxtaposed with the mourning of the world is a reversal of the frightened state of the apostles at the death of Jesus (Jn. 16:20).

### **The Final Illustration (18:21-24)**

As an emphatic symbol of Babylon’s fall, a mighty angel threw a boulder into the sea, much as Jeremiah instructed that his oracle against Babylon should be tied to a stone and thrown into the Euphrates River (Je. 51:59-64). As the enemy of God’s people, the whore was drunk with their blood (cf. 17:6).

### **The Triumph of God’s People (19:1-10)**

Following the description of Babylon’s destruction comes the mighty chorus of God’s people shouting “hallelujah” in a united roar of triumph. The word hallelujah, derived from the emphatic Hebrew expression “praise Yah,” was a temple call to worship for the post-exilic community, and it appears at the beginning and/or the end of Psalms 104-106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, 146-150.<sup>115</sup>

The latter part of this triumphant scene introduces the reader to a new figure, the antithesis of the great prostitute. Unlike the detestable whore, the new figure is one of purity, the figure of a bride ready to celebrate her marriage. She had saved herself for her husband, the Lamb. The figure of the bride is especially appropriate to describe the universal people of God who have remained faithful to their Lord (Ep. 5:22-32). In terms reminiscent of the parables of Jesus, the messianic consummation is described as a wedding feast (cf. Mt. 22:1-10; 25:1-13). The imagery of a great eschatological feast has roots in both the Old Testament (Is. 25:6-8) as well as the New Testament (Lk. 14:15-24), and especially in the eucharistic sayings of Jesus, there is the idea of a great final supper (Lk. 22:14-18).

### **The Revelation of Jesus Christ and the City of God (19:11-22:5)**

With the fall of Babylon, John now begins his description of the last great scene, the second advent of Jesus Christ and the glorious union of Christ and his people.

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<sup>115</sup> T. Mitchell, “Hallelujah,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982) 450.

## The Parousia (19:11-16)

There are three primary words used in the Greek New Testament to describe the second advent of Christ. They are:

*Parousia* (= the coming, arrival or presence of Christ)

*Apocalypsis* (= the revelation of Christ)

*Epiphaneia* (= the manifestation of Christ)

These words all have reference to the same event, though they reflect different nuances of its character.<sup>116</sup> While none of them appear in the present passage, probably due to its symbolic genre, the scene before the reader seems clearly to be an expanded description of Christ's return as it was briefly described earlier in the book (1:1, 7-8; 17:14).

The imagery is no longer the Lamb. Rather, John draws his symbolism from the Old Testament ideal of Yahweh as the Man of War riding a war horse (Ex. 15:1-12). John gives sufficient means to identify the figure. His names "Faithful" and "True" and "Word of God" and "King of kings and Lord of lords", even though they transcend human understanding, as well as the imagery of the eyes like blazing fire and the tongue like a sword (cf. 1:14, 16), unmistakably indicate that he is Jesus Christ. His mission is to crush every enemy in rebellion against God (cf. 1 Co. 15:25; Ro. 16:20). His robe is saturated with the blood of his enemies, much as the robe of one who treads grapes in a winepress would be stained with the juice of the pressed fruit (cf. Is. 63:1-4). His armies represent the hosts of heaven (Zec. 14:5; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 9:26; 1 Th. 3:13; 2 Th. 1:7).

## The Great Eschatological Battle (19:17-21)

The conflict between God and Satan, Christ and antichrist, reaches its climax with the last great battle, earlier referred to as Armageddon and the "battle of the great day of God Almighty" (16:14-16). John draws his imagery for the battle primarily from Ezekiel's prophecy of the last great eschatological battle (39:17-20). Once more, John has created a startling contrast, this time macabre in its implications. While the church is called to celebrate her wedding to the Lamb, the scavenger birds are called to feast on the carrion of God's enemies. The beast, the false prophet and all their cohorts are destroyed. The beast and the false prophet, like Pharaoh and his armies in the exodus, are thrown into the waters, this time burning waters of fiery sulfur (cf. Ex. 15:1,4-5,7-10,21).

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<sup>116</sup>A popular interpretation within dispensational teaching is that there will be two comings of Christ at the end of the age, or more precisely, two aspects of the coming of Christ separated by a seven year time span. As such, the dispensationalist attempts to separate the parousia of Christ from the apocalypse and epiphany of Christ. This cannot be done without doing violence to the biblical text. See discussion in G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 49-57.

## **The Thousand Years (20:1-6)**

This short passage, for all its brevity, has become one of the most divisive in modern Christian history. Essentially, there are four major views that evangelicals have held concerning the passage.<sup>117</sup>

They are:

### **Dispensational Premillennialism**

This is the view that the 1000 years are a future span of time in which the promises to Israel in the Abrahamic covenant shall be literally fulfilled for Israel in Palestine. This theology, which has its roots in the teachings of J. N. Darby of the early 1800s, has become the most popular one within American fundamentalism, largely due to the Scofield Reference Bible which champions it. Dispensational premillennialism usually goes hand in hand with a pretribulation rapture position.

### **Historic Premillennialism**

This position also understands the 1000 years to be a future span of time. However, it traces its view of the millennium to the earliest centuries of the Christian church, hence “historic,”<sup>118</sup> and it generally upholds the belief that the promises to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the church which is the new Israel. Historic premillennialists are usually post-tribulational.

### **Amillennialism**

This view does not look for the 1000 years as a future time-span. Rather, it interprets the language of this passage as describing the realities of Satan’s defeat by Christ when Jesus died and rose from the dead. The 1000 years itself is a symbol of the era between the resurrection of Christ and the parousia. Amillennialism has been the dominate view during long periods of Christian history. Augustine can be credited with the systematization of this approach, and most churches from the Reformed tradition, following John Calvin, are amillennial.

### **Postmillennialism:**

Postmillennialism is the view that the millennium refers to the closing era of this present age during which the church will be successful in its evangelization of the world. After the reign of Christ becomes world-wide through the preaching of the

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<sup>117</sup> For a brief but insightful comparison of these four views, each written by an evangelical who espouses it, see: R. Clouse, ed., *The Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

<sup>118</sup> Erickson, *Contemporary*, 94-97.

gospel, there will be a long period of righteousness and peace, after which Christ will return. In its historic appearances in church history, postmillennialism is often difficult to distinguish from amillennialism, since both see the present passage as relating to the church age. Thus, one can find scholars who will say that amillennialism dominated the medieval, reformation and post-reformation periods. Others, using the same evidence, will say that postmillennialism dominated these periods. In any case, we should understand that the prefixes pre-, a- and post- are modern theological jargon and cannot be traced backward very far in church history.

The viewpoint followed in this study is that of historic premillennialism. It anticipates a reign of Christ over the earth *within* history for a thousand years before the age to come has fully arrived. However, a certain reservation should be maintained along with this interpretation in view of the fact that this passage is the only one in the Bible which specifically delineates the 1000 year reign of Christ. There is no capacity for foolproof cross-referencing. The strength of the premillennial position does not come so much from a literalistic hermeneutic versus a figurative one (as sometimes suggested) as it does from the fact that to view the millennium as future avoids the anachronistic character of amillennialism and the overly optimistic tone of postmillennialism. At the same time, historic premillennialism understands the covenant promises of God to Israel to be fulfilled, not to the Jews *per se*, but to the entire body of God's redeemed people in Christ. Thus, there is no distinctive Jewish character to the millennium as is maintained by dispensational premillennialists.

The exegesis of the passage, then, follows along these lines. When Christ comes, the powers of evil will be silenced for 1000 years. This binding of Satan is precautionary rather than punitive, for Satan later will be loosed again for a short period. The righteous dead will be resurrected (cf. 11:15-18), including the martyrs, and together with Christ they will reign over the nations of the earth (cf. 2:26-27; 3:21; 5:10; 1 Co. 6:2). This resurrection of the righteous is called the first resurrection (cf. Jn. 5:29). Due to the frequent symbolism of numbers in the Revelation, the 1000 years depicts a long period of time, though it need not refer to exactly 1000 years, but rather, may represent an ideal period represented by ten to the third power.

### **The Battle of Gog and Magog (20:7-10)**

After the 1000 years of peace, Satan will be released from the Abyss. Apparently this release is necessary to manifest the evil that still resides within the nations of the world. John draws his vocabulary from Ezekiel once more as he borrows the terms Gog and Magog (Eze. 38:1-2; 39:6).<sup>119</sup> In this final battle, God's people are once more

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<sup>119</sup> While Ezekiel refers to Gog and Magog as hostile nations in the north, John uses the same terms to represent the nations of the world who stage the final assault upon God's people.

delivered. This time, the powers of evil are silenced forever. Satan will be banished for eternity.

### **The Last Judgment (20:11-15)**

With Satan banished forever, John takes the reader to the stark scene of the final judgment. Here, the entire company of humans shall appear before Christ, the judge of all (cf. Mt. 13:47-50; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:22; Ro. 2:5-10; 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10). The judgment for each is either acquittal or condemnation (Mt. 12:36-37). The testimony for and against those who stand in judgment will be given out of the books, that is, the record of their lives. A special book, the book of life, is also mentioned. The references to these books comes from the Old Testament concept of heavenly records, books in which the deeds of the living were recorded (Ex. 32:32; Ne. 13:14; Ps. 56:8; 69:28; 109:13; 139:16). In later Jewish literature, the idea is expanded to include a single book that contains the names of the righteous people of God (Da. 12:1; 1 Enoch 47:3; 108:3; Jubilees 30:20, 22; 36:10). Jesus himself made use of this imagery (Lk. 10:20), and John here employs it to describe God's omniscience with regard to human behavior. For those who are believers, the words of Paul are important: "Who shall accuse those whom God has chosen?" (Ro. 8:32-34).

The judgment of believers is not to decide whether they are saved or lost; it is to confirm their salvation based on the acquittal they already have received by faith (cf. Ro. 3:26). Furthermore, it is to determine their rewards in the eternal state (cf. 1 Co. 3:14-15). Those whose names are not in the book of life are consigned to the same future as the beast, the false prophet and the dragon.

### **The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)**

John's visions now reach their climax. He has viewed the messianic woes of the final days, the disintegration of the anti-Christian forces of lawlessness, the banishment of all the spiritual powers of evil, the consummation of the kingdom of God on the earth, and the final judgment of the human race. All that is left is to describe the new order, the final redemption of all things (Ac. 3:21; Ro. 8:19-25).

### **The New Order (21:1-8)**

John once again draws from the Old Testament, this time from Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-24. The old order is to be dissolved, and a new order will be created, this time without any sea.<sup>120</sup> In contrast to Babylon, which had fallen, the New Jerusalem becomes the dwelling place of God and the eternal homeland of his people (Ga. 4:26; Phil. 3:20).

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<sup>120</sup> The sea, for ancient peoples, was mysterious and treacherous. Its dissolution would have been welcomed, see Ladd, *Revelation*, 276.

Sorrow, death and pain will have vanished. The Holy City is dressed as a bride, recalling the previous mention of the marriage festivities of the Lamb and his wife (19:7-8). Recollections of earlier visions are given in the titles Alpha and Omega (1:8), the promise of the water of life (7:17), the hope for the overcomer (given to each of the seven churches of Asia), and the banishment of God's enemies (20:10, 14-15).

### **The Wife of the Lamb (21:9-21)**

The metaphor of God as a husband is familiar to the reader of the Old Testament. Israel was God's wife (Is. 54:5) whom, according to Jeremiah, he divorced (Je. 3:8). Legally, God could not take her back again (Dt. 24:1-4). However, in spite of the juridical prohibition of remarriage, Yahweh determined to call Israel back to her original marriage (Je. 3:11-15), and this remarriage is projected as an eschatological hope (Je. 3:16-18).<sup>121</sup> In the New Testament the same metaphor is picked up repeatedly and applied to the New Israel, the church (Mk. 2:19; 22:1ff.; 25:1ff.; Jn. 3:29; 2 Co. 11:2; Ep. 5:25-32). John draws from the same imagery as he portrays the people of God as the Lamb's wife. There is a fluidity between the Holy City and the people of God so that to see the city was to see the wife herself (cf. 21:2). This may be a clue to interpret the city, not so much as a material structure, as to the eschatological blessedness of God's people, a blessedness that known language and categories are incapable of describing.

John viewed the Holy City as situated on a great mountain, the eschatological Zion (cf. 14:1) just as the old Jerusalem had been situated at the old Zion.<sup>122</sup> In his description, he maintains the unity of the people of God, bringing together the Old Israel under the names of the twelve tribes and the New Israel under the names of the twelve apostles (cf. Ep. 2:20). The city was shaped like a cube, perhaps in likeness to the most holy place.<sup>123</sup> This explains why there is no temple in the city (21:22). The entire city, which exists in the very presence of God, is a temple. The distances, which are given in human measurements (12000 stadia is about 1400 miles), are multiples of the number of God's people (12) and the number of God's kingdom (1000).<sup>124</sup> The city's foundations were made of various precious stones reminiscent of Ezekiel's description

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<sup>121</sup> In a similar metaphor, Isaiah and Hosea show that Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh, her husband, does not end in divorce but only in separation (Is. 50:1; Ho. 2:2-23). In both metaphors, the idea is that Israel is God's wife who, though unfaithful, will be brought back to God in faithfulness.

<sup>122</sup> The Greek text is ambiguous as to whether the city was itself on the mountain or whether John was transported to a mountain vantage point from which he could see the city. In view of the Zion theology of the Old Testament, and particularly in view of Ezekiel's vision of a restored Jerusalem and temple on God's holy mountain (Eze. 40:2; cf. 28:13-14), it seems more likely that the mountain was the site of the Holy City, cf. Beasley-Murray, 319.

<sup>123</sup> The description could conceivably be of a pyramid, but such a shape would destroy the symbolism, cf. Mounce, 380.

<sup>124</sup> Since the cubed city has twelve edges, each 12000 stadia, the sum of them all equals 144,000, the number representing God's elect (7:4; 14:1), cf. Mounce, 380.

of the garden of God (Eze. 28:13).<sup>125</sup> The city's gates were each a single pearl, and its streets were like transparent gold, once more a description that discourages the reader from literalism.

### **The Glory of the Holy City (21:22-22:5)**

The Holy City is blessed with the immediate presence of God, thus eliminating the need for a temple. The city itself is the temple, and since the city symbolizes the people of God, the people of God are the temple (cf. 3:12; 1 Co. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Co. 6:16; Ep. 2:21). God himself is the light of the city, shining through Christ the Lamb (cf. Is. 60:19-20). The nations of the earth, which once gave their honor to Babylon, will now give their honor to the Holy City. Drawing from the pictures of Eden (Ge. 2:9) and the visions of Ezekiel (47:1-12), John describes the quality of eternal life, symbolized by the river and the tree. The regular sequence of fruit-bearing, the leaves for healing, and the trees on each side of the river are drawn from Ezekiel's language.<sup>126</sup> Alluding to Zechariah 14:11, John promises that the curse, the judgment pronounced upon the earth at the disobedience of the first humans (Ge. 3:14-19), will be reversed. Unlike Moses, who was forbidden to see God's face (Ex. 33:18-23), in the new order God's people shall be able to face God directly (1 Co. 13:12). The fact that God's name will be on each forehead (cf. 3:12; 14:1) is a way of representing the familial relationship between God and his people.

### **The Epilogue: 22:6-21**

John's final remarks sum up and emphasize the central message and authority of the book. The themes are:

- 1) The authority of the prophecy
- 2) The nearness of the return of Christ
- 3) The call for decision

However one wishes to understand all the complex symbolisms and allusions throughout the book, here are surely the most important points. The epilogue is characterized by a cacophony of miscellaneous observations concerning the above themes, though they are not given in any certain grouping or order.

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<sup>125</sup> The idea that the twelve precious stones represent those upon the breastplate of Israel's high priest (cf. Ex. 28:15-21), and beyond that, to the signs of the zodiac, is a more daring speculation. See discussion, R. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), loc. cit.

<sup>126</sup> John has apparently assimilated the single tree in Eden with the trees on both sides of the river in Ezekiel in order to connect them theologically.

## **The Authority of the Prophecy (22:6, 8-9, 16, 18-19)**

The authority of the prophecy is based upon its source. It comes from “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets” and from “Jesus”. Furthermore, the author assumes that his name John carries with it the integrity of true reporting. It is apparent that John considers his visions to be predictive, not merely speculative. A curse is pronounced upon anyone who would distort the contents. Such a precaution was certainly not superfluous in the ancient world in which all copies of a document were handwritten and distortions were sometimes intentional for theological and philosophical reasons. John’s words parallel the injunctions issued concerning the law of Moses (Dt. 4:1-2).

It is probably unwise to use 22:18-19 as a foundation for closing the canon of the New Testament, even though this procedure is common among some branches of conservatism. In the first place, the reproduction, collection and preservation of the various documents in the New Testament were gradual, and the evidence is against John being aware that his document was the final one. Indeed, it is openly debated whether or not the Apocalypse was indeed the final document at all. In any case, the closing of the New Testament canon was not unanimously agreed upon this early. Some books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude and the Apocalypse itself) were disputed throughout the second century. Others, which are not now in the canon, were accepted for a time as canonical in some areas of the church (1 Clement, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, Didache).<sup>127</sup> Athanasius was the first to name exactly the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we now know them (AD 367). As such, the closing of the New Testament canon is grounded upon the decision of the early church as to which books had apostolicity rather than upon a particular passage of scripture such as this one.

## **The Nearness of Christ’s Return (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20)**

The threefold repetition of the phrase “I am coming soon” impresses upon the reader the closeness in which he or she stands to this ultimate event. So also do the phrases “which must soon take place” and “the time is near.” The Christian community should always live under the expectancy of the Lord’s second advent. Such is also the force of the parables Jesus gave on the Mount of Olives in his final week in Jerusalem (Mk. 13:32-37).

## **The Call for Decision (22:7, 11-15, 17-19)**

The Apocalypse closes in an evangelistic mood. The one who obeys the warnings

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<sup>127</sup> B. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 274-275.



and maintains faith in Christ will be blessed. The lines are drawn between those who wish to do wrong and those who wish to do right. The call for decision is clear as it comes from the Holy Spirit and the church.<sup>128</sup>

## The Final Problem

There is, of course, a final problem that all students of eschatology must address. It is the tension in the New Testament between the idea, on the one hand, that the Lord's return is to be constantly watched for, and on the other, that there are clear predictions of intermediate events which must occur before the Lord comes. One sees it in the Apocalypse in the continual warnings that the Lord is coming *tachys* (= speedily, without delay, cf. 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20; cf. 3:3), yet at the same time, a variety of closing events precede the actual epiphany of the Lord in 19:11. Similarly, in the teachings of Jesus, the unknown and hence impending nature of the *parousia* is stressed (Mt. 24:36--25:13//Mk. 13:32-37//Lk. 21:29-36). So also in the teachings of Paul, the eager anticipation of the church is for the coming of the Lord (Ro. 13:11; Phil. 3:20; 1 Th. 1:10; 4:15-18; 5:6; 1 Ti. 6:14; Tit. 2:13). Other New Testament writers voice the same urgency (Ja. 5:8-9; 2 Pe. 3:9-12). Yet at the same time, certain events were predicted and expected to occur in the period prior to the return of the Lord, such as, the great famine in the Roman Empire (Ac. 11:28), the martyrdom of Peter in his old age (Jn. 21:18-19; 2 Pe. 1:14), the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem (Ac. 21:11), the world-wide preaching of the gospel (Mt. 24:14//Mk. 13:10; Ac. 1:8), the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk. 21:20-24), and the appearance of a great rebellion and the exposure of the Man of Lawlessness (2 Th. 2:1-3). How is this tension to be resolved?

Dispensationalists resolve it by bifurcating the second coming of the Lord into two phases, only the first of which is truly imminent. As such, while the rapture of the church is always impending, the actual epiphany of the Lord is not imminent but is always at least some seven years into the future. There are at least two serious exegetical problems with this view. In the first place, it simply ignores the fact that some intermediate events, such as the death Peter and the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem, could only have been fulfilled before the catching away of the church. At best they can only say that the rapture of the church is now imminent, although it was not imminent for the first two or three decades of Christianity.<sup>129</sup> Secondly and more importantly, the dividing of the second coming of Christ into two phases separated by a seven-year tribulation period strains the Greek exegesis of the actual use of New Testament terms

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<sup>128</sup> It is conceivable that the imperative "Come" in 22:17a is addressed to Christ in the same way as is the prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus," in 22:20b. However, this would create an awkward shift between the beginning and end of the verse. It seems better to understand the entire verse as an evangelistic appeal.

<sup>129</sup> Even the famous dispensationalist John Walvoord admits as much, cf. *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1957) 150-151.

for Christ's second coming, i.e., *parousia*, *apocalypsis* and *epiphaneia*, terms which are used interchangeably to refer to a single event, not an event in two stages separated by seven years.<sup>130</sup>

As such, many posttribulationists have abandoned the idea that the second coming of Christ could occur at any moment. They read the passages which seem to suggest eminency as only implying the believer's attitude of expectancy, but as not implying imminence. While this may be better than bifurcating the second coming of Christ into what is, in effect, two second comings, it still leaves an unsatisfactory treatment of those New Testament passages which seem to suggest eminency.

The position which this author espouses attempts to maintain eminency without succumbing to a divided second coming of Christ. This is possible, first of all, due to a preference for interpreting the seventy weeks of Daniel in a consecutive sequence and as already fulfilled. As such, the references to the 70<sup>th</sup> week in the Apocalypse of John are allusions more than they are fulfillments. Furthermore, since the beginning of the great tribulation cannot be definitely marked, and since the apocalyptic symbolisms in the Revelation cannot be infallibly tied to any particular historical events, at least until after they occur, then the hope of the church is still the imminent return of the Lord.<sup>131</sup> As a final word, it may be said that rigid dogmatism should be avoided. The truly important thing is that Christ is coming and that his people should be watching and waiting for him!

*Maranatha!*

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<sup>130</sup>Ladd, *Blessed*, 61-70.

<sup>131</sup>This position, while defensible, is still a minority position, the more popular ones being either dispensational premillennialism or a denial of imminency, cf. R. Gundry, "Imminence," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 551.