

Interpreting The Apocalypse of John

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Troy, Michigan
United States of America

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Commentaries on the Book of Revelation are not wanting. From conservatives to liberals, from dispensationalists to amillennialists, from historicists to futurists, theologians and scholars have produced works on this fascinating and perplexing book. Most treatments are exegetical and expositional, but a common failure is to provide a dialogical format for assessing the theological problems and perspectives that arise in the interpretation of the book. This study, then, will not be a traditional commentary. Rather, it will be a theological dialogue about the meaning and interpretation of the book. Of course, each major section of Revelation will be addressed as well as important introductory material. In the end, it is hoped that the reader will have a better grasp of the meaning and potential of the book instead of a confusing mass of exegetical details.¹

Preliminary Issues

Possibly more than any other book in the New Testament, the Revelation of John calls for a discussion of significant interpretive questions.

Is it important to know when was the book written?

The question of dating is more than just an issue of historical fact. The time of writing figures significantly in what one takes the book to mean. For instance, if the book was written in the late 60s A.D. (as some scholars think), then much of the content of the book must be read against the background of Caesar Nero's mad persecution of the Christians in Rome. Furthermore, Jerusalem had not yet fallen at that time. If, on the other hand, the book was written in the late 90s A.D. (as the majority of scholars think), then the book must be read against the background of the imperial cult in which the Caesar was to be worshiped as a god. The first Jewish revolt and the fall of Jerusalem would have been two decades in the past.

These two features, the relationship of the Christians to Rome and the status of the city of Jerusalem bear upon several critical passages in the book. There is little doubt that the "seven hills" refers to Rome, since it was a common designation from antiquity (17:9), but who is the six potentate who "now is" (17:10)? Is it Nero, Domitian, or who? What about references to the "temple of God" (11:1)? Does this refer to a temple in Jerusalem which was still standing in the lifetime of the author? Or, does it refer to something else, either a spiritual metaphor or else yet a third temple to be built sometime in the future? The same kind of questions attend the reference to the "holy city" (11:2). Does this refer to ancient Jerusalem or something else? As one can see, the academic question of dating directly connects with certain

¹If one wishes a more exegetical approach, see D. Lewis, *The Apocalypse of John* (Troy, MI: Diakonos, 1989).

features of interpreting the book. The early church considered the book to have been written in the late 90s A.D.² While this date cannot be accepted with absolute certainty, it has won the majority of scholars, and we shall follow it here.

How important is it to know who the author was?

For interpretative reasons, it matters little whether the John who wrote the book was the Apostle John or some other Christian by that name. Nothing in the content of the book demands that it be written by an apostle, and the writer simply designates himself as "John, your brother and companion in suffering" (1:9). From the mid-2nd century on, it was assumed by many, perhaps most, to have been written by the Apostle John. However, authorship of the book was disputed even in this early period. Apparently its credibility was not endangered by the question of authorship, for it had been widely accepted in Asia, the place of its origin, almost since it had been written.³

The book claims to be a letter, a prophecy and an apocalypse. What is the significance of these three designations?

As a letter, the Revelation was addressed to seven particular congregations in Asia Minor, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicia (1:4). It was intended to be read aloud in public (1:3),⁴ just as were other New Testament letters (cf. Col. 4:6). We should assume, then, that the contents of the Revelation had an historical significance for its first readers. It could hardly be otherwise. Any group of Christians to whom a letter was addressed and which was then read to them publicly could hardly fail to apply the contents of the letter to themselves and in their own times. Other, what would be the point?

As a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19), the book also contains predictions for the future. While as a letter it addresses its first readers and their times, as a prophecy it addresses what still lies ahead. This future is described as "what must soon take place," as "near," and as "soon" (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10, 20). Since it is directly connected with the second coming of Christ (1:7; 2:25; 3:3, 11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20), most interpreters take this future to be imminent. As such, it is "soon" in the sense that it is always impending. Such a sophisticated reading seems necessary in light of the last two millenniums of Christian history, though it is not clear that the first readers

²Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.xxx.3. His works date from the last quarter of the 2nd century.

³For further discussion on the traditions of the early church concerning authorship, see R. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969) 257-260; F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988) 161, 177, 195-196, 199-200.

⁴The verb *anaginosko* (1:3; cf. 22:18) means to read aloud in public, cf. *BAG* (1979), 51. Moffat's translation is entirely appropriate, "Blessed is he who reads aloud..." (cf. RSV).

understood it in this way. It seems more likely that they took the references to refer to the return of Christ in their own lifetimes (cf. Jn. 21:22-23). Thus, to read the book as a letter and to read it as a prophecy produces a tension. How much of it refers to the readers own times, and how much refers to the indeterminate future? It will be the position of this study that the Revelation refers both to the late first century struggle between Christians and imperial Rome and also, by foreshadowing, to the struggle between the people of God and the last great outbreak of evil at the end of the age. The balance between these two eras varies with the interpreter. The dispensationalist sees very little of the book relating to the first century and most of it relating to the end of the age. The preterist sees most of it as relating to the first century and little of it as foreshadowing the end of history.

The book is also an apocalypse (1:1). The apocalyptic style was well-known in the first century, since quite a number of such works had been produced in the intertestamental period and later.⁵ The apocalypse, as a literary genre, aimed at providing answers to the secrets of the hidden world. They were especially intended to offer behind-the-scenes insight into the struggle between God and the powers of evil which raged in human history. One scholar aptly called them "tracts for bad times." They assured the people of God that while evil might seem to prevail in the present, the triumph of God was assured in the end. For the time being, however, the faithful had to contend with cosmic disturbances and the work of demons.

Why are there so many radically different interpretations to this book?

The short answer to this question is that the various interpreters throughout Christian history have tended to view their own era and circumstances as the primary focus of the book. This tendency stemmed from the fact that the book is a prophecy. If the book in some sense describes the future, then readers throughout Christian history have readily seen in John's visions elements that seemed to describe their own times.

Thus, in the early centuries of Christianity, readers saw the book as describing the struggle between Christians and pagan Rome. In later times, it was the struggle between Christians and the Muslims. The Reformers thought that the book described the struggle between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe. Still later readers saw in the book the rise of Napoleon, the German Kaiser, the Bolsheviks, the Third Reich, the Cold War, and the European Economic Community. Each felt that their own era could be the final chapter in human history. If Christ was coming soon, and if current events seemed to parallel the visions of John, then the book could be read directly in the context of their own times.

⁵For actual examples, see J. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985) 2 vols.

In general, there have been some five major interpretive schemes for the book. They are **idealism**, **historicism**, **preterism**, **dispensationalism** and **historic premillennialism**. Idealism, the allegorical approach, takes the book as symbolic but tries to separate it from any particular time period. Historicism, the popular choice in the Reformation and post-Reformation, takes the book as a prophecy of the struggles of Christian Europe, often along the lines of the Protestant-Roman Catholic schism. Preterism, embraced by most critical scholars, reads the book almost entirely against the background of the late 1st century. Dispensationalism, taken up by many American conservatives, takes the book as describing the struggle between the Jews and the Anti-christ after the Christians have been taken to heaven in the rapture. Historic premillennialism, common to both the earliest centuries of Christianity and many conservatives in the present era, opts for a middle ground between the past and the future. In this view, the book refers at once to the first century struggle between Christians and pagan Rome, but it does so in a way that foreshadows the struggle between Christians and the powers of evil at the end of the age. In the opinion of this author, the latter viewpoint seems to be the most balanced.

Is the structure of the book significant?

The general structure of the book is not hard to follow.

In brief, it is:

- * John's commission (1)
- * Divine Assessments of the Seven Churches (2-3)
- * Vision of Heaven's Court (4-5)
- * Judgments of Seven Seals (6-8)
- * Judgments of Seven Trumpets (9-11)
- * The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (12-13)
- * The Lamb, the 144,000, the Angel Messages, and the Harvest (14)
- * Judgments of the Seven Bowls (15-16)
- * Reign and Ruin of Babylon (17-18)
- * The Consummation and the City of God (19-22)

This structure is important. Because there are three series of seven judgments, the question naturally arises as to whether these series should be taken as linear or cyclical. Some interpret them as occurring in sequence. Others see them as symbolic descriptions of the same seven judgments described three different times. Still others see them as an intensifying recapitulation so that the seventh seal becomes the seven trumpets while the seventh trumpet becomes the seven bowls.

How important are the numbers in the book?

It is generally agreed upon by all schools of interpretation that the numbers in the book are highly suggestive. Apocalyptic literature in general demonstrates a fondness for numerical symbolism. The number seven is found throughout the Revelation. There are seven congregations, seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls, as mentioned previously. There are also seven spirits (1:4), seven lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven angels (1:20), seven horns (5:6), seven eyes (5:7), seven trumpeters (8:2, 6), seven thunders (10:3-4), a seven-headed dragon with seven crowns (12:3), a seven-headed sea monster (13:1), seven destroying angels with seven final plagues (15:1), seven hills (17:9), and seven kings (17:9). In addition to these explicitly numbered septets, there are places where the number seven is implicit within the text, such as, the seven words of praise to the Lamb (5:12). Over the span of several chapters, the reader encounters seven symbolic personages, the woman, the manchild, the beast, the dragon, the false prophet, the whore and the horseman (12-19). All these series can hardly be accidental. It is usual for interpreters to see the number seven as symbolizing fullness.

Other important numbers in the book are three, four, ten, twelve, a thousand and their multiples. There are three woes (8:13; 9:12), three plagues (9:18), a division of humankind into three parts (9:18), three evil spirits like frogs (16:13), and the division of Babylon into three parts (16:19). There are four living creatures (4:6), four angels standing on the four corners of the earth controlling the four winds (7:1), four horns of the altar (9:13), four angels bound in the Euphrates River (9:14), the four time designations of an hour, day, month and year (9:15). Twelve counts the number of the tribes of Israel (7:5-8), the number of the apostles (21:14), and the gates of the holy city (21:21). The tree of life will bear twelve crops of fruit during the twelve-month season (22:2). The woman clothed with the sun has a crown of twelve stars (12:1). The number of elders are figured at 12×2 , and the number of God's people at $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ (7:4; 14:1). The dimensions of the holy city are given as multiples of $12 \times 1000 \times 4$ (21:16). The thickness of the walls are given as 12×12 (21:17). The gates of the holy city are reckoned as 3×4 (21:12-13). The reign of peace is 1000 years (20:4).

This repetition of numbers suggests that they all have symbolic significance. It raises the question as to whether they always should be taken literally. For instance, are there only 144,000 people of God, or does this represent the entire body of God's people in a symbolic way? Is the 1000-year reign of Christ and his saints an exact length, or does it refer to a very long period of time?

The Messages to the Seven Churches

At the outset, John addressed his apocalypse to seven congregations in the

Roman province of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodemia (1:4). Then, he described his opening vision of the resurrected and glorified Jesus, who commissioned him to write on a scroll the divine revelation contained in the book (1:10-11).

How important is the opening vision?

The opening vision is doubly important. It not only targets the recipients of the visionary material, but it also initiates the reader to the task of apocalyptic interpretation.

Of the seven churches, two are known from elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul visited Ephesus on his second and third missionary journeys (Ac. 18:19ff; 19:1), and one of his letters became attached to this congregation by name.⁶ Laodemia was a sister-city to Colossae, where another of Paul's letters was addressed (Col. 4:15). The seven cities apparently served as postal centers for the Christian churches in Asia. From Patmos, any correspondence would begin at Ephesus and, by a circular route, would reach them all. From the seven churches, copies of the revelation could then be made for other Christian congregations in neighboring cities or villages.⁷

The opening vision also orients the reader to the genre of the book. Not only does John call it an apocalypse (1:1), he begins almost immediately with a series of symbolisms which call for careful interpretation. The numeric symbolism of "seven spirits before God's throne" (1:4) seem to symbolize the Holy Spirit in his fullness (cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). The alphabetic symbolism of "Alpha and Omega" (1:8), stressing God's eternal being, is yet another apocalyptic characteristic. The "seven golden lampstands" (1:12) are interpreted for the reader as the seven churches, while the "seven stars" (1:16) are interpreted as the messengers to the seven churches (1:20). The priestly yet surrealistic "Son of Man" with blazing eyes, a sword for a tongue and glowing feet recall Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days (1: 13-16; Da. 7:13). He is obviously Jesus Christ, yet strangely unlike the portrait of him in the four gospels. This is the Jesus who was raised on Easter, triumphant over all the powers of death and hell, who ascended up on high and now reigns as Lord of the entire universe (1:17-18). The apocalyptic symbolisms express this transcendent reality far more graphically than a theological statement in standard prose could ever do (1:5)! Furthermore, this awe-inspiring figure is the one who soon will come again in the clouds in full view of the entire world population (1:7).

⁶The Ephesian letter may have been a circular letter intended for a broader audience than merely Ephesus, but this issue cannot be addressed here. See the commentaries.

⁷C. Hemer, *ISBE* (1988) IV.424. This idea is most fully developed in W. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

How should one interpret the seven churches?

There are two issues here. One is the fact that there were, in fact, seven local congregations in Asia where this revelation was sent. This factor ties the revelation firmly to the era of the late first century. The revelation must have had some meaning for them and their times, else it loses all relevance. To say that the revelation was arbitrarily given to seven local congregations, but that it had nothing at all to say to them since it was about events still a couple of millennia into the future, seems to fly in the face of reasonableness.

The other issue is in the symbolic value of the number seven. Already in the "seven spirits," and throughout the book in an endless parade of septets, John seems consistently to use the number seven to symbolize completeness or fullness. If so, then the seven churches should have a significance larger than simply the seven local congregations. The message is to them, to be sure, but it is also to the whole church. If we take seriously the statements to each church, "he who has an ear let him hear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), then we are bound to say that the message has a relevancy for all Christians of all times. In particular, in view of the imminent return of Christ (1:1, 3, 7; 2:25; 3:3, 11; 16:15; 22:6-7, 10, 12, 20), it has a relevance for those Christians who would live at the end of the age.

This sort of double entendre in prophecy is not unusual. It was a marked feature of the Old Testament prophets, who demonstrated a fluidity between the near future (the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and the return from exile) and the far future (the end of the world). Often, the images of the end of the world are superimposed upon predictions that would take place in the historical vicissitudes of the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries before Christ. Predictions of Cyrus the Persian are found intermingled with predictions about the coming Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42-53), and beyond that, to the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 63-66), even though these events are widely separated. Thus, it should come as no surprise to find John using language that addresses circumstances in the late first century while at the same time using symbolism that envisions the very end of the age.

At the same time, however, one should reserve caution about trying to over-interpret the seven churches. The problems addressed in the individual letters were real in the context of the late first century. There seems to be little warrant for trying to see in them seven church ages, nor does John give any hint that the reader should attempt such a construction. On the other hand, there seems to be considerable merit in viewing the local problems in these churches as potential dangers for any generation. So, whatever the congregation in whatever era of history, the dangers of passivity, persecution, Satanic deception, pagan compromise, hypocrisy, trial, and apathy were real. The warnings to the back-sliders and the rewards promised to the overcomers are universally valid.

What insights can be gleaned from the letters to the seven churches about Christian life in the late first century?

At several points, there are indications that Christians in the late first century addressed serious challenges. Apparently some were making false claims to apostleship and prophethood (2:2, 20; cf. 2 Co. 11:13-15).⁸ Persecution (2:10) and even martyrdom (2:13) were to be expected. The mixing of Christianity with paganism was always a threat (2:14, 20, 24-25), as was doctrinal distortion of the Christian message (2:6, 15).⁹ Christians came from both the rich and poor sectors of society (2:9; 3:17). The tension between Christians and Jews had heightened, especially after the Jewish wars and the institution of the *birkat ha-minim* in the synagogue service, a liturgical statement which amounted to a curse upon Christians.¹⁰ Christians, because of their faith in Christ, claimed to be "true Jews," while ethnic Jews who persecuted Christians were considered to be "false Jews" (2:9; 3:9).

The Vision of Heaven's Court (4-5)

If the seven churches of Asia reflect conditions of the Christian congregations on earth, John is abruptly transported into the heavens where he is privileged to view the court surrounding God's throne. This pattern of shifting back and forth between heaven and earth is reoccurring in the Revelation.

Heaven's court is depicted in a state of celestial, liturgical worship. The worshippers are arranged in concentric circles. The throne of God and the Lamb are in the center, encircled by a rainbow (4:2-3; 5:6). In front of the throne, seven burning lamps represent the seven Spirits of God (4:5; cf. 1:4; 3:1). On each side of the throne were living creatures, cherubim to judge from Ezekiel's description in the Old Testament (4:6b-7; Eze. 1:5-24; 10:15). Surrounding the throne and cherubim were enthroned twenty-four priestly elders (4:4). Then, still further back were the hosts of innumerable angels encircling the figures in the center (5:11). Finally, surrounding them all were the multitudes of all creatures in the universe (5:13).

Five hymns are sung in this heavenly liturgy. It begins with a praise to God by the cherubim (4:8). Their praise prompts an antiphony by the twenty-four priestly elders (4:9-11). The high point in the liturgy, which in Christian tradition might have been the celebration of the eucharist, is the declaration of the triumph of the Lamb

⁸We also know from a Christian document written in approximately 100 A.D. that certain self-acclaimed "apostles" and "prophets" went from church to church asking for money, cf. *Didache* 11.

⁹There is no consensus on the precise identification of the deviant Christian group called "the Nicolaitans." They may have been a proto-Gnostic group or antinomians or some group tracing its origin to Nicolaus of Antioch (cf. Ac. 6:1-6), cf. T. Donaldson, *ISBE* (1986) III.533-534.

¹⁰R. Brown, *Antioch and Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 48.

slain who is worthy to open the sealed scroll (5:6-7). At the taking of the scroll, bowls of incense are offered which depict the prayers of God's people. Now, the cherubim and the priestly elders sing the third hymn celebrating the Lamb as the Redeemer (5:9-10). The antiphony to the cherubim and elders constitutes the fourth hymn, sung to the Lamb by the myriads of angels (5:11-12). At last, the final hymn is a crescendo of all the voices in the whole universe giving praise to God and the Lamb forever and ever (5:13). The liturgy closes with the familiar "Amen" (5:14).

What is the significance of the expression, "I will show you what is necessary to occur in the future" (4:1b)?

At the outset, this statement must surely connect with Isaiah's and Paul's promise that, in the end, every knee will bow and every tongue confess the sovereignty of God--in Pauline terms, that "Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Is. 45:22-25; Phil. 2:9-11). This is the most obvious significance.

Dispensationalism, with its commitment to a pretribulation rapture, sees yet a further significance. Dispensationalists often view the twenty-four elders as symbolizing the Christian church in heaven (priesthood of believers) after the rapture of the church and during the seven years of tribulation on earth. While the world below is convulsed in distress, the raptured church is enthralled in worship. Exegetically, however, there is little recommend this view. The elders in heaven always seem to be distinguished from "the saints" rather than identical to them (5:8; 11:17-18; 19:1-4). The more common view among expositors is that the priestly elders represent a special group of spirit-beings belonging to the general class of angels. Positioned as they are between the cherubim and the general host of angels, this interpretation seems compelling.

What is the meaning of the seven-sealed scroll?

The seven seals on the scroll clearly signify events to occur on the earth (6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1). However, the contents of the scroll are not revealed. The fact that the scroll had writing on both sides is unusual, for unlike a codex, where pages could be turned with the back sides visible, scrolls were readable on one side only as the scroll was unrolled. The opisthograph¹¹ may represent a double deed such as was used in ancient Near Eastern practice.¹² In such documents, the deed was written, rolled up and sealed. An abstract of the deed, or possibly, if it were a piece of

¹¹*Opisthograph* is the technical term for a scroll written on both sides.

¹²Various such scrolls have been unearthed by archaeologists containing letters, deeds of sale, marriage deeds and financial documents. In a cave in the Wadi Daliyeh near Jericho, a scroll with seven seals (called *bullae*) was discovered from the 4th century B.C., cf. H. Shanks, "Jeremiah's Scribe and Confidant Speaks from a Hoard of Clay Bullae," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1987) 64.

property, the terms for purchase, were written and left open for public viewing. Thus, a double deed had both a sealed text and an open one, and such documents were used up into Roman times.¹³ This would seem to fit John's description quite closely (cf. Je. 32:6-14).

If the seven-sealed scroll is such a document, it likely represents the title deed to the world. God intends to reclaim a world which has been infiltrated by evil, and the final stage of this reclamation will come in the climactic events at the end of the age. The Lamb who was slain, who already has procured salvation for all humans through the cross and resurrection, is worthy to open the seals heralding the consummation. In the end, the foremost plea in the Lord's prayer will be answered. His kingdom will come--his will shall be done (Mt. 6:10; Rv. 11:15)!

The Opening of the Seven Seals (6:1--8:5)

What do the seven seals represent?

If the seven-sealed scroll represents the title deed to the world, a world which God intends to reclaim, then the opening of the seven seals represents the precursors of the end. The idea that judgments would be poured out upon the world before the end is strongly rooted in the Hebrew prophets. Some of the passages describing the opening of the seals directly allude to such Old Testament passages, such as, people hiding in the caves of the earth for fear (Is. 2:19//Rv. 6:15), the darkening of the sun and the moon turning to blood (Is. 13:10; 24:23; Eze. 32:7; Jl. 2:10, 30-31; 3:15//Rv. 6:12), the rolling up of the sky like a scroll and the falling of the stars like figs (Is. 34:4//Rv. 6:13-14), and the giving of the nations over to slaughter (Is. 13:15-18; 34:2-3; Eze. 32:3-6; Jl. 2:1-9//Rv. 6:4). The Book of Daniel, while not listing such stereotypical woes, generalizes that prior to the end there would occur "a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of the nations until then" (Da. 12:1), and Jesus reiterated this statement (Mt. 24:21//Mk. 13:19). Such trauma, sometimes referred to as the "woes of messiah," was a characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic in the intertestamental period and later. Lists of disasters and cosmic disruptions describe the darkening of the sun, the turning of the moon to blood, the shaking of the mountains,¹⁴ plagues of pestilence, famine, earthquakes, war, and hail.¹⁵

In the Apocalypse of John, the opening of each seal in turn calls forth a precursor to the end. The first four seals are depicted as horsemen. This imagery is

¹³Shanks, 64-65.

¹⁴Testament of Moses, 10.

¹⁵Apocalypse of Abraham, 30; cf. 2 Baruch, 70.

taken from the Book of Zechariah, where four horsemen, patterned after the imperial patrols of the Persian Empire, report to the Lord the conditions upon earth (Zec. 1:7-11). The horsemen in Revelation, however, are not merely reporting patrols. They symbolize the trauma of conquest, war, famine and plague (6:2-8).¹⁶ The other seals depict martyrdom (6:9-11), cosmic disruption (6:12-17) and the preparation for yet seven other terrible judgments (8:1-5).

When will the seals be opened?

The crucial question, of course, is when shall these things happen? There are three schools of thought. One is that they actually did happen in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Josephus' description of the fall of Jerusalem under the Roman general Titus is coupled with passages in Luke's version of Jesus' Olivet discourse (Lk. 21:20-26) to suggest that the entire scope of the seals are locked within the first century. Another viewpoint is that all these woes will occur just prior to the second advent of Christ.¹⁷ The language in the Olivet discourse describes many of the same cosmic disturbances (Mt. 24:29//Mk. 13:24-25//Lk. 21:25-26) which precede Christ's second coming (Mt. 24:30//Mk. 13:26//Lk. 21:27). For those who view the final chapter of human history as the 70th week of Daniel, the seals fall within this seven year period. Yet a third viewpoint is that these woes characterize the general course of the age, though they escalate as the end approaches. The third viewpoint merits some further explanation.

It is obvious that Jesus' Olivet discourse bears directly upon the interpretation of the seven seals due to their respective common predictions of catastrophic events and cosmic disturbances, such as, war, famine, earthquakes, persecution, and so forth. In the Olivet discourse, Jesus responded to his disciples' question about what "sign" was to be expected before the end. He warned them against speculation (Mk. 13:5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 21, 23, 33, 35, 37). Certainly there would be precursors during the course of the age, but the disciples must not mistake intermediate events for final ones! These precursors always warn the righteous that "the time is near" (Mk. 13:29), but its nearness is not so much a date to be calculated as an expectation to be constantly affirmed and watched for (Mk. 13:32-37).

Of these three interpretations, the first two attempt to pinpoint the specific time of fulfillment (either 70 A.D. or the period following the rapture of the church). The third one does not attempt to pin down the time precisely. In the opinion of this

¹⁶While some interpreters take the first horseman to be Jesus Christ because of the similarity between Rv. 6:2 and Rv. 19:11, this explanation is doubtful. All the other seals are tragedies, and it seems more consistent to view the first horseman as earthly trauma produced by worldly attempts at conquest.

¹⁷In the dispensational position, these woes occur after the church has already been taken to heaven but before the Lord returns to judge the earth at the end.

writer, the third approach most satisfactorily seems to correlate the Olivet discourse, the Old Testament prophets, and the vision of John. If true, it means that the opening of the seals has already begun in the course of the present age. The escalation of conquests, wars, famines, earthquakes, and martyrdoms characterize the whole of world history from the time of Jesus until the present. If, as some interpreters think, the cataclysms of the sun, moon and stars are taken as symbols of social and political disruption, then such disruptions are already in process during the age. However, one should not be too quick to dismiss the possibility of a literal disruption of the cosmic bodies. If these passage are to have a literal fulfillment, then they still await a future time.

Who are the two groups of God's people?

The interlude between the 6th and 7th seal (and its parallel interlude between the 6th and 7th trumpet, cf. 10:1--11:14) heighten the suspense. Both interludes describe the people of God during the tumultuous woes of messiah. In the interlude of chapter 7, the people of God are depicted in two ways, first as 144,000 servants of God from the twelve tribes who are sealed for protection during the great afflictions before the end (7:1-8), and second as the triumphant multitude of the redeemed from the nations who endure during great tribulation (7:9-17). The two depictions have deliberate differences. The first uses the Israelite model (7:4), the second the international model (7:9).

Most interpreters agree that these depictions of the people of God describe believers who live through the woes of the seal judgments, both because their description is sandwiched between the 6th and 7th seal and because the latter group is described as having passed through "great tribulation" (7:14). Nevertheless, there are two related questions which divide interpreters. First, do the two depictions refer to the same group by different metaphors, or are there in fact two quite different groups. Second, depending upon how one answers the first question, who are these people of God?

Typical dispensational interpretations hold that the two groups are different, the first being Israelites (because God has returned to his Jewish people during the 70th week of Daniel after the church is raptured) and the second being the non-Jewish multitudes who come to faith because of the Jewish testimony during the 70th week of Daniel. As such, then, neither group represents the church *per se*. However, there is nothing in the passage to indicate that the 144,000 are evangelists or that the international multitude are their converts. Furthermore, against a literal interpretation of the first group as being Jewish is the precise number (144,000) and the multiples from each tribe (12,000).¹⁸ These numbers clearly fall within the range of symbolic

¹⁸Also against a literal interpretation is the unusual nature of the listing, which omits Dan and Ephraim but includes

numbers typical of apocalyptic, and it seems more likely that they represent the whole elect people of God. They are described as "Israel" because the church is, in fact, the new Israel, headed by the twelve apostles (cf. Ga. 6:16). The first group corresponds to the true Israel as opposed to "those who say they are Jews but are not" (2:9; 3:9). The true Israel is the body of faithful Christians. If, in turn, this true Israel is the church, then the two descriptions both refer to the same entity but from two different vantage points. The first description is the sealing of Christians for protection during the woes of messiah, and the second description is a preview of their final triumph at the end. They are at once "the Israel of God" and the multitude of Christian believers "from every nation, tribe, people and language."

The interpretation that both groups depict the church, deliberately presented from two different vantage points, seems likely. The first description pictures the Christian community before the time of affliction, while the second anticipates its victorious celebration in heaven after the tribulation has passed. It should be noted, of course, that the seal of God which protects his people from divine judgment does not prevent them from suffering at the hands of the evil powers of the age. As noted under the fifth seal, many of them will face martyrdom (6:9-11). Nevertheless, even death could not destroy them, for as will be said later, "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death," and yet they still were victorious (12:11). They overcame by the blood of the Lamb (7:14; 12:11a).

The Blowing of the Seven Trumpets (8:6--11:19)

The opening of the seventh seal (8:1-2) produced no judgments on the earth as had the first six seals. Rather, when the seventh seal was opened, John saw seven angelic trumpeters. Trumpeters are especially associated with war, and the appearance of seven of them is ominous, to say the least.¹⁹ Their task, according to 8:3-5, was to answer the prayers of the martyrs who had been calling for vengeance from under heaven's altar (cf. 5:8; 6:9-11). The godless world had persecuted God's people; now, heaven's judgment would fall upon the godless world.

Are the parallels between the trumpet judgments and the plagues of Egypt intentional?

Yes. The parallelisms of hail (Ex. 9:22-26//Rv. 8:7), the turning of water to blood (Ex. 7:19-22//Rv. 8:8) and darkness (Ex. 10:21-23//Rv. 8:12) are almost certainly intentional. Just as in Egypt when the people of God were under severe

both Joseph and Joseph's son, Manasseh.

¹⁹The imagery of seven angels comes from Tobit 12:15 and 1 Enoch 20:1-7. The intertestamental Jewish conception was that there were seven archangels, which included the biblical Gabriel and Michael as well as Raphael, Uriel, Suru'el, Raguel and Saraqa'el.

oppression by Pharaoh, and God answered their cries of distress by sending terrible strokes of judgment upon Egypt, so God has heard the prayers of the martyrs under heaven's altar and will send terrible strokes of judgment upon the earth. It is important to also remember that in Egypt God protected the Israelites from the plagues (Ex. 8:22-23; 9:4, 26; 11:23; 12:13), and in the Apocalypse God sealed his servants so that they would not be harmed (7:3; 9:4).

How literally should one take the fractions "one-third," and how far should one go in trying to find modern parallels to the trumpet judgments?

It is likely that the repeated fractions of "one-third" (8:7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12) are indications that the trumpet judgments are not total devastation. To interpret literally a third of the sun and moon, for instance, becomes logistically problematic. It is better to treat the fractions as part of the apocalyptic genre. Remember, this is an apocalypse, not a newspaper report! Since the trumpet judgments are not total, there is room for judgments yet to come.

The interpreter should also use reserve in trying to find modern parallels to these judgments. Imaginative interpretations of ecological imbalance, toxic waste, pollution, acid rain, volcanic eruption, the greenhouse effect, black holes, meteor showers, colliding comets, solar and lunar eclipses, nuclear fallout, star wars weapon systems and a host of other possibilities have all been suggested. More than two decades ago, Hal Lindsey tried to convince the Christian community that Communist China would field a 200 million man army and cross the Euphrates River in an invasion of the west.²⁰ Others said that the scorpions-like "locusts" of 9:3ff. were actually stealth bombers. Such identifications, while they may not be ruled out altogether, are reckless and speculative. The real fulfillments may be altogether unlike anything anyone has ever suggested! The intent of John's vision of the trumpet judgments is to describe horrible plagues of universal proportions and grotesque demonic activity in a godless world. For the early church, it meant that pagan Rome, which was persecuting the Christian church, would be judged by God. Historically, this judgment certainly happened. The population of Rome was drastically reduced by war, the Germanic invasions and plague.²¹ The fulfillment of these judgments on pagan Rome does not exhaust the extent of the prophetic vision, however. At the end of the age, there may still be other terrible strokes of judgment to fall upon a godless world. It is wiser to leave the exact nature of these fulfillments an open question,

²⁰H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 81-87.

²¹It is estimated by historians that between the reign of Marcus Aurelius and the restoration of rule in 284 A.D., the population of the Roman Empire was reduced by one third, cf. E. Burns et al., *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 1982) I.264. Well know, of course, are the repeated invasions of Rome by the Goths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Huns, Visigoths and Franks.

however.

What is the meaning of the angel and the "little scroll" (10)?

The reader should recall that between the 6th and 7th seal, there was an interlude with two scenes. A similar interlude occurs between the sounding of the 6th and 7th trumpet, and it also contains two scenes. The first scene is of the angel with the "little scroll."

It should be pointed out that the "little scroll" is probably *not* the same as the seven-sealed scroll of chapter 5, since John uses different Greek words to describe them (5:1; 10:2). Rather, the imagery comes from the prophetic calls of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The eating of the scroll indicates the filling of the prophet's mouth with the oracles of the Lord (Eze. 3:1-4). At first, the eaten words would be a "joy" and "delight" (Je. 15:16), but in the end, they would bring indignation, unending pain and an incurable wound (Je. 15:18). Similarly, for John the "sweetness" of the oracle must surely refer to the triumphant promise of Christ's return, but the "bitterness" of the oracle comes from the terrible predictions of plagues and judgments on the world.

Incidentally, the wording in the older English versions, "There should be time no longer" (cf. KJV), is misleading, and it has been corrected (cf. NKJB). This statement is not announcing the end of history, but rather, that there would be no more delay before the final events in the age.

What is the point of having seven thunders speak but not revealing what they said?

This element in the scene suggests that there is more to come in the future, but the meaning is still hidden. It is not unlike St. Paul's experience of hearing inexpressible things in heaven that he was not permitted to tell (cf. 2 Co. 12:4). The counsel of God is always to some degree a mystery, even when it is in the process of being revealed!

Who are the two witnesses?

The two witnesses are rather obviously patterned after Zerubbabel and Joshua (Zec. 4:3-5, 12-14; 3:1; 4:8-9; Rv. 11:4), on the one hand, and Moses and Elijah on the other (Ex. 7:20; Dt. 18:15; 1 Kg. 17:1; 2: Kg. 1:10, 12; Mal. 4:5; Rv. 11:5-6). However, it should be remembered that single figures in the apocalypse can sometimes refer to groups as well as to individual persons (i.e., the woman clothed with the sun and the great whore are figures which may represent groups). Interpreters are divided over whether the two witnesses are individual persons or groups.

Those who interpret them as individuals usually believe them to be Moses and Elijah *redivivus*, based on the mysterious circumstances of their deaths (cf. Dt. 34:5-6;

Jude 9; 2 Kg. 2:11). Otherwise, they may refer to two individual persons yet to arise who will have the powers of Moses and Elijah.²² If they have any reference to the period of the early church, it is hard to see what it might be.²³

On the other hand, if the two witnesses refer to groups (or some particular group), the most natural interpretation is that they represent the church, God's new covenant people to whom Moses and Elijah testify (cf. Mt. 17:3//Mk. 9:4//Lk. 9:30). This interpretation has the attraction of explaining the strange reversal of Jewish-Gentile symbolism both in this passage and in the rest of the Apocalypse. Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel since the time of David, has become an unbelieving pagan community, typified as Sodom and Egypt (11:8). The temple, with its priesthood and furnishings once exclusively reserved for Jewish worship, symbolically has become the Christian church (1:6, 20; 3:12; 5:10; 6:9; 7:15). The old sacrifices of Torah have been replaced by a single, universal sacrifice, the Lamb slain (5:6). In fact, the category of Jewishness itself has been reversed (2:9; 3:9). If this reversal bears upon the temple scene in 11:1, then the worshippers in the temple are Christians who are protected until their Christian witness has been completed (11:5a). The two witnesses symbolize the church in its evangelistic witness. The beast who attacks the witnesses is pagan Rome who persecutes the early church, and in a double entendre, it is also the kingdom of antichrist at the end of the age which shall rise against the church. At the end, the church will be resurrected from the dust of martyrdom, ascending into heaven at the call of God (11:12). The city of Jerusalem, which has now become pagan, will collapse (11:13).

Do the time periods forty-two months (11:2), three and a half days (11:9), and 1260 days (11:3) have any connection with the seventieth week of Daniel (Da. 9:27)?

It is hard not to believe that these time periods in the Apocalypse are intentional reflections upon Daniel's prophecy concerning the seventy weeks, and in particular, the last week which is divided in half. Forty-two months, 1260 days, and three and a half days are all equivalents.²⁴ Furthermore, these same increments are mentioned later (12:6; 13:5), along with the enigmatic but equivalent phrase "time, times, and half a time" (12:14).

²²There is also the interpretation that they are Enoch and Elijah, the two Old Testament characters who did not "die," though there is nothing directly in this passage to suggest Enoch. Nevertheless, the interpretation is an ancient one, cf. Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 50.

²³One could speculate about the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome in the early 60s A.D., but the power to send plagues did not characterize either of the apostles' ministries.

²⁴Forty-two months, of course, is three and a half years. 1260 days, by Jewish lunar reckoning, is also three and a half years. If the last "week" of Daniel is divided in half, the three and a half days must represent half a week--but remember that Daniel's "week" is a week of years, not a week of normal days.

Christians do not agree about how the seventy weeks of Daniel should be interpreted. Some say the whole seventy weeks were contiguous and have already been fulfilled in the death of Jesus and the earliest period of the Jewish Christian church. Others, notably the dispensationalists, say that there is a great interval between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week so that the fulfillment of the final week is reserved for the end of the age and corresponds with the great tribulation after the church has been raptured. In either case, however, John intentionally seems to have drawn on the imagery of the final week of Daniel to describe the closing period of the age.

During the first three and a half years, the two witnesses carry out their ministry (11:3). During the final three and a half years, the witnesses will lie martyred (11:7-10). It is a moot question whether these final seven years are to be taken at face value or whether they are one more symbol, in an almost unending series of symbols, drawn from Jewish apocalyptic. If the latter, then the time period could even include the present age. The fact that the forty-two months are directly connected to Jesus' statement about the present age being the "times of the Gentiles" during which Jerusalem would be "trampled" seems to point toward a non-literal interpretation of the time periods (11:2; cf. Lk. 21:24). If so, then the first three and a half years represent the period when the church freely testifies to the gospel, while the last three and a half years represents the time of the church's affliction and martyrdom.

Is the seventh trumpet the same as Paul's "last trump?"

Two factors have led some interpreters to connect 1 Co. 15:52 with the seventh trumpet. One is the statement that at the seventh trumpet, the mystery of God would be completed (10:7). This has been taken to mean that the church, which is the mystery of God hidden for ages (Ro. 16:25; Ep. 3:3-6; 6:19; Col. 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3), will finally reach its conclusion at the coming of the Lord (11:15, 18). The other is Paul's reference to the "last" trumpet, given that the seventh trumpet is the end of the series.

The first of these arguments seems more persuasive than the second. John and the early church probably knew of the Pauline vocabulary about the "mystery" of the gospel, and if so, it would not be surprising for John to allude to it here. However, that Paul would anticipate John's series of seven trumpets by referring to the "last trumpet," or more to the point, that Paul would expect his Corinthian audience to anticipate John's series of seven trumpets almost half a century before the prophecy was given, is severely anachronistic and must be discounted.

Why does the seventh trumpet seem to conclude history when the Apocalypse is only half completed?

This question must be answered along the lines of the structure of the book. If the book is strictly linear, then the statements of consummation in 11:15-18 must be anticipations of what will come later. If, on the other hand, the book employs a circular structure, that is, if it either intensifies or recapitulates events, then 11:15-18 does indeed describe the end.

The structure of the book also bears upon the theory of mid-tribulationism. If one connects the completion of God's mystery (10:7) with the interpretation that the two witnesses are the church called into heaven (11:12)--and if one also understands the Apocalypse to be a strict chronology--then the rapture of the church occurs in the middle of the tribulation period since it occurs in the middle of the Book of Revelation. Mid-tribulationists have long used this passage to support their position. However, most interpreters do not see the Apocalypse as a strict chronology, and if it is not, the mid-tribulationist position falls.

The Woman, The Dragon, The Beast and The False Prophet (12:1--13:18)

The visions of the seven seals and the seven trumpets have a numerical parallelism with the vision of the seven last bowls of wrath. However, prior to the vision of the bowls of wrath, there are several other visions which depict the terrible oppression and persecution of God's people. The first of these visions features four figures: the woman clothed with the sun, the great red dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth.²⁵ God's persecuted people are alternatively called "our brothers" (12:10), "those who obey God's commandments" (12:17), "those who hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), and "the saints" (13:7, 10). Near the end of the book, they are identified as martyrs who were beheaded "because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God" (20:4). The nomenclature is general enough to permit debate about their identity. Are they Christians (the post-tribulation view)? Are they righteous Jews or non-Jewish converts who live during the great tribulation period after the church has been raptured (pretribulation view)? And who are the antagonists? Can they be identified with world figures or entities? These are the crucial questions in chapters 12 and 13.

Who is the pregnant woman clothed with the sun?

The imagery of a pregnant woman facing a dragon was an internationally known symbol depicting the struggle between the righteous and the powers of evil. It

²⁵ When these four figures are added to the figures of God on heaven's throne (4, 21), the Lamb (5, 14), and the great prostitute (17-18), they complete the series of seven primary figures in the book.

is to be found in the mythology of Greece, Mesopotamia and Egypt.²⁶ Indeed, the imagery is also to be found in the Old Testament, where a pregnant woman struggles to give birth to the messianic people and the messianic age (Is. 26:17-18; 66:7-13; Mic. 4:10-12).

Who is this woman? Interpretations have ranged from Israel or the Christian church to the virgin Mary. The clearest points of identification are the references to Joseph's dream, where the sun, moon and twelve stars refer to Jacob, Rachel and the sons of Israel (Ge. 37:9), and the male child to be born who would rule the nations with an iron scepter, a clear reference to the messiah from David's line (Ps. 2:7-9). That the woman is the virgin Mary seems unlikely due to the statements in 12:6, 13-16, where she seems to represent the persecuted people of God who would be protected for three and a half years. The dream of Joseph fits with the interpretation that the woman is Israel, but the fact that her persecution follows the ascension of Christ does not fit.²⁷ The persecution of the woman and her offspring who "hold to the testimony of Jesus" fits the interpretation that she is the persecuted church (12:6, 13-16; 20:4), but it is difficult to see how the church can be said to give birth to the Messiah. Perhaps the best approach is to simply avoid the tight distinction between Israel and the church and simply see her as representing the people of God, the true Israel. If so, then she represents all God's people.

Who is the great red dragon, and when is the war in heaven and the persecution which follows?

There is consensus about the identity of the dragon, since he is directly identified as Satan (12:9). The war in heaven, however, is a different matter. It is traditional, based on this passage and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that Satan took a third of the angels with him in his fall at the beginning of time. The present context, however, does not lend itself to such a flashback. Could it be an apocalyptic description of Christ's victory over Satan in the cross and resurrection (cf. Jn. 12:31)? If this interpretation is followed, then the dragon's persecution of God's people on earth would have a peculiar relevance in light of the Roman imperial persecutions and the martyrdoms of Christians who overcome by their "testimony" and who do not "shrink from death" (12:11). On the other hand, Daniel speaks of a time of terrible distress, protection and deliverance associated with Michael, the archangel, and the fact that this trauma is to climax with the resurrection of the dead seems to refer to the end of history (Da. 12:1). Because of the difficulty in pinning down the war to a

²⁶G. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 191-197.

²⁷The dispensational interpretation that the flight of the woman into the desert is Israel's protection by God during the great tribulation at the end of the age presupposes the gap theory between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week in the seventy weeks of Daniel, a viewpoint that is at least unclear.

particular time, some interpreters argue that the vision should be viewed in a timeless way. If so, then the war between good and evil is always in process.

At present, there is no consensus about the time of the war. It is clear that this celestial conflict, however it is to be viewed, has dire ramifications for God's people on the earth. Failing in his attempt to destroy the Messiah, the dragon takes his revenge upon the people of God for three and a half years (see discussion under 11:2-3, 9). As before, there is little consensus about whether to take the three and a half years as literal or symbolic.

Who is the beast from the sea?

The beast from the sea is clearly the earthly agent of the dragon as shown by the parallelism of seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 13:1) and the statement that the dragon gave him his power (13:2). The persecution of God's people will occupy the three and a half year period during which the beast will carry out his terrible deeds on behalf of Satan. The beast is a composite of the world empires in Daniel's vision of the four beasts (Da. 7). Most interpreters connect him with Paul's description of the "man of lawlessness" (2 Th. 2:3-12), Daniel's description of the "little horn" (Da. 7:8, 11, 20-26), and John's "antichrist" (1 Jn. 2:18; 4:3). He blasphemes God and persecutes God's people on the earth.

The healing of the beast's death wound has attracted much attention (13:3, 14). Does this refer to the *Nero redivivus* myth popular in the Roman Empire and even among some early Christians?²⁸ Dispensationalists have long taught that it refers to the death of the Roman Empire and its revival in the end of the age,²⁹ and many believe that this revived Roman Empire has its final expression in the European Economic Community. Others interpret that it refers to a reoccurring pattern of blasphemy and persecution to be seen in Antiochus Epiphanes, who desecrated the second temple in 167 B.C., Titus, who destroyed the second temple in 70 A.D., the imperial Caesars, who demanded emperor worship at penalty of death in the 90s A.D., and finally, the eschatological antichrist, who shall persecute God's people at the end of the age.

Who is the beast from the land, and what is the mark of the beast?

The description of the second beast carries a religious motif in that, like a priest, he mandates the diabolical worship of the first beast with miracles and deceptions (13:12, 14-15). Later, he will be called "the false prophet" (16:13; 19:20;

²⁸In Christian apocalyptic, Nero was depicted as the antichrist risen from the dead (*Ascension of Isaiah* 4:1-14; *Sibylline Oracles* 4:119; 5:363; 8:70).

²⁹J. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 199.

20:10). He enforces allegiance to the first beast by total economic control.

The mark of the beast is one of the best-known features of the Revelation. The beast's *charagma* (= engraving, brand, mark) stands as the antithesis of the seal of the living God. Both marks are in the foreheads (7:2-4), one identifying the "servants of God" (7:3) and the other identifying the followers of the beast (14:9-11). Those who have the seal of God are to be protected (7:2-3), while those who have the mark of the beast (or, alternatively, those who are not sealed with God's seal) are to be tortured by terrible judgments (16:2; cf. 9:4).

The identification of the beast's mark is directly associated with the number 666.³⁰ The fact that the mark is described as both a "name" and a "number" (13:17) has led many interpreters to add up the numerical equivalents of various names.³¹ The name Nero is the most popular, especially since it connects with the *Nero redivivus* myth, while the name Titus is another speculation. Both these names would have had meaning for the first readers of the book. The modern trend toward identifying people by numbers has fueled many theories, including social security numbers, international bar codes, implanted computer chips and so forth. Before any interpreter goes too far afield in speculation, however, it might be well to consider that if the seal of God is interpreted other than literally, the mark of the beast may be as well. The fact that the number 666 is a triplicate series one short of the number seven may argue for a non-literal interpretation. If seven is the number of fullness, and in particular, the number of the fullness of the church (chapters 2-3), then six is the number just short of that and perhaps signifies false religion.³² In any case, no consensus has been reached among Christian interpreters on the precise meaning of this mark.

The Lamb, The 144,000, The Angel Messages, The Harvest of The Earth, And The Seven Last Plagues (14-15)

Where is Mt. Zion?

Earlier, it was pointed out that the Apocalypse contains a series of reverse symbolisms. True Jews are Christians, the old Jerusalem becomes Sodom and Gomorrah, the priesthood is now the worshipping Christian community, and the temple has become the Christian church. Here, once more, there is such a reversal. Mt. Zion, the hill immediately north of the city of David which once was the site of the first and second temples, has become heaven itself (14:1, 3). If the mark of the

³⁰Some early manuscripts read 616, though 666 has much greater manuscript authority.

³¹In both Greek and Hebrew, cardinal numbers were written as alphabetic letters.

³²M. Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975) 128-131.

Beast will identify the followers of evil, the seal of God will identify those who triumph through the blood of the Lamb and their faithful testimony (7:1-4; 12:10-11; 14:1). They will stand with the Lamb in triumph upon heavenly Mt. Zion.

What is the meaning of the "eternal gospel" and the angel messages, and who are "the saints?"

The first angelic announcement is a final warning to the people of earth that they must make a choice--either worship God or, by default, worship the beast. This message is the basic imperative of Holy Scripture from beginning to end. The announcement of the fall of Babylon anticipates what will be described in more detail later. The third angel warns that loyalty to the beast will merit a terrible judgment. Together, these three messages "call for patient endurance on the part of the saints...who are faithful to Jesus."

Who are these "saints?" Because the term "saint" is somewhat generic, various interpretations are possible. Dispensationalists are convinced that they are Jews who have turned to Christ during the final period of tribulation. While such an interpretation is not impossible, it is driven more by the theological structure of dispensationalism than by exegesis of this passage. It seems more natural to take the "saints...who are faithful to Jesus" as referring to Christians who live during the time of terrible oppression by the beast. The blessing upon those who "die in the Lord" recalls the martyrs who are killed for their testimony (6:9).

What is the meaning of the harvest scene?

John uses two metaphors, a grain harvest and a grape harvest. In the first, he makes two important allusions. The harvester is someone "like a son of man," an obvious allusion to the vision of Daniel (Da. 7:13-14) and probably referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. The grain harvest recalls Jesus' parable of the tares and wheat (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43), where the harvest is the end of the age and a separation is to be made between "the righteous" and "everything that causes sin and all who do evil." Thus, the grain harvest is probably a metaphor for God's gathering of the righteous to himself, while the grape harvest is a metaphor for God's gathering of the wicked for judgment. As before (cf. 6:9-11; 8:3-5), God's judgment on the earth, here initiated by the command to throw the grapes into the winepress of judgment, is a response to the prayers of the martyrs.

Who are the victors singing the Song of Moses and the Lamb?

The accumulation of references to the saints, those sealed by God, the martyrs, the triumphant 144,000, and those having the testimony of Jesus all seem to be images of the same group--the Christians who have struggled against the powers of evil, both in ancient Rome, at the close of the first century, and in the world during

last period of the age. These victors are the Christian martyrs who have been faithful "unto death" (cf. 2:10). They have completed their final "exodus" over the sea of fiery trial, refusing to surrender to the beast and his mark (15:1-2). Just as Moses once led his people across the Red Sea, the Lamb has led his faithful followers to victory through martyrdom (15:3-4). The only thing remaining is for those who killed them to be dealt the seven final plagues, symbolized by seven golden bowls of divine wrath which will be poured out upon a wicked world (15:5-8).

Are the parallelisms intentional between the seven last plagues, the seven trumpet judgments and the plagues upon Egypt in the exodus?

The parallelisms are so striking that they must be intentional. Consider the similarities between the exodus and the final plagues:

The Exodus

Boils (Ex. 9:8-11)
 Water to blood (Ex. 7:19-22)
 Darkness (Ex. 10:21-23)
 River frogs (Ex. 8:5-6)
 Storm (Ex. 9:22-26)

The Final Plagues

Sores (Rv. 16:2)
 Water to blood (Rv. 16:3-4)
 Darkness (Rv. 16:10-11)
 River frogs (Rv. 16:13)
 Storm (Rv. 16:18-21)

Consider, also, the parallelisms between the effects of the trumpets and the bowls:

Trumpets

The earth (8:7)
 The sea (8:8-9)
 Rivers and springs (8:10-11)
 The sun (8:12)
 Darkness (9:2)
 The Euphrates (9:14)
 Voices, thunder, earthquake,
 lightning and hail (11:15, 19)

Bowls

The earth (16:2)
 The sea (16:3)
 Rivers and springs (16:4)
 The sun (16:8)
 Darkness (16:10)
 The Euphrates (16:12)
 Voices, thunder, earthquake,
 lightning and hail (16:17-21)

There is, of course, a difference. The trumpet judgments are partial, affecting only a third of things (cf. 8:7-12). No such restriction is given for the bowls, for they are "final plagues" (15:1).

Where is Armageddon?

The name Armageddon is a Hebraism *har-Megiddo* (= mountain of Megiddo). Megiddo lies in the Esdraelon in northern Israel. It is the site of several famous battles in Israelite history, such as, Deborah and Sisera, Saul and the Philistines, Josiah and Pharaoh-Neco. Solomon and Ahab both fortified Megiddo extensively, and the fortress of Megiddo served as a watchtower for the entire Esdraelon Plain. Hence, the name Armageddon seems to have been chosen for its association with past military excursions. If the "great city," here called "Babylon" (16:19) and earlier referred to as the "great city...where the Lord was crucified" (11:8), is the same as the city where the blood flows freely (14:20), then it is Jerusalem. Of course, Jerusalem is not in the Esdraelon, so the conflation of ideas present an anomaly. Furthermore, the name "Babylon" was well-known in John's time as a cryptic title for Rome. It

seems that John has used apocalyptic imagery to show that old Jerusalem has become a symbol for worldly oppression and evil (11:8), and it may well be that both Jerusalem and Armageddon function, not so much as geographical locators, but as symbols for a world system in rebellion against God, a rebellion that in John's day was expressed in pagan Rome. At the end of the age, this same world rebellion would be expressed in the kingdom of the beast. The "great city" = Jerusalem = Babylon = Rome = the kingdom of the beast in rebellion against God.

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

Twice already John has referred to Babylon, once in the angel message that Babylon had fallen (14:8) and the other in the description of the seventh bowl of wrath (16:19). He also has referred to "the city" (14:20), a reference that will be repeated several times in chapters 17-18. Here, John will take up the vision of Babylon in earnest as he works toward the climax of his apocalypse.

To what does Babylon refer?

Several clues are to be found in John's description of Babylon. First, he speaks of it as a city which "made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries" (14:8; 17:2; 18:3, 16, 18; 19:2). This city "sits" on seven hills (17:9), and it is "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). He also speaks of Babylon as a "mystery," that is, as an entity whose true identity would be revealed by God (17:5, 7). He describes Babylon as a whore who commits adultery with the potentates of the world (14:8; 17:1-5, 15-16; 18:3, 9; 19:2), a prostitute whose sins were piled up to heaven (18:5). He says that she is the home of demons and "a haunt for every evil spirit" (18:2). Finally, he indicts Babylon as a woman drunken with the blood of the martyrs (17:6; 18:24).

The reference to Babylon should be taken as a symbol of entrenched worldly resistance to God, the epitome of wickedness and godlessness. In the Old Testament, Babylon, the haughty empire, was doomed to destruction by the Hebrew prophets (Je. 25:12-14; Is. 13-14, 47). Just as ancient Babylon held the people of God in exile, so also this Babylon will oppress those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (17:6), including the apostles and prophets of the Christian church (18:20). Just as members of the diaspora were called to leave Babylon in the return from exile (Is. 48:20), so now the saints of God are called to leave the system of evil which is permeated with sin (18:4). Since the whore "sits upon many waters," symbolizing the nations of the world (17:15), it is clear that she cannot simply refer to Babylon in Mesopotamia or yet any other contemporary Babylon of secondary status (there were other cities named Babylon in John's era). Rather, John deliberately draws from a stock apocalyptic symbol in which Babylon was identified with Rome, the capital of the Mediterranean world (2 Baruch 11:1; Sibylline Oracles 5:143, 158-160; 1 Pe. 5:13).

The description of Rome as a city upon seven hills was well-known in John's era, appearing in the works of Virgil, Martial and Cicero (cf. 17:9).³³ So, Rome in John's time was the embodiment of the spirit of Babylon. Yet, Babylon was more than Rome, too, for it embraced more than a single empire or a single culture. Babylon is an ongoing eschatological symbol of Satanic deception and secular power. Babylon is to be found in every era of history, from ancient Babel and its tower, to Babylon in Mesopotamia, to Rome in the first century, and finally, to the modern citadels of self-aggrandizing secularism.

Earlier, through a reversal of symbolism, John depicted earthly Jerusalem as Sodom and Egypt (11:8), a city under judgment from God (11:13). It is likely that John intends Babylon, Rome, Jerusalem, Sodom and Egypt to be one and the same. They represent the aggregate of worldly cultures which exude the spirit of antichrist.

How are the seven heads and ten horns of the beast from the sea to be interpreted?

The beast from the sea, as discussed earlier (chapter 13), is the antichrist. His seven heads, in addition to representing the seven hills of Rome, also refer to seven rulers (or rulerships, if the term "king" is granted enough fluidity to represent a kingdom rather than simply a person). The critical factor in interpretation is that one of these kings "is," that is, his rulership was an existing entity at the time of the writing of the book. If the kings refer to individuals, then the date of the book's composition is crucial. That there are two competing dates among scholars is directly attributable to the correlation of the date of composition with the king who "is." The Roman emperors up until the time of Domitian are as follows: Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius (Caligula), Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Nero was the sixth emperor, and his death was accompanied by a popular myth that he would rise again. Thus, Nero could be both the sixth king and also the eighth while "belonging to the seven" (17:10-11). If the head which was wounded and healed refers to the Nero *redivivus* myth (cf. 13:3, 12), and if, in turn, this same myth lies behind the description of the beast which "once was, now is not, and will come" (17:8, 11), then Nero is the critical king who "is." Of course, as we know, Nero did not rise again, and to complicate the case, the strongest early Christian tradition is that the Apocalypse was composed during the reign of Domitian, not Nero.

A second reckoning begins with Augustus (following a listing of emperors by the Roman historian Tacitus) and passes over the three minor emperors, Galba, Otho and Vitellius. In this scenario, Vespasian would be the sixth emperor and Titus the seventh. Domitian, the eighth emperor, would have been a Nero-like emperor and the

³³R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 314.

arch-persecutor of Christians. Still, this scenario is not entirely satisfactory either, since Vespasian did nothing to disturb the Christians nor did he promote the emperor cult. Furthermore, why pass over the three minor emperors who, though their reigns were short, were nevertheless genuine emperors.

A third reckoning, in the opinion of this author better than the others, is that the rulerships refer to the great empire-builders of the ancient world, all of which carried the spirit of Babylon and antichrist: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome (the one which "is") and another still to come. This scenario satisfies the description "five have fallen, one is, and one is yet to come." The empire yet to come would be the world kingdom in the time of the antichrist, and the beast-antichrist would be the eighth but "of the seven" (17:11). Some have suggested that this final empire would be a revived Rome, either in power or in land area. This may be the meaning of the description of the beast who "was, is not, and will come up out of the Abyss." Following the demise of Rome, no world empire has existed (although attempts were made). Only in the final period of the age will there once more be a world empire to match those of the ancient world. Another way to look at this description is in terms of the arch-persecutors of God's people especially embodied in Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.), Titus (70 A.D.) and the eschatological antichrist.

The imagery of the ten horns comes from Daniel's vision of the terrible beast with ten horns (Da. 7:7-8, 20-27). Their precise identity is unclear, especially since there is conflicting data between Daniel and Revelation. In Daniel, the ten kings precede the rise of the eschatological antichrist, and in his rise to power he will destroy three of them (Da. 7:24). In Revelation the ten kings have no kingdoms until they are given rulerships in coalition with the beast (17:12-13). It is at least clear that these ten kings will gather to fight against the Lamb at his second coming (17:14; 19:19). Perhaps the number ten, in typical apocalyptic fashion, is to be taken as symbolizing fullness, and hence, the ten kings represent the collection of all worldly powers in alliance with the beast against Christ. Some have speculated that they are the European Economic Community, but this identification is at best uncertain.

Who are the people whom Babylon persecutes?

This question is like the one entertained earlier about the identity of "the saints" (cf. 14:12). Once again, various terms are used for the people of God, including "the saints...who hold to the testimony of Jesus" (17:6; 19:10), the Lamb's "called, chosen and faithful followers" (17:14), God's "people" (18:4), "saints and apostles and prophets" (18:20, 24), God's "servants" (19:2, 5), and the Lamb's "bride" (19:7). It is hard to conclude anything other than that the first readers of the Apocalypse would have taken such language to refer to the body of Christians in the world, themselves included, as they faced the onslaught of imperial Rome.

The Consummation (19:11--22:21)

With the fall of Babylon, John now begins his last great scene. It is filled with the imagery of war and probably intentionally recalls the war scenes at the end of Zechariah, where Yahweh is described in a final battle with the nations (cf. Zec. 14:1-5). No longer is Jesus viewed as the Lamb, for now he is the Old Testament *'ish milhamah* (= man of war, cf. Ex. 15:3). His mount is not the peaceful donkey of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but a war horse. The aftermath of this war will bring universal peace, the judgment of the nations, and the eternal state as God's people live forever in the heavenly Jerusalem and a new world.

Does the war scene describe the second coming of Jesus Christ?

One of the fundamental themes in the Apocalypse is the return of Christ. The book begins with the announcement of his return (1:7), and it is urged to the churches as being "soon" (3:11). A warning is issued about it during the bowl judgments (16:15), and the book closes with multiple warnings of its nearness (22:7, 12, 20). Other passages in the Apocalypse, while they may not directly speak of the second coming of Christ, anticipate events which are closely associated with it, such as, the judgment of the dead (11:18) and the triumph of God's people (14:1). So, when John names the heavenly rider as "Faithful," "True," the "Word of God," and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:11, 13, 16)--and even more to the point, when he describes the heavenly warrior with the same imagery as in his original vision of Christ (cf. 1:14, 16//19:12, 15)--it seems clear that he refers to Christ's second advent. The warlike coming of Christ to the earth is the same as what earlier was referred to as "the battle of the great day of God Almighty" (16:14-16). John also draws from Ezekiel's war visions of the last great eschatological battle (cf. Eze. 39:17-20//Rv. 19:17-18, 21). The scene is the same as that described by Jude when the Lord comes "with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones" (Jude 14-15). From other biblical passages, we should interpret the "armies of heaven" or the "holy ones" to refer to the angelic hosts (Mk. 8:38//Lk. 9:26; 1 Th. 3:13; 2 Th. 1:7; cf. Zec. 14:5).

To what does the thousand years refer?

The vision of the thousand years of Satan's imprisonment and the reign of God's saints has long been a bone of contention among Christian interpreters. Since so many other numbers in the book are highly symbolic, should not this period be interpreted as a symbolism also? Many interpreters say, "Yes." The thousand years symbolizes the church age, a period when Satan has been defeated through the work of Christ on the cross (cf. Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Rather than referring to a thousand years of 365 days each, the thousand years simply means a very long time, the time of the church in the world until the return of Christ during which believers already "reign as kings" (cf. 1 Co. 4:8). At the very end of the church age, Satan once

again is allowed to attack the people of God (20:7-9), and this final conflict is what the Book of Revelation is about. The final event following the church age is the great judgment (20:11-15). If one accepts this viewpoint, then the vision of the thousand years should not be taken as the result of the war in chapter 19, but rather, as a summary of the setting for the whole book. Following this interpretation, amillennialists do not look forward to a thousand year period in the future. In their viewpoint, it is already in process.

If, on the other hand, one takes the vision of the thousand years to refer to the result of the war in chapter 19, then it is obvious that the thousand years are still future. Premillennialists interpret it in this way. There are two primary viewpoints with premillennialism, dispensational and historic premillennial positions. While both agree that the thousand years will follow the second coming of the Lord, they differ to the degree with which they interpret the elements figuratively or symbolically. Dispensationalists tend to interpret the thousand years as normal, calendar years. Historic premillennialists tend to interpret the thousand years as a long period of time, but in light of the other elements taken as symbols (i.e., the chain of Satan, the key to the Abyss), they do not contend for normal calendar years. Also, these two branches of premillennialism differ with regard to the role of Jews during the thousand years. Dispensationalists tend to see Jewishness as primarily ethnic, and they hold that all the land promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants as well as the Hebrew prophets will be literally fulfilled during the millennium. Historic premillennialists, on the other hand, tend to see Jewishness as primarily spiritual, and hold that the promises of the Hebrew prophets are for all the seed of Abraham, that is, the children of Abraham by faith (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 4:9-12, 16-17, 22-24; 9:6-8; Ga. 3:7-8, 29; 4:28-31). Thus, the dispensational vision for the millennium is very Jewish, and the Jewish people of God will be kept separate from the non-Jewish people of God. The historic premillennial vision anticipates the union of all God's people in light of the teaching of St. Paul (cf. Ep. 2:11--3:6).³⁴ In the viewpoint of this author, the historic premillennial position best seems to cover the biblical data.

What is the meaning of the vision about the New Jerusalem?

After the last judgment, John describes the new order for eternity, once more drawing from visions in the Hebrew prophets about a new heaven and new earth (cf. Is. 65:17-25; 66:22-24). The pain and distress of earthly life will be over (21:3-4), while those who have opposed God will be shut out (21:8, 27; 22:15). The center of John's vision is of the New Jerusalem which is at once a city and a people (21:2, 9-10). Its gates represent the ancient tribes of Israel (21:12), and its foundations

³⁴For a more thorough discussion of different millennial views by evangelical proponents from each position, see R. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1977).

represent the twelve apostles chosen by Christ (21:14).

How literally should one take the descriptive elements in this vision? It seems obvious that there are at least some non-literal elements (i.e., transparent gold streets, 21:21; gates each of a single pearl, 21:21; water of life and tree of life, 22:1-2). It is likely that these superlatives in the description are intended to give some hint of the quality of eternal life that is indescribable in ordinary human terms. Most important, of course, is that God's people are eternally in his presence. The cubic city, with twelve edges each 12,000 stadia in length (21:16), equals the 144,000 which earlier symbolizes the number of God's people (7:4; 14:1).

Why does the epilogue stress that the events of the Apocalypse are "near?"

The idea of "nearness" is stressed throughout the concluding paragraphs (22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). It can only mean that the consummation of history is always pending. While the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians was not the end of history, it still was part of that system of antichrist which in every generation opposes the people of God. So, regardless of the era, the end is always at hand. In the meantime, God's people must continue to live out their lives in righteousness and holiness as they wait for the consummation (22:7, 11, 14). The visions heralding the end are for the churches (22:16), and the invitation to follow the Lamb is to anyone who wills (22:17).