

INTRODUCTION AND REVELATION

By Ashby L. Camp

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Introduction

I. Preface to the Study

A. I last taught Revelation just over 10 years ago. As I said then, I have a soft spot in my heart for the book, as it was instrumental in Meg's conversion to Christ.

1. I became a Christian on June 14, 1978. As you can imagine, my conversion dramatically shifted the focus and direction of my life, and Meg was not happy about it. It was as though someone had stolen the irreligious man she married just two years earlier. That was a tense time in our marriage. Her friends were telling her I had lost my mind and talking to her about Christ quickly became off limits.

2. A couple of months later, I came home from work one day, and Meg casually said in passing, "I read some of Revelation today." Now, that would not have been my recommendation for a starting place, but at that point for her to open the Bible anywhere was a major thing. She finished Revelation, and I think she will tell you that it frightened her. God used that fear of his judgment to stir her to pursue him, and on September 17, 1978, one of the greatest days of my life, Meg was baptized into Christ.

B. Despite knowing very little about the Bible at that time, Meg absorbed the take home message from the symbolic drama that is the Book of Revelation. There is much in the apocalyptic portion of the book, chapters 4 and following, that is uncertain in terms of details, but it is not necessary to understand the details to profit from the book. What comes through loud and clear is that God is in control of history and that he prevails over every enemy and is going to bring his creation to a perfect eternal state as he has promised. Those who are faithful to him will share in that blessing; those who are not will suffer his terrible wrath.

C. Vern Poythress in his little book on Revelation illustrates the point with a story about some seminary students who had just finished playing basketball in a gym. They noticed a janitor in the corner reading a book and asked him what he was reading. He said, "The Bible." They said, "What part of the Bible?" and he said "Revelation." They figured they would help this poor soul, so they asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and to their surprise he said, "Yes!" In astonishment they asked, "What does it mean?" He responded, "Jesus is gonna win!"¹

¹ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 14.

D. Beyond that basic message, however, Revelation can be quite puzzling. It has all kinds of strange symbolism, weird beasts, bizarre imagery, and shifting scenes. It is like a dream in that regard, or a video that bombards you with shifting symbolic imagery, and yet it carries a powerful message from God. Because of its distinctive nature in terms of New Testament writings, it seems it is either ignored or fixated upon. Regarding the latter, William Barclay lamented that Revelation "has sometimes become the playground of religious eccentrics."² And that is certainly true. I would say that we in churches of Christ have been more inclined to ignore it.

E. As always, I am going to give you my understanding of the book. There are things I am not sure about, and I am well aware that there is plenty of room for disagreement with my understanding. I own forty-three commentaries on Revelation and quite a few other books that discuss it, and there is much disagreement among those scholars. What I ask is that you just hear me out, that you try to understand how I see the book, and then take from that what you are convinced is true.

F. I want to assure you that my understanding of the book is not novel or eccentric; I am not leading you down some bizarre theological path. I may have a few different wrinkles thrown in, but the basic view I will be presenting is in the evangelical mainstream. It may be new to you, but it is well known by others.

G. Now for those who may be invested in a different interpretation, I want to alert you to where I am headed so you can decide whether being in the class will be worth the aggravation. I do not want you throwing fruit or gnashing your teeth at me.

1. I will say more about this shortly, but let me just say now that I think there is a strong futurist element in Revelation.

a. In other words, I think much of the apocalyptic material, much of the visionary material after chapter 3, relates to the end of history, to the Second Coming of Christ and the period of intense distress that will immediately precede that coming. I think the events associated with the opening of the first five seals of the scroll in chapter 6 represent the birth pains that mark human history until the return of Christ,³ and the opening of the sixth seal points to the contents of the scroll.

b. The focus of the scroll, the contents of which are not revealed until the breaking of the seventh seal,⁴ is the Second Coming and its accompanying circumstances and judgment. So I would probably be described as a modified futurist. I disagree with those who believe that the events symbolized prior to chapter 19 have already been fulfilled.

² William Barclay, *The Revelation of John Volume 1*, Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 1.

³ See, e.g., Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 830.

⁴ As Alan J. Beagley recognizes in "Scrolls, Seals" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1084, "[N]one of the contents of a real scroll would be visible until the last seal had been broken – and at that point the whole of its contents would be revealed."

2. I also am what is known as an amillennialist, which is the common understanding in churches of Christ and in a number of other groups. That means that I believe the 1,000-year (millennial) reign mentioned in Revelation 20 is a picture, a symbol, of the present reign of Christ and the saints in heaven. Christ's return will mark the end of that period, and then the final state will be ushered in.

a. That is in contrast to premillennialists who believe, among other things, that the Second Coming will *precede* a literal 1,000-year reign on earth. In their view, Christ will return and then rule over a peaceful and prosperous earthly kingdom for 1,000 years, after which time there will be a final rebellion and then the final state will be ushered in. Premillennialists are of two main types: historical and dispensational. These types differ in how they see the relationship between Israel and the church and, at least usually, in whether they think the church will be whisked away to heaven in the rapture prior to the time of intense hardship and persecution known as the Tribulation.

b. Amillennialism also differs, to a lesser extent, from postmillennialism. Postmillennialists believe that the kingdom Christ brought is progressing in history, being extended in the world through preaching and the work of the Spirit, and that this will culminate in a Christianized world. After a long period of righteousness and peace on earth, a golden age, there will be a brief period of apostasy and then Christ's consummating return.

c. Though these millennial disagreements have been prominent at different times in church history, they should not be allowed to obscure the major point that the victory Christ has won over Satan will be fully and finally realized in the end and that even before that time God cares for his saints and blesses them in his triumphant rule.

3. Okay, that is your warning. If neither of those perspectives – futurism or amillennialism – makes you hot under the collar, I think you will be safe. Who knows? You may even learn something.

H. I am going to spend today and the next class or two introducing the book. As I always say, introductory material is not filler; it contributes to one's understanding of the writing. But beyond standard introduction issues, I also want to give you an overview of the Bible story because Revelation is part of, indeed the culmination of, that story.

I. When we begin our study of the text, I will try to move things along at a good pace, meaning I will try to strike a balance between getting bogged down in minutia and skimming too quickly over the text. It is a fairly lengthy book. I am guessing it will take us about six months to move through it.

II. Authorship

A. I believe Revelation was authored by the Apostle John. There are several lines of evidence in support of that view.

1. The author identifies himself simply as John, which suggests he was well known to his readers. Reliable early church tradition places the Apostle John in Ephesus at the end of his life. No other Christian named John would have been better known to the churches of Asia in the late first century. As Donald Guthrie asks, "Was the Asiatic church overrun with brilliant Christians by the name of John, who would only need to announce their name for the Christians to know which was meant?"⁵

2. Ascription of Revelation to the Apostle John is early and widespread. Several second-century writers and works make the claim (Papias of Hierapolis [debated], Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Irenaeus, the Muratorian Canon) and do so without any hint of there being a contrary claim. Their evidence is especially strong given that Papias (if included), Melito, and Irenaeus were in a good position to know about the matter. Papias knew the Apostle John personally; Melito was bishop of Sardis, one of the churches addressed in Revelation; and Irenaeus was from Smyrna, another church addressed in Revelation, and claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had talked with the Apostle John. Third-century Christian writers ascribing Revelation to the Apostle John include Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Origen, and Tertullian.⁶

3. Linguistic and stylistic clues in the text have convinced a majority of scholars that the author was a Jewish Christian originally from Palestine.⁷ That, of course, fits the Apostle John.

B. The most significant early dissenting voice regarding the Apostle John's authorship is Dionysius, a third-century bishop of Alexandria. He did not claim there was a different historical tradition about who wrote the book. Rather, he argued that the Apostle John did not write it mainly because of how the Greek style differs from that of the Gospel of John and 1 John.⁸

C. Many modern scholars agree with Dionysius on this point, but Carson and Moo conclude:

While the difference in Greek style is a problem, we are not convinced that the arguments of Dionysius or his latter-day followers make it impossible for the same person to have written both the fourth gospel and Revelation. We are thus inclined to accept the testimony of those who were in a position to know about these matters, and we attribute both books to John the apostle, "the beloved disciple."⁹

III. Date

⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 946.

⁶ D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 700-701.

⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 812.

⁸ Carson and Moo, 701-702; Köstenberger, et al., 814.

⁹ Carson and Moo, 705.

A. The only two serious contenders for the date of Revelation are shortly after the reign of Nero (A.D. 68-69; not 64-67 as some hyper-preterists claim) and near the end of Domitian's reign (A.D. 95-96). In agreement with a clear majority of scholars, I think the A.D. 95-96 date has considerably stronger support.¹⁰

1. This date receives the earliest and the most support from early Christian writers. Irenaeus wrote in the second century that Revelation was written toward the end of Domitian's reign. He was in a position to have direct information about the matter in that he was from Smyrna, one of the churches addressed in Revelation, and claimed to have heard Polycarp, who had direct contact with the Apostle John. Eusebius reports that Melito, who was bishop of Sardis in the second century, another church addressed in Revelation, agreed that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign. Others supporting that dating include Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), Origen (c. 185-254), Victorinus (died c. 304), Eusebius (c. 260-340), and Jerome (c. 354-420).¹¹

2. The book indicates that emperor worship was practiced (13:4, 12, 15-16; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and though there were elements of emperor worship going back to Julius Caesar, it reached new heights under Domitian.

a. Bruce Metzger writes in his little commentary: "Prior to Domitian the state religion had not discriminated against the Christian faith. Nero's mad acts against Christians were restricted to Rome and had nothing to do with the issue of worship. The first emperor who tried to compel Christians to participate in Caesar worship was Domitian."¹²

b. The Roman historian Suetonius (born c. A.D. 70), who wrote in the early part of the second century, says that "Lord and God" became Domitian's regular title in writing and conversation. "[I]n the accounts of Nero's conflicts with Christians there is no evidence that Nero claimed to be divine."¹³

c. Carson and Moo state:

Domitian apparently made this confession a test of loyalty. It is indeed possible that some Christians tried to avoid the predicament this placed them in by taking refuge in the synagogue, where some of the traditional legal exceptions granted Jews in this regard still applied. This may help explain the tensions between Jews and Christians evident in the letters to the seven churches.¹⁴

3. "Colin Hemer, after an exhaustive study of the local settings of the churches [*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 2000], claims that his findings

¹⁰ See Mark L. Hitchcock's 2005 dissertation, "[A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation](#)" (accessed on 6/26/23). For a brief summary of the evidence, see Thomas D. Ice, "[The Date of the Book of Revelation](#)" (accessed on 6/26/23).

¹¹ Köstenberger, et al., 822-823.

¹² Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 160.

¹³ Köstenberger, et al., 817.

¹⁴ Carson and Moo, 709-710.

generally confirm the Domitianic date."¹⁵ For example, Laodicea was leveled by a devastating earthquake in A.D. 60-61. The city was rebuilt without any assistance from Rome, but it was decades before that rebuilding reached a level that would justify Laodicea's depiction in Revelation as a rich and economically flourishing city. Its great stadium was not completed until A.D. 79, and other of its grand public buildings were constructed around that same time. Its great triple gate and towers were probably finished in A.D. 88-90. Mark Hitchcock remarks: "[I]f Revelation was written in A.D. 95, the description of Laodicea in Rev. 3:14-22 would fit the situation exactly. By this time the city had been completely rebuilt and was enjoying prosperity and prestige and basking in the pride of its great accomplishment."¹⁶

4. The lack of any mention of Paul or Timothy in the letter to the church at Ephesus is more compatible with a date in the 90s than the 60s. This is admittedly an argument from silence, but given how long Paul had labored in Ephesus and given that Timothy was combating false teaching there in the mid-60s, it seems likely that a letter written so close to that time would in some way acknowledge their service to that church.

5. To the extent Revelation alludes to the Nero-redivivus myth, which seems likely, it favors a date during Domitian's reign because the return of Nero legend increased significantly in popularity toward the end of the first century.¹⁷ The more that idea was in the cultural wind, the better suited it would be to serve as a symbolic reference.

B. The reference in Rev. 11:1-2 to the temple and the reference in Rev. 17:9-11 to the sixth king as presently reigning do not require a Neronic date and are not sufficient to overcome the evidence for the Domitianic date.¹⁸

C. Thus, Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles conclude:

The external testimony overwhelmingly favors the late date, which became the established tradition throughout church history. The internal testimony, while less than conclusive, also tends to support a later date. Although some passages may reflect historical circumstances prior to 70, most of the evidence seems to point to a later date. The Book of Revelation was written around 95-96 by John in obedient submission to the vision he received while in exile on Patmos.¹⁹

IV. John's Situation

A. John is on the island of Patmos, to which he most likely had been temporarily banished by a local Asian official because of opposition to his message (1:9). Exile or banishment to an isolated island was a relatively common form of punishment in the Roman Empire. The sentence could be either perpetual or temporary, the former requiring a verdict from

¹⁵ Carson and Moo, 710,

¹⁶ Mark Hitchcock, "The Stake in the Heart – the A.D. 95 Date of Revelation" in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., *The End Times Controversy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 149.

¹⁷ Köstenberger, et al., 820.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Carson and Moo, 707-712; Kim Riddlebarger, *The Man of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2006), 179-186.

¹⁹ Köstenberger, et al., 824.

the emperor. According to Tertullian (c. 160-225), John's exile was of the temporary variety, so he was probably sentenced by a local official.²⁰

B. The island of Patmos is about ten miles long and six miles wide with rocky terrain. It is about forty miles west of Miletus and almost sixty miles southwest of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea. The island was inhabited, but John's presence there was a forced separation from the mainland.²¹

V. Recipients

A. Revelation was written at the Lord's command to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:4, 10-11), which incorporated approximately the western third of Asia Minor. The cities in which these churches were located were on a postal route in that province. Since the number seven symbolized perfection or completeness, these seven churches could symbolize all the churches of Asia.

B. The saints in these locations needed encouragement to remain faithful as they faced the pressure of a culture, and increasingly a political power, that was hostile to Christianity. They were being pressured to compromise their commitment to Christ in order to get along in a world opposed to them.

1. John is in exile, Antipas has been martyred (2:13), and the churches are experiencing tribulation (1:9, 2:9), enduring hardship for Christ's name (2:3), and being pressured to deny him (2:13, 3:8). Some in Smyrna will face imprisonment and even execution in the future (2:10).

2. Christians would be pressured to pay honor to the Emperor as divine and to express loyalty to local patron deities at the annual dinners held by the various trade guilds, associations that were important to one's economic livelihood. They also would come under the microscope regarding their loyalty to the Empire when Jews would insist to local government officials that Christianity was a separate religion from Judaism and that Christians therefore were not entitled to the special right of Jews to practice their religion throughout the Empire. Under this pressure, it seems that some Christians found ways to rationalize participating in the trade guild festivities and sacrificing to the Emperor.

C. God paints a picture of ultimate reality and his final victory to reinforce for them the certainty of their reward and the importance of enduring in faith whatever the enemy may throw at them. The point is not that it will be easy but that it will be worth it.

VI. Apocalyptic Literature

A. Apocalyptic literature, also known simply as apocalypse, refers to a distinctive style or type of literature that was well known among Jews of the first century. There were numerous

²⁰ Köstenberger, et al., 824-825

²¹ Köstenberger, et al., 824.

Jewish apocalypses written from the third century B.C. through the first century A.D. (e.g., 1 Enoch, Jubilees 23, Testament of Levi 2-5, portions of the Sybilline Oracles, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, 2 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch). There also were Christian apocalypses other than Revelation that were written in the late first or second centuries A.D. and beyond (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, Ascension of Isaiah 6-11).

B. This is significant because, even though those apocalypses were not inspired by God, in choosing to communicate in the Book of Revelation through that known literary form, God was signaling that his message needed to be understood in accordance with that literary form. Where, for example, God communicates truth in the literary form of a proverb, it would be a mistake to treat that revelation as though it were a legal decree. Proverbs convey general or proverbial truths not absolute truths to which there are no exceptions. The literary form brings with it certain interpretive conventions, and they need to be kept in mind to hear the message accurately.

C. Apocalyptic literature is characterized by a number of things:²²

1. It reveals some heavenly or spiritual reality through the agency of a seer or prophet. The vision usually is given in the first person and is expressed in a narrative framework, as a course of events. It frequently involves angels or other heavenly beings as guides and interpreters and includes exhortations to behave, choose, and respond in certain ways.

2. It is saturated with symbolic, metaphorical, and figurative language and with symbolic imagery.

3. It portrays a dualism, a sharp contrast, between the temporary situations of earth and the eternal realities of heaven that usually finds expression in the final intervention of the sovereign God to consummate his plans for creation. So there is commonly an eschatological element, an end-time fulfillment, to apocalyptic literature.

VII. Overview of the Bible Story

A. Before elaborating on my interpretive approach to Revelation, let me sketch for you the overarching story of the Bible. The Bible is a collection of writings that were made by many different people in different places at different times over more than a thousand-year period, but it tells one big story. As I said, Revelation is the culmination of that story, which is why it was fixed as the last book of the Christian Bible.

B. God in the beginning miraculously created all things, including human beings (Adam and Eve), during the six days of creation. Humans were created uniquely in the image of God and were given a place of special importance within the purposes of God, including the authority to rule the earth.

²² See Köstenberger, et al., 831-833.

C. God did not create to supply something lacking in his own life, as though he were in some way incomplete. We do not exist because God *needs* us in any way. Rather, he created to share with others the love he experienced eternally in the triune communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

D. The creation was at first an ideal place in which all things were acting in the way God desired. But soon Adam and Eve, who were to be God's representatives on earth, rejected his rule by disobeying him.

1. In Genesis 4-11, Sin intensifies and spreads like a plague. In chapter 4 Cain murders his brother Abel, and Lamech, after bragging about having killed a young man for striking him, claims a right of unlimited retribution and violence.

2. In Genesis 6 the Sin Adam let loose on the human world had thoroughly corrupted God's very good creation. Genesis 6:5 states (ESV): *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.* And Gen. 6:11-12 states (ESV): *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.*¹² *And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.*

E. In response to this corruption caused by Sin, God flooded the entire world in the days of Noah. Everyone was killed except Noah and his seven family members who were on the ark. God's judgment in the flood revealed not only his holy wrath against sin but also demonstrated in a powerful way the depth and extent of Sin's grip on mankind. Despite the opportunity for a new beginning that God provided in bringing righteous Noah and his family through the flood – a kind of re-creation – and in expressing his mercy by making his covenant with creation, mankind continued on its sinful course, living in rebellion to God.

F. So because of Sin, creation is not now the way it is supposed to be. It is no longer a paradise where all things work together in peace and harmony under God's rule. Instead, our world now includes things like anger, division, hatred, violence, destruction, disease, death, decay, lying, stealing, suffering, sorrow, and pain. In that sense, it is a creation that is broken, a creation that is sick as a result of sin. It has fallen from its original state of glory, which is why Adam's sinning is known in theology as "the Fall."

G. Since Sin followed mankind through the flood, clearly some kind of extraordinary work was going to be necessary to recover from the "sin plague" that Satan induced humans to bring into their world. But what would it be? The answer begins to surface in the last half of Genesis 11 (though there is an earlier hint in Gen. 3:15, the verse known as the protoevangelium) where we have a genealogy that takes us from Noah's son Shem down to Terah, the father of Abram (later Abraham), Nahor, and Haran.

H. The story of the rest of the Bible is the story of God's work through the people of Israel to rescue his creation, which includes mankind, from its fallen state. People are the high point of God's creation, but his rescue effort includes all of creation because all of creation was harmed as a result of sin. That is why Paul in Rom. 8:19-22 says that creation itself looks forward to the day it will be

freed from the consequences of human sin. In the words of "Joy to the World," Isaac Watts's famous Christmas carol, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found."

I. God chose Abraham to be the person through whom all nations would be blessed. This meant that God was going to bless the nations, the people of the world, by using Abraham in his plan for healing the sick creation. The fulfillment of this promise involved Abraham's descendants becoming the nation of Israel. That happened when God led them out of Egyptian slavery under Moses around 1446 B.C., an event known as "the Exodus," and brought them into the Promise Land (Canaan) under Joshua around 1406 B.C., an event known as "the Conquest."

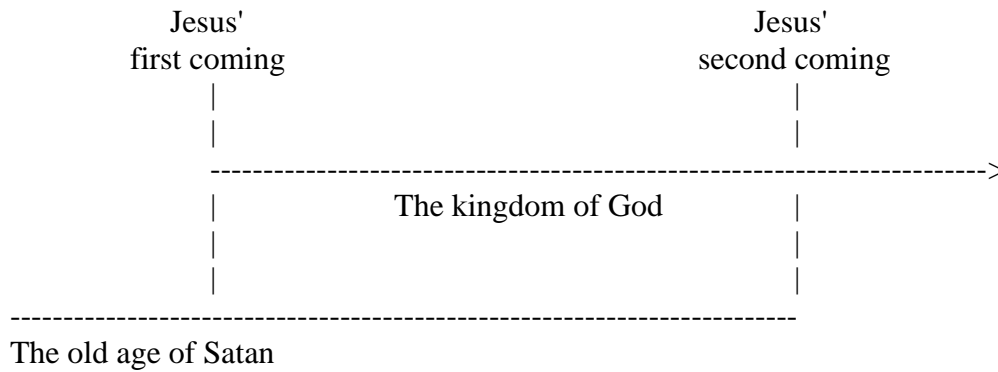
J. Israel was to live in the land God gave them as a holy and obedient people so that the nations around them would see the greatness of God and the goodness and blessedness of life lived under his rule (Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). But Israel was unfaithful to God. Because of their continual disobedience, God had Israel's enemies defeat them and sent the Israelites into exile in foreign lands as he had warned them repeatedly that he would do.

K. The Old Testament ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. The glorious state of peace, harmony, and complete blessing – the healing of creation – that the Old Testament suggested God was going to bring about did not arrive when the Jews returned from Babylonian exile. Israel continued to be ruled by foreign powers instead of a son of David, and the marks of this old fallen creation continued to exist. When Jesus came in the first century and announced, "the kingdom of God is at hand," the people were excited. They were hoping that God at long last was going to bring about the divine utopia, was going to heal the sin-sick creation and bless his people by having them live in that glorious state.

L. Jesus' claim that he was bringing in God's final state, the kingdom of God, raised a question in the mind of Jews. How could Jesus be bringing in the glorious eternal state of perfect love, peace, and fellowship when the signs of the old fallen order – things like sin, death, sorrow, suffering, and pain – continued to exist? Jesus explained, especially in some of his parables, that people were mistaken in thinking that the coming of the kingdom of God would mean the *immediate* removal of all bad things. He taught that the kingdom, the final state, comes in two stages. He was introducing or inaugurating the kingdom with his first coming, but it would not be finalized or consummated, fully manifested, until he returned from heaven.

M. So the kingdom of God is already here in a beginning or initial sense. The new age has already begun to exist, but the old age is still present. The two ages will overlap until Jesus returns and strips out everything that is part of the old fallen order, everything that is contrary to the eternal vision of God. The kingdom's presence is now subtle. It is experienced by Christians and is seen in their transformed lives and their influence in the world.

N. When Christ returns, the kingdom will be expressed in its fullest sense. At that time, all bad things, things like sin, suffering, death, mourning, crying, and pain, will be removed. Christians will live forever in glorified bodies in a transformed creation, a "heavenized" creation, known as the new heavens and new earth. This little diagram might help you see the idea.



1. This concept of the kingdom being *already* here in one sense but *not yet* here in another sense is the dominant view of New Testament scholarship.

a. Douglas Moo wrote in 1988: "[A] pretty good consensus of evangelicals from various theological persuasions hold to some form of 'inaugurated' eschatology, whereby it is held that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated through Jesus' first coming, but will be 'climaxed' or fulfilled only at his second."²³

b. Michael Wilkins wrote in 2004 that "the 'already-not yet' general position is a large consensus."²⁴

c. Rather than "already-not yet," some (e.g., Sören Agersnap) prefer the description "already-even more," but the point remains the same. The kingdom of God has been a present reality since Christ's first coming, but it will not be consummated or finalized until his second coming.

d. Richard Bauckham wrote in 2007:

In New Testament scholarship a broad consensus emerged . . . [regarding] a position sometimes labeled 'inaugurated' eschatology. There is a tension between the 'already' of experience and the 'not yet' of eschatological fulfillment. The realization of God's final purpose for the world has already begun in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but its completion is still awaited. Believers live in the overlap of the old and new ages, between the resurrection of Jesus understood as an eschatological event and their own bodily resurrection at the future *parousia* of Jesus, participating through the Spirit in the new life of the age to come but in the context of the as yet unredeemed world.²⁵

2. This already-not yet concept of the kingdom lies behind many of the seeming paradoxes of the New Testament. That is why the New Testament writers speak of many things as being a present reality but also something that is still to come. Thus, the **kingdom** is now

²³ Douglas J. Moo, "Divine Healing in the Health and Wealth Gospel," *Trinity Journal* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 197.

²⁴ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 175 (fn. 15).

²⁵ Richard Bauckham, "Eschatology" in John Webster and others, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 307.

(Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13; Heb. 12:28), but the kingdom is still to come (Mat. 6:10, 7:21-23, 25:34; Mk. 14:25; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:50; Gal. 5:21; 2 Tim. 4:1); **eternal life** is now (Jn. 5:24, 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:11, 5:13), but eternal life is still to come (Mat. 19:29, 25:46; Mk. 10:30, Lk. 18:30, Rom. 6:22; Gal. 6:8; Tit. 3:7; Jude 21); the **end of the ages** is now (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26), but the end of the age is still to come (Mat. 13:39-40, 13:49-50, 28:20; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21, 2:7, 5:16; Heb. 6:5); **redemption** is now (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14), but redemption is still to come (Lk. 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30); **salvation** is now (Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Jude 3), but salvation is still to come (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9-10, 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14, 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5); **adoption** is now (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26, 4:6; Heb. 12:7-8), but adoption is still to come (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:23); **death's defeat** is now (2 Tim. 1:10), but death's defeat is still to come (1 Cor. 15:26); **new creation** is now (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), but new creation is still to come (Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1-4).

3. As Christians, as participants in the kingdom that has already invaded the present, we now share in the blessings of that kingdom. We now have eternal life, redemption, salvation, adoption, etc. and we have the indwelling Spirit who is transforming us toward the purity and perfection of the Lord Jesus, but there is an aspect of those blessings that will not be realized until Jesus returns. Indeed, the Spirit is a down payment on the fullness of our hope (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). It is in that hope that we wait patiently and eagerly for the Lord's return (Rom. 8:23-25; Tit. 2:13).

4. As Christians, we live in the tension between the already and the not yet, and we must maintain the balance between the two.

a. What is called "over-realized eschatology" is the error of thinking that you already have blessings that God has reserved for the future; it is viewing the now too much in terms of the not yet. You can see this attitude reflected in 1 Cor. 4:8-11 and 2 Tim. 2:17-18. You can see it in modern "health and wealth" teachers who claim that God intends us already to be free of all sickness and poverty.

b. What is called "under-realized eschatology" is the error of failing to appreciate the blessings we as Christians already have from God. It is undervaluing the effect of Christ's kingdom-bringing work on the present. You see this in people who think there is no power in Christ for transformed living, who think that a Christian is forgiven but is still trapped in the power of sin. As I often say, a Christian is not the same person in a new situation but a *new* person in a new situation.

O. At his first coming, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival but also demonstrated its character and gave us a foretaste of it. John Piper remarks in a sermon titled "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, *the first coming of the Messiah was not the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age*. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people.

Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.²⁶

P. As I argued when we looked at Matthew 24, Jesus taught that the time between his ascent and his return is one of birth pains – one of wars, conflicts, disasters, tumult, persecution, false prophets, and lawlessness – that will intensify, as birth pains do, and then ultimately give way (give "birth") to his return. A key figure in the final intensification of persecution and hardship will be Antichrist, also known as the man of lawlessness. He will be a Satan-inspired leader of a violent, anti-Christian empire. His coming was foretold as early as the book of Daniel and was taught by the apostles Paul and John. When he is on the scene, Christ will overthrow him with the splendor of his coming (2 Thess. 2:8).

Q. Christ will return with mighty angels and will take vengeance, inflict punishment, on the unbelievers of the world (2 Thess. 1:7-8; Jude 14-15). In conjunction with that coming, the dead will be resurrected, the living will be transformed, creation will be made over into the new heavens and new earth, and the final judgment will be executed, meaning people will be sent to their permanent dwelling places. God's children will spend eternity in the love and joy of the new heavens and new earth. Those who are not God's children, meaning those who sinned and did not receive his forgiveness, will spend eternity in the sorrow of hell.

R. Revelation, in my view, is largely a symbolic representation of the wrath and judgment that surround Christ's return, but it also contains the grandest depiction of the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth. It is a visionary elaboration of the final chapter of the Bible story. The paradise that was lost in Genesis is regained in Revelation and regained to a transcendent degree, regained in even greater form. Revelation pictures the restoration of all things promised by God through the prophets, the restoration mentioned by Peter in Acts 3:21. The curse that followed sin in Genesis is removed in Revelation, and the creation that was defiled by sin in Genesis is transformed into the new heavens and new earth in Revelation. The tree of life from which mankind was banished in Genesis because of sin is part of the eternal home of the redeemed in Revelation.

S. Jesus is the center of this entire effort. It was planned from eternity that to solve the sin problem that would infect creation God the Son would become the God-man Jesus Christ and would take on himself the penalty that all human sin deserved. This allows God to forgive sinners without making light of the horror of sin, without trivializing sin. It allows God to forgive in a way that is consistent with his nature, a way that expresses his love without neglecting his holiness and justice.

1. Christ's sacrifice is therefore the key to healing all the consequences of sin, even the damage it caused to the nonhuman creation. Thus, Paul in Col. 1:19-20 speaks of Jesus as the one through whom God the Father reconciled *all things* to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross.

²⁶ John Piper, "[Christ and Cancer](#)" (August 17, 1980) (accessed on 5/19/23).

2. Andrew Lincoln says of Eph. 1:9-10:

An important part of the eulogy is the middle section which blesses God for revealing that his gracious purpose in history is all-embracing (vv 9, 10). As believers are reminded of the revelation of this mystery, they are brought to realize that the salvation with which they have been blessed centers in the same comprehensive Christ in whom God is working to restore all things. The divine election which has grasped them is shown to be God's decision to sum up all things in Christ. To be in Christ, therefore, is to be part of a program which is as broad as the universe, a movement which is rolling on toward a renewed cosmos where all is in harmony.²⁷

VIII. Interpretive Approach

A. As I already indicated, my interpretive approach to Revelation is probably best labeled a modified futurist view. I see John's visions as referring primarily to the last days of human history that are ended with Christ's return in judgment. It is a "modified" futurism because, unlike some others, I believe the events associated with the opening of the seals are a depiction of the birth pains that will characterize history until Christ's return. The events of the sixth seal indicate the coming of Christ, the subject of the scroll, the contents of which are revealed after the breaking of the seventh seal.

B. There are several other basic interpretive approaches.

1. Virtually everyone agrees that the visions from the latter part of chapter 19 to the end of the book relate to a still future coming of Christ that will include the consummation of the kingdom – the general resurrection, making of the new heavens and new earth, and the final judgment. But some think the visions prior to chapter 19 were fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire or in the fall of Jerusalem, the latter being an option only for that minority that believes Revelation was written prior to A.D. 70. This is known as the *preterist approach*, from the Latin word *praeter* meaning past. It is not to be confused with what is known as full or hyper-preterism, the eccentric view that the Second Coming has already occurred.

2. Some see John's visions prior to chapter 19 as a historical roadmap, a chronological outline referring to people, countries, and events throughout history from the first century. This is known as the *historical approach*. It is illustrated by certain early Protestant theologians who equated the Pope with the Antichrist. This view has very few adherents today.

3. Some see John's visions as symbolic depictions designed to teach us generally about God's person and ways in the world; they teach principles of spiritual war rather than symbolize actual events. These principles operate throughout the church age and may have repeated embodiments. This is known as the *idealist approach*.

²⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 43-44.

C. In taking a predominantly futurist view, I am in some good scholarly company. I know some of you do not care about that, but let me quote just a few scholars who share that basic perspective. That does not prove the perspective is correct, of course, but it shows it is a mainstream understanding.

1. Carson and Moo state, "[I]t is the futurist approach that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation. . . . Revelation is about eschatology, not history."²⁸

2. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles state, "In modern times, the futurist position enjoys pride of place among most evangelical Christians," and "Since the book itself explicitly claims to be about future events surrounding the return of Christ (1:19; 22:18-20), preference should be given to a form of the futurist approach."²⁹

3. Craig Blomberg states, "But to the extent that all three of these views [preterism, historicism, and idealism] typically deny a still-future, more-awful fulfillment of the judgments depicted throughout this book or a discrete period of unparalleled tribulation ushering in the parousia, we have to demur and adopt a primarily *futurist* perspective."³⁰

4. Grant Osborne writes in his commentary on Revelation (p. 22):

My study of ancient apocalyptic and the Book of Revelation has led me to believe that John's visions (esp. chaps. 4-22) were primarily intended to describe the events that will end world history. The saints in these chapters are believers alive in that final period, and the beast is the Antichrist who will lead the "earth dwellers"/unbelievers in a final pogrom against all the people of God.³¹

D. Many early Christian writers held to some form of the futurist view, including Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Irenaeus (c. 130-200), Tertullian (c. 160-225), Hippolytus (c. 170-236), and Victorinus (died c. 304).

E. Not only is it "the nature of apocalyptic writings to be concerned primarily with the consummation of God's redemptive purpose and the eschatological end of the age,"³² but the internal indications that John's visions are eschatological (end time) strike me as overwhelming.

1. The statement in 1:7 that Jesus is coming with the clouds, every eye will see him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn matches the signs of Christ's return in glory in Mat. 24:30, which verse commentators overwhelmingly recognize refers to the *parousia*.

²⁸ Carson and Moo, 720.

²⁹ Köstenberger, et al., 849, 852.

³⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts Through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H 2006), 519.

³¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 22.

³² George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 14.

2. I think the reference in 3:10 to the hour of trial coming on *the whole world* probably is to the final judgment on the ungodly world at Christ's return.

3. The souls of Christian martyrs under the heavenly altar, which come into view with the opening of the fifth seal in 6:9, cry out for God to judge and avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth. The fact they are told to wait until the full number of martyrs has been reached means that the judgment in mind coincides with the cessation of Christian martyrdom. Since Christians have been martyred throughout history and continue to be martyred today, the full number of martyrs was not reached in the past and thus the judgment referred to could not have come in the past.

4. At the signs of Christ's immediate arrival in 6:12-14 (compare Mat. 24:29), people call out to the mountains and rocks in 6:16-17, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

5. The "great tribulation" mentioned in 7:14 is a reference to the period of intensified hardship and persecution that Daniel (7:21-27, 12:1) and Jewish apocalypses indicated God's people would undergo immediately before the coming of the final eternal state. That intensification is implicit in Jesus' referring in Matthew 24 to the tumult of the world as "birth pains" that precede his return. Birth pains intensify as delivery approaches. Paul also indicates that the hardship and persecution right before Christ's return will be intensified by stating in 2 Thess. 2:8 that the man of lawlessness will be on the scene when Christ returns.

6. The half-hour of silence in heaven that follows the opening of the seventh seal (8:1) indicates something of utmost gravity is about to occur, which fits the judgment that accompanies Christ's return, and the scope and intensity of the judgments associated with the six trumpets (8:6-9:21) give them an eschatological flavor.

7. The great angel swears in 10:6-7 that there would be no more delay and that mystery of God would be fulfilled with the seventh trumpet as announced by the prophets.

8. When the seventh angel blows his trumpet in 11:15, loud voices declare, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." In 11:17 (and 16:5) God is no longer described as the one "who is and who was and who is to come," as in 1:4 and 1:8, but simply as the one "who is and who was." The "who is to come" is dropped because he is there depicted as having already come.

9. In the next verse (11:18), the twenty-four elders who sit on the thrones before God and who had fallen on their faces say, "The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." This is consummation language if I ever heard it.

10. In 14:7 a flying angel declares in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

11. Another angel says in 14:10-11 that those who cast their lot with the beast, "also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night."

12. In 14:15 an angel announces, "the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." Verse 16 says "and the earth was reaped." Reaping of the earth refers to the end of the age in Mat. 13:38-40.

13. Revelation 14:19-20 says that the grape harvest of the earth was thrown "into the great winepress of God's wrath. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia." We are told in 19:15 that it is Christ who "will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty."

14. Revelation 15:1 declares "the wrath of God is finished" with the seven plagues of the seven angels. This is consistent with the scope and intensity of the wrath that is poured out in 16:1-21 from the bowls of those seven angels. Revelation 16:14 speaks of "the great day of God the Almighty," 16:15 has the parenthetical declaration "Behold, I am coming like a thief!" and with the pouring out of the seventh bowl a loud voice from the temple proclaims in 16:17 "It is done!"

15. In 19:7 a great multitude declares that the marriage of the Lamb has come. In 20:12 the dead are judged; in 20:14 death and Hades thrown into lake of fire; in 21:1 he sees a new heaven and a new earth; in 21:4 it is announced that there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying or pain; in 22:3 it is said that there will no longer be anything accursed; in 22:5 it is said that God's servants reign forever; and in 22:20 there is the prayer "come Lord Jesus."

F. It is true that Christ can "come" in a figurative sense by bringing a localized judgment, as distinct from his literal return from heaven, but as Robert Shank notes:

But (say some) Christ warned the churches at Ephesus, Pergamos, and Sardis that he would come to them unless they repented of their faults and mended their ways (2:5,16, 3:3), and his "coming" would have been a visitation of judgment and only in spirit, rather than "bodily, visible, and glorious." True, as context clearly indicates. But the meaning of Christ's coming in 2:5,16 and 3:3 establishes nothing concerning the meaning of his coming in 3:11 and 22:7,12,20. In both groups of passages, the meaning of Christ's coming is clearly established by context, and the contexts of the two groups are altogether different. We repeat: the personal, bodily, visible, glorious Advent of Christ, everywhere anticipated in the NT, is a terminus integral in the structure of the eschatology of Revelation.

Any interpretation which ignores or denies this fact is without premise in Revelation.³³

G. Some object to the futurist view on the grounds it would be meaningless to first-century Christians, but I disagree with that.

1. In revealing God's triumph over the *ultimate* evil and hostility, and thus the triumph of the faithful in Christ, John makes clear that the faithful have nothing to fear from any *lesser* manifestation of evil and hostility. This powerful portrayal and confirmation of the ultimate, end-time victory makes certain that the reward of faithfulness is secure and thereby strengthens us in whatever battle we face prior to that time.

2. Certainly the Old Testament prophecies that were to be fulfilled in the distant future, like those of Daniel, were meaningful to those who heard them. 2 Peter 3:10-13 refers to the ultimate transformation of creation into the new heavens and new earth at the end of history, and then the very next verse shows its relevance for current life.

3. Moreover, the fact Revelation (and the New Testament generally) portrays the end as "soon," rather than declaring that centuries or millennia would pass before its occurrence (which is known only in hindsight), means that each generation lives on the verge of Christ's coming. The relevance of the end is magnified by the fact that, ever since Christ's inauguration of the "last days," the end is in some sense always near. I will say more about this in a moment.

H. Part of the confusion in reading Revelation from a futurist perspective is that the eschatological climax is revealed against the backdrop of John's day.

1. In other words, the first-century manifestations of evil and opposition are taken up in the portrait of the end-time evil and opposition. They provide some of the imagery through which to convey the climactic assault. The end is portrayed as a magnified form of what is known, which reinforces the connection between the final victory and the struggle that John's immediate audience was experiencing.

2. Here is how Grant Osborne expresses it:

My study of ancient apocalyptic and of the Book of Revelation has led me to believe that John's visions (esp. chaps. 4-22) were primarily intended to describe events that will end world history. The saints in these chapters are believers alive in that final period, and the beast is the Antichrist who will lead the "earth-dwellers"/unbelievers in a final pogrom against all the people of God. . . . But the preterist school also is correct, because the visions use the events of the future to address John and his readers in the present. Most of the imagery used to describe the beast and Babylon the Great comes from actual first-century parallels. The beast is a final Nerolike figure, and Babylon is the final unholy Roman Empire.

³³ Robert Shank, *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 394.

One of my definitions for apocalyptic is "the present addressed through parallels with the future."³⁴

3. Carson and Moo put it this way:

Revelation is about eschatology, not history.

Nevertheless, the peculiar eschatological stance of the early church demands that we not ignore the degree to which John pictures this eschatological climax against the backdrop of events in his own day. It is likely, for instance, that John's depiction of the "great prostitute," "Babylon," that is doomed to fall (18:1-4), has some reference to the Roman Empire of his own day, and that the terrible persecution described in Revelation would remind John's readers of their own oppression. To some extent, then, John, while describing the end, describes it against the background of his first-century situation. . . . [B]iblical prophets have always pictured "the day of the Lord," the eschaton, in terms of their own time.³⁵

I. Some claim that the futurist approach is incompatible with indications in Revelation that the fulfillment would be "soon" – things that must soon take place (1:1); time is near (1:3); I am coming soon (3:11); what must soon take place (22:6); I am coming soon (22:7); do not seal up words of the prophecy for time is near (22:10); I am coming soon (22:12); I am coming soon (22:20).

1. But these texts also present difficulties for the view that the prophecy "soon" was fulfilled in the fall of the Roman Empire (preterist view). (Dating Revelation to A.D. 95-96 eliminates the fall of Jerusalem as a possible fulfillment, as does the portrayal of the judgment and the empire that is judged.)

a. The Roman Empire lasted for several hundred years (into the fifth century) and changed its attitude toward the church before its fall (Constantine became emperor in A.D. 306 and converted to Christianity in 312). If "soon" can mean several centuries it can by the same principle mean a couple millennia. And if the Roman Empire was favorably disposed to Christians long before it fell, it does not fit the picture of the empire that falls in Revelation.

b. The indications noted above that the fulfillment is eschatological are inconsistent with the fulfillment being the fall of the Roman Empire within history.

2. The "soon" statements in chapter 22 are after the clearly eschatological descriptions in 20:11 - 22:6 – the dead are judged, death is eliminated, and the new heavens and new earth is brought into being. So whatever "soon" means, it must fit with the fact it applies to the coming of the ultimate end at the return of the Lord Jesus.

3. Because Jesus does not know the time of his return (Mat. 24:36; Mk. 13:32), some claim his statements that he is "coming soon" must refer to a coming other than the *parousia* (e.g., his coming figuratively in a temporal judgment). The argument is that if one does

³⁴ Osborne, 22.

³⁵ Carson and Moo, 720-721.

not know when something will occur one cannot know that it will occur soon. But that misses the sense in which he says his coming is "soon."

a. It is precisely because Jesus does not know the time of his return (which implies that God is not going to reveal it in advance) that this cannot be a statement of absolute timing. Rather, it is an indication of a perspective with which this future event of uncertain timing is to be viewed. It means something like, "The time of my coming is uncertain, so you are to live in the expectation that I am coming soon."

b. It is like someone saying to leaders of a city that must maintain levies to prevent flooding in the event of a catastrophic storm, "The storm is coming soon." That is not intended as a literal assertion of timing, because nobody knows when such a storm will come. Rather, it is a statement about the need for constant readiness in light of the uncertainty as to when the storm will come.

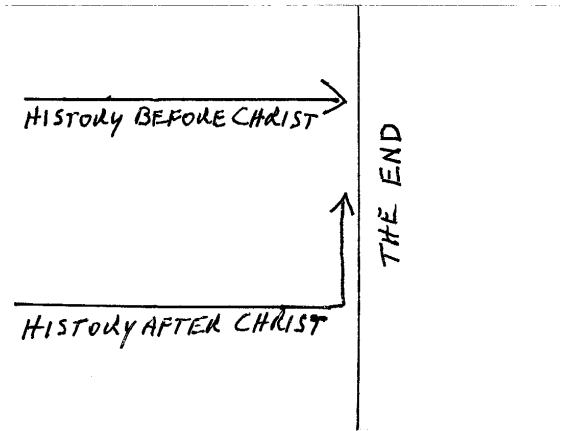
4. The nearness of the *parousia* is indicated in a number of places in the New Testament in addition to Revelation (e.g., Rom. 13:11-12 [?], 16:20 [?]; Jas. 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). From the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and Pentecost, each generation lives on the verge of Christ's return. The next and final step in salvation history is the consummation, and though we do not know the day or hour of his coming, we know he could come swiftly in any generation. Here's how Douglas Moo puts it:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.³⁶

5. So in this sense, Christ's coming, his return in glory, was "soon" in every generation even though it still has not happened.

a. I have on a number of occasions used this (poorly drawn) diagram to help communicate the idea. It is from J. H. Newman, a 19th-century pastor, and has been cited in a number of commentaries. As long as this reality, history as we know it, continues, it does so on the brink of Christ's return and the consummation of all things. However long God in his purposes extends the time since Christ, Christ's coming is ever at our door.

³⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224.



b. As Alan Johnson states in his commentary on Revelation, "Therefore, 'soonness' means imminency in eschatological terms. The church in every age has always lived with the expectancy of the consummation of all things in its day. Imminency describes an event possible any day, impossible no day."³⁷

c. Craig Keener states in his commentary on Revelation:

[T]he rhetorical function of the language [of imminent fulfillment in chapter 22] is not to give times or seasons (no date is offered), but to summon us to preparedness. The text teaches what many of us mean by imminence: Until he comes, Jesus' return is always potentially near, and we must always remain watchful, for inevitably he will come, catching the morally unprepared.³⁸

d. Shank writes:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect

³⁷ Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 13:595.

³⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 519.

him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.³⁹

6. The seemingly absolute declaration that the things revealed are "what must *soon* take place" (Rev. 1:1, 22:6) is not an independent assertion but a reference to the LXX of Dan. 2:28, which speaks of God having revealed to Nebuchadnezzar "what must take place *in the last days*," a revelation that encompassed both the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom (Dan. 2:34-35, 44) without sharp distinction. Changing "in the last days" in Dan. 2:28 to "soon" in Revelation is a way of indicating the impact of Christ's having come. His coming ushered in the "last days" and from that time we have lived on the brink of his consummating return. As a result of his coming, the kingdom in its consummated form moved from distant to "soon," not in terms of absolute timing but in the sense it could now occur quickly at any time (as distinct from any moment). It moved from distant to soon perspectively, in terms of what our expectations are to be.

J. Does the fact Daniel is told to seal up the vision for it refers to many days from now (Dan. 8:26) whereas John is told *not* to seal up words of the prophecy for the time is near (Rev. 22:10) prove that John's prophecy must be fulfilled in a shorter time than Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled? In other words, if the time between Daniel's prophecy and its fulfillment was so great as to prompt sealing of his prophecy, how can a greater time between John's prophecy and its fulfillment not likewise prompt sealing of his prophecy?

1. First, Rev. 22:10 follows the clearly eschatological descriptions in 20:11 – 22:6, so the prophecy that is not to be sealed includes the consummation of the kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, unless one claims that Christ has already returned (hyper-preterists), which is almost universally rejected because of its insurmountable problems, one recognizes that the command not to seal the prophecy does not exclude a fulfillment more than 1900 years later.

2. The "nearness" of the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy and the "distance" of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Dan. 8:26 apparently relate to something other than a strict time measurement. That is, in some sense Christ's return was "near" despite, as it turns out, being more than 1900 years away and Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival was "distant" despite being only centuries away.

a. I believe Christ's return was "near" in the sense noted above. It was near as a constant expectation that shaped and reinforced Christian faith and ethics. Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival, on the other hand, was revealed as something that would not occur for centuries and which had no comparable devotional relevance.

b. Whatever the correct solution, it must harmonize the fact that a complete fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy that exceeds 1900 years *is not* so long as to prompt sealing of the prophecy whereas a significantly shorter time in fulfilling the Daniel prophecy *is* so long as to prompt sealing.

³⁹ Shank, 395-396.

Text

I. Introduction and greeting (1:1-8)

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. ⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. ⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

A. The Greek word translated "revelation" (*apokálupsis*) has the basic sense "to uncover what was hidden." The revelation in this book is *of* Jesus Christ, but it is not clear how that genitive phrase "of Jesus Christ" is to be understood.

1. We recognize the ambiguity in a phrase like "the appreciation *of the workers*." That could refer to appreciation the workers have for something (subjective), or it could refer to the appreciation someone has for the workers (objective). In this case, it seems likely the phrase "of Jesus Christ" functions as what is known as a "plenary" genitive, meaning it carries both connotations, subjective and objective. The revelation is "of Jesus Christ" in the sense it *comes from* him and is *about* him.⁴⁰

2. God gave it to Jesus for him to show his servants, the recipients of Revelation, the things that they are to reckon (see introduction) will take place soon, things regarding which they are to live in constant expectation as they face hostility because of their faith. The revelation uncovers "the hidden reality of God's sovereign control of the future, of how he is going to bring an end to the seeming success of the forces of evil in the present age."⁴¹ Jesus' return is referred to as a revelation elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13, 4:13).

⁴⁰ NET note states:

The phrase ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (*apokalupsis Iēsou Christou*, "the revelation of Jesus Christ") could be interpreted as either an objective genitive ("the revelation about Jesus Christ"), subjective genitive ("the revelation from Jesus Christ"), or both (M. Zerwick's "general" genitive [Biblical Greek, §§36–39]; D. B. Wallace's "plenary" genitive [ExSyn 119–21]). In 1:1 and 22:16 it is clear that Jesus has sent his angel to proclaim the message to John; thus the message is from Christ, and this would be a subjective genitive. On a broader scale, though, the revelation is about Christ, so this would be an objective genitive. One important point to note is that the phrase under consideration is best regarded as the title of the book and therefore refers to the whole of the work in all its aspects. This fact favors considering this as a plenary genitive.

⁴¹ Osborne, 53.

B. In keeping with apocalyptic form, Jesus showed the revelation to his servants by sending his angel to his servant John. The angel was involved in communicating the revelation to John, and John then bore witness to it by writing down for the churches all that he saw. This revelation is the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

C. Revelation was intended to be read out loud in a Christian assembly (1:3, 22:18-19), as were Paul's letters (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16). At that time, that was the only practical way of sharing its contents with the community of faith. A blessing is pronounced on the reader and on those who hear *and keep* what is written.

D. John sends a greeting of grace and peace and then identifies the source of that grace and peace as the Trinity, the three members of the Godhead.

1. God the Father is referred to as he who is, who was, and who is to come. Putting the present tense first is probably designed to emphasize that he is in control of the present even though it may not seem like it. The mention of his future *coming* in the last clause instead of the expected parallel that he "will be" highlights the main stress of the book that God is going to intervene decisively and bring this reality to a close.

2. The Holy Spirit is referred to figuratively as "the seven spirits who are before his [God's] throne."

a. This imagery is rooted in Zech. 4:2-7 where seven lamps are identified as the one Spirit of God who imparts his grace. In Rev. 4:5 seven lamps are identified with the seven spirits of God. So apparently the seven lamps of Zechariah are the seven spirits in Revelation, and since the seven lamps of Zechariah represent the one Spirit, the seven spirits of Revelation likewise represent the one Spirit. The tie to Zechariah 4 is confirmed by Rev. 5:6. In Zech. 4:10 the seven lamps (the one Spirit) are said to be the eyes of the Lord that range through the whole world. In Rev. 5:6 the seven eyes are identified with the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth.

b. This fits with the fact one would expect "spirit" to refer to the Holy Spirit in the context of references to God and Christ. As Ian Paul notes, "The insertion of *seven spirits* between the references to God and Jesus makes it impossible to understand it as anything other than a symbolic description of the Spirit as the third person of the Trinity."⁴²

c. It is also possible that Isa. 11:2-3 is in the background of this reference. The LXX of that text lists seven virtues of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, piety, and fear of God), and the number seven symbolizes completeness, totality, or perfection. So "seven spirits" may be a way of referring to the "sevenfold Spirit," which is how it is translated in NLT and footnoted in a number of other translations.

3. Jesus Christ is described as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. He bore witness to God through his faithfulness under pressure, was the first to be raised from the dead *to resurrection life* (which is different from merely being

⁴² Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 62.

raised from the dead – see, e.g., Rom. 6:9), and is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the only ruler worthy of worship.

E. In 1:5b-6 John breaks into an expression of praise for Christ that celebrates his work and his relation to his disciples. He loves us, freed us from our sins by his blood, by his sacrificial death, and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father, an allusion to Ex. 19:6 (see 1 Pet. 2:9). As saints, we are members or participants in the kingdom Christ inaugurated – children of the great king despite whatever difficulties we may be facing – and as priests we have free and joyful access to God and serve him in this world. In light of all this, John praises the Lord, saying to him be the glory and the power forever and ever, amen.

F. Revelation 1:7 refers to Christ's *parousia*, his magnificent and triumphant return in judgment that will leave all the people-groups of the entire earth, which groups on the whole reject him, wailing over their condemnation. The description recalls Jesus' words in Mat. 24:30 (par. Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27) and brings to mind Paul's description in 2 Thess. 1:6-10. The sense of the "Yes, amen" at the end is that this will certainly come to pass.

G. In v. 8, God the Father, already identified in v. 4 as the one "who is, who was, and who is to come," declares that he is the Alpha and the Omega. As the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the meaning is that he is the beginning and the end (21:6), the all-encompassing one who is sovereign over all things. Given Jesus' oneness with the Father, it is fitting that in 22:13 Jesus likewise declares, "I am the Alpha and the Omega." He is the same essence or divine nature as God the Father.

II. Vision of Christ (1:9-20)

⁹ I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." ¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

A. John identifies himself in 1:9 as a Christian brother of his addressees and as a partner or sharer with them in the persecution, the kingdom, and the endurance that are all part of being in Christ. As participants in the kingdom Christ inaugurated, Christians at present, during this overlap of ages, endure the persecution that comes with identifying with Jesus. All the while, we await his return when he will pour out his wrath on the opposing kingdom of this world and consummate the eternal kingdom. John's share in this situation is evident in his being exiled to the island of Patmos because worldly powers were opposed to his preaching the word of God and testifying about Jesus (taking the genitive as objective).

B. John says that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." The Lord's Day is a reference to Sunday, the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead. Christians from the earliest time assembled on Sunday to commemorate the Lord's resurrection (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), and Christian writers in the second century clearly used "Lord's Day" to refer to Sunday.

1. After surveying the relevant second-century evidence, Bauckham states:

We conclude that in the *Didache*, Ignatius, and the *Gospel of Peter* Κυριακή is a technical term in fairly widespread use at least in Syria and Asia Minor, designating the first day of the week as the Christian day of regular corporate worship. It therefore becomes extremely likely that κυριακή ἡμέρα in Revelation 1:10 also means Sunday.⁴³

2. Thus, as David Aune notes, "κυριακή ἡμέρα in Rev. 1:10 is widely understood to be a new Christian designation for Sunday."⁴⁴ It is the day that belongs to the Lord in the sense it is the day on which his people assemble to specially commemorate his death and resurrection by sharing in the memorial he prescribed.

3. The adjective κυριακός, which means "belonging to the Lord," occurs only in 1 Cor. 11:20, where it modifies "Supper," and Rev. 1:10, where it modifies "Day." Some scholars are convinced that the title "*Lord's Day*" (Rev. 1:10) derives from Sunday's connection with the "*Lord's Supper*" (1 Cor. 11:10).

a. For example, in his extensive study of Sunday in the first centuries of the church, the German scholar Willy Rordorf states, "it is probable that the title κυριακή ἡμέρα [Lord's Day] is derived from the designation κυριακὸν δεῖπνον [Lord's Supper]: in other words, it seems probable that the whole day on which this 'Lord's Supper' took place received the title 'Lord's Day.'"⁴⁵

b. According to Paul Jewett:

⁴³ Richard Bauckham, "The Lord's Day" in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 231.

⁴⁴ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1 – 5*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 1997), 84.

⁴⁵ Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 221.

The most plausible explanation of the term [Lord's Day] is that it derives from the parallel expression "Lord's Supper" (1 Cor. 11:20), since the early Christians gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate this meal as the culmination of their corporate worship. An account of an early (late 50's) Lord's Day service is found in Acts 20:7-11, beginning with the words "on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread."⁴⁶

c. Aune is a bit more cautious about the derivation of the title "Lord's Day," but he acknowledges the inextricable link between Sunday and the Lord's Supper:

A clue to [the meaning of the term Lord's Day] may be provided by the only other occurrence of the adjective *kyriakos* in the NT, 1 Cor. 11:20, where Paul refers to the Lord's Supper (*kyriakon deipnon*). Since the breaking of bread, i.e., the Lord's Supper, was the central ritual of Christian worship, it is possible that this very early way of referring to the ritual as 'the Lord's Supper' was later used to designate the day of worship itself.⁴⁷

C. John's being "in the Spirit" probably refers to his being in a Spirit-enabled state for receiving the visions that he reports. As Buist Fanning states, quoting Bauckham, "It is 'in the Spirit's control,' referring to John's 'condition of visionary rapture attributed to the action of the divine Spirit' and not to any exertion or qualification on his part."⁴⁸ Ian Boxall comments:

It is possible that John had fellow-Christians with him on Patmos, and indeed later traditions mention not only his scribe Prochorus, one of the seven 'deacons,' but also a growing band of Christian converts. If so, John would be like other early Christian visionaries who received their revelations during the liturgy (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:6, 30). Or he may be a solitary figure, joining himself 'in spirit' with his fellow-Christians who would have been gathered for worship across the sea.⁴⁹

D. John hears from behind him a loud voice like a trumpet that tells him to write what he sees in a book and to send it to the seven churches. He turns toward the voice and sees seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands is "one like a son of man."

1. Revelation 1:20 makes clear that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches to which he is writing. A lampstand is a fitting symbol of a church because Christians are to be "the light of the world" (Mat. 5:14-16). We are to be the light of God's presence in a darkened world, a world that has turned from its creator. Given the connection in Revelation, by way of Zechariah 4, between the Holy Spirit and a lamp (see discussion of 1:4 above), symbolizing a church by a lampstand may further suggest that the churches are empowered in their mission by God's Spirit.

⁴⁶ Paul K. Jewett, "Lord's Day" in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:158.

⁴⁷ David E. Aune, "Worship, Early Christian" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:980.

⁴⁸ Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 96.

⁴⁹ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 40.

2. Revelation 1:18 makes clear that "one like a son of man" is the Lord Jesus, the one who overcame death. The phrase is taken from Dan. 7:13-14 (part of a vision given in the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, c. 553 B.C.). It indicates Christ's absolute power and dominion. The picture shows the glorious Christ in the midst of his church. We are not alone; Jesus promised that he would be with his church in a special way until the very end of the age (Mat. 28:20). And with that, he is examining that state of his churches, observing whether they are faithful.

E. The various descriptions of the Lord that are given in 1:13-16 are not to be accumulated into a single visual image of Jesus. Rather, each description serves to evoke within the hearer an emotional sense of some aspect of Christ's glory.

1. Full-length robe and a golden sash or belt around his chest

a. This depicts Christ as an exalted, dignified figure. A full-length robe was a mark of distinction, a sign of high rank or authority (e.g., Isa. 22:21; Mk. 12:38). Long robes and sashes across the chest were worn by dignitaries and rulers. Laborers wore belts around their waists so they could tuck their tunics into them for work; aristocrats wore the belts up on their chests. That the sash is gold only magnifies the symbolism.

b. In this case, the robe may signify Jesus' high-priestly function. The word used to describe this robe is the same word used in the LXX to describe the robe the high priest wore (Ex. 28:4; 29:5).

2. Hair white like wool, like snow – In that society, the white-haired person was worthy of honor, and white hair conveyed the idea of wisdom and dignity (e.g., Lev. 19:32 commands respect for the elderly, and Prov. 16:31 says gray hair is a crown of glory that is gained in a righteous life). But this description echoes Dan. 7:9 which speaks of God (Ancient of Days) as having hair as white as wool. Jesus is being identified with God.

3. Eyes like blazing fire – The image comes from Dan. 10:6. The burning, piercing look of Christ misses nothing. As stated in Heb. 4:13, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." The churches among whom he walks need to live in awareness of this.

4. Feet like bronze glowing in a furnace – In Ezek. 1:4-7, 27 and Dan. 10:6 glowing metal is connected with the appearance of the glory of God. It apparently portrays strength, stability, and absolute purity.

5. Voice like the sound of many waters – This image is used of God's voice in Ezek. 43:2. It suggests the awe-inspiring power of a great waterfall and again associates Jesus with God the Father.

6. Holds seven stars in his right hand

a. In 1:20 the stars are said to be the angels of the seven churches. Though some have argued that angels in 1:20 means simply "messengers" and thus refers to a human being, whether a church leader or someone transporting the letter to the church, that is almost certainly wrong. Angel refers to heavenly beings throughout Revelation, as is common in apocalyptic literature.

b. These probably are angels who in some distinctive way are associated with the individual congregations (as demons are associated with geographical areas in Daniel 10) and thus function as spiritual representatives of those congregations. The blurring of the earthly and the heavenly in terms of the addressees of the letters, such that the letter is written to the angel but speaks to the congregation, reinforces the critical notion that the spiritual and earthly realms are interlocked.

c. The right hand is a place of power and protection. This symbolizes Christ's control of the angels and, through their representation of the churches, his protection and blessing of the churches.

7. Sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth – This depicts that Christ's authoritative word (mouth) will be the basis of divine judgment (sword). His word will be what ultimately counts, not the decrees of the imperial cult. Jesus says in Jn. 8:51, "If a man keeps my word, he will never see death." He says in Jn. 12:48, "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my word; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day." Revelation 2:16 and 19:15, 21 employ this imagery of judgment.

8. His face like the sun shining in all its brilliance – This symbolizes his divine glory and power. Recall how Moses' face was radiant just from being in the divine presence (Ex. 34:29-30; 2 Cor. 3:7-8). Jesus was shown in this same manner to Peter, James, and John on the mountain when he was transfigured (Mat. 17:1-2).

F. The Aftermath of the Vision

1. John falls down as though dead. The qualifier "as dead" shows that this was not the typical oriental prostration to show respect but was the physical effects of the overpowering vision. Any movement in the presence of such an exalted being would be presumptuous. Jesus is that awesome. As Poythress says, "Christ is our friend, according to John 15:14-15. But he is more than a mere friend: he is awesome in majesty, power, and purity. Too many Christians in our generation have seen Christ only as a 'buddy,' losing sight of his majesty. Revelation provides a strong corrective to this notion."⁵⁰

2. Jesus tells John not to be afraid, the same thing he told a terrified John on the mountain of his transfiguration (Mat. 17:7). He identifies himself with God by declaring "I am the first and the last" (1:17), which refers to God in Isa. 41:4, 44:6 and 48:12 and is essentially the same as God's self-designation in Rev. 1:8, "the Alpha and the Omega." Jesus proclaims his resurrection and his eternality and makes clear that he has power even over death and its realm (1:18).

⁵⁰ Poythress, 80.

3. In light of Jesus' glorious identity ("therefore"), John is commanded in 1:19 to write "the things he saw and the things that are and the things that will take place after these things." Some put a lot of weight on this verse in terms of the structure of the book, but I think it probably just means he is to write all that is shown to him, which includes what has been shown, what is now being shown, and what will be shown to him.

4. In 1:20 John is told the meaning of the golden lampstands and the stars in Christ's right hand. This explanation was discussed above.

III. Letters to churches (2:1 - 3:22)

A. The Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. ² 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

1. Background on Ephesus⁵¹

a. Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Its harbor and location at the convergence of three great trade routes made it an important commercial center. Rome had granted Ephesus the right of self-government, and Ephesus served as a site at which the Roman governor would regularly try important cases.

b. It had a major stadium and marketplace and a theater cut into the hillside that seated around 24,000 people. This is the theater that the Ephesians rushed into in Acts 19:29 and where they shouted for about two hours "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." The city also had a great marble main street that ran from the harbor to the theater, which was flanked on both sides by an elaborate colonnade. The population in NT times often has been estimated at around 200,000–250,000, but more recent estimates are around 100,000, claiming that the higher figures are more accurate for the second century.⁵²

⁵¹ Osborne, 108-110; see also, Clinton E. Arnold, "Ephesus" in Gerald F. Hawthorne et al., eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); 249-253; Richard E. Oster, Jr., "Ephesus" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:542-549.

⁵² S. M. Baugh, "A Foreign World" in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 29.

c. There was a well-established Jewish presence in the city that Josephus says extended back to Seleucid times. Paul preached in a Jewish synagogue for three months when he first arrived back in Ephesus on his third missionary journey before he began teaching in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8).

d. Ephesus had temples devoted to emperors and to a full range of Greek and foreign deities, but its major religious attraction was the Temple of Artemis (Latin = Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. According to one reconstruction, it was about 420 feet long, 240 feet wide, 60 feet high, and supported by 117 columns. Since the temple was regarded as sacrosanct throughout the Mediterranean world, it became the primary banking institution of Asia. It also attracted pilgrims to Ephesus during the festivals of Artemis in March-April. The statue of Artemis quite possibly was in part constructed from a fallen meteorite (see, Acts 19:35). The temple was destroyed in A.D. 262 by the Goths.

e. Magic arts, the attempt to master spirits, were popular in Ephesus. Indeed, charms or books believed to possess magical powers were called "Ephesian Letters." The scope of this phenomenon is evident in Acts 19:19 where, after the episode involving the seven sons of Sceva, people repented of their involvement in magic and burned their magic books. The value of these books was 50,000 silver coins, which Eckhard Schnabel says "amounts to the yearly wage (with no days off) of 137 workers."⁵³

f. The Christian faith came to Ephesus about A.D. 52 when Paul left Priscilla and Aquila there in route from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey, Paul remained there about three years (Acts 19:8, 10, 20:31), during which time the gospel was spread throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10). He was violently opposed by a silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of Artemis. Demetrius stirred up the people against the Christians, arguing that their message threatened both their livelihood and their god. When Paul met with the Ephesian elders in Miletus in Acts 20:17-38, he told them that "savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (20:29). Sometime later Timothy ministered in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), and tradition associates the Apostle John with the city during the latter part of his life.

2. The Letter

a. Greeting

(1) The letter is addressed to "the angel of the church in Ephesus." It is written to a single person or entity ("you" and "your" are singular), so "angel" cannot refer merely to a messenger or a spokesman. The letter is addressed to the angel, not simply given to him.

(2) Yet, 2:7 makes clear that the message is to the "churches." As I said, it seems that the angel is a heavenly being who in some sense represents the church. Gregory Beale suggests that the churches are addressed through their representative angels to remind them "that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly, that their real home is not

⁵³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 799.

with the unbelieving 'earth dwellers' . . . , and that they have heavenly help and protection in their struggle not to be conformed to their pagan environment."⁵⁴

b. Title – Jesus is identified as "the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands." As the "mother church" of this region, the church in Ephesus is reminded that Christ alone is sovereign over the churches. He is walking in their midst, both protecting them and observing their faithfulness.

c. Praise

(1) The Lord commends them for their works, which consisted of toil, meaning intense labor, and patient endurance (perseverance). Their toil seemingly involved their struggle against, their refusal to put up with, certain evil people, heretics who falsely claimed to be apostles of some kind. This was in keeping with what Paul had foreseen in Acts 20. In what apparently was a significant ordeal, they "tested" the claims of these false teachers, meaning they critically examined them, and exposed their lies. The Ephesian Christians were not gullible.

(2) These false teachers are probably the same group referred to in v. 6 as the Nicolaitans. There the church is commended for *hating* the works of the Nicolaitans, which the Lord also *hates*. It is not sub-Christian to hate sin and to fight against its promotion and spread, and the church cannot get lured into accommodating sin by the false claim that it is unloving to reject it. This is very relevant to the push in some so-called churches to accept as moral things like sex outside of marriage, homosexual conduct, men and women pretending to be the opposite sex, and the willful taking of innocent human life in the womb.

(3) We can be certain of very little with regard to the Nicolaitans. Based on later references to the group, they were a sect that practiced idolatry and immorality. The accuracy of that later description is supported by the fact the sins of idolatry and immorality are linked in Revelation with the teachings of Balaam (2:14-15) and Jezebel (2:20-23), which probably are different ways of referring to the Nicolaitans. (I will say more about that when we get to those verses.) So the Nicolaitans it seems had rationalized accommodating the pagan world in idolatrous practices like emperor worship, the pressure for which had increased greatly under Domitian, and had rationalized immoral living.

(4) In Mat. 7:15-20 Jesus warned against false teachers who would come in sheep's clothing but inwardly be ferocious wolves. Jude 4 speaks of those who pervert the grace of God into a license for immorality. Jesus said (Mat. 7:15-20) that any teaching that permits or justifies sinful living is false teaching, no matter how wise or sophisticated it was made to sound: "You will know them by their fruits." That no doubt factored into the Ephesians' testing of the claims of the self-styled apostles.

(5) It is not clear how the Nicolaitans tried to justify their practices theologically. An incipient or proto-Gnosticism was prevalent in Asia (see 1 John), a view that disparaged the physical as being spiritually irrelevant, and it is quite possible they followed that

⁵⁴ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 218.

to the conclusion that what one did with one's body in terms of sexual activity was spiritually irrelevant.

(6) The patient endurance for which the Ephesians are commended by the Lord involved their bearing up and not growing weary for the sake of his name. They had stood up for Christ in the face of persecution (1:9) and false teaching (2:2). They had persevered, they had borne patiently the hostility of a society at odds with their goals and efforts (recall Acts 19).

d. Criticism

(1) They are criticized for having abandoned the love they had at first. Given the fact they had persevered for Christ's name and had not grown weary, I do not think this is referring, in the first instance, to their love for Christ. I think it is a reference to the fact they no longer loved each other as they once did (which evidences a loss of love for God – 1 Jn. 4:20-21). The sense of spiritual family had ebbed.

(2) It is possible that this had resulted from the threat they faced from false teachers. Their good and commendable love for the truth and desire to maintain doctrinal correctness may have deteriorated into an unduly suspicious and critical spirit that stifled brotherly love, made it grow cold. We must learn how to maintain a zeal for orthodoxy that does not fragment the faithful by assuming every believer is a heretic until proven otherwise.

(3) To the extent their love for God is in view, it means that they had gotten off track in their motivation. They were enduring and doing good things, but they did them for some lesser motivation than love for God (see 1 Cor. 13:1-3).

e. Command

(1) They are commanded to remember how far they have fallen. Remembering how things used to be can be a powerful force in effecting repentance. In this type of situation, it is the basis of conviction, the first step in overcoming sin.

(2) They are told to repent. They must make a decisive break with how they are now living. They must commit their hearts to change and implement that commitment by doing what they did at first.

f. Warning

(1) Unless the church repents of its lack of love, Christ will come in a preliminary judgment and remove its lampstand, probably meaning eliminate its status as a church. G. R. Beasley-Murray comments, "Whatever outward appearance may suggest, the congregation will be as devoid of Christ as the temple of Jerusalem was of the presence of God's glory when his judgment fell upon it (see, Ezek. 11:22ff), and it will lose its place in the fellowship of Christ's congregations."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 75.

(2) This warning is reinforced with the call in v. 7a to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The exalted Christ is speaking through the Spirit as he inspired John to write to the churches. Grant Osborne observes, "All who read this letter are to ask whether their church fits this situation and whether they too should 'listen' and 'repent.'"⁵⁶

(3) From Ignatius's letter to the Ephesians, written around A.D. 110 while Ignatius was in route to Rome to be put to death, it seems the church in Ephesus heeded the Lord's word. It shows evidence of deep love.

g. Promise – Those who "overcome" the enemy, which is done by remaining faithful to the one who defeated that enemy, will receive eternal life in perfect fellowship with God. Osborne writes:

According to Homcy, "Our lives must declare the victory of Jesus over sin and death, with confidence in the ultimate triumph of his work over all the power of the enemy." Thus it demands faithfulness and a determination that we will place living for him alone above all earthly things. To be an "overcomer" in the eschatological war demands a day-by-day walk with God and dependence on his strength. In this sense, there is also warning, as seen in the contrast between the "overcomer" and the "cowardly" in 21:7, 8. Only the ones who conquer in Christ will stand on the crystal sea and sing hymns of victory as in 15:2 or "inherit" God's kingdom as in 21:7.⁵⁷

B. The Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. ⁹ "'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

1. Background on Smyrna⁵⁸

a. Smyrna was about 40 miles north of Ephesus, where the modern city of Izmir is located. It had a population in New Testament times of about 200,000 (some would put the figure around 100,000), slightly less than that of Ephesus, had an excellent harbor, and was second only to Ephesus in regard to exports. Smyrna had a famous stadium, library, and public

⁵⁶ Osborne, 122.

⁵⁷ Osborne, 122-123.

⁵⁸ Osborne, 127; Aune (1997), 159-160; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 64-65; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, AB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 271-274.

theater (the largest in Asia – the one at Ephesus seated about 24,000!). Its famous street, called the "Street of Gold," curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor).

b. Smyrna had long history of being loyal to the Roman Empire. When Domitian began emphasizing Emperor worship, Smyrna was one of the cities leading the way. This, plus a large Jewish population that was hostile to Christianity, made it very difficult to be a Christian in Smyrna.

c. We are not sure when the church was planted there. It may well have been in the early to mid-50's when Paul was in Ephesus. Around A.D. 110, Ignatius of Antioch, on a forced march to Rome where he would be martyred, stopped at Smyrna and there wrote letters to four other churches in the region. When he arrived in Troas, he wrote a letter to the church in Smyrna and a personal letter to Polycarp, one of its leaders.

2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life." This letter is to a persecuted church that needs to be reminded that Christ is the sovereign one, the one who is in control of all things. (In Isa. 44:6 God declares, "I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god.") As he was victorious over death, they need to be reminded that they too will be victorious if they remain faithful to him in the face of persecution.

b. Assures them he knows:

(1) their affliction (distress or suffering)

(a) This doesn't mean inconvenience; it means a serious burden that is threatening to crush them. They were being persecuted, which is not unusual for Christians. Christians have been mistreated from the beginning: Acts 4 – arrested and threatened; Acts 5 – imprisoned and flogged; Acts 7 – stoned to death; Acts 8 – great persecution; Acts 12 – arrested and put to death; Acts 13 – slandered and expelled; Acts 14 – run out; stoned in next city; Acts 16 – imprisoned and flogged; Acts 17 – arrested by rioting mob; run out; laughed at; Acts 18 – abused; arrested; beaten; Acts 19 – involved in riot; Acts 21 – beaten by mob; Acts 22 – imprisoned; Phil. 1:28-30 – church persecuted; 1 Thess. 1:6, 2:14 – church persecuted; Heb. 10:32-34 – persecuted; Jas. 1:2-8, 5:10-11 – persecution; 1 Pet. 4:12-16 – persecuted.

(b) Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia. His letter to Emperor Trajan in A.D. 112 reveals just how serious this persecution became after Emperors began demanding that their subjects worship them and the Roman gods.

Pliny wrote to Trajan:

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction

on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses [better *servants* – Latin *ministrae*]. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and

cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.⁵⁹

Trajan responded to Pliny:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

(c) Jesus wants these suffering Christians to know that their loyalty to him is not going unnoticed. He wanted them to know what Paul had told the Corinthians, that their "labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

(2) their poverty

(a) Their lack of money and possessions is no doubt connected with their persecution. As outcasts, it would be difficult for them to make a living. It may also be the case that their property had been looted (see, e.g., Heb. 10:32-34).

(b) Despite this poverty, Jesus declares that they are rich! They are rich because true wealth, true value, is not a matter of material things. The person who has a faith that he or she will not abandon when pressured by persecution to do so has something worth more than all the world's gold.

(3) their being slandered by non-Christian Jews

(a) Non-Christian Jews, those who refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah, opposed Christians. They did so because they saw Christian worship of Jesus as blasphemy, because Christians were having success winning people to their faith, including Jews and those investigating Judaism (God-fearers), and probably because they were nervous, after the Jewish war with Rome in A.D. 66-73, about Judaism being associated with a messianic movement like Christianity.

(b) These Jews slandered Christians presumably by fanning the lies that Christians were engaged in criminal and antisocial behavior (were immoral, subversive, home wreckers, atheists, cannibals, and arsonists) and by sometimes renouncing

⁵⁹ From <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html> (accessed 6/15/23).

individual Christians before authorities as threats to the public peace and welfare. There is evidence of this in Smyrna some sixty years later when Polycarp was killed by the Romans. When the authorities came for Polycarp, then an old man, the Jews were screaming for him to be killed and helped in gathering the wood that was used to burn him to death. Poythress suggests the statement in 2:9 that "they say that they are Jews and are not" may be a play on Jews who denounced to the Roman authorities Christians who were seeking the protection of Jewish identification by saying "they say they are Jews but are not."⁶⁰

(c) Jesus makes clear that these opponents were not "real" Jews. A real Jew is not simply a physical descendant of Abraham but one who accepts God's truth about Jesus (Rom. 2:28-29, 4:16, 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7-9, 29). Unbelieving Jews had been removed from God's olive tree by their unbelief (Rom. 11:17-21). By rejecting Christ, they had rejected God, and by aiding the persecution of Christians, they were working for God's supreme adversary, Satan (see Jn. 8:31-47).

c. Calls them to endure future suffering

(1) He tells them not to fear what they are about to suffer. This is reminiscent of his words in Mat. 10:28 where he told his disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

(2) Outwardly the governing authorities would be harming them, but in reality, they were tools of the devil. The devil is going to do this "that they may be tempted/tested" (*peirázō* has both senses). If the clause refers to the devil's purpose, it means he is doing it so that they may be *tempted* to abandon their faith, their allegiance to Christ. If it refers to God's purpose, as the passive form may indicate, it means he is allowing it that they may be *tested* with regard to their faith, given the opportunity to demonstrate its character and to be strengthened in it. Some (e.g., Beckwith) think it has a double meaning here.

(3) In saying they will have tribulation for (or during) "ten days," Jesus probably is indicating that the total time of the specific affliction of which he is speaking – ten often symbolizing completeness or totality, perhaps stemming from the fact ten is the full number of our fingers⁶¹ – will be relatively short, being measured in days rather than months or years. Nevertheless, it was going to be extreme and was going to cost some of them their lives.

(4) He commands them to be faithful, even to the point of death.

(a) This theme appears throughout the book. In 12:11 it says that Christians overcame the devil (NIV) "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." In 14:9-12 an

⁶⁰ Poythress, 53.

⁶¹ See Marvin H Pope, "Number, Numbering, Numbers" in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:565-66; see also, Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 254; Beale, 59; James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 31.

angel announces that (NIV) "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury." In 21:7-8 God says (NIV), "Those who are victorious will inherit all this [great blessings], and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the *cowardly*, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur."

(b) As Pliny said in his letter to Trajan, he had been told that people who are really Christians cannot be made to burn incense to the Emperor's image or to Roman gods. The Lord's message had sunk into these early Christians. Being faithful to him was more important than life itself. That puts a different light on such verses as Lk. 9:24, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

(c) It is quite likely that Polycarp was one of the members of the church in Smyrna at the time Revelation was written and that he knew firsthand the suffering the church endured at that time. He went on to become a leader in that congregation. In A.D. 155 he was put to death by the Roman authorities for his refusal to renounce Christ. We have an account of that event that was made by members of the church not long after his death. It includes the following:

The Governor then said, 'I have wild beasts here. Unless you change your mind, I shall have you thrown to them.' 'Why then, call them up,' said Polycarp, 'for it is out of the question for us to exchange a good way of thinking for a bad one. . . .' The other said again, 'If you do not recant, I will have you burnt to death, since you think so lightly of wild beasts.' Polycarp rejoined, 'The fire you threaten me with cannot go on burning for very long; after a while it goes out. But what you are unaware of are the flames of future judgment and everlasting torment which are in store for the ungodly. Why do you go on wasting time? Bring out whatever you have in mind to do.'⁶²

(d) This kind of commitment and faithfulness was repeated throughout the history of the church. Maybe a decade after Polycarp's execution, Justin Martyr and six other Christians were scourged and beheaded in Rome for refusing to sacrifice to the gods.⁶³ Origen was tortured in Caesarea in the mid-3rd century during the reign of Decius.⁶⁴ Cyprian was beheaded in 258 during the reign of Valerian, Decius's successor, for refusing to offer a pagan sacrifice.⁶⁵ And many were horribly executed during the "Great Persecution" under Diocletian in 303-304.⁶⁶

(5) Jesus promises that he will give the faithful a crown of life. This is a victor's crown, what was awarded to athletes who triumphed through a struggle. Smyrna

⁶² Andrew Louth, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. by Maxwell Staniforth (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 128.

⁶³ Theodore Stylianopoulos, "Justin Martyr" in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 648.

⁶⁴ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 273.

⁶⁵ Robert D. Sider, "Cyprian" in Ferguson (1998), 307.

⁶⁶ Eusebius, 333-334, 337-338.

was famed for its games, so this would be a natural metaphor. The crown is a "crown of life" because the faithful will be resurrected to an eternal and glorious life, just as Jesus was. Paul certainly grasped this. He told Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:6-8 (ESV):

⁶ For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

(6) Jesus assures them that those who overcome, who remain steadfast in their faith, will not be hurt by the second death. They will receive eternal life, not eternal condemnation. They will not be cast into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, which 21:8 identifies as the second death.

d. He exhorts them to heed his words saying, "He who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"

C. The Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

¹² "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³ "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

1. Background on Pergamum⁶⁷

a. It was located about seventy miles north of Smyrna, about fifteen miles inland, where the modern city of Bergama is located. As early as the first half of the second century B.C., it boasted a library of some 200,000 volumes.

b. Pergamum was a center for the worship of the most important pagan gods (Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asklepios). It was the capital of the province and the official center in Asia for the imperial cult. It was the first city in Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living ruler. In 29 B.C. Augustus granted permission for a temple to be erected in Pergamum "to the Divine Augustus and the goddess Roma."

⁶⁷ Osborne, 138-139.

2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as the one "who has the sharp, two-edged sword." This is a reminder to the threatened congregation that, although the Roman proconsul in this capital city had the power to execute at will, ultimate power over life and death belongs to God and his Christ. He is the true judge.

b. Jesus assures them he knows:

(1) They live where Satan has his throne. This probably refers to the fact Pergamum was the official center of emperor worship in Asia. This would make it a hotbed for Christian persecution. Osborne states:

The best option [for what is meant by 'Satan's throne'] is the imperial cult, the major problem behind Revelation as a whole . . . and the core of Pergamum religion. It was emperor worship that most directly occasioned the persecutions under Domitian and Trajan, and Pergamum was the center of the imperial cult for all of the province of Asia. As Aune (1997: 183-84) says, it is not so much an architectural or local feature that is in mind but rather Roman opposition and persecution of Christians that is central.⁶⁸

(2) Despite the difficulty this created, they had remained faithful to his name. Even when the persecution had become so intense that one of them (Antipas) was put to death, they did not renounce their faith. The phrase "where Satan lives" reveals that such hostility to Christianity is ultimately driven by Satan.

c. Criticism

(1) They are criticized for tolerating in their midst some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, which teaching is analogous to the teaching of Balaam. In Numbers 25:1-9 and 31:16 we see that Balaam was the mastermind behind luring Israel away from God and into idolatry and sexual immorality at Peor. These people have figuratively grabbed hold of the teaching of Balaam in grabbing hold of the analogous teaching of the Nicolaitans.

(2) Like Balaam, it seems the Nicolaitans had rationalized participating in idol feasts and the accompanying sexual immorality, events that under Domitian would often include emperor worship as a sign of patriotism and loyalty. There would be great pressure for this type of compromise living in a city that was a center of pagan worship.

(3) Whereas the church in Ephesus was praised for not tolerating, indeed for *hating*, the works of the Nicolaitans, the church in Pergamum is endangered by allowing these heretics in their midst. They were harboring a spiritual cancer that would wreak

⁶⁸ Osborne, 141.

havoc if not excised; it would influence the saints toward the evil of idolatry and sexual immorality.

d. Command – Repent! They must cease accepting in their fellowship those who promote and engage in such works. It is not "spiritual" to be tolerant of wickedness; it is disobedient, ungodly, unloving, and damaging to the body of Christ. That is why Paul in 1 Cor. 5:1-5 rebuked the church in Corinth for tolerating a sexually immoral man in their midst and demanded that they disfellowship him. Christ forgives without limit, but he always demands repentance.

e. Warning and promise

(1) If the church does not repent of tolerating this sin, Christ will come in judgment against the church, presumably by removing its lampstand as in 2:5, and he will war against the proponents and practitioners of the Nicolaitan heresy with the sword of his mouth. In other words, his word, which is the basis of judgment, will be given effect in his warring against them, which I suspect means he will inflict illness, suffering, and even death on them as in 2:21-23 (see also, Acts 5:1-11 [Ananias and Sapphira] and 1 Cor. 11:27-30 [discipline for corrupting the Lord's Supper]).

(2) Those who "overcome," those who resist the pressure and lure of the Nicolaitans or who repent of having fallen prey to it, will be given "hidden manna." I think "manna" represents God's miraculous provision for his people, which is what it was in the wilderness after the Exodus, and it here stands for all that God will provide his people in the eternal state. Those blessings are currently unseen, hidden in heaven, awaiting disclosure in the consummated kingdom at Christ's return.

(3) Those who overcome also will be given a white stone inscribed with a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. It is not clear what it means. The background may be the white stone that ancient jurors would place in an urn to vote for acquittal or a stone that was given to victors at games as an admission ticket to a feast. Either one would symbolize a blessing from God. The new name may be a way of indicating the special nature and status of the Christian's relationship with God in eternity.

f. He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

D. The Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

¹⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹ "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her

works,²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come.²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.²⁸ And I will give him the morning star.²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

1. Background on Thyatira⁶⁹

a. It was about forty miles southeast of Pergamum (where modern Akhisar is located) on the road to Sardis. Politically, culturally, and religiously, it was the least significant of the seven cities, but it receives the longest of the seven letters.

b. It was a commercial city with a large number of trade guilds or unions. Inscriptions mention woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leatherworkers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths. Acts 16 refers to Lydia as a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira. Every craftsman and trader naturally belonged to the appropriate guild.

c. Ancient trade guilds were very much connected to local religious observances. Each guild had its own patron deity, and the meetings of these societies often included a common meal dedicated to a pagan god and frequently involved sexual immorality. The primary god worshiped in Thyatira was Apollo, the sun god and son of Zeus.

2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze." This is the only place in Revelation where the title "Son of God" is used, probably as a reminder that Jesus, not Apollo, is the true Son of God. His eyes of blazing fire see through the seductive arguments of Jezebel, and he is powerful in his opposition.

b. Jesus assures them he knows their good works or deeds, which he specifies as their love, their faith, their service, and their perseverance. Osborne remarks, "These four describe a life of Christian caring for others and faithfulness to God."⁷⁰ He also knows that, unlike the church in Ephesus that had forsaken its first love, they are now doing more than they did at first. They had some very important things right at the church in Thyatira.

c. Criticism

⁶⁹ Osborne, 151-152.

⁷⁰ Osborne, 155.

(1) But whereas the church in Ephesus was praised for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, the church in Thyatira is criticized for tolerating a woman referred to as Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess. Jezebel, of course, was the wicked Phoenician wife of the Israelite king Ahab who promoted in Israel the worship of the Canaanite god Baal (1 Ki. 16:29 ff.; 2 Ki. 9:30 ff.), which included sexual immorality.

(2) Like Jezebel, this woman in Thyatira, who claimed to be speaking directly for God, was teaching that it was acceptable for Christians to participate in idol feasts and the accompanying sexual immorality. She most likely was the local voice of the Nicolaitan movement, which 2:14-15 and church history indicate involved the same practices. She offered a compromise that allowed them to be accepted in the economically important trade guilds, and her teaching was persuading a segment of the church.

(3) One is reminded here of the claim by some in Corinth, identified in 1 Corinthians 8, that participating in idol feasts, the ritual meals in the pagan temples, was acceptable because Christians know that there is only one God and therefore that the idols are not in fact gods. Since Christians know that idols are not gods, eating ritual meals in a pagan temple was not an act of worship but a purely social matter. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 8-10 why that claim is false, but the point is that false teachers worked overtime to justify participating in idolatry because it was so important socially.

(4) Christ, probably through his spokesmen, had urged her to repent of her compromise with paganism, but she was unwilling to heed his word. He now promises to inflict her with illness. He also threatens her followers with suffering and death unless they repent (again, see Acts 5:1-11 [Ananias and Sapphira] and 1 Cor. 11:27-30 [discipline for corrupting the Lord's Supper]). The result of this will be to reinforce for the churches the fact that he knows all things and cannot be mocked, that he punishes impenitence and rewards faithfulness. Ian Paul comments:

Rewarding people according to [their] deeds is not about some kind of 'salvation by works', but (in line with all other teaching in the NT) the conviction that the grace of God in Jesus effects the transformation of a person's life, and so true faith in Jesus manifests in the kinds of qualities and actions that the Thyatirans are commended for at the start of the message.⁷¹

d. Encouragement and promise

(1) Jesus refers to those who do not hold to Jezebel's teaching as those "who have not known (had not accepted) what some call 'the deep things of Satan.'" Jezebel's group, the Nicolaitans, probably considered their false teaching that Christians can participate in idolatry as spiritual insight and presented it as being among "the deep things of God," but some faithful Christians rejected that characterization and rightly described it as "the deep things of *Satan*." It is possible, however, that Jezebel's group used the phrase. They may have admitted that they engaged in things like idolatry, *what the orthodox considered "the deep*

⁷¹ Paul, 95.

things of Satan," but claimed it was spiritually enlightened to do so because it reflects recognition that knowledge of Christ renders such conduct insignificant.

(2) He lays no burden on these faithful saints other than the requirement that they hold to the truth they have until he comes. Those who overcome and who do his will "to the end" will share with Christ in his final victory over his (and their) opponents, which is described from Psalm 2 as the breaking of them to pieces. It is a rule expressed in the ultimate defeat and punishment of the enemies of Christ (19:15), and Christians in some sense will share in that victory in and through their identification with Christ. As Leon Morris states, "This seems to show that the overcomer will have a place in the final decisive victory of Christ over the world forces opposed to God."⁷²

(3) Those who overcome and do his will also will be given the "morning star." Jesus is called the "bright morning star" in 22:16, and I think the idea is the same one Peter expresses in 2 Pet. 1:19: And we have the wholly reliable prophetic word, to which you do well in paying attention as to a light shining in a dark place, *until [the] day dawns and [the] morning star rises in your hearts*. The "day" of which Peter is speaking is the day of Christ's consummating return. At that time, the "morning star," Jesus Christ, will rise in the hearts of the faithful in that their gratitude for and appreciation of him will become even greater as their faith becomes sight. They will, in the vernacular, "be busting." So the faithful will be given the morning star in the sense they will be given Christ in a new way, given a new experience of his glory.

e. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We cannot allow our desire to fit in for economic or safety reasons to cause us to compromise our undivided allegiance to Jesus Christ.

E. The Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

1. Background on Sardis⁷³

⁷² Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 74.

⁷³ Osborne, 171-172; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 108-109; John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 261-262.

a. It was located on a mountain on the edge of the Hermus River valley, about 40 miles southeast of Thyatira and 45 miles east of Smyrna. Some 600 years earlier it had been one of the most powerful cities in the ancient world, but it had been in decline as far as political importance for many years.

b. In A.D. 17 Sardis was severely damaged in an earthquake. It was rebuilt with considerable financial assistance from Emperor Tiberius. It was an active commercial city and was very wealthy. It was a center for woolen goods, it claimed to be the first to discover the art of dyeing wool, and it was where gold and silver coins were first made. The estimated first-century population was around 120,000.

2. The Letter

a. Title – Jesus is described as "the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." This suggests that in and through him they have available the power of the Holy Spirit and that he is the Lord and protector of the churches. This nearly dead church needed to know that the Lord who calls them to revival has and makes available the power to achieve it.

b. He assures them he knows their works:

(1) Here there is nothing to commend. In prior letters his assurance of knowing their works served to comfort the church. Here, it is the basis for his criticism. They had a reputation for being alive, but in fact they were spiritually dead. This was demonstrated by the incompleteness or unsatisfactory state of their works. The works praised by Christ in 2:19 (re Thyatira) are love, faith, service, and perseverance. Just as Sardis had declined politically over the centuries, the church was declining spiritually.

(2) They apparently had enough "Christian show" to maintain their reputation, but their efforts were half-hearted attempts at obedience. They were not really obeying Christ; they were "playing Christianity." This may well be why we do not read of any persecution there. It was a mediocre form of Christianity that did not challenge or disturb its neighbors. It was a model of inoffensive Christianity, a Christianity that valued getting along, not rocking the boat, over faithfulness to Jesus.

c. Commands

(1) They must "wake up," must recognize their condition and appreciate its serious and degenerative nature.

(2) They must begin strengthening what remains and is about to die. They must fan the sparks of the spiritual life that remains within the church. He elaborates on how this will happen:

(a) They must remember what they had received and heard. They needed to recall the gospel they had received (had said "yes" to) and to recall the teaching they had heard on the implications of that gospel for their lives.

(b) They must repent and obey it. They needed to commit themselves once again to obeying the word of the Lord that had been delivered to them and to follow through on that commitment.

d. They are warned that if they remain on their present course, Christ will come in judgment against them at a time they do not expect. The nature of that judgment is not specified, but with many commentators,⁷⁴ I think it refers to some kind of temporal judgment that he will inflict on the church, a punishment *within* rather than at the end of history, perhaps the removal of its lampstand or some physical harm.

e. Commendation – There were a few in Sardis who had not "soiled their garments," a play on the manufacture and dyeing of woolen goods in the city. These saints had not compromised with the pagan environment and thereby defiled themselves so as to be unacceptable to a holy God but had remained faithful to Christ's call of discipleship.

f. Promise

(1) As faithful servants of Christ, those who had not "soiled their garments" are promised that they will walk with Christ in white, in the purity and holiness that his atoning death provides. This is a reference to their eternal fellowship with Christ and thus with the Godhead. As Robert Mounce explains, "They themselves have done nothing to merit their exalted position. They are worthy in the sense that they have withstood the pressure to apostatize and hence have done nothing which would result in forfeiting their position."⁷⁵ In Paul's words in Phil. 1:27, they had conducted themselves in a manner *worthy* of the gospel of Christ.

(2) The promise is now spoken more generally in terms of the one who overcomes. This includes the presently faithful in Sardis who are overcoming by not soiling their garments and any who will heed Christ's warning and repent. The one who overcomes will be clothed in white garments as just indicated, and unlike those who succumb to the pagan culture, will not have his name blotted out of the book of life.

(3) The overcomer's position among the saved is reinforced by the statement that Jesus will confess that person's name before his Father and the angels (see Mat. 10:32; Lk. 12:8). As Jesus said in Mk. 8:38 (ESV), "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Osborne states, "The majority of the church at Sardis had been 'ashamed' of Christ, probably by compromising their Christian distinctives in order to be accepted by their peers."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Osborne states (p. 178), "As many have noted (Caird, Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Giesen, Aune, Beale), this is not the second coming here but a historical visitation in judgment."

⁷⁵ Mounce, 112-113.

⁷⁶ Osborne, 181.

g. Again, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

F. The Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

⁷ "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.' ⁸ "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

1. Background on Philadelphia⁷⁷

a. Founded in the second century B.C., Philadelphia was smaller and younger than the other cities addressed. It was located about 30 miles southeast of Sardis on the site of modern Alashehir. The city was destroyed in A.D. 17 by the same earthquake that leveled Sardis and was rebuilt with assistance from Emperor Tiberius.

b. Philadelphia was a prosperous city with much pagan worship, particularly worship of Dionysus, and it had an established Jewish population. These Jews were opposed to the church there and possibly taunted the Christians as having no part in the Messiah and his kingdom.

2. The Letter

a. Self-identification

(1) Jesus identifies himself to this church as "the holy one, the true one." The "holy one" was a familiar title for God (e.g., Isa. 1:4, 37:23, 40:25; Hab. 3:3; Mk. 1:24; Jn. 6:69). In Rev. 6:10 God himself is described as holy and true. Jesus is alluding to his divinity and to the fact he is the genuine Messiah and thus can be counted on to deliver on his promises.

(2) He further identifies himself as the one "who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens."

⁷⁷ Osborne, 185-186; Koester, 321-323.

(a) This is an allusion to Isa. 22:22 where Isaiah prophesies that Eliakim will replace Shebna as Hezekiah's steward. The Lord says of Eliakim, "I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." He had complete control of access to the king and complete control over the king's affairs.

(b) The expression is used of Christ to indicate his complete control over entrance to the eternal kingdom, the New Jerusalem. It is not a matter of public opinion or political debate. When Christ opens the door for his followers, no amount of criticism, denial, or persecution can shut it. When he shuts the door on those who oppose him, no human decree or desire can open it. This may well have been aimed at the Jews who were falsely claiming that they would inherit the kingdom and that Christ's followers would be shut out (as they had probably been shut out of the synagogue).

(c) In v. 8a Jesus specifically says he has placed before these Christians an open door that no one can shut. A Christian can choose to walk away from Jesus, but no person or power can prevent a faithful Christian from entering the consummated kingdom.

b. Jesus assures them he knows their deeds

(1) As with Smyrna, there is nothing but approval here. He knows that they have little strength, meaning they were not influential or powerful. They were a small congregation that had not made a major impact on the city. They would not make today's list of "great churches."

(2) Yet they have kept his word and have not denied his name. They are praised by Christ in spite of their little strength because they had not denied him in the face of persecution. As he notes in v. 10, they had kept his command to endure patiently. Chuck Colson wrote years ago in Prison Fellowship's monthly newsletter, *Jubilee*:

By the time you read this, we will have dedicated our new national offices near Washington, D.C. As a result of this and other recent expansions, many people have written me to the effect that "God is obviously blessing Prison Fellowship's ministry."

As much as I am sincerely certain that God is, indeed, blessing us, I believe even more certainly that it's a dangerous and misguided policy to measure God's blessing by standards of visible, tangible, material "success."

The inference is that when things are prospering "God is blessing us" and, conversely, that when things are going poorly, or unpublicized, God's blessing is not upon the work or it is unimportant. . . . We must continuously use the measure of our obedience to the guidelines of his Word as the real – and only – standard of our "success," not some more supposedly tangible or glamorous scale.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ This is quoted in R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1987), 37-38.

c. Reward for faithfulness

(1) Jesus promises that he will make those Jews who are slandering and persecuting them, who are a "synagogue of Satan" (see 2:9) in that they are God's adversary despite their claim to be his people (see Rom. 2:28-29), ultimately bow down before their feet. As indicated in 2:26-27, Christians in some sense will share in Christ's ultimate defeat and punishment of his enemies through their identification with Christ, and these non-Christian Jews who were persecuting the church will be among the unbelievers who at that point are forced to submit to Jesus as Lord and to those with whom he has chosen to share his victory. They will acknowledge on that day that Christians are the blessed of the Lord. So the homage that these Jews expected they would receive from Gentiles at the eschaton, they will themselves give to the church, many of whom were Gentiles!

(2) Because they kept Christ's call for steadfast endurance (or, alternatively, kept the teaching about Christ's endurance – "my" modifying "endurance" rather than the entire phrase "word of endurance" – in that they conformed their lives to his example), Jesus will keep them from the hour of trial coming on the whole world to try those who dwell on the earth.

(a) With a number of commentators,⁷⁹ I think the point here is that, because of their faithfulness to Christ, they (and, by implication, all of like faithfulness) will be protected from the divine wrath that will be poured out in association with Christ's return in judgment, which return is "soon" in the sense it is always "at the door" (see Introduction). They have nothing to fear from that temporal aspect of the judgment (or from its eternal element) for it is punishment of those who persisted in impenitence and unbelief. Note that in Revelation "those dwelling on the earth" is a technical term for unbelieving idolaters, the enemies of God.⁸⁰ So this trial is not persecution of Christians but God's judgment against the world.

(b) This protection of Christians from the divine wrath that is part of the judgment meted out at Christ's return is symbolized in the sealing of the 144,000 in 7:1-8. This does not mean that Christians will be exempt from suffering and even death at the hands of their enemies. On the contrary, Christians have experienced and will experience the birth pains of persecution, the wrath of the dragon, which will intensify at the end in what is known as the great tribulation. But they will not experience the wrath of Almighty God.

(3) They are reminded in 3:11 of the fact Christ's coming is near, as it always is since he inaugurated the kingdom, as an encouragement to constant faithfulness. They must hold fast to their faith in the midst of persecution lest they allow their persecutors to deprive them of the crown of life that is promised to those who are faithful even to the point of death (2:10). This reinforces the conclusion that the hour of trial referred to in 3:10 is the judgment at Christ's return.

⁷⁹ Beasley-Murray, 101; Ladd, 62 (less clearly); Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 61; Beale, 290 (accepts as a possible reading); Johnson, 633.

⁸⁰ Beale, 290; Osborne, 193.

(4) Jesus says he will make the overcomer a pillar in God's temple. This symbolizes that those who remain faithful, who overcome the pressure to compromise their allegiance to Christ, will be permanently in the presence of God. It is a metaphor depicting the believer's permanent place in the consummated kingdom so it does not conflict with the absence of a temple as indicated in 21:22. The fact Jesus will inscribe on this pillar the name of God, the name of the city of God, specified to be the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven (see 21:2), and his own new name symbolizes that the person belongs to God, to the city of God, and to the Son of God (whatever his "new name" may be).

d. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

G. The Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

¹⁴ "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. ¹⁵ "'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. ²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. ²¹ The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

1. Background on Laodicea⁸¹

a. Laodicea (modern Eskihisar) was located at the intersection of two important trade routes about 45 miles southeast of Philadelphia and about 100 miles due east of Ephesus. Along with Colossae and Hierapolis, it was one of the cities of the fertile Lycus Valley. In Roman times, it became the wealthiest city in this area (Phrygia). An indication of its wealth is that when it was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60 it rebuilt itself over several decades without any financial aid from Rome.

b. The city was known for its banks, for its linen and wool industry (famous glossy black wool), and for its medical school. The medical school was related to the temple (13 miles away) and cult of a god known as Mēn Carus/Karrou. Other gods were honored and worshiped at Laodicea, the main one being Zeus.

c. The city lacked a convenient source of water, so it brought water in from springs six miles to the south through a system of stone pipes (the aqueduct enters from the south, not from the direction of Hierapolis). This was a common way of providing water to cities

⁸¹ Osborne, 201-202; Smalley, 95-96; Koester, 333-335.

in the Roman Empire, including other cities to which Revelation was directed. Though many assume the source of Laodicea's water was a hot spring, which might make the water unusually warm when it arrived, Koester notes that "studies of the water system do not bear that out."⁸²

d. The church was probably founded during Paul's stay in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10), possibly by Epaphras who planted the church in Colossae. There is no evidence that Paul visited this church (but see Philem. 22), but he did write them a letter (Col. 4:16) that has been lost (unless it is our letter to the Ephesians). There is indirect evidence from ancient sources that suggests there was a sizeable Jewish population in the city.

2. The Letter

a. Self-identification

(1) Jesus identifies himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler/originator/beginning (*archē*) of God's creation." "Amen" is primarily an acknowledgment of that which is sure, valid, and binding. It is a word of human response to God's truth or action. Jesus is "the Amen" in that he is the perfect response to God's will and promises. He is the ultimate "so be it" or "your will be done," the ultimate man of faithfulness, which is quite a contrast to the Laodiceans.

(2) The phrase "faithful and true witness" clarifies this meaning of "the Amen." Jesus is an absolutely trustworthy and reliable witness on God's behalf. Indeed, as the writer of Hebrews put it (Heb. 1:3), he is the exact representation of God's being or nature. There is perfect fidelity in his representation.

(3) As "the ruler/originator/beginning" of creation he has absolute power over the world and thus needs to be heeded. This resonates with Christ's role in creation expressed in Col. 1:16, a text with which the Laodiceans were familiar (as Paul had commanded the letter to be read in the church of the Laodiceans – Col. 4:16).

b. Jesus assures them he knows their deeds. As with the church in Sardis, there is nothing to commend. His assuring them he knows their works is not a basis for comfort but a basis for criticism.

(1) He knows their works, that they are neither cold nor hot, whereas he desires that they be one or the other, either cold or hot. Because they are neither, they are instead lukewarm, he is about to spit them out of his mouth. Modern scholars understand this in two different ways.

(a) Most are convinced that in rebuking the church for being neither cold nor hot, Jesus is playing off the water situation in Laodicea and the neighboring cities of Hierapolis and Colossae. The hot springs of nearby Hierapolis were famous for their health benefit, and the cold, pure drinking water of Colossae was a means of

⁸² Koester, 337 (citing Celal Şimşek and Mustafa Büyükkolancı, "The Water Springs of Laodicea and Its Distribution Systems," 9 *Adalya* [2006], 83-103).

refreshment, whereas the water that flowed into Laodicea over the aqueduct, being neither hot nor cold, was good for neither.⁸³ In this understanding, the church is being rebuked for its failure to be a spiritual benefit to people, its failure to provide either refreshment for the spiritually weary or healing for the spiritually sick. The Christians there were too complacent about their faith to have a proper impact. In keeping with the water reference, Christ says he is about to vomit them out of his mouth, i.e., reject them. They are running out of time, but there is still time to repent (v. 19).

(b) Others insist that the lukewarmness of the water that flowed into Laodicea over the aqueduct would not make it a suitable image of uselessness. On the contrary, many cities were supplied with water via aqueducts, and that water was considered a great benefit and blessing. Indeed, daily life depended on it. Acknowledging this fact, some contend that the water sent to Laodicea through its aqueduct was different from the water supplied to other cities by aqueduct because it came from a hot spring and therefore was unusually warm when it arrived, but a 2006 investigation of Laodicea's water springs indicates the source was not a hot spring. But even if it came from a hot spring six miles away, being warmer than normal for aqueduct water would not make it useless. Water has more uses than for drinking, and if the temperature made it unpleasant to drink, it simply would need to be cooled off. It is precisely because this water was useful, indeed necessary, that the aqueduct was built.

(c) This inappropriateness of Laodicea's water as a symbol of uselessness has led some to conclude that Jesus was not playing off the local water situation. Instead, he was using the fact that people, especially at banquets, desired that their drinks be hot or cold, depending on whether the air temperature was cold or hot, because the temperature difference made them refreshing (as we prefer hot cocoa on a winter night and iced tea on a summer day). In that light, the point is:

Cold or hot beverages are valued because their temperature differs from that of the surrounding air, which makes them refreshing. In contrast, the temperature of lukewarm water is like that of its surroundings; it does not distinguish itself to the touch. By analogy, nothing distinguishes the works of the Laodicean Christians from the common practices of their society. In previous messages Christ commends perseverance, faith, and love – works that would be positively regarded as cold or hot (Rev 2:2, 19; 3:8). The call for works that are cold or hot is a summons to a way of life that differs from familiar patterns of wealth breeding complacency, expressing instead the commitment to Christ and the Christian community that sets readers apart.⁸⁴

(2) The complacency that was displeasing or caused their ineffectiveness was rooted in their affluence. Material blessings carry the danger of a sense of self-sufficiency. Those who "have it now" have a hard time feeling their spiritual needs. The Bible warns repeatedly about the spiritual-numbing effect of wealth. They did not realize that, in terms of what matters (faith), they were poverty stricken. Osborne comments, "With no external pressure from pagan (like Sardis) or Jewish (like Smyrna or Philadelphia) persecution, with no

⁸³ See, e.g., Paul, 113-114.

⁸⁴ Koester, 344.

internal threat from heretical movements (like Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira), they had succumbed to their own affluent lifestyle, and they did not even know it!"⁸⁵

c. The solution is to repent, to make Christ the center of their lives. Only from him can true riches be obtained. He urges their repentance in terms that were particularly suited to their situation, i.e., in terms that related to their banking industry, their textile industry, and their medical school.

(1) He "counsels" them to buy *from him* gold refined in the fire. This refers to the genuine spiritual wealth that only Christ can provide.

(2) He counsels them to buy from him white clothes to cover their shameful nakedness. In contrast to their famous black woolen garments, these white clothes are symbols of righteousness that will avert the judgment and humiliation symbolized by their nakedness.

(3) He counsels them to buy from him salve for their eyes so they can see. Eye salves were common throughout the Roman Empire, but only Christ can provide the ultimate salve, the true perspective on reality that permits one to see what is truly valuable.

d. Jesus urges them further to repent. He tells them that his stern rebuke is because he loves them. It is not loving to whitewash a spiritually deadly condition for the sake of not offending someone.

e. He stands at the door and knocks in the sense he is beckoning each individual in that congregation to repent. If any will respond to his plea, their fellowship with him will be secure. In Oriental lands, the sharing of a common meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship. The culmination of this fellowship will be at Christ's table in the consummated kingdom (Lk. 22:30).

f. He promises those who overcome, who resist all that threatens to alienate them from him, that they will share his glory in eternity. Through their identification with him, they will in some sense share the throne that he shares with the Father; they will in some sense reign with him.

g. The call to listen is repeated once more: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

IV. Heavenly Vision (4:1-11)

A. Relation to the messages to the churches

Although the specifics differed, all the churches addressed in chapters 2 and 3 had been urged to remain faithful to God and to his Son Jesus. In being told to repent and to endure or

⁸⁵ Osborne, 207.

overcome, they were being told to put their trust in the unseen reality rather than be lured or frightened away by the physical reality. John is now given a vision of heaven, a vision of the God who controls all history and of the Son who accomplishes his plan.

B. The Vision

1. Prelude (4:1)

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

John looks and sees a door into heaven, into God's dwelling place, that is open. This is reminiscent of Ezek. 1:1, "the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." He hears the voice of the Lord Jesus telling him, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." We know it is Jesus who is speaking from the prior identification in 1:10. He is going to show John what God is going to do in the future, what must take place after this. And since God is behind it, it *must* take place; there is no thwarting the purposes of God.

2. Vision of God (4:2-6a)

² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

a. At once John enters into a Spirit-sent visionary experience in which God reveals his mysteries. Now I suspect that if you asked John, he would say, like Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2, that he did not know whether his body actually accompanied him on his trip into heaven. He in some sense went up and was shown heaven but the precise mechanics of that vision are not given to us and probably were not even given to John.

b. Upon entering heaven, John sees a throne with one seated on it.

(1) Now we do not talk a lot about thrones in our culture, but in John's day, and until quite recently, a throne was an immediately understood symbol of the sovereign majesty of the king; it signified both rule and judgment. And here we have the *heavenly* throne, the throne that is above *all* earthly thrones, the rule that is superior to *all* earthly rule.

(2) Whatever tyrant may be raging at the moment – from Emperor Domitian to Kim Jong Un – whatever injustice any human authority is inflicting – from a violent

parent to a power-crazed cop – *his* is not the last word. There is a throne that is above his, and the abuser one day will answer to the one who sits on it.

(3) And the one who sits on it is, of course, "the Lord God Almighty," as noted in v. 8. The throne of God is often referred to in Scripture (e.g., Isa. 6:1; Ps. 47:8) and in other Jewish literature. Rather than name him, John simply describes the splendor with which he is portrayed.

(a) He has the appearance of brilliantly colored precious jewels, usually translated as jasper and carnelian. Carnelian is a fiery red stone, and unlike its modern counterpart, this jasper probably was translucent. The God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16) is here represented as a sparkle of colored light.

(b) Now to appreciate the awesomeness of this depiction you have to remember that this was before electric light shows and computer graphics. This was stunning. God is communicating the fact he is the ultimate in majesty in a picture that spoke powerfully to a first-century audience. It shouted GLORY to them, and that is its message to us. As one commentator says, the use of these stones in John's description "evokes the dazzling splendour of the divine presence, a scene before which human beings can only bow down in adoration and worship."⁸⁶

(4) Adding to the brilliance of the image is the fact a rainbow that resembles an emerald and is shaped like a halo encircles the throne. It may resemble an emerald by being a spectrum of green colors or by being the colors of a normal rainbow that are tinted green. But clearly it is a sign of God's supreme majesty. The normal splendor of the rainbow is heightened by its association with an emerald, another precious jewel.

c. As the vision continues, we see that outside the emerald-like rainbow that is encircling God's throne there is another circle, this is one of 24 other thrones, and seated on these thrones are 24 beings called "elders." Throughout Revelation they are pictured as falling down before God in worship (5:14; 11:16; 19:4), and adoration and praise are continuously on their lips (4:11; 5:9-10; 11:17-18; 19:4).

(1) Now with many commentators, I am convinced that these elders are an important order of angelic or heavenly beings. They are part of the heavenly court that is alluded to in some of the Psalms (see, e.g., Ps. 29:1, 89:6-7, 103:19-21, 148:1-2). Let me quickly run through some of the reasons for thinking they are heavenly beings.

(a) Jewish literature of the time, especially apocalyptic literature, referred to powerful angelic or spiritual beings by the terms rulers, authorities, powers, and thrones,⁸⁷ so thrones and crowns certainly would not be out of place in a depiction of heavenly beings. Paul also uses these terms to refer to spiritual beings (Col. 1:16, 2:15; Eph.

⁸⁶ Boxall, 84.

⁸⁷ Daniel G. Reid, "Principalities and Powers" in Gerald F. Hawthorne, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 748-749; Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 252-255.

1:21, 3:10, 6:12), but his references often, if not always, are to hostile powers (see also, 1 Pet. 3:22).

(b) In several places in the New Testament angels are described as wearing white clothing (Mat. 28:3; Jn. 20:12; Acts 1:10).

(c) Throughout the Book of Revelation these elders perform what in Jewish apocalyptic literature are common angelic functions. Specifically, in 5:8 they, with the four living creatures, present the prayers of the saints to God, and in 5:5 and 7:13 they explain or interpret things.⁸⁸

(d) Revelation 5:8-10 seems clearly to distinguish these creatures from the redeemed. And if they are not part of the redeemed, it seems pretty clear that they are some kind of heavenly being.

(e) And finally, it is possible (though certainly disputed) that the term "elder" in Isa. 24:23 refers to angelic beings.

(2) So I am convinced these elders are some kind of angelic or heavenly beings. The white garments they are wearing signify their purity and holiness, and their golden crowns indicate their royal status. These clearly are beings of significant rank, but their rank serves solely to emphasize the ultimate glory of the one they encircle. The message of the imagery is: *If beings this great encircle the throne, then how great is the one who sits on that throne?*

(3) There are 24 of these beings probably because in their function as leaders of heavenly worship and in their presentation of the prayers of the saints to God (5:8, 8:3-4) they are a heavenly counterpart to the twenty-four priestly and Levitical orders specified in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 24:4; 25:9-31).

d. Next we are told that lightning and thunder are emanating from God's throne.

(1) If you have never been frightened or awed by the power and grandeur of a thunderstorm, you have never been close to one. Nobody in his right mind treats a thunderstorm casually; it is treated with fear and respect. And here that awesome force serves merely as a witness to the power and majesty of the One who sits on the throne.

(2) If you want to see what this symbolism conveys, Ex. 19:16 is a good place to look. When God made his presence known in the lightning and thunder at Sinai, all the people in the camp trembled. He is not a being into whose presence one casually "bops." There is no "Yo, what up?" This is the Almighty!

e. The scene then shifts to before the throne where there are seven blazing torches and something like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

⁸⁸ See Aune, 291; Poythress, 103; Beale, 323.

(1) We are told that the seven torches represent the "seven spirits of God," which I have suggested is a figurative reference to the Holy Spirit by way of Zechariah 4 or possibly Isaiah 11. This third member of the Godhead is ever ready to fulfill the Father's purpose in creation.

(2) The vast quantity of what looks like clear glass further emphasizes the splendor and majesty of God, not only because it was free of impurities but also because clear glass was rare in the ancient world and thus quite expensive (see Job 28:17). Glass at that time normally was dark or even opaque. This material before God's throne that looks like clear glass is so abundant that John says it is "like a sea." Interestingly, the Koran, which of course was written centuries later, contains a legend about a pavement of clear glass that was before King Solomon's throne.⁸⁹

3. Ceaseless worship (4:6b-11)

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" ⁹ And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹ "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

a. Here we see another circle around the throne, this one consisting of four living creatures.

(1) The language seems to indicate that they are right next to the throne, surrounding it on all sides. So they are inside the circle of 24 thrones and probably just outside the halo-shaped rainbow. This concentric arrangement carries an important message; it symbolizes the fact God is the center of all things. It says, as we might put it, that it is not about us, and it is not about any heavenly beings – it is about *God*. Everything is about God. Osborne goes so far as to say, "These concentric circles around the throne are the core of the vision and depict glory and worship."⁹⁰

(2) The closeness of these four living creatures to the throne suggests that they are a highly exalted order of heavenly beings. They have some similarities with the cherubim of Ezekiel chapters 1 and 10 and with the seraphim of Isaiah chapter 6, but there also are some differences.

⁸⁹ See Morris, 88.

⁹⁰ Osborne, 228.

(a) They are full of eyes front and back, which signifies awareness and unceasing vigilance. Nothing can be withheld from these beings as they oversee God's affairs.

(b) One of them looks like a lion, one looks like an ox, one has the face of a human, and one looks like a flying eagle. There is much debate about the significance of these creatures' appearance, but I think they are shown this way to communicate their greatness. There is combined in them the great courage, strength, wisdom, and swiftness that the lion, ox, human, and eagle symbolize; they possess the grandest attributes of earthly creatures. And as in the case of the 24 elders, their greatness serves only to magnify the glory of the one on the throne, the one they worship.

(c) Like the seraphim in Isaiah 6, they each have six wings, except that the wings of these creatures are, like the rest of their bodies, covered with eyes. Perhaps these wings represent speed in carrying out the will of God, but do not let uncertainty about any of the details detract from the awesomeness of the overall scene.

(3) As great as these four creatures are, v. 8 says that "day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"

(a) They continually praise God, extolling his holiness (repeated three times as in Isa. 6:3), his power (the Almighty), and his eternality (was, is, and is to come). See, 7:11 and 19:4.

(b) Of course, God's holiness refers not just to his moral purity but to his intrinsic distinctiveness from all other things. It encapsulates all that is "other" about God, and for that reason has been called "an attribute of attributes." It is in that sense that Rev. 15:4 declares that the Lord *alone* is holy. To say God is holy in that sense is, in essence, to say that he is God.

b. And as often as these living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the eternal God, the twenty-four elders fall before his throne – prostrate themselves – throw down their crowns before him, and join in the adoration (see, 7:11 and 19:4). This is absolute and utter submission and homage. God alone is sovereign and worthy of universal honor. Casting down their crowns is an acknowledgment that their authority is delegated. These outbursts do not contradict the continuous worship of v. 8 because this is poetry of adoration.

c. As they lie on their faces before the Almighty, the elders praise him proclaiming that he is worthy to receive glory and honor and power because he created all things.

(1) You see, reverential and awe-filled praise, genuine worship, flows from a proper vision of God. He is the greatest conceivable being and unlike any human being is *worthy* of our worship and adoration, so claims that God is vain or egotistical in insisting on worship are groundless. Given his glory, splendor, and majesty, it would be wrong for him not to insist on being worshiped.

(2) Moreover, God insists that we worship him not only because it is right and proper to do so, as is a child's respect for a parent, but also because he wants us to stay attached to him for our own good. He is the ultimate reality, and if we lose sight of that truth and begin to construct a fantasy world that denies it, we will suffer harm. Worship, as we might say, helps to keep our mind right, which results in our blessing.

V. Scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14)

A. The sealed scroll (5:1-5)

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴ and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

1. Chapter 4 ends with the four living creatures giving glory and honor and thanks to the eternal God and with the 24 elders prostrating themselves before the Almighty and praising him as the Creator of all things. Then, at the beginning of chapter 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne that is written on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

a. The right hand was traditionally the hand of power or authority. That the scroll is in God's hand says that he is its author. What is written in it is his revelation.

b. Though one *could* write on both sides of the papyrus sheets that were attached together to form a scroll, that usually was not done because it was hard to write on the side on which the papyrus strips ran vertically. Your pen would bump along over the strips as you wrote horizontally. So, the norm was to write only on the inside of the scroll, the side on which the strips ran horizontally.

c. The fact the scroll in God's hand has writing on both sides says something about the fullness of the revelation. There are different views about the subject or contents of the scroll, but I am with those who think it is God's revelation of the final outcome of his creation, the consummation of his redemptive plan. I think Mounce is on target when he states in his commentary, "[the scroll] contains the full account of what God in his sovereign will has determined as the destiny of the world."⁹¹ Johnson likewise says, "[The scroll] contains the divine announcement of the consummation of all history – how things will ultimately end for all people: judgment for the world and the final reward of the saints (11:18)."⁹² The *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* says, "The scroll contains God's consummate plan of judgment and redemption, which Jesus alone

⁹¹ Mounce, 142.

⁹² Johnson, 646.

reveals and executes."⁹³ That destiny of the world unfolds pictorially and symbolically in the Book of Revelation after the breaking of the seventh and final seal which permits the scroll to be opened.

d. Seals were wax or clay blobs that were attached to certain important documents and impressed with a signet ring from the author of the document. A seal assured that the writing had not been altered and thus that it truly expressed the will of its author. Only the owner or a properly authorized person could break a document seal.

e. As Boxall and others note, the number seven in the ancient world "evoked completeness or perfection (it being the number of days in the week and of the planets, therefore built into the structure of the universe). For Jews, it reflected the pattern of creation, which culminated in God's sabbath rest on the seventh day (Gen. 1:1–2:3)."⁹⁴ So the fact the scroll is sealed with *seven* seals symbolizes that it is completely or perfectly sealed; its contents are absolutely authentic, and it is absolutely secure from unauthorized disclosure.

2. Next appears a mighty angel who booms out a challenge to all creation: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And we are told in v. 3 that "no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it." Not the mightiest of angels, not the greatest of living or dead saints was able to open the scroll. No creature anywhere was worthy for that task.

3. This failure to find anyone who was worthy to open the scroll causes John to weep loudly in grief.

a. That tells you something about the significance of this scroll. Indeed, it is so significant that when the seventh seal is opened, Rev. 8:1 says, "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." You talk about dramatic.

b. John is weeping not simply because he will not learn what is in the scroll, not simply because his curiosity is being stifled, but because it is clear from the set up in the vision that the fulfillment of God's purposes recorded in the scroll requires someone who is *worthy* to open the scroll. That is because worthiness to open the scroll, as indicated in v. 5, belongs only to the one who conquers the opposition to fulfillment of God's plan, only to the one who is the means of achieving God's plan. If there is no one to open the scroll then there is no faithful champion who has won the victory, who has accomplished God's purposes, and thus what otherwise would have been will not take place. John is mourning that loss.

4. As John is weeping, one of the 24 elders described in chapter 4 says to him, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

a. These titles, the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the root of David, were stock Jewish references to the Messiah that had developed over time from Gen. 49:9-10 and Isa. 11:1, 10. The Messiah was the long-awaited righteous king in the line of David that God had

⁹³ D. A. Carson, ed., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2597.

⁹⁴ Boxall, 90-91.

promised would rule supremely. And, of course, Jesus is the Messiah, God's ultimate anointed one. Indeed, the title "Christ" is from a Greek word (*christos*) meaning "anointed one," and "Messiah" is from a Hebrew word (*māshîah*) meaning "anointed one." So they are equivalent terms; to say Jesus is the Christ is to say he is the Messiah. You will recall that Jesus flat out tells the woman at the well in John 4 that he is the Messiah.

b. There was a view among many Jews that the Messiah would overthrow Israel's enemies by military might, as the great King David had done. And here the elder tells John to behold this messianic figure who *has conquered* and who for that reason is able to open the scroll and its seals.

B. The Lamb, the scroll, and heavenly worship (5:6-14)

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." ¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

1. But when John looks, the lion, the mighty conquering Messiah, is portrayed as a standing lamb that appears to have been slain. This lamb's body bears the marks of its execution, and yet it stands at God's throne triumphant. The lion of the tribe of Judah, Jesus Christ, *is* the lamb. He has conquered, not through military power, but by enduring the hostility of sinners and dying a sacrificial death like a Passover lamb. His crucifixion is the sacrifice that spares all who will receive it from condemnation and takes them from the bondage of the devil to the glory of the kingdom of God.

a. The truth that is pictured here is perhaps nowhere better stated than in Rom. 3:21-25, a text Martin Luther called "the chief point, and the very center of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible." Paul there writes: ²¹But now, the righteousness of God has been displayed apart from the law, though being attested by the law and the prophets, ²²that is, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For there is not a distinction, ²³for all sinned and come short of the glory of God, ²⁴being pronounced righteous as a gift by his grace through the

redemption [accomplished] in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God set forth to be, by means of his blood, a wrath-averting sacrifice [appropriated] through faith.

c. It is the absolute glory and holiness of God Almighty portrayed in chapter 4 that makes necessary this sacrifice pictured in chapter 5. We must appreciate the glory and holiness of God to appreciate the gravity and horror of sin. And we must appreciate the gravity and horror of sin to appreciate that an absolutely glorious and holy God cannot simply wink at it. To forgive sin without payment of a penalty would be to condone the evil, to trivialize it, and to open God to the charge of being unjust. It would be to exercise mercy *at the expense of* justice.

d. So regarding our sin, there is tension between aspects of God's nature, between his justice and his mercy, between his holiness and his love.

(1) But that tension is not irreconcilable. The cross is where God's justice and mercy, his holiness and his love are manifested *simultaneously*. Because in his love he desires to forgive us of our sin, he sent Jesus, his Son, to take upon himself the punishment for that sin. He did not wink at it; he did not condone it; he did not trivialize it. Far from it – he bore it!

(2) So in the cross God is able to satisfy both his holiness and his love; in other words, through the cross he is able to forgive consistently with his being, he is able to forgive *justly* or to forgive *righteously*.

2. But this slaughtered lamb also has seven horns and seven eyes.

a. A horn is a symbol of power and strength, and in a number of Jewish writings a horned lamb or ram was a messianic conqueror who leads the people of God to victory.

(1) That he has seven horns indicates he is perfect in might, omnipotent. So there is combined in this image of Jesus both the sacrificial lamb of Calvary and the warrior Messiah who will finalize the victory he already won at the cross when he destroys all enemies at his Second Coming.

(2) The warrior Messiah is the rider on the white horse in Revelation 19, the one called Faithful and True and the Word of God. We are told there that he in righteousness judges and makes war and that his robe is dipped in blood. He comes with the armies of heaven which are dressed in white linen and follow him on white horses. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

b. The seven eyes symbolize not only the all-seeing nature of the Lamb – as in Zech. 4:10 where "the seven eyes of the Lord . . . range throughout the earth" – but also represent the seven spirits of God, which should be understood as a reference to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sent out into all the world to carry out the divine mission.

3. Jesus, the all-powerful and all-knowing slaughtered lamb of God, takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. And when he does, the four living creatures and

the 24 elders, who in chapter 4 repeatedly worshiped the one on the throne, break out in worship of the Lamb.

a. The harps and bowls of incense the 24 elders are holding are symbols drawn from the Old Testament of the prayers of the saints that are both spoken and sung. On earth Christians were being despised in the persecution of Emperor Domitian, but in heaven their prayers were precious and pleasing to God

b. In vv. 9-10 the four living creatures and the elders, on their faces before the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ, sing a song of praise to him for his work of redemption. They sing: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

c. Only Jesus was worthy to reveal the contents of the scroll, God's destiny for the world, because only he accomplished God's eternal purpose by his sacrificial death. He conquered Satan once for all, having achieved the victory over evil at the cross, and when he returns that victory will be manifested in the final judgment of those who already have been conquered and in the eternal reward of those who have already been saved. There is no other savior, no other path, no other way.

(1) In Christ's death he paid the penalty of sin and purchased for God people from all over the world. As the children's song goes, "Red, yellow, black, and white, they are precious in his sight." The gospel is for all people of all nations.

(2) Those drawn out from the nations of the world through faith in Christ collectively have become a kingdom, those submitted to the reign of the Lord, and individually have become priests, those serving God in worship and in witness to the world. As Israel was to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), the new Israel, the church of Christ, is the fulfillment of that intention.

(3) When the Lord Jesus returns, Christians, the redeemed, shall reign with him forever on a new earth, a radically transformed or "heavenized" earth, which is depicted so beautifully in Rev. 21:1-5. We will be kings serving Christ in authority over his creation. It is a hope like none other.

4. Next John looks and hears around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of innumerable angels, myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, praising Jesus in a loud voice. They are saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

5. And then John hears every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And when they said this, the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

6. Let that sink in for a moment. The Bible is completely monotheistic. There is only one God who is separate from all created things, and only that one God may be worshiped. The worship of anything other than God is idolatry. Even angels refuse worship, as you can see in Rev. 19:10 and 22:8-9. And yet, here the Lamb, Jesus Christ, is worshiped in 5:8-12, which leads to the worship of God and the Lamb by the whole creation (5:13). Rev. 22:3 speaks of the throne (singular) of God and of the Lamb.

a. It is clear from this that Jesus is one with the Father (Jn. 10:30), that they are one in essence or being, so that to worship God the Father and God the Son is to worship only one God. This is part of the mystery of the Trinity, the fact God is a three-person being. There is one essence or being but three distinctive persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

b. In eternity the Father, Son, and Spirit freely chose the roles they would take in the redemption of humanity. As James White puts it:

The Father chose to be the fount and source of the entirety of the work; the Son chose to be the Redeemer and to enter into human flesh as one subject to the Father; and the Spirit chose to be the Sanctifier of the church, the indwelling Testifier of Jesus Christ.

c. If someone knocks on your door and tells you that Jesus is a created being, an angel of some kind, do not you believe it. They are urging a heresy on you.

VI. First Six Seals (6:1-17)

A. Comment on Mat. 24:1-42

1. In chapter 6 we have the opening of the first six seals. My understanding of what the opening of these seals represents is influenced by my understanding of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24. As I taught classes on Matthew 24 a few months ago, I am not going to cover that ground again. For a fuller explanation of my reasoning, you can check the article, "[A Sketch of Mat. 24:1-42](#)," that is on my website, www.theoutlet.us, or watch videos of the classes that are available online [here](#).

2. Very briefly, I think Jesus says in Mat. 24:1-42 that the time between his ascension to heaven and his return from heaven, the time until the Second Coming, will be a time of unknown length – in the sense it is a length known only by the Father – and will be a time of "birth pains," a time that is punctuated with episodes of pain and distress in various forms. More specifically, it will be a time of unknown duration that is punctuated with false christs, war, famine, earthquakes, persecution, hatred, betrayal, apostasy, and false prophets.

3. He is warning the disciples not to be led astray during the time before the end comes, not to jump to the conclusion that the occurrence of any of these things means the end is immediate. These things all will happen *without the arrival of the end*, just as contractions happen during labor without it being time for the baby to come. Birth pains are clear indications the baby is

on the way, but just how many birth pains will be experienced before the actual delivery is unknown.

4. As is true of human birth pains, the birth pains of the Messiah, the episodes of tumult and hardship that will happen during this time of unknown duration prior to the Lord's return, can occur unevenly. Some pains are sharper than others, and some sharp pains can occur early in the process. He tells them, in so many words, that they need to see the fall of Jerusalem, which he alluded to in v. 2, in that light. When they see Jerusalem coming under attack, the abomination that causes desolation (Lk. 21:20), they are not to think this is the time of their redemption. Rather than straightening up and raising their heads as they are to do at the time of their redemption at the Second Coming (Lk. 21:27-28), in this instance they must *flee* immediately – not even take the time to retrieve personal items – because "the abomination that causes desolation" signals not the end, as their questions in v. 3 indicate they believed, but a very severe episode of distress within this age of distress, a particularly sharp pain within "the birth pains of the Messiah."

5. As is true of human birth pains, the birth pains of the Messiah, the episodes of tumult and hardship that will happen during this time of unknown duration prior to the Lord's return, will intensify. They will culminate in the Lord's open and obvious return with the angelic host, which will be a time of mourning for the rebellious from all the people groups on earth because it will be a time of punishment and judgment.

B. Opening of the six seals (6:1-17)

1. General remarks

a. The opening of the seals is a dramatic buildup to revealing the contents of the scroll. With a number of commentators,⁹⁵ I do not believe the scroll is opened until the final seal, the seventh seal, is broken. I agree with Thomas Schreiner⁹⁶ and others that the events associated with the opening of the first five seals "characterize human history from the time of Christ's cross and resurrection until the time of the end." As Schreiner notes, "During this period of time there are wars, famines, death, and the persecution and martyrdom of the people of God."

b. The events symbolized in conjunction with the opening of the seals correspond to the birth pains to which Jesus referred in the Olivet Discourse,⁹⁷ birth pains that ultimately give way to the judgment at Christ's return. As Ladd explains:

The successive breaking of the seals does not gradually open the book. Its contents cannot be disclosed until the last seal is broken. However, as each seal is broken, something happens. After the first seal, conquest rides forth over the earth; after the second, war; then famine, and death, and martyrdom. The sixth seal brings us to the end of the age and the coming of the great Day of the Lord and of the wrath of the Lamb (6:16-17). This suggests that the events attending the breaking of the seals do not constitute the end itself but events leading up to

⁹⁵ E.g., Mounce, 151; Boxall, 104; Smalley, 146; Koester, 405.

⁹⁶ Schreiner (2008), 830.

⁹⁷ See Johnson, 651.

the end. The structure is paralleled in Matthew 24, where wars, famines, and other evils are but the "beginnings of woes," not the end itself (Mt. 24:8).⁹⁸

c. That the first four depictions are called forth by the four living creatures symbolizes God's control over even the forces of rebellion, chaos, and hostility. As with Satan's attacks in the Book of Job, they occur only within the scope of God's permission. When the sixth seal is opened, the judgment is imminent, history has moved to that "great day of wrath," what I take to be the dominant subject of the scroll.

2. First four seals: Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (6:1-8)

Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!"² And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.³ When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!"⁴ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.⁵ When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand.⁶ And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"⁷ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"⁸ And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

a. The opening of the first four seals of the scroll brings forth what is known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Boxall remarks: "Few scenes in John's book have been as influential in art, literature, and wider culture as this. Perhaps its most famous representation is Albrecht Dürer's woodcut in which the four ride out together, trampling bishops, princes and merchants in their wake, an indication that power and prestige cannot render human beings immune from what John sees."⁹⁹

b. Rider on white horse – conquest and militarism

(1) The Lamb of chapter 5, the Lord Jesus, is the one who opens the seals because he is the only one worthy to open them. When he opens the first seal, one of the four living creatures thunders "Come!" and then John sees a white horse with a rider who has a bow and a victor's crown (not a royal crown) that was given to him, meaning he was permitted by God to have his victories. This rider came out conquering, and to conquer, which indicates his lust for conquest. He was intent on conquering more than he had already conquered.

(2) Some have argued that this rider on the white horse is the Lord Jesus, since Jesus is described in 19:11-16 as coming on a white horse to destroy his enemies, but as

⁹⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 674.

⁹⁹ Boxall, 103.

Beasley-Murray notes, "this is to play havoc with the whole scheme of John's vision."¹⁰⁰ The only similarity between this rider on the white horse and Jesus in 19:11-16 is the color of the horse! Everything in this chapter indicates that the rider represents some form of distress or hardship, and not only is Christ already represented in the vision as the one opening the seals, but he certainly would not appear as merely one of the Four Horsemen.

(3) Leon Morris states in his commentary that white was the color of victory,¹⁰¹ and R. H. Charles cites in his commentary a number of triumphant warriors who rode white horses.¹⁰² The bow in the Old Testament was a symbol of military power (e.g., Hos. 1:5; Jer. 51:56), and at this time may have been particularly associated with the Parthians, a warlike federation of tribes east of the Euphrates River that had defeated an invading Roman army in A.D. 62. "They were known as mounted warriors, and their cavalry were especially known for their formidable archery."¹⁰³

(4) With the majority of commentators,¹⁰⁴ this rider is a symbol of conquest and militarism. As Jesus said in Matthew 24, this present age, the age of birth pains, will see "nation rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom." That has been the case.

c. Rider on red horse – bloodshed

(1) With the opening of the second seal, John sees a rider on a red horse. Red was the color of slaughter and bloodshed. This rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

(2) This is broader than wars between nations or kingdoms. It includes the bloodshed of civil strife, which occurs *within* nations and kingdoms, as well as religious persecution, terrorism, and all forms of murder. In Matthew 24 Jesus makes clear that human bloodshed will be a part of this age.

c. Rider on black horse – famine

(1) With the opening of the third seal, John sees a rider on a black horse. Black symbolizes scarcity. The scales in the rider's hand and the prices stated for wheat and barley indicate he brings famine. In a famine, prices rise (these are 10 -12 times higher than normal) and food is very carefully allocated (so no one gets an unfair share – see, Ezek. 4:16; Lev. 26:26).

(2) "Do not damage the oil and the wine" may be a way of indicating the concern over such basics caused by scarcity. Or it may be a reference to the fact Roman owners of provincial estates in this area at this time grew more olives and grapes than grain because doing so was more profitable than growing grain. In fact, after a famine in A.D. 92 Domitian had tried to

¹⁰⁰ Beasley-Murray, 131.

¹⁰¹ Morris, 101; see also, Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 125.

¹⁰² R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:162.

¹⁰³ Keener, 202.

¹⁰⁴ Smalley, 150.

restrict grape growing in Asia to force the growing of more grain. If that is what the saying reflects, it may be a way of emphasizing the famine's impact by highlighting the poor preparation for that eventuality.

(3) Mat. 24:7 speaks of famines in this age of birth pains. They have occurred regularly throughout the world.

d. Rider on pale, yellowish-green horse – death

(1) With the opening of the fourth seal, John sees a rider on a pale, yellowish-green horse. The horse is the color of a corpse. The rider is specifically named Death, and he is being followed by Hades, the realm of the dead.

(2) Death by sword, famine, disease, and animals is part of the distress of the age in which we live. It will continue until the Lord returns and finalizes the healing of this fallen creation. The fact death is an inherent aspect of the disasters symbolized in the first three seals shows that the seals need not be read as strictly sequential occurrences but can be read as occurring simultaneously.¹⁰⁵

3. The fifth seal (6:9-11)

⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" ¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

a. With the opening of the fifth seal, John sees under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. Christian martyrdom will be a part of this age. As D. A. Carson points out in his commentary on Matthew,¹⁰⁶ the 20th century had more Christian martyrs than all previous nineteen centuries put together, and the pace of Christian killing in the world has not slowed. It seems removed from us because, so far, it is a very rare occurrence in America.

b. That the souls of the martyrs are seen as being under the altar in God's heavenly temple is a way of saying that their untimely deaths on earth are, from God's perspective, a sacrifice on the altar of heaven (see, 2 Tim. 4:6). In Old Testament sacrifice, the blood (life) of the bull was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Ex. 29:12; Lev. 4:7).

c. These martyred saints appeal to God for vindication, for justice. They want the world's judgment of them to be reversed. They want God to be glorified by punishing those who defied him by attacking his people.

¹⁰⁵ See Beale, 370.

¹⁰⁶ D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 503.

d. The white robes they were given represent blessedness (see, 7:13-14) or perhaps victory as in 6:2. They are in a blessed state as they await the outworking of God's plan. They are told to rest a little longer until the full number of martyrs has been reached. At that time, God will vindicate them and glorify himself through the final judgment. This is part of what leads me to see the events associated with the opening of the five seals as things that precede the final judgment. That will not take place until more Christians have died for their faith.

4. The sixth seal (6:12-17)

¹² When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴ The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶ calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

a. With the opening of the sixth seal, John sees a heavenly upheaval that is similar to the description in Mat. 24:29, which description there is recognized by a large majority of scholars to refer to the *parousia*, the Second Coming of Christ.

(1) The language of Mat. 24:29 is drawn from Isa. 13:10 and 34:4. Most basically it depicts what we might call "earth-shattering" events, those interventions by God that seem to "turn the world upside down." In Isa. 13:10 it refers to God's judgment against Babylon; in Isa. 34:4 it refers to God's judgment against "all the nations" but particularly Edom.

(2) Similar language is used elsewhere of God's judgment within history on cities and nations (e.g., Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:9), but as Donald Hagner states, "[t]here is, however, a tendency for this language to shade into a description of the eschatological Day of the Lord. This tendency becomes more apparent in the utilization of the same language in the Pseudepigrapha (e.g., Ass. Mos. 10:5; Sib. 3:801 f.) and in the NT."¹⁰⁷ In other words, this language became an image for the ultimate divine intervention, that which occurs at the end of the age and most radically alters this reality (age) by bringing it to a close and ushering in the final, eternal state, the consummated kingdom of God.

b. The birth pains are here at their end. The heavenly upheaval symbolizes that Christ is returning and judgment is about to begin. So frightening is that prospect that God's opponents, from the greatest and most powerful to the lowliest, hide themselves in the caves and among the rocks and call out to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath

¹⁰⁷ Donald A. Hagner, "hēlios" in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3:731.

has come, and who can stand?" They would rather be buried in an avalanche than face what they know is coming.

c. In my understanding, the scroll that is about to be opened with the breaking of the seventh and final seal elaborates on the terror of this judgment and warns the church of the tribulation, the period of intensified birth pains – intensified persecution – that will immediately precede that judgment. This revelation of this *final* and *ultimate* conflict carries a message for the church regarding all the manifestations of this spiritual conflict throughout history. God's victory is sure, and eternal glory is the reward of faithfulness.

(1) As we will see, this "great day of judgment" is a judgment event that includes vengeance and punishment of God's enemies on the earth and finishes with an eternal judgment of all humanity. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 1:7-8 and Jude indicated in Jude 14-15, Christ will return with mighty angels and will take vengeance, inflict punishment, on the unbelievers of the world.

(2) So this return in judgment will be a cosmic nightmare for the enemies of God who are then dwelling on the earth, and it will continue into the general resurrection and the final assignment of resurrected (or transformed) humanity to their permanent dwelling places, which will be either the new heavens and new earth or hell, depending on one's relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

(3) Before that time, the church will face extreme persecution from a Satan-inspired political ruler – a magnified form of what John's immediate audience was experiencing – but God's victory is certain, and all who remain faithful in whatever their circumstance will share in the joy and glory of it.

d. As readers, we are now primed for the opening of the final seal and the revelation of the contents of the scroll, but we must wait. Chapter 6 ends with the question of who will be able to stand when the terrifying judgment of God falls. How can anyone stand under such a holy wrath?

VII. Christians assured (144,000 and multitudes) (7:1-17)

A. General remarks

Chapter 7 forms a suspenseful interlude before the opening of the seventh seal, but it serves more than a literary purpose. It provides assurance to Christians, the people of God, that God knows they are his and will spare them from his punishment in the day of his wrath. *They* will stand because they are marked as objects of God's saving mercy. They will all be brought safely into eternal life with God. This assurance is needed in light of the terrible judgment to be revealed.

B. Sealing of God's servants (7:1-8)

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ² Then I saw

another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God ^bon their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: ⁵ 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad, ⁶ 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh, ⁷ 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar, ⁸ 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

1. Four angels, who are God's agents of judgment, are pictured as controlling the winds that have the power to damage the earth and the sea. ("Four corners of the earth" is an idiom based on the four compass directions and means every part of the world.) They are holding these winds back until the time God has decreed for judgment. The sirocco, a scorching wind off the desert, was used in the Old Testament as a metaphor for divine punishment (e.g., Jer. 4:11; Hos. 13:15) and wind became a metaphor in Jewish apocalyptic writing for judgment (e.g., 1 Enoch 76).

2. They are instructed by another angel, who comes from the east (from the rising of the sun), not to damage the earth, the sea, or the trees until the "servants of God" have been marked with a seal on their foreheads.

a. This seal is to assure the Christians that in the coming judgment God in his grace has marked them for protection. He will not lose sight of any who are his. Though more Christians will suffer at the hands of God's enemies, they will be protected from the wrath that really matters, the wrath of Almighty God. They are sealed to salvation.

b. In Ezekiel 9 God instructed a man clothed in linen, probably an angel, to place a mark on the forehead of all those who were deeply troubled over the sins of Jerusalem. His six companions were told to put to death all those who did not have the mark. The vision given to John is obviously alluding to this text.

c. It appears from 14:1 that the mark this seal leaves on the forehead is the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father. It is a mark of those who belong to God.

3. In vv. 4-8 John hears that the number of the sealed is 144,000 from every tribe of the sons of Israel with 12,000 coming from each of the 12 listed tribes.

a. Those sealed are identified in v. 3 as "the servants (or slaves) of our God," which in the context of the book means they are Christians (e.g., 11:18, 19:10, 22:3, 22:6, 22:9). There is wide agreement that the figure 144,000 is a symbolic number, as is common in apocalyptic literature. It is the number of the tribes of Israel (12) squared and multiplied by a thousand, which is a three-fold way of emphasizing completeness. The point is that the full number of this group has been included; not a single one has been overlooked.

b. Some think the 144,000 represent *Jewish* Christians, but I am with the many commentators who believe this is a symbolic reference to the entire church represented in

terms of its Jewish root. There is physical Israel (physical descendants of Abraham), true Israel (physical Jews who accept God's testimony about Jesus), and new Israel (the church, being comprised of true Israel and the Gentiles who have been grafted into it). The church's identity as the new Israel, the new people of God, is indicated in several ways.

(1) The church is addressed as the twelve tribes in Jas. 1:1.

(2) The Christian is the true Jew in Rom. 2:29, Abraham is the father of all Christians in Rom. 4:11, and Christians are Abraham's seed in Gal. 3:29.

(3) The church probably is described as the "Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16.

(4) Descriptions of Israel are taken directly from the Old Testament and applied to the church in 1 Pet. 2:9.

(5) John himself has already indicated that unbelieving Jews are actually a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9, 3:9), and he regards the New Jerusalem as the home of Christians (21:2ff).

c. Limiting those who are sealed to Jewish Christians makes a distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians that seems contrary to the oneness of the church expressed in Gal. 3:26-29 and Col. 3:11. And given that the purpose of the sealing is to mark the recipients for protection from God's judgment, it makes no sense to limit that protection to Jewish Christians. As Osborne states:

The purpose here is to stress the perfect completeness of the whole (note "every tribe") "number" of the persevering faithful in the church in a threefold way: taking 12 (the number of completeness), then squaring it, and then multiplying by 1000, another symbol of completeness in the book (note also the "24 elders" of 4:4, the "12,000 stadia" of 21:16, the "144 cubits" of 21:17, and the "twelve crops of fruit" of 22:2).¹⁰⁸

d. The list of the twelve tribes is somewhat odd. Judah is put first no doubt because the Messiah is from that tribe (Mat. 1:3, 2:6; Heb. 7:14). Instead of Manasseh and Ephraim being listed in place of their father Joseph, Joseph is listed along with Manasseh, but it is quite possible that Joseph here stands for the tribe of Ephraim as in Num. 1:32-33. Levi is included, which often is not done because that tribe did not receive an allotment of land, and Dan is excluded, perhaps because that tribe fell into idolatry (see Judges 18).

e. The point of the symbolism is that the saints have nothing to fear from the coming wrath of God, the approach of which is symbolized in 6:12-17. When that terrible judgment falls on the inhabitants of the earth, every faithful servant at that time, and by implication at any time, will be protected. The message for the seven churches and for us is to remain faithful to Christ

¹⁰⁸ Osborne, 312.

in the face of any threat or persecution because the faithful certainly will be spared the infinitely worse wrath of Almighty God.

C. Bliss of the redeemed in heaven (7:9-17)

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

1. The scene now shifts from his *hearing* about the sealing of all the saints on earth in preparation for the outpouring of God's wrath on this evil world to his *seeing* the multitude from all the people groups of the world that kept the faith during the great tribulation, that time of intense hostility and persecution that immediately precedes the final judgment. They stand before the throne and before the Lamb, a place of honor, sheltered by God's presence, never again to suffer or weep, and being guided by the Lamb to springs of living water.

2. It is an image of blessing as a reward of faithfulness, and these great-tribulation saints stand as an example and a challenge for saints during any time of tribulation. If a saint's time of suffering is indeed the great tribulation, then the vision is immediately applicable to their situation. If a saint's time of suffering is some lesser tribulation, then they should be strengthened and encouraged by the multitude shown in the vision to have stood strong in the face of worse persecution.

3. These saints have white robes, as were given to the faithful martyrs in 6:11, which indicate purity and victory. They also have palm branches "which were a sign of rejoicing on a festive occasion, such as the triumphal entry of Christ (John 12:13)."¹⁰⁹ They are crying out "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" and the heavenly beings fall on their faces before the throne and worship God. They say "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

¹⁰⁹ Osborne, 320.

4. So God not only indicates by the image of sealing that no Christian will fall under his holy wrath, but he also holds out in this picture the glory and joy that faithfulness in persecution will bring. Allegiance to God is the path to the deepest imaginable blessing, no matter how it may look at the moment.

5. The question by the elder in v. 13 about the identity of those clothed in white robes presupposes John's unasked question. John knows the angel does not expect him to answer, as it is the angel who knows the answer. The question simply opens the door for the angel to give the information to John.

6. These saints are said by the elder to have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. This is, of course, a reference to the cleansing purchased by Christ's sacrificial death. As Metzger suggests, these saints "washed their robes" through their steadfast faith; they were cleansed by Christ's blood through a genuine faith that shone through their trials.¹¹⁰ In Paul's phrase, they worked out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).

7. Although 7:14 specifically states that those robed in white had come out of the great tribulation, I think it is possible that all the faithful of all time are represented by the great multitude in this vision.

a. In other words, it seems possible that the faithful of all generations are pictured and described as those who came out of the great tribulation because the nature of their faith was the same as the faith of those who came out of the great tribulation. The faith of that final, most severely tested generation was a display of the faith of all generations. That may explain the emphasis on the great number.

b. But even if the pictured multitude is only the last generation of saints, their blessedness still implies blessedness for the faithful of all generations. What they receive by enduring in faith all will receive by enduring in faith. The question is whether that truth is conveyed by the picture of the multitude or only by an inference from the blessing of the last generation.

8. I think this is a picture of the faithful who are in heaven prior to the resurrection and the final assignment of humankind to their permanent dwelling places of the new heavens and new earth or hell. Yet the description of their lives assumes their continuing existence in the final eternal state. Their thirst will there be ever quenched by the spring of the water of life (21:6, 22:17), and there will be no more suffering or tears (21:4). Precisely where this picture fits in terms of the timing of the end is not spelled out presumably because that detail is not necessary for the point, which is that those who hold fast to their faith in the face of pressure to compromise will be blessed beyond measure.

VIII. Seventh seal - climactic divine intervention (8:1-11:19)

A. Prologue (8:1-5)

¹¹⁰ Metzger, 61-62.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ² Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³ And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴ and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵ Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

1. When the Lamb opens the scroll's seventh and final seal, there is dead silence in heaven for about half an hour. You talk about dramatic! This emphasizes the significance and awesomeness of the coming judgment that culminates in the eternal state. Osborne remarks, "All in heaven are in breathless anticipation as they await God's final actions in bringing history to a close."¹¹¹

2. John sees *the* seven angels who stand before God. The use of "the" indicates that he is referring to a specific group of angels. Jewish apocalyptic writings speak of "the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One" (Tob. 12:15). They are called archangels and have names (including Michael and Gabriel – 1 Enoch 20:2-8). In Lk. 1:19 the angel declares to Zecharia, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God," and Jude v. 9 refers to the archangel Michael.

3. These seven angels were given seven trumpets. Trumpets are often associated with the judgment of God in the Old Testament (Isa. 27:13; Joel 2:1; Zeph. 1:16; Zech. 9:14), and in Jewish apocalyptic the trumpet often announced the eschatological judgment (2 Esdr. [4 Ezra] 6:23; Sib. Or. 4.173-174; Apoc. Abr. 31). In the New Testament, trumpets announce the final judgment in Mat. 24:31, 1 Cor. 15:52, and 1 Thess. 4:16. So the appearance here of trumpets in the context of the final judgment is not surprising.

4. Another angel appears who is pictured offering incense on the golden altar of incense before the throne in heaven. The earthly tabernacle and temple contained an altar of incense on which incense was offered to God by the priests (e.g., Lk. 1:11). The incense is mingled with the prayers of the saints. The point is that the angel, cast as a kind of heavenly priest, presents the prayers of the saints, perhaps referring specifically to the prayers of the martyrs for vengeance and justice in 6:9-11, as a fragrant offering to God (see, Ps. 141:2). The angel does *not* make the prayers acceptable; that is the work of Jesus Christ, the one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). It is because they are acceptable through Jesus that the prayers are presented by the angel as a fragrant offering.

5. This priestly angel then becomes an avenging angel. No doubt in response to the command of God, he fills the censer with fire from the altar and throws it to the earth. Fire falling from heaven is a regular symbol in scripture of God's judgment (Gen. 19:24; Ex. 19:18; 2 Ki. 1:10-14; Ps. 11:6, 18:8; Lk. 9:54; Heb. 12:29). The thunder, rumblings, lightning, and earthquake indicate God's intervention, similar to the theophany at Sinai (Ex. 19:16ff). Smalley remarks, "The descent of burning coals from the heavenly altar, combined with the disturbances

¹¹¹ Osborne, 337.

to nature signaled at the end of verse 5, therefore heralds the visitation of God to his world in judgment and his wrathful reaction to all evil and oppression."¹¹²

6. The judgment here appears to be associated in some way with the prayers of the saints. Their cries do not go unheeded.

7. The divine judgment symbolized in the angel hurling to earth this fire from the heavenly altar is going to be developed and expanded upon as the angels sound their trumpets. In all of this, it is worth bearing in mind the words of Bruce Metzger in his commentary:

We must remember that the objects and events seen in a vision are not physically real. As was mentioned earlier, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37) and Peter's vision of a great sheet let down from heaven and filled with all kinds of unclean creatures (Acts 10) were perceived in a trance. Such things seen in a vision are not physically present. So too, in the book of Revelation the descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of the real occurrences. The intention is to fix the reader's thought, not upon the symbol, but upon the idea that the symbolic language is designed to convey.¹¹³

B. First six trumpets (8:6 - 9:21)

1. The first four trumpets (8:6-12)

⁶ Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. ⁷ The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. ⁸ The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. ⁹ A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. ¹⁰ The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹ The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. ¹² The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

a. At the sounding of the first trumpet, hail and fire mixed with blood are hurled to the earth from heaven.

(1) Hail and fire (lightning?) were a means of God's judgment as early as the plague on Egypt in Ex. 9:13-35, which destroyed the vegetation. God hurled huge hailstones on the Amorite army in Josh. 10:11 and said in Job 38:22-23 that he reserves

¹¹² Smalley, 217.

¹¹³ Metzger, 66.

"storehouses of hail" for the day of battle and war. And, of course, God destroyed wicked Sodom and Gomorrah by raining down sulfur and fire out of heaven (Gen. 19:24; Lk. 17:29).

(2) The mixing of blood with the hail and fire heightens the psychological horror of the judgment. It not only leaves people surrounded by blood but also brings home that what they are experiencing includes God's vengeance for the blood of his saints (6:10, 16:6).

(3) The storm causes great devastation. A third of the earth and trees and all the grass are burned up. The fact locusts are told in 9:4 not to harm the grass of the earth after all the grass is said here to have been burned up is not a contradiction. These visions are not to be read like sequential depictions of literal occurrences. As Osborne notes, "the reader is supposed to feel the impact of this image as it is, not compare it to 9:4. Each vision is a self-contained unit in this sense"¹¹⁴ (though they certainly are connected as parts of a unit yielding an overall impression).

b. At the sounding of the second trumpet, something *like* a flaming mountain is thrown into the sea.

(1) It affects one third of the sea, turning it to blood, and a third of the living sea creatures died and a third of the ships were destroyed. One is reminded of the first plague on Egypt (Ex. 7:19-21) in which the rivers were turned to blood, but the effect of this judgment is far greater.

(2) Osborne states, "Only a people directly dependent on sea traffic and food production could appreciate how terrible this would seem to the original readers. . . . The sea lanes were called the lifeblood of Rome, because the Romans were so dependent on the sea for both food and commerce (see also Rev. 18:17-19)."¹¹⁵

c. At the sounding of the third trumpet, a blazing star named Wormwood falls from heaven. It affects one third of the inland waters turning them bitter and causing many deaths. This poisoning of the fresh water supply may again call to mind the first Egyptian plague involving the rivers.

(1) Wormwood is a plant with a very strong bitter taste. Though it is not poisonous, it became a symbol of judgment and death because those things are emotionally bitter. In the vision, this "fiery star turned the water poisonous, and the effect was as bitter as wormwood."¹¹⁶

(2) Ancients did not use the word "star" in our technical sense. The picture is of a gigantic meteorite ("shooting star") falling to earth with devastating consequences.

¹¹⁴ Osborne, 351.

¹¹⁵ Osborne, 353.

¹¹⁶ Osborne, 355.

d. At the sounding of the fourth trumpet, God strikes the sun, moon, and stars.

(1) The first sentence suggests a quantitative extinguishment of these heavenly bodies, but the second sentence suggests a temporal extinguishment. The point seems to be that there is absolute darkness for one third of the day (no sun) and night (no moon or stars). The first sentence is a poetic way of saying that.

(2) Supernatural darkness is a form of divine punishment, as in the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:21-23) where there was three days of darkness. God symbolizes the final judgment with repeated allusions to the Egyptian plagues to say that at the final judgment he will powerfully punish the hostile forces that oppose and oppress his people as he punished the Egyptians who did the same.

e. The servants of God, those who have been sealed as his, are protected from this punishment, as Israel was protected from the plagues on Egypt (Ex. 8:22-23, 9:4, 9:26, 10:23, 11:7, 12:13). That is implied by the fact Rev. 7:3 says the harm to be inflicted on the earth, sea, and trees was delayed until the saints could be sealed. The protection of the saints with regard to the punishment symbolized by the events associated with the final three trumpet blasts is stated expressly in Rev. 9:4.

2. Warning about last three trumpets (8:13)

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

a. After the fourth trumpet, a grave warning is sounded by a bird of prey, either an eagle or a vulture. The bird seems to symbolize doom, the devouring of the flesh (see 19:17-18).

b. The judgments accompanying the last three trumpets are going to be horrifying. The three woes are spoken to "the inhabitants of the earth," a semi-technical term for those opposed to God, and it is announced in 9:4 (see also 3:10, 9:20) that these plagues are not to fall upon the church, those who have been sealed.

3. Fifth trumpet (first woe) - demonic locusts (9:1-12)

And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. ² He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³ Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. ⁴ They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵ They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion

when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. ⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸ their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹ they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. ¹² The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

a. The fifth angel blew his trumpet, and John saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth. As the angels of the seven churches were represented by stars (1:20), this star also represents an angel, an agent of God's will. When angels are depicted as stars in such Jewish apocalyptic writings as 1 Enoch (dating from second century B.C. to early part of first century A.D.), "to fall" means no more than "to descend" (see, 1 Enoch 86:1, 86:3, 88:1). This angel may be the same as the angel in 20:1 who descends from heaven with the key to the Abyss.

b. The angel was given the key to the shaft that connects to "the Abyss." The word "abyss" (ἄβυσσος) literally means "bottomless pit." It originally was applied to the unfathomable depths of the sea and was used in the LXX to translate *tehom*, "the deep." It came to stand for the realm in which demonic spirits are incarcerated by God. In 1 Enoch the Abyss is portrayed as a horrible place with "great descending columns of fire," and in Lk. 8:31 the demons beg Jesus not to be sent there.

(1) I do not think the Abyss needs to be a literal place of physical confinement even though it is presented that way. Rather, I think the Abyss is a figurative description of the state of demonic spirits whose activities God has restricted in ways they hate, restrictions that torment them because they so strongly desire the greater freedom to express their evil natures. In other words, I think the Abyss is a symbolic depiction of the restraint of their power rather than a literal description of a restraint of their movement.

(2) Other texts that speak of confinement of spirits (Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4) have a symbolic flavor to them. For example, the reference in Jude 6 to spirits being bound by physical chains makes little sense if taken literally. And given that this is apocalyptic literature which commonly employs symbolic imagery, I think what I am suggesting is a reasonable possibility.

(3) If it is indeed a valid way of understanding the Abyss, then demons who are there, in the sense of having certain restrictions on their powers, can still interact with humans; they simply cannot engage in the prohibited activities. Those released from the Abyss are those for whom the particular restrictions have been lifted so they are free to harm to a greater extent than when they were bound. They have been "turned loose" in that sense.

c. When the shaft of the Abyss is opened, huge amounts of smoke pour out, indicating fires burning below, and demonic locusts descend out of the darkness that is caused by the smoke.

(1) Throughout the Old Testament locusts are a symbol of destruction. They formed the eighth plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:12-20), and Joel interprets the devastation of Israel by locusts as an omen of the destruction that will come with the Day of the Lord.

(2) The demonic locusts are given power like scorpions in that they are given power to sting like scorpions. They are not allowed to go after any grass or greenery; instead they are directed toward God's enemies. What an absolutely terrifying picture: a cloud of scorpion-like locusts *intent* on harming you that drops onto the earth out of the darkness.

(3) These locusts were given the ability to torment people with a scorpion-like sting for five months, which I take to mean that, unlike a scorpion sting, the pain of their sting would not subside in a few hours or a day. This need not mean the people actually experienced the pain for five months before the judgment concluded. It is a way of saying that this was a more intense sting, that the pain was worse in duration than that of any scorpion sting. It was so horrific, especially given the likelihood of multiple stings, that there will be people who long to die but will not be able to do so.

(4) In unleashing these demonic forces on his enemies, in ceasing to restrain their drive to torment mankind, God turns back on his enemies the very forces and powers they had chosen to serve over him. He has them see how the "gods" they chose to follow actually hate them, and in so doing adds to the pain of their judgment and the vindication of his glory.

d. The appearance of the demonic locusts adds to the nightmare.

(1) They are like horses prepared for battle. Joel 2:4 refers to locusts as having the appearance of horses as does an Arabian proverb. The similarity is apparently in the head shape. It is possible this indicates abnormally large size. They were equipped and ready to do battle.

(2) They wore something like crowns of gold, which perhaps symbolizes their victorious mission of inflicting punishment.

(3) Their faces were like human faces. This would be very frightening on an insect-like creature. It indicates the intelligent cunning of these forces.

(4) They had hair like women's hair. This may be an allusion to the military prowess of the Parthians whose warriors rode into battle with long hair. Or perhaps the incongruous combination of femininity and devastation is meant to make the scene more disturbing.

(5) They had teeth like lions' teeth, which symbolizes their ferocity and destructiveness.

(6) They had breastplates like breastplates of iron. This symbolizes their lack of vulnerability.

e. They were so numerous that in flight they sounded like an army of horses and chariots rushing into battle.

f. Their tails were equipped with five-month scorpion stings. This was the means by which they tormented the unsealed.

g. Their king was the angel of the Abyss, named Destruction or Destroyer. This makes this demonic horde even more terrifying because they are not a leaderless rabble.

h. John announces that only the first of the woes announced by the eagle has passed; two remain. Granted that all this is apocalyptic symbolism and not a description of literal events – it is more like art, something designed to make an emotional impact – but the message this symbolic imagery is designed to convey is unmistakable. Being on the wrong side of God's judgment will be the most horrible thing you can imagine. It will be, as we might put it, your worst nightmare. And the picture of that judgment is not finished.

4. Sixth trumpet (second woe) - fiendish cavalry (9:13-21)

¹³ Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴ saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵ So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶ The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. ¹⁷ And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸ By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹ For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound. ²⁰ The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, ²¹ nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

a. The sixth angel blew his trumpet, and John heard a voice from the golden altar tell the sixth angel to release the four angels who are bound at the Euphrates. The fact the voice is from the altar at which the prayers of the saints were presented to God (8:3-4) may reiterate the connection between those prayers and God's action.

b. The fact the four angels have been *bound* suggests they are evil beings rather than good angels who voluntarily do God's will. They were turned loose at the very hour decreed by God to kill a third of mankind. Their location at the Euphrates further suggests their

hostility. Israel's arch enemies came from this region (Assyrians and Babylonians), and Rome's greatest threat, the Parthians, was from this region.

c. The four angels appear to be in charge of the limitless horde (symbolized in the number 200,000,000) of demonic horsemen who ride across the world spreading death and terror. The specter of a huge hostile cavalry had always been a source of terror for Jewish people and no doubt for all people of that time.

d. Regarding the appearance of this fiendish cavalry, John notes specifically that all of this was seen in his *vision*. This is a reminder that there is a strong symbolic element in what he is saying.

(1) They, meaning either the riders or both the riders and the horses, wore breastplates of fiery red, dark blue, and yellow, perhaps corresponding to the fire, sulfurous smoke, and sulfur coming out of the mouths of the horses.

(2) The horses had heads like lions, which symbolizes ferocity and destructiveness.

(3) Fire, smoke, and sulfur came out of the horses' mouths. This probably indicates the demonic origin of these creatures (e.g., Leviathan in Job 41:19-20 breathing smoke and fire; see also, Rev. 9:2, 19:20, 21:8). The fire, smoke, and sulfur are called plagues and are the means by which one third of mankind is killed. The first woe brought torment; the second woe brings death.

(4) The tails of the horses are like serpents, having heads with which they inflict injury. This is perhaps another way of suggesting the demonic origin of these creatures, as snakes and demons were closely associated (e.g., Rev. 12:9).

e. Osborne comments, "Here this judgment is sent from God via the demonic hordes that have become his instrument of judgment, and there is great irony in the demonic forces breathing out the same 'fire, smoke, and sulfur' that will become their own eternal torment (19:20; 20:10)."¹¹⁷

f. The targets of this punishment, the enemies of God, who survived these plagues, do not repent of their sins.

(1) They do not repent of idolatry, which is ultimately demon worship (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20), and thus continue to worship the very forces bringing about their destruction. Nor do they repent of their murders, magic arts (sorcery, witchcraft, and the use of magic potions often linked with demon worship), sexual sin, and thefts, which are involved with or naturally flow from idolatry.

(2) When this judgment falls, there ultimately will be submission by God's enemies but there will be no turning to him in saving repentance. As with the judgment

¹¹⁷ Osborne, 383.

on the Egyptians, the final judgment will harden God's enemies in their sin. That is part of the judgment; the time for repentance is over. I agree with Gregory Beale that the plagues "were not intended to have a redeeming effect but a damning effect."¹¹⁸ The message for saints being pressured to accept the idolatry of Emperor worship is obvious.

C. Little scroll and two witnesses (10:1 - 11:14)

Just as there was an interlude when we were primed for the report of the opening of the seventh and final seal, now there is an interlude as we are primed for the report of the sounding of the seventh and final trumpet, the promised third woe.

1. John sees another mighty angel descend from heaven (10:1-7).

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. ² He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, ³ and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. ⁴ And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." ⁵ And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶ and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, ⁷ but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

a. The phrases by which the angel is described (wrapped in a cloud, rainbow over his head, face like the sun, and legs like fiery pillars) are elsewhere connected with God (4:3) or Christ (1:13-16), so this angel is very important, but he is not Christ. Christ is never called an angel in this book, let alone simply "another angel," and this angel is nowhere given divine honors (e.g., worship).

b. A little scroll lies open in his hand, and he puts his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land. His gigantic size is another means of portraying his power and significance.

c. In response to his tremendous shout, "the seven thunders" sound and John is about to write down what they said, since he was told to write down the contents of the visions (1:11, 19), but a voice from heaven (Jesus or God) tells him not to do so. My guess, which is about all anyone has regarding the meaning of this text, is that God is symbolizing through the restriction on revealing what the seven thunders said that some aspects of the final judgment will remain unknown until experienced. Perhaps this is designed to remind readers that God is in control and they do not need to know all the details of the end. The broad contours given by the visions are sufficient for God's purpose.

¹¹⁸ Beale, 517.

d. The angel raises his right hand and swears there will be no more delay. The sounding of the seventh trumpet will fulfill the mystery of God in that the final judgment will be completed and that which God purposed in creation and made possible through the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10) will be brought to its fulfillment. As 11:15-18 demonstrate, the consummation of God's plan accompanies the sounding of the seventh trumpet, which brings the final woe (8:13, 11:14), the completion of his judgment.

e. As we will see, the final woe that comes with the sounding of the seventh trumpet gets presented and elaborated on through a series of visions involving the pouring out of seven bowls of wrath. So the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets in that the breaking of that seal reveals the contents of the scroll with its trumpet judgments, and the seventh trumpet contains the seven bowls of wrath in that the final woe that accompanies the seventh trumpet is portrayed through the judgments of the seven bowls.

2. The little scroll (10:8-11)

⁸ Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." ⁹ So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." ¹⁰ And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. ¹¹ And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

a. John is commanded by a heavenly voice to take the scroll that is open in the hand of the mighty angel. John asks the angel for the scroll and is told by him to take it and eat it. This is reminiscent of Ezek. 3:1-3.

b. The angel says the scroll will turn John's stomach sour but will be sweet in his mouth, and this is precisely what happens. The joy of being God's prophet and announcing the fulfillment of his eternal purposes, which includes the ultimate triumph of his people, is tempered by the difficult message he must deliver regarding the destiny of the church in the last days of fierce satanic opposition. It is a story of delivery *through* martyrdom and death, not delivery *from* it.

c. The basic message of the little scroll is revealed in the symbolism of 11:1-13. Before the vindicating judgment of God, when the saints will receive their ultimate reward, the church will face fierce satanic opposition (see, e.g., 13:7). The birth pains will become extreme.

d. John is encouraged to go on with his call to prophesy. There is more he must tell involving God's purpose for all people, Christian and foe alike. He needs such encouragement because the little scroll has revealed the ferocity of opposition to God's prophets.

3. The measuring of the temple (11:1-2)

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months.

a. John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there.

(1) With many commentators, I think these are various representations of the church. The church is elsewhere called the temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; see also, 1 Pet. 2:4-5). The altar represents Christian service, an indirect reference to Christians, and the worshippers are the people of God.

(2) Measuring these representations of the church is a symbolic way of declaring its preservation. What is measured at God's command is a focus of his intense interest, which interest in this case is to protect and preserve. The spiritual destiny of the faithful is secure. They may die physically in the persecution symbolized in v. 2, but nothing can bar their entrance into the eternal kingdom. So whereas the sealing in 7:1-8 marked the saints for exemption from God's judgment, the measuring here signifies God's protection of his servants *through* whatever they may be called to endure at the hands of their persecutors.

b. The outer court of the temple complex is *not* to be measured.

(1) I think this is the church viewed from a different perspective. It indicates that the church will not be protected from physical suffering and death during the time of intense persecution right before the end, when the pagan nations will be allowed to trample the "holy city," those set apart by God, for 42 months. The faithful saints will be left vulnerable and unprotected in that sense, while being invulnerable in terms of their ultimate destiny and victory.

(2) Osborne states: "[T]he 'outer court' like the sanctuary must symbolize the saints who are persecuted. In all three temples – Solomon's, Ezekiel's, and Herod's – the sanctuary, inner court, and outer court were sacred ground and belonged to God. Thus, in this section the outer court would mean that the church is handed over to the Gentiles/nations for a time."¹¹⁹

(3) The time of 42 months referred primarily to the period of intense Jewish suffering under Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 B.C., but he died in 163). Stemming from Daniel, it became a conventional symbol for a limited period of time in which evil would be allowed broad reign, in which God's people would be persecuted and oppressed. That time is expressed in various ways in 11:3, 12:6, 12:14, and 13:5.

¹¹⁹ Osborne, 412.

4. The two witnesses (11:3-13)

³ And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵ And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. ⁶ They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. ⁷ And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, ⁸ and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. ⁹ For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, ¹⁰ and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³ And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

a. During this period of intense persecution (1,260 days = 42 months = times, times, and half a time [3 1/2 years]; note also "And" at the beginning of v. 3), two witnesses are given strength to prophesy, and thus they are called two prophets in v. 10. They wear sackcloth, which indicates sorrow. In this case there was sorrow over the reign of wickedness. They call a world entrenched in evil to repentance in the name of Christ.

b. These witnesses symbolize that part of the church that is specially called to bear prophetic witness to Christ in the last days before the end. There are several indications that they represent a group larger than just two individuals.

(1) They are described as two *lampstands* (v. 4), an image John used in chapters 1 and 2 for local congregations comprised of many individuals.

(2) It is said that the beast will "make war" on them (v. 7), which is strange terminology if they are only two individuals.

(3) The fact the "inhabitants of the earth," God's opponents throughout the world, were tormented by their preaching and rejoiced at their deaths would imply to the original audience, a first-century audience that had no mass communication, that these witnesses had a broader impact than could reasonably be attributed to two individuals. So the picture would imply to that audience, especially given the symbolic nature of apocalyptic, that the two witnesses represented a group of individuals.

c. The witnesses are identified as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth."

(1) Similar imagery exists in Zechariah 4. Two olive trees, representing Joshua (the high priest) and Zerubbabel (the Jewish governor under the Persian king Darius), are depicted standing next to a golden lampstand (which now becomes two) that supports a bowl with seven lamps (the eyes of the Lord) burning on the perimeter. The portrayal of these witnesses as olive trees and lampstands indicates they are Spirit-filled, royal and priestly servants of God who bear witness on his behalf.

(2) The number two may be due to the fact two witnesses were required for valid legal testimony (e.g., Num. 35:30; Dt. 19:15; Mat. 18:16; Lk. 10:1-24). It also suggests that only part of the church is meant. The totality would be represented by the number seven (see, e.g., Rev. 1:12). All are to serve Christ faithfully in every circumstance, but some will serve in a distinctive prophetic capacity, distinctive proclaimers of God's word, that will expose them to martyrdom more than others.

d. They are supernaturally protected for the period of their prophetic activity. This is symbolized by fire flowing from their mouths and consuming their foes (see, 2 Ki. 1:10-12 - fire from heaven consuming Elijah's enemies).

e. They also have power to shut the heavens during the time of their prophesying (3 1/2 years), to turn the waters to blood, and to strike the earth with plagues. This is a clear allusion to the ministries of Elijah (1 Ki. 17:1; Lk. 4:25; Jas. 5:17) and Moses (Ex. 7:17-21, 9:3, 14, 11:1). This may be a way of symbolizing preaching that is done in the power and spirit of Elijah and Moses, just as John the Baptist ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk. 1:17; Mat. 11:14). Note that John never performed a miracle (Jn. 10:41).

f. When their ministry has fulfilled God's purposes, which involved tormenting (convicting) the inhabitants of the earth (v. 10), they are no longer protected from physical harm. In the last days, the beast from the Abyss kills the prophetic element of the church, its preachers, teachers, and leaders. John expects his readers to recognize this beast as the Antichrist, about whom he will have more to say. With this, the full number of martyrs is completed (see, 6:11). So heavy is the blow that the church is thought by its enemies to be vanquished, to be as good as dead.

g. For 3 1/2 days their corpses lie in the street of the "great city" while the inhabitants of the earth celebrate wildly.

(1) The refusal to bury the witnesses refers to continued humiliation and scorn of the decimated church by the inhabitants of the earth.

(2) The "great city" in which they are killed and left in the street is not a specific city, as the witnesses represent the prophetic element of the church throughout the

world, but represents any city opposed to God and the witness of his servants. It is the transhistorical city of Satan. In Morris's words, "The 'great city' is every city and no city."¹²⁰

(a) The "great city" elsewhere in Revelation refers to the heart of Antichrist's empire, which is called "Babylon" (16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21; see also, 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2) because Babylon was an ancient enemy of God's people. It is pictured as an end-time Rome because Rome was the embodiment in John's day of organized, satanic opposition to God through its hostility toward the church.

(b) This city is "spiritually called," i.e., in the language of prophesy or by those with spiritual understanding, Sodom and Egypt. These two places were proverbial for godlessness and oppression, and both felt the judgment of God.

(c) This city is also where Jesus was crucified. Jerusalem was but another manifestation of organized opposition to God.

h. After 3 1/2 days (a relatively short time), the Lord will return. The church, including these martyrs, will rise to meet the Lord in the air (see, 1 Thess. 4:15-17). This will be a time of terror for the enemies of God as the final judgment, the time of God's vengeance and punishment, begins. The earthquake symbolizes the arrival of that judgment.

i. In keeping with the symbolism of the final judgment from the trumpet blasts, the final judgment is portrayed as a progressive devastation directed at God's enemies. Perhaps the progression is designed to add to the portrait of horror by enhancing the psychological element – with each wave that hits the hope that the fury was over with the last wave is dashed. Here it begins with 7,000 people being killed in the great earthquake. The faithful have been removed, which comports with the protection earlier symbolized by their being sealed.

j. Those who are not killed are terrified by this outpouring of God's wrath. Though many believe the phrase "and gave glory to the God of heaven" indicates they repented of their sin and converted to Christ, I think Beale is correct in stating, "any conversion, whether of Jews or of Gentiles, must be ruled out, since it would have to be placed *after* the commencement of the last judgment, which is signaled in v. 13a."¹²¹

(1) In other words, they glorified God not by surrendering to him but by being terrorized by the earthquake, which was a tribute to its power, and by recognizing God as the one who caused it. It is a forced acknowledgment of the power and sovereignty of God.

(2) Quoting Kiddle, Mounce states, "They give glory to God 'when they are compelled by overriding terror to recognize that the true Lord is Christ and not

¹²⁰ Morris, 146.

¹²¹ Beale, 607.

Antichrist"¹²²(see also, Hughes, Kistemaker, and Wilcock). This fits with the lack of repentance of those undergoing the judgment in 9:20-21.

5. Announcement of the woes (11:14)

The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

Having previewed in this interlude the destiny of the church in the final hour, John now reorients the reader with a reminder that only two of the announced woes have passed. He says "the second woe has passed," which was the demonic cavalry reported in 9:13-21, and then declares that "the third woe comes without delay." This is followed immediately by the seventh trumpet, the third woe according to 8:13.

D. Seventh trumpet - the "end" (11:15-19)

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. ¹⁸ The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." ¹⁹ Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

1. With the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the vision surprisingly jumps to the end state, the consummated kingdom of God, which presupposes the completion of the outpouring of God's holy wrath in judgment. In other words, the horrible third woe that accompanies the sounding of the seventh and final trumpet, the completion of the portrait of God's terrible judgment, is not reported. Instead one is taken to the eternal state that will exist when that judgment is complete.

2. This is apparent from the fact the loud voices in heaven are saying (v. 15), "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.*" And the 24 elders, on their faces before God, worship him saying (vv. 17-18), "*We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was [note the absence of "and who is to come" from 1:4, 1:8, and 4:8], for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.*" ¹⁸ *The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.*" It is a worshipful look from the perspective of the consummation back at what God had done in bringing that about; it is a view from the eternal state, *after* the completion of God's wrath and the judgment of the dead.

¹²² Mounce, 229.

3. As I explained in the introduction to the class, the OT ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

4. But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose. His creation would be redeemed from the dreadful consequences of sin that had invaded it. This world of rebellion, sin, hostility, and fragmentation would be rescued by God, transformed by him into a true utopia, a perfect reality of love, joy, and fellowship with God and one another. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

5. Jesus inaugurated that kingdom, that fullest expression of God's rulership, but taught that it would not be consummated or finalized – expressed in its most complete form – until he returned. At that time, all bad things, things like sin, suffering, death, mourning, crying, and pain, will be removed; the creation made sick by sin will at last be healed. Christians will live forever in glorified bodies in a transformed creation, a "heavenized" creation, known as the new heavens and new earth.

6. This is the time to which the heavenly beings are referring in saying "The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" and in saying the Lord God Almighty "has *begun* to reign." They are referring to the consummation of the kingdom which follows the return of Christ and the final outpouring of God's wrath; they are announcing the fulfillment or establishment of that to which Peter referred in Acts 3:21.

7. Verse 19b symbolizes God's coming in judgment, so it is an indication that we are going to take a step back and see the completion of God's wrath that is implicit in the vision of the final state given in vv. 15-18. It creates an expectation that the third woe, the terrible judgment associated with the seventh trumpet, will be reported. But as we begin chapter 12, our expectations once again go unmet. The third woe will not be depicted until chapter 15, and then it will be portrayed as the outpouring of seven bowls of wrath. That final woe of the final trumpet gets developed and magnified through the imagery of the seven bowls of wrath.

8. But before that picture, we are given in chapters 12-14 a spiritual summary of history from the coming of Christ until the end. Having represented the final state and then backed up to the brink of the final woe, the completion of God's wrath, John is made to pause to reveal the spiritual forces at work in this struggle that is played out on earth.

9. The ark of the covenant that John is allowed to see in God's heavenly temple in v. 19a is a symbol of God's love and faithfulness. It is shown in conjunction with the symbolism of God completing his judgment, the indication of the coming third woe, to reinforce that God

will fulfill his promises and reward the faithful and to provide further assurance for the saints in the coming days of wrath.

IX. Spiritual summary of struggle from Christ to end (12:1-14:20)

A. Christ and church opposed by Satan (12:1-17)

1. Woman, dragon, and male child (12:1-6)

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ² She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. ³ And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴ His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. ⁵ She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, ⁶ and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

a. A great sign appears in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She is in the pain of childbirth.

(1) It is a "sign" in that the woman is a symbol of something, as is the woman on the beast in chapter 17. It is a "great" sign in that this woman is a symbol of something that has great significance in the purposes of God.

(2) She symbolizes true Israel, faithful Israel, the covenant community giving birth to the Messiah. Jesus, of course, is a Jew, meaning he was born from within that community of faith. Verse 5 leaves no doubt as to the identity of the child this woman is delivering. It says she gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. In Psalm 2 it is the Messiah who will rule the nations with an iron rod.

(3) The portrait of Israel as a woman is a familiar one in scripture (e.g., Isa. 50:1, 54:1-6; Jer. 2:2, 4:31; Ezek. 16:6-14; Micah 4:9-10). This woman's identity as Israel is reinforced by the inclusion of twelve stars, which probably is rooted in Joseph's dream in Genesis 37 where his brothers were eleven stars bowing down to him. (Joseph is not there described as a star, but the first-century Jewish writer Philo refers to him as the twelfth star in that dream.) Osborne remarks, "In Jewish literature 'twelve stars' often refers to the twelve patriarchs or the twelve tribes."¹²³ The references to the sun and moon probably speak of faithful Israel's glory in God's sight.

(4) Though the interpretation is disputed, some scholars (e.g., Andre Dupont-Sommer, G. R. Beasley-Murray, J. Massyngberde Ford) believe that one of the

¹²³ Osborne, 456.

Qumran thanksgiving hymns (1QH 11:9-10) pictures the faithful community as a woman, Mother Zion, enduring birth pains until she gives birth to a male child, the messianic Deliverer of God's people. That obviously would be in line with what I am suggesting here.

b. Another sign appears in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns waits to devour her child. Verse 4 states: His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child, he might devour it.

(1) The dragon is specifically identified in v. 9 as "that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan." Interestingly, Ezek. 29:3 and 32:2 refer to Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people, as a dragon. Beale remarks, "The devil is the force behind the wicked kingdoms who persecute God's people."¹²⁴

(2) Satan sought to destroy Jesus from the moment of his birth. You recall how Herod the Great was so obsessed with killing the baby Jesus that when the wise men did not return to inform him of the child's whereabouts, he slaughtered all the children in the area who were two years old and under (Mat. 2:1-18).

(3) But Jesus was protected by God, then and throughout his earthly ministry (e.g., attempt of crowd to throw him over cliff in Lk. 4:28-39), until the time of his crucifixion, which was according to God's plan (Acts 2:23).

(a) Thereafter he was, as indicated in v. 5b, "caught up to God and to his throne." As Osborne and others (e.g., Beale) note, "The narrative omits all details of Christ's life, ministry, and death and moves directly from his birth to his ascension."¹²⁵

(b) It is that ascension, the resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God in heaven, which summarizes Christ's victory. The dragon's attempt to thwart God's plan involving the Messiah was completely defeated. God prevented Satan from killing Jesus before God's time, and the crucifixion that Satan thought was his long-sought victory was in fact his defeat. As we might say, God beat him like a drum; God is always triumphant.

(4) The dragon's appearance symbolizes a number of things.

(a) The color red represents his murderous character, especially as expressed against the people of God. In Jn. 8:44 Jesus called Satan "a murderer from the beginning."

(b) The seven heads and ten horns are probably intended to give a picture of the fullness of the creature's evil and power. Horns are a sign of power, and evil beasts are depicted elsewhere in antiquity as having a multiplicity of heads (including Leviathan in Ps. 74:14). This may be a sign of their immense vitality. The fact the beast out of the sea in

¹²⁴ Beale, 634.

¹²⁵ Osborne, 462.

13:1 also has seven heads and ten horns suggests that he shares Satan's nature, which fits with the understanding of that beast as Antichrist, the Satan-inspired enemy of God and his people.

(c) The greatness of the dragon's power is also reflected in his enormous size and in his ability to sweep a third of the stars from the sky. The sweeping of the stars from the sky also may symbolize the original fall of some of the angels when they, under Satan's leadership, first rebelled against God. The result of this turning from God was the perversity, viciousness, and wickedness that has since characterized demons.

(d) I think the royal crowns represent Satan's presumptuous claim of sovereignty over against the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords," upon whose head are many crowns (19:12, 16). Satan is called "the prince of this world" (Jn. 12:31, 14:30, 16:11), the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Eph. 2:2), and the "god of this world/age" (2 Cor. 4:4), because he is allowed for now to have a certain influence in this world, but he is not sovereign. He has already been defeated, and his miserable end is certain.

c. There is a brief reference in v. 6 to the fact the woman will be cared for (nourished) by God during the days of her persecution, represented by the standard figure 1,260. The image of the wilderness suggests God's providential care in times of hardship (e.g., manna during the Exodus). This theme of care in the wilderness that is rooted in the Exodus is echoed in texts like 1 Ki. 19:4-8, which deals with Elijah's flight from Jezebel. This anticipates the discussion of vv. 13-17. Verses 7-12 reveal the spiritual background of that persecution.

2. War in heaven (12:7-12)

⁷ Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸ but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world-- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

a. The defeat of Satan effectuated by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is symbolized in the expulsion from heaven of Satan and his angels. This may be the victory Christ foresaw in Lk. 10:18 when he said he saw "Satan fall like lightning from the sky." In the context of the seventy-two rejoicing over Christ's power over demons, Christ alludes to the ultimate victory ahead, the ultimate breaking of Satanic power.

b. Verse 10 links this expulsion to the inauguration of the kingdom of God that Christ accomplished most fundamentally in his death, resurrection, and ascension.¹²⁶ It clearly refers to the inauguration of the kingdom rather than the consummation because the expulsion of Satan that is associated with it is followed by Satan's making war against the church (vv. 12-13, 17).

c. In the vision, the expulsion is carried out by Michael and his angels, but Michael is merely executing the victory won by Christ at Calvary; his action is "a heavenly reflection of what Christ does on earth."¹²⁷ As John says in 1 Jn. 3:8, Christ appeared to destroy the works of the devil.

d. Satan apparently had some type of access to heaven and continually accused the saints of disobedience (Job 1:9-11; Zech. 3:1). Perhaps he was tolerated in that role because God recognized the justice of these allegations. With the atoning death of Christ, God's justice has been satisfied, so Satan's accusations are no longer valid. He is thus expelled from heaven. He ultimately is powerless against Christians; the victory has already been won.

e. The angel then announces (v. 11) that Christians ("our brothers" in v. 10 showing the angel's identification with Christians as fellow servants) have conquered Satan, the accuser, by means of Christ's sacrifice, which they appropriate through a steadfast faith that confesses him even at the risk of their lives. As Jesus told the angel of the church in Smyrna in Rev. 2:10: *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

f. Because of Christ's victory and the participation of the saints in it, the voice calls on heaven's inhabitants to rejoice (see, 5:8-14). But this same victory means distress for God's people on earth. The persecution that John's readers were enduring and the persecution that will arise in the end are not because Satan is too strong but because he has been defeated. He is in his death throes. He knows his "days are numbered."

3. War on earth (12:13-17a)

¹³ And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷ Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

¹²⁶ Beale, 657-658.

¹²⁷ Beale, 657.

a. Knowing that God through Christ has defeated him, that he is living on borrowed time so to speak, Satan persecutes the woman that gave birth to Christ, i.e., true Israel (the messianic community). Following Christ's coming, true Israel consisted of those Jews who accepted him as God's Messiah. In other words, the woman is the messianic community before and after Christ. She is faithful Israel, which after Christ's coming is the church. Of course, the church in the beginning was exclusively Jewish, and at the very beginning was confined to Jerusalem.

b. The original, Jewish church was the focus of persecution (by unbelieving Jews and by Herod) for a period of time (1,260 days and time, times, and a half a time) but was protected by God from destruction (though individual Christians certainly were killed). Acts 4 through 12 record this persecution. Later chapters of Acts reveal an established Christian center in Jerusalem. Satan had failed to stamp it out. Instead, it spread (reproduced) "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

c. Having failed to destroy, to stamp out, the original Christian community, Satan turned his attention to its offspring, the Christians and churches that were spawned by that original community ("those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus"). The churches in Asia to which John was writing were experiencing the dragon's war, and the final generation will experience the last great spasm of his fury. The vision now moves to that final battle.

B. Satan's agents - two beasts (12:17b – 13:18)

1. The beast out of the sea (12:17b – 13:10)

And he stood on the sand of the sea. ^{13:1} And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. ⁴ And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" ⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear: ¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

a. There are differences in the versification of the phrase "And he stood on the sand of the sea" that follows the phrase "hold to the testimony of Jesus" in 12:17. In some

translations (RSV, ESV), "And he stood on the sand of the sea" is the last clause of 12:17. In some translations (NRSV, NET, NJB, HCSB), it is 12:18. And in some translations (ERV, ASV, NASB, REB, NIV), it is the first clause in 13:1. The KJV and the NKJV have it as 13:1 but accept as original the less likely textual variant "I stood" (*estathēn*) instead of "he stood" (*estathē*).

b. There is no time link between 12:17 and the clause "And he stood on the sand of the sea." Having shown the reason for the Satan's fury, the vision moves to the final act of history. Satan stands on the seashore awaiting or summoning the beast who will be Satan's agent in the final assault on the church.

c. John sees a beast rising out of the sea. In 11:7 the beast was said to come from the Abyss, but as I noted there, the origin of the Abyss as a place of demonic incarceration was the unfathomable depths of the sea. Thus, Osborne states, "the two images are synonymous."¹²⁸

d. The beast John saw had seven heads and ten horns, like the dragon, but unlike the dragon its crowns were on its horns instead of on its heads (there thus being ten instead of seven). As Osborne observes, "Primarily, the imagery of the seven heads and ten horns parallels the description of the dragon, showing that the beast is united with the dragon and yet has a separate role."¹²⁹ But the symbolism of the beast's heads, horns, and crowns will be developed further in chapter 17.

e. The beast has blasphemous names on each of its heads. This is an indication that, like the little horn of Dan. 7:25, he will speak against the Most High. Osborne says, "His blasphemous claims to deity and his demands to be worshiped in place of God and Christ form the core of his hideous work."¹³⁰ In that regard, the "lesser antichrists" of 1 Jn. 2:18, those sharing the spirit and goals of *the* Antichrist, already were at work in the person of Roman emperors insisting on divine prerogatives.

f. John says the beast was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. The fact the beast is said to have seven heads and only one mouth is a clue that these are apocalyptic images that should be taken on their own and not be pressed into a single portrait. The picture is of a beast that is incredibly hideous and horrifying, one intended to embody all that is evil.

g. There are, however, echoes here of the four beasts that rise out of the sea in Daniel 7.

(1) The four beasts of Daniel 7 represent successive kingdoms ending with the Roman Empire, which the parallel vision in Daniel 2 reveals was the first kingdom to coexist with the opposing kingdom of God. It was in the days of that fourth kingdom that the kingdom of God appeared. So those beasts represent a series of earthly kingdoms that

¹²⁸ Osborne, 490.

¹²⁹ Osborne, 490.

¹³⁰ Osborne, 491.

culminates in a kingdom that manifests a prideful sense of sovereignty in the face of the divine kingdom's presence. The fourth beast in Daniel 7 is the Roman Empire in one sense, but it is the Roman Empire as a *type* of all worldly rule in opposition to the present kingdom of God.

(2) The combination of elements from the four beasts of Daniel in the one beast that John sees suggests that John's beast has the fearsome and destructive natures of those kingdoms combined with the hostility to God's present kingdom evident in the fourth beast.

h. You can see from v. 2b that this beast is Satan's agent in a special way. Satan is behind all opponents of God, all blasphemous rulers, in some manner or form, but here the connection is intimate. Satan gives the beast his power, his dominion (throne), and great authority. He gives the beast the power to perform miracles and mighty deeds in the eyes of the world; as the god of this world/age (2 Cor. 4:4), he gives him rulership over the kingdoms of the world (recall his offer to Christ in Mat. 4:9-10; Lk. 4:5-6), meaning he is the supreme earthly ruler; and related to that, he gives him great authority over "every tribe, and people, and language, and nation" (13:7).

i. There are many questions about this beast, but some things seem clear:

(1) The beast is the Satan-inspired ruler of a powerful, worldwide, and violently antichristian empire (13:1-9, 17:9-14).

(2) He rules for "42 months" (13:5), the same period of time in which the holy city is said to be trampled by Gentiles and the two witnesses torment the world with their preaching (11:2-3).

(3) When the two witnesses have completed their mission, the beast is responsible for murdering them (conquering the saints) (11:7).

(4) He is worshiped throughout the world by those without a true Christian faith (13:4, 8, 12).

(5) This worship is fostered by the performance of miracles (13:11-15; 16:14; 19:20).

(6) He is involved in organizing the nations for the final battle against God and his Christ (16:12-16) and is destroyed by Christ (16:15; 17:14; 19:19-21).

(7) He comes out of the Abyss (sea) (11:7, 13:1, 17:8) and goes to destruction (17:8, 11).

j. With early Christian interpreters like Irenaeus and Tertullian and with a fair number of modern commentators (e.g., Ladd, Morris, Thomas, Osborne), I believe this beast represents Antichrist, the one referred to by Paul in 2 Thess. 2:3 as the man of lawlessness.

(1) The idea of this final, ferocious opponent of God and his people goes back at least as far as the little horn of Daniel 7 and the king who exalts himself at the end of Daniel 11 (see, e.g., the commentaries on Daniel by Keil, Young, Archer, Ferguson, Miller, and Steinmann).

(2) In Mat. 24:22-25 Jesus says that this age of birth pains, this age of distress – these days of wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, hatred, apostasy, false christs, and false prophets – will become so bad that if it were allowed to continue, if God in his providence did not cut them short for the sake of the elect, no human being would survive. He warns in v. 24, "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."

(3) In 2 Thess. 2:1-12 Paul explicitly rebuts the claim that the Second Coming referred to in 1 Thess. 4:13-5:3 had already occurred by reminding them of what he previously had taught them, namely that Jesus will not return until the rebellion and the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction, is revealed. Since that had not occurred, the claim that Jesus had already returned was false.

(a) Paul says this person will exalt himself over any claimed deity or object of worship. In this he is, symbolically speaking, taking a seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

(b) And he explains that this person's coming is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders. According to 2 Thess. 2:8, he will be on the scene at the time of Christ's return. Leon Morris states, "Paul does not use the term 'antichrist', but the 'man of lawlessness' of whom he writes in 2 Thess. 2:3ff. clearly refers to the same being."¹³¹

(4) John tells his readers in 1 Jn. 2:18 that as they had heard that Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. So they had been taught about the coming of Antichrist, just as Paul had taught the Thessalonians about his coming. This was a common element of apostolic teaching in the early church.

(a) John says that *even now*, before the coming of *the* Antichrist they had heard about, that climactic opponent of God, many antichrists (plural) have come. He is referring to the false teachers who were threatening those to whom he was writing. They are "antichrists" in the sense they share the spirit of the Antichrist (4:3), that spirit that opposes God and his Christ. This is evident from their denial of Jesus as the Christ (2:22; 2 Jn. 7).

(b) In saying this, John is not denying the future coming of *the* Antichrist. As George Ladd states, "We may conclude that the spirit of antichrist manifests

¹³¹ Leon Morris, "Antichrist" in I. Howard Marshall et al., eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 49.

itself everywhere in heretical, schismatic teachers, but will be climactically embodied in a single evil person at the end of the age."¹³²

k. The major questions regarding the identity of the beast involve its heads.

(1) One of the seven heads appeared to have a fatal sword wound that had healed (13:3, 12, 14).

(a) Note that in 13:12, 14 it was the *beast himself* who lived after having been fatally wounded, not merely one of his heads. If the symbolism is consistent with chapter 17, this suggests that the beast had in some sense previously appeared as a blasphemous earthly ruler who had been slain. That is indicated by the fact that the beast's seven heads that have blasphemous names on them are said to be seven kings, so they represent seven blasphemous kings. Since seven is a number of perfection or completeness, seven blasphemous kings represent the full number or complete set of earthly rulers who claim divine status in the face of God's kingdom. The beast finishes that set as its ultimate representative.

(b) The beast belongs to the seven (17:11) in that he shares their blasphemous claim of divinity, their opposition to God, and their persecution of God's people – as I say, he is the completion of that set of rulers – but he is "an eighth king" in the sense he is distinct from the others of that set, presumably by virtue of his greater embodiment of Satanic power. It is also possible that he is an "eighth" king in the sense he is a reappearance, a new embodiment, of an earlier blasphemous king. The number eight could symbolize a new beginning based on Sunday, known as the "eighth day," being the start of a new series of days (and also being the day of Christ's resurrection).

(c) In 17:8, 10-11 the beast is described as one who was, now is not, and yet will come. Although the present ruler Domitian is a blasphemous king (i.e., part of the seven kings), he is not the beast. The beast had previously appeared as a blasphemous ruler and had been killed by a sword (13:14). He will, however, return again as the end-time Antichrist and be more enraged than ever. This seems to fit a reference to Emperor Nero.

[1] Nero savagely persecuted Christians in Rome in A.D. 64 to divert attention from the great fire that engulfed that city. Tacitus, a Roman historian (A.D. 56-117), reports that Nero rounded up all the Christians he could identify and had them eaten by dogs, crucified, or set on fire. It was so cruel that the people (not Christian sympathizers) pitied them, feeling that "they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest" (Annals XV 44).

[2] Nero killed himself with a sword in A.D. 68 after the Senate had voted to back Galba's revolt. Soon the belief arose that he had not really died but was living in retirement and would return to bring great calamity upon his enemies. Edicts were issued in his name and at least three impostors claimed to be Nero. By the end of the first century, it was believed that he had died but would return from the dead to seize power.

¹³² Ladd (1993), 662.

[3] Nero was presented as a human manifestation of Satan/Beliar who attacks the church in an early second-century work known as the *Ascension of Isaiah* (ch. 4). He also possesses the attributes of Antichrist in the Sybilline Oracles, another second-century work. Keener comments, "The tradition that Nero would come back as the final Antichrist became so pervasive that in the Armenian language 'Nero' actually became the Armenian equivalent for Antichrist."¹³³

[4] The number of the beast is 666 (13:18; but note there is textual support for the number being 616). If one uses a defective Hebrew spelling of Nero Caesar (a spelling that is attested in the Qumran materials), the numbers of the letters come out to 666. This is the most commonly accepted solution of this problem, but it is by no means certain.

(d) The point is not that Nero is going to be literally resurrected prior to the resurrection of the damned (Rev. 20:6, 14) but that his distinctive rage and brutality against the saints in Rome reflects the kind of satanic influence that will again be manifested, though to an even greater degree, in the Antichrist. Antichrist will be another Nero in that sense.

(2) The seven heads are said to represent seven kings, five of which have fallen, one is, and the other, who must remain a short time, is yet to come (17:10).

(a) If the seven kings are symbolic of the full number of blasphemous earthly rulers (those claiming divine status), which set culminates in Antichrist, then I think this is an apocalyptic way of indicating that Christ is at the door. Though the time of his coming is uncertain, Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near. Being to the sixth king of the complete set of blasphemous earthly rulers means that the seventh and final one, Antichrist, who will stay only a short time before being taken out by Christ, may arise at any time.

(b) Mounce writes: "John is not interested in a careful tabulation of the past but is declaring the nearness of the end by the commonly accepted use of a numerical scheme. For John seven is the number of completeness. Five kings have fallen, one is, and the last one remains only for a short time."¹³⁴

(c) As I said, though Antichrist is "of the seven" (17:11), he is an "eighth king" in the sense he is a unique embodiment of satanic power and/or he is a reappearance of Nero, albeit on steroids.

1. The ten horns with crowns symbolize the kings of the earth that align with Antichrist in the last days to make a final great assault against the Lamb (17:12-14). Christ defeats this final assault with his return in judgment.

¹³³ Keener, 338.

¹³⁴ Mounce, 315.

m. The need for faithfulness during the ferocious opposition of Antichrist that is expressed in vv. 9-10 is a call for faithfulness in persecution in every generation. The church will not then or now be delivered *from* suffering and death but *through* it.

2. The beast out of the earth (13:11-18)

¹¹ Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. ¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

a. John next sees another beast, this one rising from the earth. It had horns like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. This second beast is a deceiver (v. 14). Elsewhere he is called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). His lamblike horns represent gentle harmlessness, but he speaks with the cunning of the dragon (e.g., serpent to Eve).

b. The role of the second beast is to bring humanity to worship the first beast, Antichrist. Toward that end, he exercises the authority of the first beast, authority derived from Satan. He performs miracles (like Elijah calling down fire from heaven - 1 Ki. 18:38) to deceive the people into worshipping the first beast. In that regard, he is even granted the power to breathe life into the idolatrous statue of Antichrist so that it spoke. This speaking image in some way caused those who would not worship the image to be killed. ("The subject is not the false prophet but the idol itself that causes the execution of all who refuse to worship it.")¹³⁵

c. As there have been many "antichrists" in history, lesser manifestations of the ultimate Antichrist, so there have been lesser manifestations of the false prophet. In the province of Asia at this time, there was a council called the Commune of Asia that represented the major cities of the province. It promoted participation in the imperial cult and demanded that citizens participate in it. Osborne remarks, "While this council was not the 'false prophet,' it provided background imagery for the portrayal of his idolatrous practices, as Nero did for the Antichrist, and the original readers would certainly have seen the parallel."¹³⁶

d. Note that only the "inhabitants of the earth," those opposed to God and thus predisposed to embrace the lie, are deceived. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 2: 9-12, it is only

¹³⁵ Osborne, 516 (fn. 7).

¹³⁶ Osborne, 513.

those who "refuse to love the truth" who ignore the warning of Deut. 13:1-3 and thus follow the false prophet to their condemnation. The signs serve in part to reveal the true believers.

e. The second beast requires everyone be marked with the name of Antichrist or the number that represents his name.

(1) According to 3 Macc. 2:28-29, in 217 B.C. Egyptian Jews were forced by Ptolemy IV (a.k.a. Philopater I) to be branded with an ivy leaf design of the god Dionysus. Those who refused were killed. As Osborne notes, "The purpose of such a mark is to signify both the rejection of former loyalties and the absolute acceptance of a new allegiance."¹³⁷

(2) This mark of Antichrist is essential to buying and selling, to carrying on necessary functions in the society. So going underground will not insulate Christians from the hardships.

f. There seems to be a satanic parody of God's plan in all of this. As Christ received authority from the Father, so Antichrist receives authority from the dragon. As the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ, so the false prophet glorifies Antichrist. As God's elect are sealed on their foreheads as assurance against his wrath, so the followers of the beast escape his wrath against the church by bearing his mark.

g. The mark of allegiance is the name of the beast or the number of its name. As noted, this may be a reference to Nero Caesar as a prior incarnation of Antichrist, but it also may simply be a name that represents the beast's continuing failure to accomplish his purpose, the trinity of imperfection. It apes the holy trinity (777), but always falls short.

C. Christians again assured (14:1-5)

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

1. John sees the Lamb standing on Mt. Zion with 144,000 who have his name and his Father's name on their foreheads. As I said in connection with chapter 7, I see this number as a symbolic reference to the entire church represented in terms of its Jewish root. It is the number of the tribes of Israel (12) squared and multiplied by a thousand, which is a three-fold way of emphasizing completeness.

¹³⁷ Osborne, 518.

a. The 144,000 stand in contrast to the followers of the beast who bear his mark (666) on their right hand or forehead (13:16-17). So, as in chapter 7, the 144,000 symbolize at the first level the totality of faithful Christians *in the last generation*, the time of the beast when the wrath of God's final judgment falls on the inhabitants of the earth. But at another level, the faithful of that last generation represent that faithful of all generations in that they exhibit the true nature of the faith they all share. All Christians of all time are exempt from the wrath of God's final judgment, which in the case of the final generation includes the punishment on earth with which that final judgment begins.

b. Mt. Zion had long been associated with divine deliverance (e.g., Joel 2:32). The point of the imagery is that not one Christian has been lost; the full number stands victorious with the Lamb. This vision corresponds to the innumerable multitude in the second vision in chapter 7. It is a preview of the blessings of the faithful before another reference to the judgment ahead.

2. John hears a voice from heaven that is like the roar of rushing waters, meaning it was powerful; that is like the sound of loud thunder, meaning it was loud; and that is like the sound of harpists playing their harps, meaning it was melodious (not that it was accompanied by the playing of harps).

a. He is hearing the anthem of redemption sung in God's presence by the choir of 144,000 (with angelic orders as an audience). It is the "new song" of 5:9, but it is now being sung in first person, by the very ones who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb. As in so many of the "new songs" in Psalms (96:1; 98:1; 144:9), the theme is deliverance.

b. Only the 144,000, those specifically identified as "redeemed from the earth," could learn the new song. Only they who experienced redemption could sing about it in first person.

3. The 144,000 are described in v. 4 as virgins who have not defiled themselves with women. This is not to be taken literally, as sexual relationships within marriage are not defiling (Mat. 19:4-6; Heb. 13:4).

a. John is using symbolism. Virginity is ascribed to the people of God in the Old Testament (e.g., 2 Ki. 19:21; Jer. 18:13; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:2), and unfaithfulness is likened to improper sexual relations (e.g., Jer. 18:13; Ezekiel 16; Hos. 2:5, 5:4). In 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul states that his goal is to present the Corinthian church "as a pure virgin to Christ."

b. The 144,000 are the promised bride of Christ (21:9) who, while awaiting their marriage (the consummation), kept themselves from defiling relationships with the pagan world. They resisted the seductions of the great harlot with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication (17:2) and the seductions of all lesser manifestations of the great harlot.

4. John says the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have surrendered the leadership of their lives to the Lamb. They have taken up their cross and followed him (Mk. 8:34).

5. He says the 144,000 were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. They were purchased by Christ's blood, as stated in 5:9. This is John's only use of the word "firstfruits." Since this group represents *all* of the redeemed, it is possible John is using "firstfruits" simply to indicate separation and sanctification to God without its normal implication of there being more to come. But if he is using the term with its normal implication, he may be referring to the fact that the redemption of Christians anticipates "the whole creation being renewed [or 'redeemed'] when Jesus returns."¹³⁸

6. No lie was found in their mouth. They had a strict regard for the truth of God and especially rejected the lie that Antichrist or any of his lesser manifestations were entitled to worship (see, Rom. 1:25; 1 Jn. 2:22). Notice that in 21:8, 27 and 22:15 liars are excluded from the eternal kingdom and thrown into the lake of fire.¹³⁹

7. They are "without blemish," meaning they are acceptable to God. They had appropriated Christ's cleansing through a genuine faith, a faith that was steadfastly loyal in the face of all the pressure to compromise. (Note that the "for" in ESV's "for they are blameless" in v. 5 probably is not original.)

D. The end (14:6-20)

The arrival of God's final judgment, which completes this sweep of spiritual history, is now indicated by the message of three angels and the imagery of two harvests.

1. The angels' messages (14:6-13)

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷ And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." ⁸ Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality." ⁹ And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰ he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." ¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. ¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

¹³⁸ Paul, 247.

¹³⁹ Osborne, 531.

a. The first angel John sees is flying overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on the earth within every people group in the world.

(1) This is a proclamation that addresses God's opponents throughout the world. That they exist among every people group is evident in 11:9 and 13:7, as well as here. Verse 6 literally says to "those *sitting* on the earth," but there is wide agreement that this is a synonym for "those who dwell on the earth," which as I have noted is consistently used in Revelation for God's opponents.

(2) The proclamation is called "*an* eternal gospel" rather than "*the* eternal gospel," and its content, as indicated in v. 7, is not God's redeeming grace in Christ but the fact God's judgment *has come* and with it the time for his enemies to be forced to pay homage.

(a) The proclamation is objectively good news, however it may be perceived by God's enemies, because God's people will be vindicated, and his righteous purpose will be fulfilled. The defeat of Satan and his allies will be finalized, and the eternal state of glory will ensue.

(b) The noun for "gospel" or "good news" in 14:6 is εὐαγγέλιον. The verb for announcing such good news is εὐαγγελίζω, which also is used in 14:6. In 10:7 the verb for announcing good news is used in reference to the fulfillment of the mystery of God that takes place with the sounding of the seventh trumpet. In other words, God's judgment is there viewed as good news. The announcement of God's judgment on the enemies of his people is also called "good news" in Nah. 1:15.

(c) Commentators who think the good news here refers to the announcement of the arrival of God's judgment include Ladd, Ford, Beale, and Keener. Beale states:

The command in 14:7 is not one that primarily applies during the whole course of the age before the parousia. It is, rather, an edict that directly precedes and inaugurates the last judgment itself. The immediately following ὅτι clause indicates that the commencement of the judgment is the reason the command is issued. The time for repentance is gone when the final judgment approaches. Those addressed are not warned to give glory *before* the time of punishment arrives but "because" (ὅτι) the time has arrived. For it is only when "the hour of his judgment *has come*" that those hitherto immovable in their rebellious spirit *will be made to confess* that God is their sovereign judge, who glorifies himself by judging them. They will acknowledge him not only as their judge but also as their almighty creator . . . Consequently, the angel is not telling the earth-dwellers to repent in order to avoid judgment, but is issuing a decree that, at last, they acknowledge the mighty hand of their maker.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Beale, 752-753.

b. A second angel announces that Babylon the Great has fallen.

(1) "Babylon the Great" is an allusion to Dan. 4:30 where Nebuchadnezzar boasts, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" It was at that moment (vv. 31-33) that God's judgment fell on Nebuchadnezzar, and he went insane. Babylon the Great represents the final and ultimate expression of human pride and rebellion, the heart of Antichrist's empire, which pulls people from the worship of God.

(2) Babylon made "all nations drink of the passion of her sexual immorality." She was a corrupting influence on the world (17:2; 18:3), and this corruption brings upon itself the wrath of God. R. H. Charles comments, "The nations, having drunk the wine of the fornication of Babylon, have really therein drunk the wine of the wrath of God."¹⁴¹

(3) The outpouring of God's wrath on the end-time, ultimate Babylon, which will be expanded upon in chapters 16-18, implies his hostility toward and rejection of all lesser Babylons. They all manifest the spirit of Antichrist, and as such, the portrayal of God's wrath against Antichrist's empire reveals what ultimately will be in store for his forerunners. Of course, Rome was the Babylon of John's day; Peter even referred to it as such several decades earlier in 1 Pet. 5:13. And because Rome was the Babylon of John's day, the present manifestation of the spirit of Antichrist, the final Babylon, the center of *the* Antichrist's empire, gets portrayed as Rome to the max, Rome on steroids.

c. The third angel warns of the eternal punishment of all who worship the beast and its image and receive the beast's mark.

(1) They will receive the undiluted wrath of God. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb, meaning they will be consigned to that fate by the judgment that is meted out in the presence of the Lord Jesus and the holy angels. In other words, the angels and the Lamb will be present at least when the described punishment begins, but vv. 10-11 do not require that they be eternally in the presence of the tormented.

(2) The Lamb's presence when they are tormented with sulfur and fire is probably mentioned as one more element in the pain of the lost. Beckwith says the Lamb is mentioned after the angels for emphasis, "as if the most poignant factor in the pain of the wicked would be the sight of the triumph of the Lamb, against whom as worshipers of the Beast they had made war."¹⁴²

(3) The torment of those who side with the beast is specifically described in v. 11 as lasting forever and ever, and they are said to have no rest day or night. This certainly is one of the most sobering and frightening passages in all of Scripture. As with all descriptions of hell, there is ample room for symbolism, but in my judgment, one drains too

¹⁴¹ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 2:15.

¹⁴² Quoted in Osborne, 541.

much from the imagery if one denies the absolute horror of the condition or one's conscious experience of it for eternity. (In that regard, one may be interested in [Does Scripture Teach the Annihilation of the Unsavd?](#))

(4) Verse 12 is a reminder that Christians must remain steadfast in obedience and faith, even in the face of the demands to worship the beast. The price of apostasy would be far greater than the temporary suffering of fidelity. The relevance to Emperor worship being forced on John's readers is obvious.

d. A voice from heaven tells John, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord [from now on]." ["Blessed indeed"] says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" (Use of brackets explained below.)

(1) Although faithfulness to Christ may result in martyrdom, those who die in a state of spiritual union with Jesus Christ are blessed. They stand in sharp contrast to pagans and apostates.

(2) Note that "from now on" may not be a correct reading. Instead of *ap' arti*, the word may be *aparti* (certainly or truly).¹⁴³ This only works if *nai* (yes) at beginning of 13b is omitted, because *aparti* makes it redundant, but *nai* is omitted in the oldest manuscript. Verse 13b then reads (Aune's translation), "Truly, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their works follow after them."

(3) But even if "from now on" is correct, it does not deny the same reward to saints who previously died. It is simply an allusion to the more active persecution John anticipates.

e. The Spirit emphatically affirms the truth of v. 13a. They will rest from the painful toil of this life, including the hardships of faithfulness, because the fruit of their faithfulness (their deeds) will follow them. Death for faithful saints is but a passage to unspeakable blessings.

2. The "end" is symbolized by two harvests (14:14-20)

a. Harvest of the earth (14:14-16)

¹⁴ Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

(1) John sees one like a son of man who is seated on a white cloud. He has a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.

¹⁴³ See Aune, 788.

(a) There is some debate about the matter, but I am with the majority of commentators in thinking this refers to the Lord Jesus. In 1:13, "one like a son of man" refers unequivocally to Jesus. The background for the imagery is Dan. 7:13. That verse had rightly come to be associated with the Messiah under the title "son of man," and the other allusions to Dan. 7:13 in Revelation clearly refer to Jesus (Rev. 1:7, 13). Indeed, Jesus used this same imagery in referring to his return in judgment in Mat. 24:30.

(b) That he is seated on the white cloud may be an echo of Joel 3:12 which speaks of God sitting to judge the nations. The gold crown or wreath is a victor's crown, so it may symbolize Christ's victory that is most fully expressed at his return. However, emperors would sometimes wear wreaths as symbols of victory, so it is possible, especially given the allusion to Dan. 7:13, that the gold wreath here includes connotations of sovereignty.

(c) The sickle in his hand is a symbol, as in Mk. 4:29, of reaping at the final harvest, the final judgment. Its sharpness emphasizes its effectiveness for the task.

(2) The statement in v. 15a that "*another* angel came out of the temple" is not meant to imply that the "one like a son of man" in v. 14 was an angel. It means that John sees yet another angel of the many he has already seen in the vision. This one comes from the heavenly temple, meaning from the immediate presence of God, and calls out to the Lord Jesus "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." The angel is simply delivering from God the Father, who alone knows the time of the final judgment, the command to begin the harvest.

(3) Jesus harvests the earth at God's appointed hour, when the "earth is fully ripe."

(a) This harvest may symbolize the positive side of the judgment, the gathering of the righteous, the faithful, at the return of Christ. In that case, Christ being the reaper may signify his close connection with the redeemed. In the New Testament, the figure of a harvest is normally (but not exclusively) used of the gathering of people into the kingdom of God (e.g., Mat. 9:37-38; Mk. 4:29; Lk. 10:2; Jn. 4:35-38). And in this harvest, unlike the harvest of the grapes in vv. 17-20, there is no indication of God's wrath or rejection.

(b) Others think this harvest provides a general picture of the coming judgment that includes the recompense of both the good and the bad, the redeemed and the lost, as pictured in Mat. 13:30, 39. (Jesus could be pictured in Rev. 14:16 as the one reaping instead of the angels in Mat. 13:39 to indicate he stands behind the angels' activity.) Verses 17-20 are then seen as narrowing the focus to the negative side of that general picture.

(c) In other words, the question is whether the first scene focuses on the fate of the redeemed who are pictured as being received by God and the second scene focuses on the unsaved being rejected by God, or whether the first scene symbolizes the judgment in its totality, encompassing both the redeemed and the unsaved, and then the second

scene focuses on the unsaved. Either is possible, and I do not think it makes much difference to the overall point.

b. Harvest of the grapes (14:17-20)

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

(1) Still another angel comes from the temple in heaven, and he too has a sharp sickle. And then another angel with authority over the fire comes from the altar and commands the angel with the sickle to harvest the grapes because they are ripe. The angel who comes from the altar may be the angel of 8:3-5 who filled his censer with fire from the altar and cast it to earth, but even if it is a different angel, the fact he comes from the altar may suggest a connection between the prayers of the saints and God's final judgment (see, 6:9; 8:3-5).

(2) The angel, God's agent of wrath, harvests the grapes from the earth and casts them into "the great winepress of God's wrath."

(a) Treading of grapes was a familiar figure for the execution of divine wrath on the enemies of God (e.g., Isa. 63:3; Lam. 1:15; Joel 3:13). That the winepress was trodden "outside the city" is a symbol of the absolute rejection, the eternal banishment, of the damned by God. They will have no part in the holy city of God.

(b) The completeness and horror of God's judgment is depicted by the amount of blood flowing from the winepress. It flowed as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of about 1,600 stadia (about 184 miles). This distance may result from the fact 40 was a traditional number of punishment (Num. 14:33 – Israel's 40 years in the desert; Dt. 25:3 – 40 lashes for a criminal) and 1,600 is 40 squared. Others think it may have some other symbolic significance or that it simply is a hyperbolic image emphasizing the exceptional nature of the slaughter.

(c) In Rev. 19:15 Jesus is the one who treads the winepress of the fury of God's wrath. Part of the imagery there in chapter 19, drawn from Isa. 63:1-6, is that his robe is dipped in blood, soaked in the blood of his enemies trodden in the winepress.

X. Details of wrath accompanying sounding of seventh trumpet (15:1 - 16:21)

A. Review of context

1. The final judgment of God, the fire thrown down to the earth by the angel in 8:5, is symbolized in the punishments meted out in the sounding of the seven trumpets. They are not

seven separate judgments but the portrayal of the one final judgment as a seven-fold judgment, seven being the number of perfection or completeness.

2. You recall that the first woe that accompanied the sounding of the fifth trumpet was described in detail as the terrible assault of demonic locusts that tormented people. The second woe that accompanied the sixth trumpet was likewise described in detail as the vast horde of demonic horsemen that slaughtered people as it swept across the earth. But the third woe of the seventh trumpet that was sounded in chapter 11 was not described. Instead, as I have noted, the vision jumps to a time after the outpouring of God's wrath is completed, a time when God's wrath and the judging of the dead had already come (11:18).

3. With a number of commentators (e.g., Ladd, Mounce [tentatively], Aune, Johnson, Michaels, Fanning), I think the seven bowls of wrath that are introduced in chapter 15 are the delayed description of the third woe of the seventh trumpet.

a. According to 10:7, when the seventh trumpet is sounded the *mystery of God will be fulfilled* as he announced to the prophets. In keeping with that, we see in 11:15-18 that the sounding of the seventh trumpet includes the consummation of the kingdom and the completion of divine wrath that precedes that consummation.

b. It is clear from 15:1 and 16:7 that the plagues of the seven bowls complete the outpouring of God's wrath. Since the seventh trumpet includes the completion of God's wrath, it seems the punishments of the seven bowls are the unreported "third woe" that accompanies the sounding of the seventh trumpet. As the final woe associated with the final trumpet, it is magnified through its own series of seven.

B. Preparation for outpouring of seven last plagues (15:1-8)

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. ² And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire-- and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. ³ And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! ⁴ Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." ⁵ After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶ and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. ⁷ And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, ⁸ and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

1. John sees a "great and amazing" sign in heaven: seven angels with the seven last plagues that complete God's wrath. The emphasis is on God bringing history to a close, which is an amazing thing to see.

2. In chapter 7 the faithful are assured of their future glory before the depiction of the final judgment that begins with the trumpets in chapter 8. In chapter 14:1-5 they are assured of their future glory before the final judgment that is summarized in 14:6-20. So here in 15:2-4 they are assured of the joy and blessing of faithfulness prior to the completion of God's wrath that is symbolized in the outpouring of the seven bowls of wrath.

3. In vv. 2-4 he sees the faithful, represented by those who expressed that faith in the extreme circumstance of the final generation, standing on what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire. In 4:6 a sea of glass like crystal was before the throne of God. This imagery depicts the majesty and brilliance of God. The mention of fire here may be an allusion to God's judgment which is often portrayed in terms of fire.

4. This great picture again reinforces the truth that the blessings of faithfulness are worth any price. It is imagery of the concept Paul expressed in 2 Cor. 4:16-18: ¹⁶Therefore, we do not lose heart, but even if our outward man is being wasted away, yet our inward man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For the lightness of our affliction, which is momentary, is producing for us far beyond all measure an eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸as we focus not on the things that are seen but on the things that are not seen, for the things that are seen [are] temporary, but the things that are not seen [are] eternal.

5. The victorious saints are described simply as "having harps of God" (see, e.g., ASV, ERV, NKJV, WEB, LSB).

a. If I may detour briefly, the text does not say anything about these harps being "held" or being "in their hands"; those are interpretive glosses based on the assumption that "harps of God" refers to an image of an external instrument that has either come *from* God (e.g., oranges of *Florida*) or is to be used *for* God (e.g., the sacrifices of God).

b. I do not think that is correct. The Greek word *echō* can mean holding something, which is why some translations insert the word "hands," but it also can mean "having" in the sense of being equipped with. It often is used of a person having hands, feet, ears, and eyes. Though imagery of external harps, along with bowls of incense, was used in 5:8 as static symbols of prayers, they are not there called harps of *God*. I think this qualification is more significant than is usually recognized.

c. I think "harps of God" is probably a metaphorical reference to their *internal* instrumentation – the larynx, tongue, and mouth that produce vocal sounds. Indeed, voices were already said in 14:2 to be *like the sound of harpists playing their harps*. It is the human voice consecrated to God in the expression of praise that is "God's harp," the instrument that is uniquely suited for the worship of a God who is spirit. The voice is the immediate and ultimate expression of the inner man, the human spirit, which when under the influence of the Holy Spirit is beautiful and pleasing to God. As Everett Ferguson explains:

Vocal expressions are peculiarly well suited to the expression of spiritual worship, to the expressing of what comes from the human spirit and through the Spirit of

God. They are rational, not in the sense of non-emotional, but as proceeding from and appealing to the highest of human nature. The whole self (including the emotions) is involved in Christian worship, but the mind (reason) is to be in control. Instrumental music can express feelings and emotions. Vocal music can express the will and intellect. The latter is better suited for the communion of spirit with Spirit. In vocal music there is an immediate contact. In instrumental music there is an intermediary. The voice is much more a matter of one's self than any other gift of praise can be. Vocal music thus best corresponds to the nature of one's relationship to God.

d. Certainly such a metaphorical reference would not be out of place in a book like Revelation. About a century after Revelation was written, Clement of Alexandria described the tongue as "the psaltery of the Lord" and said the kithara (harp) was "the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum."

e. In addition, there is no mention of external harps being played. The text merely reports that those having God's harps are singing. Given the persuasive evidence that the church did not use musical instruments in worship and saw the human voice as the instrument best suited for worshipping a God who is spirit, it would be primed to understand "God's harps" as a metaphor for the singing capacity of the Spirit-filled Christian.

f. Of course, if I am wrong and these singing saints are indeed pictured as holding harps it would not mean that instrumental music is appropriate for the earthly worship of the church. In Revelation there is incense in golden bowls and golden censers (5:8, 8:3), a golden altar (8:3), a temple (11:19), and the ark of the covenant (11:19), but almost no one believes it would be appropriate to introduce these items into Christian worship.

6. They are singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

a. This is probably one song with a double title. It is a song of praise for God's deliverance, a deliverance made possible by God's sovereignty. The deliverance of which Moses and the people sang in Ex. 15:1-18 prefigured the greater deliverance brought about by the Lamb.

b. God is so great that ultimately every nation will fear and glorify him, acknowledging his sovereignty, his unique holiness, and his absolute power. The promise of texts like Ps. 86:9 that all nations will come and worship him is now fulfilled *because* his *judgments* (KJV, RSV, NKJV, NRSV, ISV; or righteous acts) have been revealed. In other words, all nations, whether eagerly or under compulsion, whether happily or unhappily, will give God his due when his righteous judgment falls on the earth. Even the rebellious will bow down, "bend the knee" (Phil. 2:9-11), in forced acceptance of the reality of God's glory. (The word "worship" here, προσκυνέω, can be used of bowing and kneeling before another even if one does not have a heart of worship. See, e.g., Mk. 15:19 where those mocking Christ are said to have been worshipping him.)

7. Seven angels with the seven last plagues (vv. 5-8)

a. The temple (or sanctuary) in heaven is referred to in v. 5 as the tent or tabernacle of the testimony. The tabernacle of Israel's early history was called the tabernacle of the testimony because it housed the ark of the covenant, which in turn held God's testimony in the form of the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were written (Ex. 32:15-16, 34:28; Deut. 10:5). I think this is a reference to God as the source and standard of mankind's moral obligation and thus a reference to him as the one who judges sin.

b. Seven angels emerge from the heavenly temple wearing pure bright linen with golden sashes across their chests. Their coming from the temple is indicative of the divine origin of their commission. Their appearance symbolizes their purity and importance.

c. One of the four living creatures gives a golden bowl to each of the seven angels. The bowls are full of the wrath of God. In 5:8 the golden bowls symbolized the prayers of the saints. This may suggest a relationship between prayer and divine retribution.

d. The temple is filled with smoke, which symbolizes the presence of God in all his glory and power to carry out his judgment upon wickedness. Until the seven plagues are finished, no one can enter the temple. I think this suggests that nothing will alleviate or cut short the punishment God is meting out in the final judgment; it will be completed in full. In the imagery of Lk. 13:24-27, the owner of the house has closed the door. The subject is closed.

C. Outpouring of the seven last plagues (16:1-21)

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God." ² So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. ³ The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea. ⁴ The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵ And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. ⁶ For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" ⁷ And I heard the altar saying, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!" ⁸ The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹ They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. ¹⁰ The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds. ¹² The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³ And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴ For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵ ("Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!") ¹⁶ And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. ¹⁷ The seventh angel

poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!"¹⁸ And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake.¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.²¹ And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

1. Perhaps this is a good time to repeat the earlier quote from Bruce Metzger:

We must remember that the objects and events seen in a vision are not physically real. As was mentioned earlier, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37) and Peter's vision of a great sheet let down from heaven and filled with all kinds of unclean creatures (Acts 10) were perceived in a trance. Such things seen in a vision are not physically present. So too, in the book of Revelation the descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of the real occurrences. The intention is to fix the reader's thought, not upon the symbol, but upon the idea that the symbolic language is designed to convey.

2. And note that the horrible punishment that is symbolized in the bowls is reserved for those who chose Satan over God (16:2b), those who opposed the saints and were thus culpable in the shedding of their blood (16:6). They curse God as he punishes them into submission and vindicates the faith of his servants. The people of God are exempt from his punishment as made clear in their being sealed in chapter 7 and in other ways.

3. The first bowl is poured out on the earth (v. 2). The followers of the beast receive ugly and painful sores reminiscent of the boils that God through Moses brought on the Egyptians, the enemies of his people (Ex. 9:9-11). These are the kinds of sores that plagued Lazarus in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

4. The second bowl is poured out into the sea (v. 3). The sea became like the blood of a corpse (coagulated and rotting), and every living thing in the sea died. This is reminiscent of the first plague on Egypt (Ex. 7:20-21) and of the punishment that accompanied the second trumpet (8:8-9), but here we see the full picture of this aspect of the final judgment. As horrific as it was in 8:8-9 to have a third of the sea turned to blood, a third of the sea creatures die, and a third of the ships destroyed, that was merely a weigh station in the unfolding picture of God's final judgment. Whatever hope the inhabitants of the earth may have harbored that the punishment had peaked short of complete devastation is dashed. The cup of God's wrath will be emptied.

5. The third bowl is poured out into the rivers and springs (v. 4-7).

a. This is reminiscent of the punishment that accompanied the third trumpet, but there is again a completion of that aspect of the punishment that dashes any hope that the worst was over. Now all the inland waters, the entire supply of fresh water, are involved, not just one-third, and they are turned to blood instead of simply becoming bitter.

b. The angel attests to the righteousness of God's action. His judgment is grimly appropriate: those who have shed the blood of God's people, depicted in 17:6 as having drunk the blood of the saints, which includes all who were complicit in that bloodshed through their siding with Antichrist, deserve to have blood to drink.

6. The fourth bowl is poured out on the sun (v. 8-9). The sun is allowed (by God) to scorch the beast's followers with intense heat, a horrifying picture indeed.

a. When this judgment falls, they are hardened in their hostility to God. As indicated with regard to the second woe of the sixth trumpet (9:20-21), there is no repentance. Instead God's enemies are hardened in their sin; they curse (blaspheme) his holy name. Mounce remarks: "Like Pharaoh, their hearts have become hardened and repentance is out of the question. Caird says, 'They have wholly taken on the character of the false gods they serve.'"¹⁴⁴ As Beale said about the sixth trumpet, the plagues "were not intended to have a redeeming effect but a damning effect."

b. They will not glorify God through repentance, through turning to him for salvation; that time has passed. They will, however, ultimately glorify him through their forced acknowledgement of and submission to his supremacy.

7. In the imagery, the fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast (v. 10-11) which results in his entire kingdom being plunged into darkness.

a. As I said regarding the fourth trumpet, supernatural darkness is a form of divine punishment, as in the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:21-23) where there was three days of absolute darkness. God symbolizes the final judgment with repeated allusions to the Egyptian plagues to say that at the final judgment he will powerfully punish the hostile forces that oppose and oppress his people as he punished the Egyptians who did the same. Note that the Israelites in Egypt are specifically said to have had light during this time of darkness (Ex. 10:23).

b. It is possible that part of the symbolism of this darkness is separation from God. Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish writing from the latter part of the first century B.C., understands the darkness of the Egyptian plague in Exodus 10 as symbolizing spiritual separation from God (Wisdom 17:2).

c. Those who chose Antichrist are gnawing their tongues in anguish, both from the terrifying darkness and the pain of their sores. It is again pointed out that they do not repent; they are set in their sin and hostility toward God. They curse him as they are being dragged to submission.

8. The sixth bowl is poured out on the great Euphrates River (v. 12), and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east. I think this probably symbolizes punishment being meted out on Babylon the great, the center of Antichrist's empire, through an allusion to the fall of the ancient city of Babylon to Cyrus the Persian.

¹⁴⁴ Mounce, 297.

a. Both Herodotus, a Greek historian of the mid-fifth century B.C., and Xenophon, a Greek historian of the fourth century B.C., recount that Cyrus captured Babylon in 539 B.C. by diverting the Euphrates River so that his troops could enter the city through the now passable river bed that ran through it. There may even be allusions to this in the Old Testament (Isa. 44:27-28; Jer. 50:38, 51:36). This was, of course, the victory by which God freed his people from Babylonian captivity.

b. Cyrus is described in Isa. 41:2 and 46:11 as one "from the east" and as one "from the rising of the sun," meaning the east, in Isa. 41:25. He led a coalition of Medes and Persians, as indicated in Dan. 5:28, which was in keeping with prophecies that the Medes would play a part in the destruction of Babylon (Isa. 13:17, 21:2; Jer. 51:11, 28). In Jer. 51:11, 28 God refers to bringing "kings of the Medes" against Babylon. So Babylon fell at the hand of a plurality of "kings" being led by one "from the east."

c. So this bowl not only removes from "Babylon" its essential water supply (viewed separately from the consequence of the third bowl) but is preparation for its destruction, which climaxes with the pouring out of the seventh and final bowl of wrath.

9. I am with a minority of commentators (e.g., Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Osborne, Blount) in thinking verses 13-16 are an interlude prior to the outpouring of the seventh bowl. Between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals, there was the interlude of the sealing of the saints in chapter 7. Between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, there was the interlude of the little scroll and the two witnesses in 10:1-11:14. So here I think there is an interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls of wrath.

a. John sees three demonic spirits, described as unclean and froglike, issue from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Frogs were unclean animals under the Law (Lev. 11:10-11) and generally are regarded as unattractive. The fact they come out of the mouths of the dragon, beast, and false prophet may symbolize the deceptive speech that is used by this trinity of evil.

b. These evil spirits employ miraculous signs, presumably through the false prophet (13:13-15), to gather the kings of the whole world (not kings "from the east" as in as in 16:12) for the battle on the great day of God the Almighty. They are assembled for that battle, the great day of Christ's return when he will execute God's final judgment, having come together in their attack on the Lord's church as indicated in 11:7-10 and in chapter 13.

c. In other words, this interlude, in my judgment, resets the scene of the world coming to the point of the final judgment. Prior to the depiction of God's wrath being completed in the seventh bowl, we are taken back to the state of the world when that judgment fell. There is a resetting of the world being organized against God and his people under the leadership of Antichrist through the performance of miraculous signs wrought by demonic power. It was at that time, when the world was aligned, assembled as it were, against God through its persecution of his people, when the number of martyrs was completed (6:9-11), that the final judgment was launched.

It is that final judgment that has been depicted in various frightening images since the hurling of fire to the earth in 8:5.

d. Verse 15 refers expressly to Christ's coming in this context of the world aligned against God in the days of the dragon, beast, and false prophet. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 2:8, the lawless one, Antichrist, will be on the scene when Christ returns. Jesus pronounces as blessed those who, in light of the deception and persecution of those days, stay faithful, those who remain ready to meet him as symbolized by keeping their garments on.

e. The site at which God's enemies are said to be assembled against him for battle on the great day of God the Almighty is in Hebrew called "Harmagedon" (or "Armagedon").

(1) Most see this as a reference to Megiddo, either as the "mountain (or hill) of Megiddo" or the "city of Megiddo." The former seems closer to the Hebrew, but there is no mountain of Megiddo (in John's day the tell of Megiddo was only about 70 ft. high).

(2) Megiddo was an ancient city in north central Israel (Galilee in Jesus' time) on the southern edge of the Jezreel Plain. Although Megiddo is rarely mentioned in connection with battles, Barak's defeat of Sisera being a significant exception (Jud. 5:19), many major battles had been fought in its vicinity. This could make it an appropriate symbol for the eschatological battle.

(3) Some interpret "Harmagedon" as the "mount of assembly" (Bruce) or as "his place of gathering troops" (Johnson). This would be an allusion to God's gathering of the nations for judgment.

(4) In any event, the name is symbolic and probably does not refer to any geographical location. It is symbolic of the final resistance by and overthrow of all the forces of evil by the might and power of God.

10. The seventh bowl is poured out into the air (vv. 17-21)

a. With this bowl, God, the voice from the throne, announces "It is done!" The outpouring of his wrath is completed, as indicated in 15:1. Antichrist and his associates waged war against God through their organized and ferocious persecution of the church, but God punished them on earth, and as we will see, cast them into "the lake of fire that burns with sulfur" (20:20), which is the place of eternal torment.

b. As with the opening of the seventh seal (8:5) and the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:19), the outpouring of the seventh bowl is accompanied by lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and an earthquake. These are apocalyptic images of God's intervention in judgment. Here, in keeping with its finality, the earthquake is described as the most violent ever.

c. The great city, Babylon, is completely destroyed (split into three parts), and with it, the cities of the nations, which were under its control. It is emphasized that God remembered Babylon and gave her "the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath." Babylon, as the

center of the beast's empire, represents that empire. It is the embodiment of human pride and rebellion against God; it is mankind in organized opposition to God. That is why its destruction is given such elaboration in chapters 17-18.

d. God's final wrath is so awesome that the islands and mountains are described as fleeing, perhaps the effect of the tremendously violent earthquake. The storm of divine wrath climaxes with the "exceedingly great" plague of hundred-pound hailstones falling on people. As I said in the discussion of the first trumpet, hail was a means of God's judgment as early as the plague on Egypt in Ex. 9:13-35, which destroyed the vegetation. God hurled huge hailstones on the Amorite army in Josh. 10:11 and said in Job 38:22-23 that he reserves "storehouses of hail" for the day of battle and war. Despite the severity of God's punishment, the enemies of God are so defiant that they curse him as they are being brought to submission.

e. This devastating final judgment that has been pictured in different ways and in an unfolding scheme throughout much of Revelation occurs in association with the return of Christ. As indicated in 2 Thess. 1:7-8 and Jude 14-15, he will return with mighty angels and will take *vengeance, inflict punishment*, on the unbelievers of the world. But Christ's role in this victory at Harnagedon is not really brought out until 19:11-21. There he is seen as the King behind the destruction of the powers opposing God. He overthrows the beast with the splendor of his coming (see, 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:17-19). The focus from 16:17 - 19:10 is on God the Father's role in the judgment.

XI. Details of judgment on Babylon depicted in the seven bowls (17:1 - 19:10)

A. The Great Whore and the Beast (17:1-18)

1. Description of the great whore (17:1-6)

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters,² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."³ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.⁴ The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.⁵ And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."⁶ And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.¹ When I saw her, I marveled greatly.

a. One of the seven angels with the seven bowls says he will show John the judgment of the "great whore." This is almost certainly the same angel who in 21:9 shows John the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

(1) This whore is specifically identified as "Babylon the great" (17:5) and as the great city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18). It is the center of Antichrist's

empire, the center of human pride and rebellion expressed in its organized opposition to God. It is the Rome of the end time.

(2) The image of a whore is common in Old Testament prophecy. It is applied to pagan cities in Nahum 3:4 (Nineveh) and in Isa. 23:16-17 (Tyre). It represents one who sells what should not be sold, who abandons what is right and noble in exchange for the false values of the world, things like money, power, and luxury.

(3) God's judgment on Babylon was symbolized in 16:19; his wrath on Babylon has been poured out. In the words of 16:17, "It is done!" Chapters 17-18 are an elaboration of that destruction, a different symbolic portrayal of the same reality.

b. The great whore is seated on many waters (17:1). These waters represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages (17:15). Her influence has flowed to all parts of the world. The kings of the earth committed fornication with her in that they joined in her idolatrous worship and in her other evils. The inhabitants of the earth, those whose names are not written in the book of life (17:8), likewise became intoxicated by these practices, meaning they came under their influence.

c. John is carried away "in the Spirit" (reiterating his prophetic state) into a wilderness and sees a woman, the whore ("mother of whores," v. 5), now seated on a scarlet beast.

(1) This beast seems to be the same beast presented in chapter 13. It has seven heads, ten horns, and is covered with blasphemous names, which is how the beast of chapter 13 is described. The color scarlet probably points to the luxury in which the beast lived. The association of "scarlet" with luxury is seen in 17:4 and 18:12, 16, but it also could represent sin (Isa. 1:18 – "though your sins are like scarlet") or possibly be an association with the "red" of the dragon.

(2) The woman is clothed in luxurious garments, adorned with gold and costly jewels, and holds a gold cup. She is the image of luxury, splendor, and wealth, a symbol of the worldly or carnal attractions that lure people away from devotion to God. What she offers in her cup, however, is idolatrous worship, something abominable in the sight of God. She is a gilded death trap.

(3) Written on her forehead was a name of mystery, a name with a deeper meaning or significance than is apparent on the surface. (There is some evidence that certain Roman prostitutes would wear on their foreheads headbands inscribed with their names.) Only those to whom the meaning is revealed (v. 7) will grasp the full significance of the title. The name was "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." She is the ultimate manifestation of humanity in organized opposition to God, the center of the end time, anti-God political empire.

(4) She was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. This portrays the wanton slaughter of a significant number of believers along with the intoxicating effect it produced on the murderous harlot. It speaks of a lust for violence against God's people.

d. John is greatly amazed by the sight of the woman. Perhaps it was because her situation seemed in such contrast to the judgment the angel had promised to show (v. 1).

2. Interpretation of the scene (17:7-18)

⁷ But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. ⁹ This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰ they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. ¹¹ As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. ¹² And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³ These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴ They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." ¹⁵ And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. ¹⁶ And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷ for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸ And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

a. The angel offers to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast. It is a single mystery involving both figures, but the explanation centers on the beast. I incorporated some of what is said here into the discussion of chapter 13. As you know, the beast, in my view and in the view of a fair number of commentators, is Antichrist, the end-time, Satan-inspired ruler of a powerful, worldwide, and violently anti-Christian empire (11:2, 7; 13:1-10; 17:3-6, 12-14).

b. He *was, is not, and is yet to come* in that Antichrist was not on the scene when John wrote ("is not") and when he comes in the future ("yet to come") he will in some sense be a reappearance of the Christ-hating Nero who killed himself with a sword in A.D. 68 ("was"). This reappearance is also indicated in the statements that the beast had a fatal sword wound, one that killed him, from which he was healed (13:12, 14).

c. He is from the Abyss or bottomless pit (11:7, 17:8), also referred to as the sea (13:1) because the "bottomless depths" of the sea is the origin of the concept of Abyss or bottomless pit, in that he is closely associated with Satan and the demonic realm. This is indicated by his similar appearance to the dragon, by the dragon giving him his throne and authority, and by demonic miracles fostering the worship of him.

d. Verse 8a can be translated either that the beast "is about to" come up from the Abyss (as in most translations) or simply that he "will" come up with an implication of certainty (as in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NJB, NIV).¹⁴⁵ If "about to" is the correct sense, then it is another way of indicating that Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near (as in 17:9-11).

e. He goes to destruction (17:8, 11) in that his fate is the lake of fire into which he will be thrown at Christ's return (19:20, 20:10; 2 Thess. 2:8).

f. With the KJV, NAS, NKJV, NASU, HCSB, and CSB, I think the angel says the unbelievers, the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not in the book of life, will marvel when they see the beast that was and is not and will be present again, meaning when they see Antichrist. In other words, I do not think he is saying they will marvel *because* the beast was and is not and will be present again but rather that they will marvel when they see what the beast says and does and will flock to him like moths to a flame.

g. The seven heads are first said to represent seven mountains on which the whore sits. In the Prophets, mountains are sometimes used as a symbol for world powers or kingdoms (Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 35:3), and seven, as you know, symbolizes completeness or perfection.

(1) I think this symbolizes the worldwide scope and influence of "Babylon the great," the representation of Antichrist's defiant kingdom. In 17:18 the woman is described as "the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

(2) It is true that Rome was known in the ancient world as the city on seven hills, but I do not think this is a straightforward identification of the woman, Babylon the great, with Rome. As Leonard Thompson notes, the more common phrase for referring to Rome was the adjectival form "seven-hilled."¹⁴⁶ In addition, v. 9a says that wisdom is called for in grasping the meaning, which suggests it involves something deeper than a well-known geographical identification.

(3) So in my view Babylon the great sits on seven mountains in that Antichrist's empire encompasses all the kingdoms of the earth. That symbolism serves a secondary purpose of portraying Antichrist's empire as a kind of Rome, a city that shares, but surpasses, the power, godlessness, and anti-Christian hostility of the Rome of John's day.

h. The seven heads of the beast are also said to represent seven kings, five of which have fallen, one is, and the other, who must remain a short time, is yet to come (vv. 9-11). As I said in the discussion of chapter 13, I think the seven kings probably are symbolic of the full number of blasphemous earthly rulers (those claiming divine status), which set culminates in Antichrist. If that is correct, then this is an apocalyptic way of indicating that Christ is at the door. Though the time of his coming is uncertain, Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near. Being to the sixth king of the complete set of blasphemous earthly rulers means that

¹⁴⁵ See Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 628.

¹⁴⁶ Leonard L. Thompson, *Revelation*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 161.

the seventh and final one, Antichrist, who will stay only a short time before being taken out by Christ, may arise at any time.

i. The beast belongs to the seven (17:11) in that he shares their blasphemous claim of divinity, their opposition to God, and their persecution of God's people – he is the completion of that set of rulers – but he is "an eighth king" in the sense he is distinct from the others of that set, presumably by virtue of his greater embodiment of Satanic power. It is also possible that he is an "eighth" king in the sense he is a reappearance, a resurrection so to speak, of an earlier blasphemous king. The number eight could symbolize a new beginning based on Sunday, known as the "eighth day," being the start of a new series of days (and also being the day of Christ's resurrection).

j. The horns of the beast are here said to symbolize ten future kings (they have not yet received authority) who, with the beast, will receive authority for a short time. They represent the "kings of the whole world" (16:14) who cast their lot with the beast (17:13) and make war on the Lamb in the great persecution of his church. As Beckwith notes, "*Ten*, which among all the peoples using the decimal system is found frequently as a round number for *fullness*, *completeness*, occurs often in this sense in the Bible and apocalyptic writers."¹⁴⁷ So the seven mountains represent the kingdoms of the world, and the ten kings represent the kings of the world in solidarity with the beast.

k. Verse 14b says, "and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called the chosen and faithful." In one sense, of course, Christ has already conquered all enemies through his atoning death and resurrection, but there is another sense in which he will conquer those who will make war against him. Christ is returning in judgment with his holy angels, when the number of martyrs is complete (6:9-11), and he will mete out punishment and vengeance on his enemies. Those who are with the Lord are called "chosen and faithful"; those who stand steadfast with him will hear "Well done my good and faithful servant."

l. The many waters on which the great whore was seated in 17:1 are said in 17:15 to represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. Her influence has flowed to all parts of the world, not only to rulers and their kingdoms but to people from all groups on earth.

m. Virtually all commentators see in vv. 16-17 an indication that the beast and his allies turn on Babylon and destroy it in some kind of civil strife, but I am not convinced that is correct.

(1) As I said, I believe the ten kings (17:12) represent the "kings of the whole world" (16:14) who cast their lot with the beast (17:13) and make war on the Lamb in the great persecution of the church. If that is correct, they cannot have turned against Babylon and actively destroyed her (v. 16b) because the kings of the earth mourn her destruction in 18:9-10.

(2) Also, since the whore represents Babylon the great (17:5), the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18), it is a symbol of Antichrist's empire,

¹⁴⁷ Beckwith, 254. See fn. 61 for additional references.

the center of humanity in organized rebellion against God. Certainly God could cause Antichrist to self-destruct, to actively and directly attack his own empire, but given how unusual that would be I need less ambiguous language to reach that conclusion. The fact Babylon's destruction is elsewhere portrayed as coming through God's direct action with no hint of Antichrist serving as his agent (16:19-21; 18:7-8, 20-21; 19:2) reinforces my uneasiness with that interpretation.

(3) I think the point of vv. 16-17 is that the beast and the kings of the world who unite with him "hate" the beast's empire, represented by Babylon the great, in the *objective* sense that their uniting against God in the persecution of his people precipitated God's destruction of Babylon. In bringing about that destruction, they expressed hatred for the empire, as we might say a child who drove his mother to an early grave by continually breaking her heart "hated" his mother. However he may have felt about her subjectively, he hated her in the objective sense he would not cease from the conduct that killed her.

(4) God led them to unify in their hostility against him, to cooperate in their evil, because it was his purpose to bring the final judgment in their day, to bring history to a close at that time. In doing so, they were fulfilling the words of God, fulfilling his revelation that the final judgment would be preceded by the rise of a worldwide anti-God/Christian empire (see Daniel 7, 11-12; 2 Thess. 2:1-12).

B. The Fall of Babylon Elaborated (18:1-19:10)

1. The fall portrayed (18:1-24)

a. Announcement of Babylon's certain fall (vv. 1-3)

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. ² And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. ³ For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living."

(1) John sees an angel coming down from heaven who has great authority; he is an agent of God Almighty. The earth is made bright from the angel's glory, which suggests he has come directly from the divine presence.

(2) The angel announces with a mighty voice Babylon's inescapable destruction. As Morris (and others) points out, "The city's doom is still future but it is so certain that it can be spoken of as already accomplished."¹⁴⁸ Note, for example, the future tense used in vv. 8-9, 15, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Morris, 208.

(3) In words reminiscent of God's condemnation of ancient Babylon (Isa. 13:19-22; Jer. 50:39, 51:37), the angel portrays Babylon the great as a city left desolate. This thriving center of a world empire is depicted as a wilderness void of human inhabitants. It is left with only the non-human symbols of its hostility and alienation from God, unclean spirits and various unclean animals.

(4) The reason for her judgment is her role in leading the world in its rebellion against God. It drew the nations and rulers into its idolatry, its worship of the beast, which is unfaithfulness to the Creator, and from that idolatry flowed all kinds of literal sexual misconduct. Part of its lure was its wealth, the opportunity it offered those willing to sell their souls to share in her luxury.

b. Call for Christians to separate themselves from the city (vv. 4-8)

⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; ⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶ Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. ⁷ As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' ⁸ For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her."

(1) Another voice from heaven, perhaps of the Lord Jesus, commands his people to come out of Babylon. This is an echo of Jeremiah's words in Jer. 51:44-45.

(a) It is a call to protect oneself from the divine judgment coming on Babylon the great. They are to "come out" of her in the sense they are to pull away from whatever ties they have to that godless society and culture that give it a grip to pull them from allegiance to God. It is a way of saying they must steel themselves against the temptations to compromise their faithfulness to Christ that Babylon presents. If they are drawn into her sins, if they are pulled from the Lord Jesus by her seduction, they will share in her plagues.

(b) This is a message for all times not only because one can never be certain that the evil of one's own day is not the rise of Babylon the great but also because, as I have said repeatedly, the demand for faithfulness in the extreme of the final generation applies with even greater force in the lesser extremes of prior generations. Though we are *in* the world we must be vigilant not to be *of* the world. Surrendering our loyalty to the Lord Jesus, joining in the sins of the world, will put us with the world on the Day of Judgment.

(2) The punishment of plagues that the saints are urged to avoid are because Babylon's sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities. Human history has climaxed in rampant evil. But instead of a universal flood and a restart in this fallen creation, it will be a judgment and renewal of all things.

(3) The addressee shifts in v. 6 to God's agents of judgment. Babylon is to be paid back with justice, in a way that is in keeping with her conduct. Many commentators are convinced that the words (verb and cognate adjective) translated "double" in v. 6b ("repay her *double* for her deeds") and 6c ("mix a *double* portion for her") are better translated something like "match" and "matching." Thus, Beale translates the clauses, "give the very equivalent according to her work; in the cup in which she mixed, mix for her the equivalent."¹⁴⁹ Whether that is correct or not, v. 6a and 7b set the theme of just recompense; v. 6b and 6c may serve to emphasize the severity of that just payment.

(4) Babylon's pride, arrogance, wealth, and sense of invincibility, while engaged in all-out-war against God, are cited as reasons that she must be destroyed. Note verse 8 says "her plagues (plural) will come in a *single day*" (and see vv. 10, 17, and 19c "For in a *single hour*"). That is not necessarily the impression one would get from a literal reading of the prior accounts of the plagues, which highlights the fluid nature of apocalyptic imagery. Even here, the plagues that will come in a single day include famine, not something that normally occurs in a day.

(5) Babylon's delusion notwithstanding, her terrible fate is sealed.
For mighty is the Lord God who has judged her!

c. Laments for Babylon's fall (vv. 9-20)

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. ¹⁰ They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come." ¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, ¹² cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, ¹³ cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. ¹⁴ "The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!" ¹⁵ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, ¹⁶ "Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! ¹⁷ For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste." And "all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, "What city was like the great city?" ¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste. ²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!"

(1) Lament of kings of the earth (vv. 9-10)

¹⁴⁹ Beale, 901.

(a) The kings of the earth had given their allegiance to Antichrist, which involved them in idolatry and the various forms of immorality that flowed from it. They reaped great material benefits from their alliance with Antichrist, sharing in the luxury that characterized his empire.

(b) When the hammer of God's judgment falls, they are pictured here as weeping and wailing over Babylon. They see that the source of their luxury is gone, and they realize they have backed the wrong power. They stand far off, in fear of the city's great torment, and confess that, despite her greatness, she has been brought to judgment. Part of the wailing is the realization of what it means for them to have opposed the one who brings this great judgment. That facet is depicted in 19:19-21.

(2) Lament of merchants (vv. 11-17a)

(a) The merchants who prospered from the empire's booming international trade – represented here by first-century items in the categories of precious stones and metals, luxurious fabrics, expensive wood and building materials, spices and perfumes, food items, and animals and slaves – weep and mourn her destruction. They grew rich from serving the whore, and they now see it vanish in her collapse.

(b) Verse 14 is a statement of the merchants about how Babylon lost all the material luxuries it had once craved. Among other things, Babylon represented the love of money over the love of God. That was part of its corrupting influence.

(c) Like the kings, these merchants are shown here as standing far off, in fear of the city's great torment, weeping and mourning the devastating collapse of such an affluent city/empire. All of its wealth was laid waste.

(d) And like the kings, part of the wailing is the realization of what this judgment bodes for them, people who have given to Antichrist the worship that belongs only to God. They chose the material profits of idolatry rather than suffering on the side of Christ, despite the powerful preaching of the olive trees and lampstands during those dark days, and as v. 23b suggests, were full of their own importance and self-sufficiency instead of giving glory to God (note Jas. 4:13-16). They will be among those who, in the imagery of 19:18, 21, have their flesh eaten by birds.

(3) Lament of seamen (vv. 17b-20)

(a) The seamen likewise prospered from the empire's booming trade as the means of transporting the various goods demanded. When they see the city burning they cry out, "What city was like the great city?" It was the epitome of worldly grandeur, and yet it was laid waste by God Almighty.

(b) Their awareness that this is God's judgment is clear from v. 20. They acknowledge that God was thereby giving judgment in favor of his people – the saints,

apostles, and prophets – against those who despised and persecuted them. It was God's vindication of their faithfulness through it all.

(c) As with the merchants, they loved money rather than God and thus chose to serve the whore. They too will be among those who, in the imagery of 19:18, 21, have their flesh eaten by birds.

d. Destruction of Babylon depicted (vv. 21-24)

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more; ²² and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, will be heard in you no more, and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more, and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more, ²³ and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more, for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. ²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

(1) A mighty angel hurls a great stone into the sea and declares that Babylon will thus be thrown down with violence. It will be found no more in that it is going to be permanently destroyed. Human rebellion is going to be eliminated. Verses 22-23a reinforce this permanent destruction by listing various elements of normal life and declaring that they will be found no more.

(2) The reasons given here for Babylon's destruction are the arrogance and self-sufficiency of her merchants, her deceiving the nations *through sorcery* (probably in the figurative sense of having "cast a spell" over a large segment of humanity through demonic deception – 13:13-15, 16:14, 19:20), and her murder not only of the prophets and saints but also of the others she killed throughout the world.

2. Rejoicing in heaven (19:1-10)

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, ² for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." ³ Once more they cried out, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever." ⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" ⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great." ⁶ Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. ⁷ Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; ⁸ it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. ⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the

true words of God." ¹⁰ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

a. John hears what sounds to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven shouting praise to God for the judgment of Babylon (vv. 1-5).

(1) This is the celebration of the saints in heaven. In 7:9-12 there was a *preview* of this great multitude, a picture of the state of blessing that awaited them after the terrible judgment of God that was about to be portrayed beginning with the trumpets in chapter 8. Here we see the same state of blessing but from the other side of that judgment. In the perspective of the vision, the celebration is no longer a preview but a *fait accompli*.

(a) As I said when we were looking at chapter 7, though 7:14 specifically states that those robed in white had come out of the great tribulation, it is possible that all the faithful of all generations are pictured and described as those who came out of the great tribulation because the nature of their faith was the same as the faith of those who came out of the great tribulation. The faith of that final, most severely tested generation was a display of the faith of all generations. As the church of their day and time, they represented the church of all time. That would explain the emphasis on the great number and also why this post-judgment scene, which one would expect to include all saints, echoes 7:9-12.

(b) But again, even if the multitude pictured in chapter 7 was only the last generation of saints, their blessedness still implies blessedness for the faithful of all generations. And that is what we are seeing here.

(2) The word "hallelujah" appears only four times in the New Testament, all of which are in 19:1-6. It is a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "praise [you] the Lord." It is found frequently in the Psalms and is a directive to worshipers. Over time, the word morphed into an independent exclamation of joy, so that it was simply transliterated into Greek rather than translated (as we might transliterate rather than translate a word like "hooray" or "yay").

(3) God is praised as the one to whom belongs salvation and glory and power as shown by the fact his judgments are true and just. To answer Abraham's rhetorical question (Gen. 18:25), the Judge of all the earth will do what is right. That truth is demonstrated most immediately in his punishment of the great prostitute, Babylon the great, which was a moral cancer on earth and a murderer of Christians, God's servants.

(4) There is rejoicing over their vindication by God, over his punishing Babylon for murdering Christians. In keeping with Paul's words in Rom. 12:19, they had not avenged themselves but had left it to God to deal with their abusers. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," and on that Day he is setting all things right. It is only through our trust in his faithfulness, power, and just nature that we can accept mistreatment. Because God is who he is, we can rest with leaving our despisers in his mighty hands.

(5) We desire our persecutors to repent, to turn to God to receive the mercy with which he has blessed us, but we will celebrate the rightness of God's judgment against those who refused to do so. We will stand with God, seeing as never before the absolute horror of disobeying him, and we will praise him for the rightness of the eternal punishment he metes out. As Grant Osborne notes, the smoke of Babylon that "goes up forever and ever" is the "eternal 'smoke of torment' that accompanies the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10, 14-15)."¹⁵⁰ In 14:11 this language referred to the ungodly individuals whose lives were inseparably linked to that evil empire, those who had cast their lot with the beast rather than the Lord.

(6) The 24 elders and the four living creatures, these important angelic or heavenly beings, fall down before God and "Amen" what the saints have been shouting. They also repeat the saints' expression of rejoicing, "hallelujah."

(7) In v. 5 a voice from the throne commands God's servants, described as those from all walks of life (great and small) who fear him, to praise him. The voice is probably that of a heavenly creature who is very close to the throne, perhaps that of one of the four living creatures, and the command to praise is directed to all Christians. I think this voice steps out from the perspective of the vision, comes out from behind the camera so to speak, and addresses the readers directly in light of what was just revealed about God's vindicating judgment and what is about to be revealed about the consummation that is associated with that judgment. The church is to praise God now for what he is without question going to do in the future.

b. John hears what sounds to be the voice of a great multitude shouting even louder the joyful praise of God for the consummation of the kingdom, the church's full experience of God's blessings in Christ (vv. 6-10).

(1) With the NEB, REB, NJB, and HCSB and with many commentators (e.g., Aune, Osborne, Beale, Smalley, Boxall, Blount), the cry of the last clause of v. 6 is better translated "For the Lord our God the Almighty *has begun* to reign." The verb needs to be understood in the same way (ingressive or inceptive) it is in 11:17. As the seventh trumpet, the symbol of the completion of God's wrath, is there associated with the beginning of God's reign, so here the elaboration of the completion of that wrath is associated with the beginning of God's reign.

(a) As I have explained before, the Old Testament ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

(b) But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his

¹⁵⁰ Osborne, 665.

creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

(c) The Jews expected the kingdom to come suddenly and decisively. They thought God's final intervention would be a one-shot deal – the Day of the Lord – where the old age would be terminated abruptly and the new, glorious age would begin. You remember in Lk. 19:11 where the people supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately upon Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.

(d) Jesus explained in a number of parables and elsewhere that the kingdom comes in two stages. It is introduced or inaugurated, then there is an interval of time, and then there is a decisive intervention when the kingdom is consummated or finalized. The statements in Rev. 11:17 and 19:6 that God *has begun* to reign refer to his reigning in that final, fullest sense. This is consummation language.

(2) There is great rejoicing and glorifying of God because the punishment of the final judgment comes in association with the consummation of the kingdom, here expressed as the wedding or marriage of the Lamb.

(a) Through the grace of God (v. 8), his bride was prepared for that occasion. It was *granted her* to clothe herself with fine linen, attire suitable for the wedding, which in the last clause of v. 8 is described as the righteous deeds of the saints.

(b) We who have put our faith in the Savior not only have been cleansed from sin; we have been transformed into people who live righteously, who do righteous deeds. We were created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10), and God produces those works in us as we abide in his Son (Jn. 15:5). As has been said, one is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

(3) John is told to write "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper, the wedding celebration feast, of the Lamb."

(a) Beale remarks:

Verse 9 presents a different perspective on the wedding metaphor from vv 7-8. There the bride, the corporate church, was viewed as about to wed the Lamb, but now individual Christians are portrayed as guests at the marriage banquet. Both pictures portray the intimate communion of Christ with believers, but the first focuses on the corporate church and the second on the individual members of the church.¹⁵¹

(b) Osborne states, "In 19:7 [the believers] are the bride of the Lamb, while here they are . . . those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Thus, the saints

¹⁵¹ Beale, 945.

are both the bride and the invited guests. Such mixing of metaphors was common in the ancient world to add richness to the imagery."¹⁵²

(c) In Mat. 26:29, Mk. 14:25, Lk. 22:16-18, and Lk. 22:28-30, Jesus ties the supper he instituted, the Lord's Supper, to this eschatological messianic banquet. He said he would not eat it until it was fulfilled in the kingdom of God and that he would not drink the fruit of the vine of that meal until the kingdom of God comes (Lk. 22:16-18). He assigned his disciples a kingdom that they may eat and drink at his table in his kingdom (Lk. 22:29-30). The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of our participation in the Lamb's wedding feast that symbolizes the consummated kingdom. We eat it in expectation of that Day, a day to which we look forward because of the death he died in our place. Thus, Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*."

(4) The fact Christians, those invited to the wedding celebration of the Lamb, are blessed is confirmed by the solemn declaration "These are the true words of God." Brothers and sisters, it will be the deepest, richest, most joyful, most rewarding, and most fulfilling existence that you can possibly imagine. Indeed, it is beyond present human comprehension – But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9 ESV).

(5) John falls at the feet of this heavenly being to worship him, but he is immediately told not to do that.

(a) Whatever John may have thought about the identity of this being (v. 9 begins simply "And *he* said to me"), the being makes clear to John that he is not divine and thus is not a proper object of worship. Rather, he is a servant of the one God, as are John and his Christian brothers. Worship may be offered only to God (e.g., Mat. 4:10; Lk. 4:8).

(b) The message to the church is unmistakable. If even God's heavenly agents, the mighty angels who convey his glorious message, cannot be worshiped, then there certainly is no room for worshiping sinful human beings like the beast and all his predecessors. And that applies as well to any human being who is serving God (Acts 10:25-26, 14:13-15).

(c) The same thing happens again in 22:8-9, which seems odd in light of the rebuke in 19:10. Perhaps John mistook the first-person statement in 22:7 being reported by the angel ("I am coming soon") as words of the angel himself, which led him to think this was a theophany of some kind. In any event, the angel makes clear that he is not divine.

(6) The last clause of v. 10 ("For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy") seems to be a parenthetical comment on the wisdom and propriety of John and his fellow Christians in holding firm to the gospel, the testimony about (objective genitive) or from Jesus (subjective genitive). The gospel message, the embrace of which marks the servants of God, is worthy of being held firmly because it is the spirit of prophecy in the sense it is a manifestation or

¹⁵² Osborne, 675.

expression of that Spirit. In other words, the gospel message is from God not man and is therefore absolutely trustworthy.

XII. Role of Christ in the judgment highlighted (19:11-21)

A. Vision of the heavenly Christ as the king behind the destruction (19:11-16)

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

1. These verses highlight Christ's role in the meting out of God's wrath that has occupied much of the book.

a. That role was alluded to in 6:16-17. There the powerful and the lowly are hiding among the rocks and longing to die rather than face "him who is seated on the throne" and "the wrath of the Lamb."

b. In 14:19-20 the earth is harvested by an angel and thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God. Here the Lord Jesus is identified as the one who treads that winepress (19:15).

c. In 17:12-14 the beast and the kings united with him make war on the Lamb and are conquered by him. In 19:19-21 that same event is symbolized.

2. John sees heaven open, and there appears a white horse. This is a warhorse, and as I noted before, white was the color of victory. R. H. Charles cites in his commentary (1:162) a number of triumphant warriors prior to Revelation who rode white horses. This is Christ the king coming to conquer those who have made war on him.

3. He is called "Faithful and True" and in righteousness he judges and makes war. He is perfectly faithful to God the Father, and he is true, right, in all his judgments and in the justice he administers. The rightness of his judgments and actions, including his going to war against those who have made war against God and his saints, is not in question or up for debate. He is truth and wisdom and justice and righteousness personified; he is the God-man.

4. His eyes are like flames of fire, repeating the description from 1:14 and 2:18. This suggests not only his penetrating vision, his divine ability to discern all things, but also the fiery judgment that will result from that discernment.

5. He has many crowns on his head, and these are rulers' crowns rather than victors' crowns. This symbolizes his unlimited sovereignty. He is "King of kings and Lord of lords," as stated in 19:16 (see also 17:14).

6. He has a name written that no one knows but himself. One's name expresses one's nature, so this suggests that the full nature of Christ and his relationship to the Father and to humanity transcend present human understanding. There is a mystery to divinity that mankind can never exhaust, but the point here seems to be that we will receive new insight into God when Christ returns.

7. His robe is dipped in blood. This is the blood of the enemy shed in conflict. The figure draws heavily on Isa. 63:1-6 where God's robes are red with the blood of his enemies trodden in his winepress (note 19:15). The fact his robe is soaked in blood as he is *arriving* for the final battle leads some to believe it must not be the blood of his enemies because that blood is yet to be shed. Osborne remarks, "But this argument fails to consider the circularity of the imagery throughout the Apocalypse. Chronology is ignored for the sake of rhetorical effect."

8. The name by which he is called is the "Word of God." He is God expressed in the form of a human being. The message he brought to mankind is the message of God, and the judgment he is bringing is the judgment of God. As the word of a ruler was effective in bringing about the ruler's intention – for him to speak it was for it to be so – Jesus is the active agent who, in this instance, achieves God's intention to punish his enemies.

9. In this symbolic picture, the armies of heaven, the holy and pure angels of God Almighty, follow the Lord Jesus on their own white horses. The angelic accompaniment of the Lord's return in judgment is a common theme in the New Testament (Mat. 13:41, 16:27, 25:31; 1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14).

10. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which he will strike down the nations. This symbolizes the lethal power of his word of judgment. His pronouncement effects the judgment, makes it so. See 2 Thess. 2:8 where Christ destroys the lawless one "with the breath of his mouth" at his second coming.

11. His striking down the nations with the sharp sword from his mouth is the way in which he will rule the nations with a rod of iron. That is a different way of putting the same truth of judgment. In Psalm 2 God says to his Anointed, "I will make the nations your heritage . . . You shall break them with a rod of iron." To rule with a rod of iron means to destroy.

B. Christ's role in Harmagedon, the completion of God's wrath (19:17-21)

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false

prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. ²¹ And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

1. In imagery drawn from Ezekiel's apocalyptic-style oracle against Gog (Ezek. 39:17-20), an angel invites the birds to gather for the great supper of God, to feast on the flesh of those who are going to be killed in the battle.

a. The condemned are described very similarly to those in 6:15 (see also 13:16) who were hiding in terror over the great wrath about to be disclosed. Having one's flesh eaten by birds is not only a frightening picture but is also a symbol of divine punishment and rejection (Deut. 28:26; Jer. 7:33, 16:4, 19:7, 34:20; Ezek. 29:5).

b. Osborne writes, "There will be two great messianic banquets at the eschaton: the feast with the Lamb for the saints and the feast *on* the sinners for the carrion birds. The saints will partake of the great banquet, and the sinners will *be* the great banquet."¹⁵³

2. Bruce Metzger offers this reminder of the symbolic nature of these depictions:

All this is symbolism at its highest. No one imagines that such statements are literal. Never shall we see the "white horse," or the sword projecting from the mouth of the conqueror, or the birds gorged with the flesh of fallen warriors (19:21). The descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of the real occurrences. The message that John conveys through this symbolism is that evil will surely be overthrown. Here that message is presented in apocalyptic pictures of almost repellent realism.¹⁵⁴

3. The forces of Antichrist are gathered for the final assault against the forces of heaven. This is a reference to their uniting in opposition to God as they launch their war on the Lamb, the great persecution of the church, that was referred to in 11:2, 11:7-8, 13:7-10, 14:9-12, 16:6, 16:13-16, 17:5-6, 17:13-14, and 18:24.

4. The actual warfare is not described. It is as if the sword from the Lord's mouth ends the battle instantly. Perhaps this is to emphasize the unrivaled power of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

a. The beast and the false prophet are thrown *alive* into the lake of fire, which has the connotation of *conscious* punishment. Osborne remarks, "it may be that John expected the reader to remember that with respect to the other three groups [cast there]."¹⁵⁵ We soon learn that the beast and false prophet are joined by the devil (20:10), Death and Hades

¹⁵³ Osborne, 687.

¹⁵⁴ Metzger, 91-92.

¹⁵⁵ Osborne, 690.

(20:14), and the unbelievers, who are described in 20:13-15 as those whose names are not in the book of life and in 21:8 as the cowardly, faithless, idolatrous, and immoral.

b. All the condemned will be cast in the lake of fire "alive" – they share a common fate (Mat. 25:31; Rev. 14:11) – but most will be alive by way of a resurrection after having experienced death (Jn. 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:11-15). That is why the lake of fire is called the "second death" in 20:14 and 21:8. It is a "second death" in that it is a negative, sin-caused separation that follows (generally) a resurrection from the first death.

5. Those who sided with the beast in his opposition to God are killed by the sword from the Lord's mouth. The scavenging birds that were summoned in advance now gorge themselves on their flesh.

XIII. God (not Satan) controls the coming of the end (20:1-10)

A. General remarks

At chapter 20 I think we are once again backing up, this time to magnify or put the spotlight on God's dealing with Satan prior to the final battle. Since Satan is the true opponent, the power behind the beast and the false prophet and the one who has raged against God's people since being cast down (12:7-17), his story is told separately to emphasize the certainty of God's control over the end. The point is that Satan will in no way set the end-time agenda. God's sovereignty and control over Satan is exhibited in the fact that he alone is orchestrating salvation history.

B. Binding of Satan (20:1-3)

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. ² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, ³ and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations [yet], until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

1. John sees an angel descend from heaven who is holding the key to the Abyss or bottomless pit and a great chain. The angel binds Satan for a thousand years, throws him into the pit, and shuts and seals it over him.

2. To understand what is being symbolized here, v. 3b is crucial because it specifies the reason why this was done. Its purpose was to deprive Satan of his power to deceive the nations for the period of time that was set by God. In God's time, in the time God has determined, Satan will be released from the restriction God placed on him. When that happens, he then deceives the nations to gather them for the great battle against God, as it says in 20:7-8.

3. New Testament scholar Sam Storms comments:

The question must be asked: “In regard to what is Satan bound? Is the binding of Satan designed to immobilize him from any and all activities?” The PM thinks so. Beasley-Murray tells us that Satan’s binding entails his inability “to harm the race of man.” But is this what John says? Clearly not. The PM interpretation errs in that it has attempted to universalize what John explicitly restricts.

Two statements in Rev. 20 tell us the purpose of Satan’s imprisonment. First, in v. 3, John says that Satan was bound “*so that he should not deceive the nations any longer.*” Then secondly, in v. 8, John tells us that upon his release from the abyss Satan will come out “to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war.” Note well what John does and does not say. He does *not* say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer persecute Christians, or so that he should no longer prowl about “like a roaring lion” (1 Pt. 5:8) devouring believing men and women. He does *not* say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer concoct schemes to disrupt church unity (2 Cor. 2:11), or so that he should no longer disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). He does *not* say that Satan was bound so that he should no longer hurl his flaming missiles at Christians (Eph. 6:16), or so that he should be kept from thwarting the plans of the apostle Paul (1 Thess. 2:18).

Rather, John says that Satan was bound so that he should no longer deceive the *nations* (v. 3), the purpose behind which is to mobilize them in an international rebellion against the city of God (v. 8). And the language John employs in 20:1-3 makes it clear that there is no possible way for Satan to do so during the thousand years. The restriction on this particular aspect of his sinister ministry is absolute and invincible. ***The intent of the devil is to incite a premature eschatological conflict, to provoke Armageddon before its, that is to say, before God’s time. But the exalted Christ, through the agency of an angelic being, has temporarily stripped Satan of his ability to orchestrate the nations of the earth for the final battle*** (regardless of the form that battle might assume).

The final offensive against the Lamb and his elect shall come only when the restriction placed on *this* element of Satan’s work is lifted. For the duration of the present Christian era Satan’s hand is stayed. Upon release from his imprisonment he will dispatch his demonic hordes “which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty” (Rev. 16:14).

Although Satan may and will do much in this present age (as the epistles clearly indicate), there is one thing of which John assures us: ***Satan will never be permitted to incite and organize the unbelieving nations of the world in a final, catastrophic assault against the church, until such time as God in his providence so determines.*** That event, which the Lord will immediately terminate with the fiery breath of his mouth (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 20:9), will come only at the end of this age.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Sam Storms, "[Revelation 20:1-15 - Part I](#)," (accessed on 10/17/23).

4. Dennis Johnson states:

Although it is true throughout history that Satan, the ancient serpent, "deceives the whole world" (Rev. 12:9), in this vision a specific deception to obtain a specific objective is in view. We see this objective when, at the end of the thousand years, the dragon is released and comes out "to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war" (20:8). "The war," as we have seen, is a reference to "the war of the great day of God, the Almighty," for which the world's kings were gathered by three unclean spirits that proceed from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (16:13-16). Their role is to deceive the kings in order to gather them, as is shown by the demons' origin in the mouths of the archvillains and the signs they perform, as the false prophet deceives those who dwell on the earth through his signs (13:14). In light of this explanation of the aim behind the dragon's deception (20:8), his binding during the thousand years prevents Satan from gathering the nations in a worldwide conspiracy to blot out the church.¹⁵⁷

5. As we have seen throughout Revelation (13:13-14, 16:14, 18:23 [probably], and 19:20) and as is indicated elsewhere in the New Testament (Mat. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-10), it is largely through the exercise of miraculous power that Satan will deceive the nations into gathering against God. Since the purpose of this binding is to prevent him from so deceiving the nations, I submit to you that this binding symbolizes the removal of Satan's power to perform "nation-gathering miracles," the kind of jaw-dropping miracles that seem to confirm his divinity.

6. As Beale notes regarding v. 3, "It is possible that ἔτι could be rendered 'yet' with the resultant translation 'he should not yet deceive the nations.'"¹⁵⁸ In that case, there is no idea of a former ongoing deception that is coming to an end. Though Beale acknowledges there is "Johannine precedent" for such usage, he considers that meaning improbable here partly because of his understanding of the overall argument throughout this segment. I disagree and think the meaning "yet" fits the argument well. The point is not that Satan was exercising nation-gathering miracles previously but that he was stripped of his ability to do so in the future until God's appointed time. NET seems to adopt this sense of ἔτι by translating v. 3a simply: The angel then threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it so that he could not deceive the nations until the one thousand years were finished.

7. That power will be restored to Satan, he will be "set free" from that restriction, only when God chooses to consummate the kingdom, to bring this overlap of ages to a close.

a. This may well be what Paul is referring to in 2 Thess. 2:6-8 when, in a discussion about Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, he says: *And you know what is now restraining [him] so that he will be revealed in his own time.* ⁷ *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only [there is] now one restraining [it], until he is out of the way.* ⁸ *And then the lawless*

¹⁵⁷ Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 284-285.

¹⁵⁸ Beale, 991.

one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will slay with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing with the appearance of his coming.

b. The idea seems to be that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work in the world but has not culminated in the appearance of Antichrist because one of God's angels is restraining that appearance in some way so that Antichrist will only be revealed in God's time. That fits with an angel-administered restraint on Satan's power to perform the kind of miracles necessary for Antichrist to fulfill the role of organizing the world in rebellion against God.

8. The time of 1,000 years symbolizes the fullness of God's time (ten cubed). Satan will in no way "jump the gun" and thereby dictate the timing of the end; he will not be "released" until the precise moment God desires.

9. Satan is released from the restriction on his power to perform nation-gathering miracles for "a little while" in that he promptly, through Antichrist and the false prophet, gathers the world in opposition to God and his saints and then is done away with at Christ's return (20:7-10).

10. That this is a stepping back to present Harmageddon from a different angle rather than a chronological continuation from chapter 19 is supported strongly by the fact Rev. 19:11-21 portrays the complete destruction of all of God's enemies at the return of Christ (all men, free and slave, small and great). The kings of the earth and their armies are gathered against the Lord and are crushed. As R. Fowler White notes, "it makes no sense to speak of protecting the nations from deception by Satan in 20:1-3 after they have just been both deceived by Satan (16:13-16) and destroyed by Christ at his return in 19:11-21."¹⁵⁹

C. Reign of the martyrs (20:4-6)

This translation that will make it easier to follow my understanding of 20:4-6:

⁴ And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them, that is [*kai* taken epexegetically], the souls of the ones who were beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, the kind who [*kai* taken epexegetically and *hoitines* taken qualitatively] did not worship the beast nor its image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵ (The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one having part in the first resurrection. Over these the second death does not have power; rather, they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him the thousand years.

1. The first part of v. 4 states, "And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them." The next word in the Greek text is the conjunction *kai*, which commonly is rendered "and" or "also." Therefore, many translations indicate that John sees two distinct things: he sees (1) thrones on which are seated certain unidentified beings, referred to

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 204.

only as "they" and "them," to whom an unspecified role in judgment has been given, and (2) he also sees the souls of Christian martyrs, those beheaded for their faith.

2. But *kai* is often used epexegetically, to mark an explanation of what has preceded. This usage is commonly expressed in English by "that is,"¹⁶⁰ which is how I have rendered it. Those seated on the thrones are the souls of Christian martyrs. They are the ones to whom (or for whom) judgment has been given.¹⁶¹ The statement that they were *beheaded* for their faith is not meant to exclude Christians who had been put to death for their faith by other means but symbolizes all who were martyred.

3. This is a different perspective and presentation of the souls of the martyrs who in 6:9 cry out from under the altar. In Blount's words, "John's language is metaphorical rather than literal. . . . His clear paralleling of this text with 6:9 indicates that he thinks of these executed souls as the same group. . . . 'Beheaded' in 20:4 is John's way of amplifying the term 'executed' in 6:9."¹⁶² Dennis Johnson similarly remarks, "These souls had earlier appeared as sacrificial blood poured out under the altar (Rev. 6:9); now they appear as risen and ruling overcomers, for indeed they overcame the dragon because of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, which they maintained even to the death (12:11)."¹⁶³

4. Many translators¹⁶⁴ and commentators¹⁶⁵ recognize that the *kai* immediately after "the word of God" is epexegetical, meaning the following clause provides information about the martyrs being discussed, but nearly all of them think the following clause identifies those martyrs as those who did not worship the beast nor its image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand. In other words, they think the souls of the martyrs on the thrones *are* the souls of those martyred during the final generation when Antichrist was on the scene. I do not think those martyrs are from the final generation. Rather, they are from prior generations but are *the kind who*, in the final generation, refused to worship the beast. Let me flesh that out a bit.

a. The relative pronoun *hoitines* (form of *hostis*) certainly can mean simply "who, which," and thus can serve to identify the martyrs as those who resisted Antichrist, as most believe, but that pronoun also can have a qualitative sense, in which case it indicates that persons belong to a certain class.¹⁶⁶ As noted by the famous New Testament scholar C. F. D. Moule, *hostis* can mean something like "who is such that."¹⁶⁷

(1) The Greek grammarian A. T. Robertson observes, "The value of the pronoun [*hostis*] sometimes does not differ greatly from *hoios* and expresses quality."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ See, e.g., Aune, 1071; Boxall, 283; Blount, 364; BDAG, 495.

¹⁶¹ Boxall, 283; Blount, 365.

¹⁶² Blount, 365.

¹⁶³ D. Johnson, 290.

¹⁶⁴ E.g., NRSV, NIV, NET, CSB.

¹⁶⁵ E.g., Blount, 365.

¹⁶⁶ BDAG, 729.

¹⁶⁷ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 123.

¹⁶⁸ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 727.

According to BDAG, *hoios* "pert. to being similar to someth. or belonging to a class, of what sort (such)."¹⁶⁹ You can see the meaning of *hoios* from its use by Plutarch, a Greek historian of the first and early second centuries. He wrote in *Apophthegmata Laconica* 229F ("Sayings of the Spartans," one of the books of the *Moralia*): "this high honor should belong not to those who were **descended from Heracles** (*hoi ap' Hērakleous*), but to **men like Heracles** (*hoi hoios Hēraklēs*)."

(2) This qualitative sense of *hostis* is reflected in various translations of 1 Cor. 5:1: Fornication is actually reported among you, such fornication **of a kind that/as** [is] not even among the Gentiles. Jerome Quinn and William Wacker translate *hostis* as "**the kind that** engulf people in utterly ruinous destruction" in 1 Tim. 6:9 and "**the kind who** will also be competent to teach others" in 2 Tim. 2:2.¹⁷⁰ Quinn translates it "**the kind who** teach things they ought not" in Tit. 1:11.¹⁷¹

b. What I think is being said is that these martyrs are the same kind or class, they have the same faith, as those who suffered under Antichrist in John's earlier vision (11:7; 13:15; 17:6; 18:24). They are cut from the same cloth.¹⁷² They exhibited in their time and place the same unshakeable loyalty to Christ as the Christians in John's vision who suffered under the beast. In historical chronology, the beast's great persecution of the saints, his war on the Lamb, comes *after* the suffering of Christians during the time of the Satan's restraint, but that great persecution has already been revealed in the vision. So John can say that the historically earlier saints are like the later saints who suffered under the beast because in the vision the character of the later saints has already been revealed. That is what I intend to convey by "the kind who did not worship the beast nor its image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand."

5. That understanding accounts for the paralleling with the martyrs of 6:9. As Blount noted in the earlier quote, that paralleling "indicates that [John] thinks of these executed souls as the same group." Since the martyrs of 6:9 clearly predate Antichrist and these martyrs are presented as the same group, it is best to understand 20:4 in a way that has them predating Antichrist.

6. Even with the conventional understanding of *hoitines*, it is possible that the martyrs referred to predate the literal Antichrist *and* are those who "did not worship the beast nor its image and did not receive the mark on their forehead and on their hand." That would be so if John for rhetorical purposes was characterizing resistance to prior manifestations of the spirit of Antichrist as not worshipping the beast or receiving his mark.

7. I suggest to you that the souls of these martyrs who are on the thrones, those who were faithful unto death, as were those who resisted Antichrist in the final generation, are

¹⁶⁹ BDAG, 701.

¹⁷⁰ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 495 and 618.

¹⁷¹ Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 97.

¹⁷² Many scholars accept that the second clause is a way of more particularly defining the martyrs identified in the first clause despite the fact *hoitines* is a masculine nominative pronoun. See, e.g., Beasley-Murray, 293; Mounce, 355; Aune, 1088; Osborne, 706; Koester, 773; see also, NKJV and HCSB.

exemplary conquerors who represent all the faithful brothers and sisters, even those who died from causes other than martyrdom. In 3:21, it is the conquerors or overcomers to whom Jesus grants the privilege of sitting with him on his throne, a group that is not restricted to martyrs. It includes all who remain faithful, who resist all that threatens to alienate them from him, but martyrs are the quintessential "overcomers." A. Johnson states:

I feel somewhat more comfortable with the view expressed earlier (see comments at 6:9) – that the martyrs represent the whole church that is faithful to Jesus, whether or not they have actually been killed (cf. G. A. Krodel, *Revelation* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989], 333-34; Boring, 204; Osborne, 705). They constitute a group that can in truth be described as those who "did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:11). As such, the term is a synonym for overcomers (chs. 2-3).¹⁷³

8. John sees the souls of those who were faithful even unto death sitting on thrones and reigning in heaven with Christ throughout the age of Satan's restricted power.

a. The message is that the souls of those who die in Christ in the age prior to the great tribulation, meaning those who die having maintained their loyalty to Jesus, as represented by the martyrs, will enjoy blessed intimacy with Christ and honor in heaven as they await the literal resurrection. Just as the faithful of the final generation, those who in the vision died under Antichrist, are shown experiencing a blessed heavenly existence (e.g., 7:9-14, 14:1-5, 19:1-3), so all the faithful *prior to* that generation experience that blessing. As I suggested repeatedly, the blessing of the faithful of the final generation implied the blessing of the faithful of prior generations because the faithful of the final generation were expressing the faith they held in common with the prior generations. They are cuts from the same cloth just taken at different times. Here that implication is made clear.

b. This is what the voice from heaven declared in 14:13. John was told, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Truly, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their works follow after them" (recalling that "from now on" may not be the correct reading of the verse).

c. As I said, we here get a different perspective on the martyrs throughout history whose souls were depicted in 6:9-11 as being under the heavenly altar, symbolizing that their lives had been poured out in sacrifice to God.

(1) That it is a different perspective on the same group is indicated by the fact we have in both places disembodied souls of people who had been killed for the word of God and their testimony about Christ and who are living in the divine presence in heaven. Here, however, the emphasis is on the blessing of their condition, their intimacy and exaltation with Christ in heaven, rather than on their cry for God's final vindication of their faith through the final judgment.

¹⁷³ A. Johnson, 768.

(2) Paul had the blessing of this intermediate state in mind when he said in Phil. 1:23 that his desire was to depart and be with Christ for that is far better. This was also behind his statement in 2 Cor. 5:8 that they would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

d. The blessing of the Christians' existence in the intermediate state, the time before their physical resurrection, is here portrayed as their souls sitting on thrones and judgment having been given to/for them.

(1) The reference to thrones and disembodied souls (they were beheaded) strongly indicates that this scene is in heaven. As Sam Storms points out:

The word *thronos* appears 62x in the New Testament, 47 of which are in the book of Revelation. Twice (2:13; 13:2) it refers to Satan's throne (being synonymous with his authority or power) and once to the throne of the beast (16:10). On four occasions it refers to God's throne on the *new* earth in consequence of its having *come down from heaven* (21:3,5; 22:1,3). **In every other instance (40x) *thronos* refers to a throne in heaven**, either that of God the Father, of Christ, of the 24 elders, etc.¹⁷⁴

(2) Their sitting on thrones is an indication of divine favor. Even now, before the consummation, they are given the privilege of sharing in some way in Christ's rule. Beale states:

When saints are translated to heaven at death they join Christ on his judicial throne to rule over the enemy in inaugurated fulfillment of the promise given to "overcomers" in 3:21 and 2:26-27, though these promises will reach complete fulfillment at the final resurrection of the saints (3:21: "to the one overcoming I will give to him to sit with me on my throne, as I overcame and sat with my Father on his throne"; so likewise Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). . . . They actually carry out their reign with Christ probably by agreeing with and praising his judicial decisions, and their witness becomes a basis for Christ's judgment of the ungodly at the end of the age (e.g., see on 19:14). . . . Consequently, the saints are pictured as beginning to reign and to execute the judicial function that they will carry out consummatively at the end of the ages in fulfillment of Dan. 7:22 (so also Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2; 1 *En.* 38:5; 48:9; 95:3; 98:12).¹⁷⁵

(3) If it means judgment was given "for" them, it is way of saying their blessed state was God's judgment in their favor, an indication of his approval.

9. The "rest of the dead," meaning non-Christians who die during this period of Satan's restraint, do not "live," meaning their souls or spirits do not enjoy fellowship with God, which *is* life. Their lot in the intermediate state is the dreadful realm of the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. They will not "live" until the end of all things,

¹⁷⁴ Sam Storms, [Revelation 20:1-15 – Part III](#) (accessed on 10/18/23).

¹⁷⁵ Beale, 996-997.

until the general resurrection, when they will live in a different way. They will at that time be raised to life *bodily* but only to be "thrown into the lake of fire" (20:11-15), which is the second death.

a. This admittedly makes "live" in v. 4 and "live" in v. 5 mean different things, but such a switch is possible. After all, Jesus said in Mat. 8:22 and Luke 9:60, "Let the dead bury their own dead," switching from a spiritual to a physical meaning in just a few words.

b. Also, "first" and "second" can reflect a difference in kind in addition to a difference in order or sequence. In other words, labeling things first and second need not imply that those things are identical except for their order of appearance. For example, the "first" heaven and the "first" earth in Rev. 21:1 do not refer to the first in a sequence of the same kind of heaven and earth. Rather, there is a contrast between the two. The "first" heaven and earth is a fallen creation that is contrasted to the "new" creation, the redeemed creation which comes after the first. So "first resurrection" need not imply it is the same nature as the second or final resurrection.

10. So there is the first death, which is dying physically, a separation of body and spirit/soul. For the saints, that first death is followed by a new kind of spiritual life with God, so it is a figurative resurrection, a move from death to that life. This figurative resurrection that is limited to the saints is called the *first* resurrection because it will be followed by a second, literal resurrection, a bodily resurrection, in which all the dead will join. For the lost, this second resurrection is followed by being cast into the lake of fire, an eternal punishment. This is the second death, in which the bodily resurrected saints will have no part because they are not condemned. Their eternal destiny is the glorious life with God in the new heavens and new earth.

First death – death in a literal sense (separation of body and spirit) – saved and lost

First resurrection – resurrection in a figurative sense (uniting of spirit with God) – saved alone

Second resurrection – resurrection in a literal sense (uniting of body and spirit) – saved and lost

Second death – death in a figurative sense (separation of whole person from God) – lost alone

11. The passage of the righteous from death to the spiritual blessings of the intermediate state is nowhere else called a *resurrection*. That is not surprising given that resurrection literally refers to the restoration of bodily life (but see Lk. 2:34). But such figurative usage is not out of the question in an apocalyptic book like Revelation, especially given the fact John distinguishes this resurrection by the adjective "first," the only time that is done in the New Testament. Even N. T. Wright, who thinks such a figurative use of resurrection is unlikely, acknowledges that it is "possible with the kind of imagery we find in Revelation."¹⁷⁶

D. Satan's fate in the end (20:7-10)

⁷ And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸ and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹ And they marched up

¹⁷⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 474.

over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them,¹⁰ and the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where also the beast and the false prophet [are thrown], and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

1. In God's time, Satan is released, i.e., is empowered to perform nation-deceiving miracles, and he promptly exercises that power to gather the nations for battle against God. This is the same battle referred to in Rev. 19:19, what in Rev. 16:14-16 is called the battle at Harmageddon on the great day of God the Almighty. This is clear from the fact that both Rev. 20:8 and Rev. 19:17-18 refer to the battle against Gog in Ezek. 39:17-20. As R. Fowler White remarks, "if we are expected to interpret the revolts in Revelation 19 and 20 as different episodes in history, we would hardly expect John to describe them in language and imagery derived from the same episode in Ezekiel's prophecy."¹⁷⁷

2. In Ezekiel 38-39 Gog refers to the leader from the land of Magog, the leader of a distant and fierce people who, in a great alliance with people from all over the world, attacks Israel, the people of God. John sees the fulfillment of that prophecy in the hostile nations that are drawn by Satan into attacking the church. "Gog and Magog" were frequently interpreted in Jewish (rabbinic) circles to refer symbolically to the nations in Psalm 2 that are in rebellion to God and his Messiah and that will be destroyed in the eschatological battle.¹⁷⁸

3. The enemies of God march against his people, who are called the "camp of the saints" and are equated with "the beloved city" (*kai* taken epexegetically). The church is referred to as the "holy city" in 11:2, and in 3:12 Jesus says that he will write on the faithful the name of his God and the name of the city of his God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from God out of heaven, and his own new name.

4. As the church is under siege by God's enemies, the judgment of God comes, described as "fire from heaven." Recall that the breaking of the seventh seal in 8:1, which made available the revelation of the scroll, is followed by the angel hurling fire onto the earth (8:5). This symbol of divine judgment then gets developed and expanded as the contents of the scroll are revealed.

5. Revelation 20:10 states: *And the devil that deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where also the beast and the false prophet, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.* Notice it does not say that the beast and false prophet were thrown into the lake long before Satan. In fact, it says nothing about the timing of those events. One could supply "are thrown" as easily as supplying "were" or "had been thrown." And even if the text indicated the beast and false prophet were thrown into the lake before Satan, it could mean they were thrown in just before or that their being thrown in was shown first *in the vision*. Sam Storms writes:

So when were the beast and false prophet cast in? The answer would appear to be, at the conclusion of the war, when the devil himself was cast in. The three jointly

¹⁷⁷ Quoted in Storms, "[Revelation 20:1-15 - Part I](#)," (accessed on 10/24/23).

¹⁷⁸ Smalley, 152.

instigated the Armageddon/Gog-Magog revolt and are therefore jointly cast into the lake of fire to be jointly tormented forever and ever. The text does not say that the beast and false prophet were “already” in the lake of fire when Satan was cast in. Even if it did, this need only imply that after the war the beast and false prophet were first judged and cast into the lake of fire, a judgment and fate then immediately applied to Satan. . . .

All that we may legitimately conclude is that the vision given to John of the beast and false prophet being cast into the lake of fire precedes the vision given to him of Satan being cast in. In order to prove the historical antecedence of the former to the latter, far more is needed than what the text itself supplies. It is just as likely, if not more so, that what we have here is simply the literary antecedence of one vision to another, not the historical sequence of their respective contents.¹⁷⁹

E. Some objections to the premillennial interpretation

1. Let me briefly note some additional problems I have with what is known as premillennialism. There are different “flavors” of premillennialism – traditional (also called historical), the more complicated dispensational (represented in the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins), and progressive – and I do not want to take the time to explore these in any detail. For our present purposes, just know that all of the flavors have Christ returning to the earth at the time of Antichrist and defeating him at Harmageddon, then binding Satan, and then establishing a literal earthly kingdom for a thousand years (or a long period symbolized by a thousand years). At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released, gathers the unconverted to attack Christ at his earthly headquarters, and is defeated in the Gog-Magog battle and thrown into the lake of fire.

2. All of the premillennialist views have the resurrection of the righteous, the saved, occurring *before* the thousand-year reign and the resurrection of the wicked, the unsaved, occurring *after* the thousand-year reign, after Christ defeats the recently released Satan. They also have the final judgment and the assignment of all persons to their eternal dwelling places occurring *after* the thousand-year reign, after the defeat of the recently released Satan.

3. In my mind, this splitting of the resurrection of the righteous from the resurrection of the wicked and this splitting of the final judgment from the second coming of Christ cannot be justified from Scripture.

a. The final judgment is tied to Christ's second coming in a number of texts (2 Thess. 1:7-10; see also, Rev. 22:12; Mat. 16:27, 25:31-46; Jude 14-15). It does not occur a thousand years after that coming. Indeed, Peter in 2 Pet. 3:4-13 links the beginning of the final state, the creation of the new heavens and new earth, to Christ's return (see also Rom. 8:19-23). If the final state occurs in conjunction with Christ's return, there is no room for an earthly reign of a thousand years after that return.

¹⁷⁹ Sam Storms, “[Revelation 20:1-15 - Part I](#),” (accessed on 10/23/23).

b. The Scriptures also teach that there is one bodily resurrection of believers and unbelievers. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Mat. 13:24-30, as explained in vv. 36-43, the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one are harvested at the same time. Paul says in Acts 24:15 that there will be "a resurrection," singular, of both the righteous and the wicked. Jesus specified in Jn. 5:28-29 that the resurrection of both believers and unbelievers would occur *at the same hour*, not a thousand years apart. He also declared in Jn. 6:39-40, 44, 54 that the saved would be raised *on the last day*, not a thousand years earlier. This may not rule out *all* temporal separation between the resurrection of the saved and the lost, but separating the resurrection of the two groups by a thousand-year period that is a distinctive phase in salvation history (the millennial kingdom) seems to me to stretch the "oneness" and the temporal coincidence of the general resurrection beyond the breaking point.

c. The seven bowls *complete* the wrath of God (15:1; 16:17). This final wrath follows the gathering of the kings of the whole world for the battle at Harmagedon (16:12-16) and is poured out on "Babylon" (16:19), the empire of Antichrist (Revelation 13; 17:3, 17:8-14). If God's final wrath is poured out at the time of Antichrist (Harmagedon), there cannot be another punishment of earthly enemies a thousand years later (20:7-9).

d. Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 15:50-54 that death is abolished, "swallowed up in victory," at the time of the resurrection, the time when perishable bodies are raised as immortal bodies. Since death is abolished at the time of the resurrection, there is no room for the death that the premillennialist insists occurs after the millennium when Satan launches the attack on Christ (Rev. 20:9-10).

XIV. Eternal judgment and description of final state (20:11 - 22:5)

A. Eternal Judgment (20:11-15)

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

1. The Judge

a. John sees a great white throne and him who was seated on it. "Great" refers to the size and majesty of the throne, and white probably here reflects both purity and victory.

(1) The one seated on the great white throne is probably to be understood as God the Father (see, 4:2, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5). We know,

however, that Jesus is intimately associated with the judgment rendered from this throne, so much so that the New Testament speaks of both the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) and the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14:10), implying a unity (see, Jn. 10:30), and in Rev. 22:1 there is a reference to "the throne (singular) of God and of the Lamb."

(2) The idea seems to be that Jesus, or more specifically one's relationship to him, is the criterion, the basis, of the judgment that is rendered by the Father. In that sense, God has given judgment to the Son though he still renders it. That fits with the key role given to the "book of life" in vv. 12 and 15, which is further identified in 21:27 as "*the Lamb's book of life*."

b. The earth and sky are pictured as fleeing from God's awesome presence. This may be poetic way of expressing the fear of the corruptible in the presence of God. Or it may symbolize the dissolution of the universe as we know it in preparation for the new heaven and new earth (21:1). In its flight, the universe could find no place to hide from God.

2. The Judgment

a. With Grant Osborne, I think v. 12 refers to the judgment of the righteous, the saved. John sees all the righteous dead, those from all stations in life (great and small), who have now been literally resurrected (the second resurrection) and are standing before the throne. The resurrection of the second group, the condemned, is referred to in v. 13 by the statement that the sea and Death and Hades "gave them up."

(1) The realm of the dead "giving up" its captives was a traditional way of referring to resurrection.¹⁸⁰ The parallel with the first group, along with teaching elsewhere in the New Testament, makes clear that they too were resurrected.

(2) The souls of the righteous dead, the saved, were in heaven, and thus their resurrection would not be described as the sea or Death and Hades giving them up. The sea, Death, and Hades are personified as malignant forces in the book (sea: 12:12, 13:1; Death and Hades: 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14), which better fits with their being the realm of the unsaved dead.

b. That v. 12 refers to the righteous and v. 13 refers to the condemned also may be hinted at in the fact the book of life is said to be opened with regard to the judgment in v. 12, whereas the book of life is not mentioned in the judgment in v. 13. Those in v. 13 are simply said to be judged according to what they had done, which corresponds to the books of deeds. Perhaps opening the Lamb's book of life signifies inclusion in it and not opening the book of life signifies exclusion. Verse 15 specifies that anyone who was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

c. The relationship between the books of deeds and the book of life is not specified. There are several possibilities. Perhaps the books of deeds include all that a person

¹⁸⁰ See Richard J. Bauckham, "Resurrection as Giving Back the Dead: A Traditional Image of Resurrection in the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocalypse of John," in James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans, eds., *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 269-291.

does, including his response to God's grace in Christ. Or maybe the books of deeds serve only to condemn, salvation being solely dependent on one's name being in the book of life. I suspect that, since saving faith in Christ will inevitably produce good works, the books of deeds reveal the reality of one's faith. But, of course, deeds without faith in Christ are inadequate to save anyone; the record of our deeds can only condemn us. So both books are consulted. Those who have genuine faith in Christ will have their names in the Lamb's book and will also have evidence of that faith in their lives. The books will reflect a harmony of faith and life.

d. As personified enemies, Death and the realm of its prey, Hades, are subjected to the same fate as Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and all the unsaved: they are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death. Their power over mankind is ended in that they are excluded from the new heavens and new earth, the sphere of eternal life of God.

e. Anyone whose name is not written in the Lamb's book of life, meaning any accountable person who is not a disciple of the Lord Jesus, is also thrown into the lake of fire. This is the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels of which Jesus spoke in Mat. 25:41. As it says in 14:11, the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever and they have no rest, day or night. It is the worst fate imaginable.

B. The Final State (21:1 - 22:5)

1. The new creation (21:1-8)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

a. A new heaven and earth replace the first heaven and earth.

(1) In contrast to the horrible fate of those whose names are *not* written in the Lamb's book of life, we here see the breathtaking splendor, glory, and joy that is the eternal blessing of those whose names are written in that book. As Osborne states, "Not just the Book of Revelation but the whole Bible has pointed to this moment. Since Adam and Eve lost their place in Paradise and sin reigned on earth (Rom. 5:12-21), the divine plan has prepared

for the moment when sin would finally be eradicated and the original purpose of God when he created humankind could come to pass."¹⁸¹

(2) In Isa. 25:8 God spoke of swallowing up death forever, in Isa. 65:17 he declared his intent to create the new heavens and new earth, and in Isa. 66:22 he promised that he would create the new heavens and new earth that would remain before him forever. The reference in Isa. 65:20 to death at 100 and to failing to reach 100 in the context of the new heavens and new earth probably should be taken, in light of Isa. 25:8, as a counterfactual hypothetical that serves to emphasize the length of life. Eternal life is portrayed as a state where if one *were to die* at 100 (which one will not) he would be considered only a child and if one *were to fail* to reach 100 (which one will not) he would be considered cursed.¹⁸² Given John's reference to Isa. 65:17 in Rev. 21:1-8 (esp. vv. 1, 5), that is apparently how he understood it.

(3) In Mat. 19:28 Jesus refers to the "new world" (also translated the "renewal of all things" or the "regeneration"), which is widely recognized as a reference to the new heavens and new earth. In 2 Pet. 3:10-13 Peter speaks of the dissolution of the heavens and the earth after which there will be new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness will dwell. In Rom. 8:19-25 Paul indicates that creation itself will be freed from its slavery to decay and will enter into the end-time glory to be enjoyed by God's children. We and it both are getting the "ultimate makeover."

(4) George Ladd comments on the new creation (p. 275):

Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God's people is an earthly destiny. In typical dualistic Greek thought, the universe was divided into two realms: the earthly or transitory, and the eternal spiritual world. Salvation consisted of the flight of the soul from the sphere of the transitory and ephemeral to the realm of eternal reality. However, biblical thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.¹⁸³

(5) To give just one more of many such quotes that could be provided, Anthony Hoekema says:

One gets the impression from certain hymns that glorified believers will spend eternity in some ethereal heaven somewhere off in space, far away from earth. . . . On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified resurrection bodies. . . . For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one (see Rev. 21:1-3). . . . The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem this entire creation from the effects of sin. That purpose will not be accomplished until God

¹⁸¹ Osborne, 726.

¹⁸² See J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 530; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, NAC (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 721-722; Gregory K. Beale, "An Amillennial Response to a Premillennial View of Isaiah 65:20," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61.3 (2018): 461-92.

¹⁸³ Ladd (1972), 275.

has ushered in the new earth, until Paradise Lost has become Paradise Regained.¹⁸⁴

b. The sea is eliminated from this new earth because it was associated with ideas inconsistent with the new creation. In the ancient world, the sea symbolized unrest (Isa. 57:20), danger, evil, and separation, and this symbolism is employed in Revelation (13:1; 17:1-6).

c. The transformation of creation involves its "heavenization," which is here depicted as the heavenly uniting with the physical creation through the image of the new Jerusalem descending from heaven with all the beauty and splendor of a bride adorned for her husband. This adornment is elaborated on in 21:11-21. This city represents both the eternal abode of the redeemed, God's perfect community, and the redeemed themselves; it is a place and a people. Reddish remarks, "Interpreters must not be overly concerned about the lack of consistency in the city/bride imagery. . . . John's imagery is fluid. The new Jerusalem is the community in which the people of God will dwell, but even more, it represents the people themselves."¹⁸⁵ There is an obvious contrast between the earthly city, Babylon the whore, and this heavenly city.

d. With the completed redemption, the "heavenization," of creation, God's dwelling is with redeemed humanity (21:3) and the throne of God and of the Lamb is among them (22:3). It will be an existence of complete love, joy, fellowship, and satisfaction lived out in the very presence of God Almighty.

e. I just love the promise of verse 4: *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.* In that eternal state there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain because the old order has passed away, meaning all the brokenness of this fallen creation has been healed. God wipes away the tears of the redeemed by bringing them from a fallen creation full of sorrow and suffering that produces tears into the redeemed creation in which such things no longer exist.

f. In one of the few occasions in Revelation in which God himself speaks, he declares that he is making all things new and commands John to record those words because they are trustworthy and true. It is a "done deal." You can "take it to the bank" that God is going to redeem creation, bring the new heavens and new earth into existence, because he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; he is absolutely supreme, the creator of all things and sovereign over all. This is the ultimate encouragement in the Christian walk.

g. God freely gives the water of life to the thirsty. He provides life, refreshment, and satisfaction to all who long for him. Those who overcome, who persevere in their faith, will inherit the glorious blessings of the eternal state, and God *will be* their God and they *will be* his sons (children). As I have explained before, we in one sense already are sons of

¹⁸⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 274-275.

¹⁸⁵ Reddish, 403.

God (Rom. 8:14), but the full experience of that reality awaits the consummation (Rom. 8:23 – We wait eagerly for our adoption as sons.). That is the time to which God is referring in v. 7b.

h. Those who choose the world over the Lord will be thrown into the lake of fire. They will experience the eternal torment of the second death. This list of sins illustrates the non-Christian character of this group. The reference to the "cowardly" speaks of those who reject Christ when under pressure. The remaining descriptions reflect non-Christian and overtly anti-Christian (murderers) behavior.

2. Details of the new Jerusalem (21:9-27)

⁹ Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹² It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed-- ¹³ on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴ And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. ¹⁵ And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶ The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷ He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. ¹⁸ The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹ The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰ the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹ And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. ²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

a. One of the angels who carried out the seven last plagues (chap. 16) commands John to come and see the bride, who is now called the wife of the Lamb, which suggests that the marriage has taken place. (Since the city and its inhabitants are one, it represents the dwelling of the redeemed and the redeemed themselves, the church, which will spend eternity with her husband.) This is probably the same angel who in identical language in 17:1 commanded John to come and see the judgment of the great whore (Babylon). This draws attention to the contrast between Babylon and the new Jerusalem.

b. The presence and glory of God gives the city a brilliance like that of a precious stone. The city is surrounded by a great wall that has twelve gates and an angel stationed at each gate. The gates are inscribed with the twelve names of Israel, and the wall's twelve foundations have the name of the twelve apostles on them.

(1) The great wall was part of the description of an ancient ideal city. It also symbolically reinforces the fact that those God has excluded are completely and forever excluded (see, 21:8; 21:27; 22:15).

(2) The angelic gatekeepers are a mark of dignity. Their presence symbolizes that this is God's city. It may further reinforce the fact that exclusion from eternal life in God's presence is permanent. Nothing will pass through these gates that is not permitted to do so.

(3) The names of the twelve tribes of Israel and the names of the twelve apostles suggest that all of God's faithful throughout history are included in the city. Jews who prior to Christ's first coming shared the faith of Abraham and not simply his bloodline are included because the benefits of Christ's atoning death were applied to them "on credit" so to speak, applied to them because Christ was coming. After Christ's coming, having the faith of Abraham meant accepting God's truth about who Jesus is. In other words, true Israel in the New Testament consists of Jewish Christians. "New Israel" is the church, the body of Christ consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers, the latter having been grafted into the Jewish root (true Israel), as Paul explains in Romans 11. The point is that all Old Testament and New Testament saints are there.

c. The angel measures the city with a golden measuring rod. This focus of attention indicates care and protection (e.g., 11:1-2), but here the emphasis may be on the enormous size and perfect symmetry of the eternal dwelling place of the faithful.

(1) The city is a perfect cube, 12,000 stadia (about 1,500 miles) in length, width, and height. This symbolizes the immensity, perfect symmetry, and splendor of the new Jerusalem, but also the presence of God. The shape of the Holy of Holies was a cube (20 cubits in each direction – 1 Ki. 6:20; 2 Chron. 3:8-9)

(2) The wall is 144 cubits (about 72 yards) high or thick. As a multiple of 12, it probably symbolizes a complete separation of the city from the outside.

d. The wall is built of jasper and the city is pure gold, like clear glass. This symbolizes its immense splendor and worth. "Like clear glass" may mean as pure, as unadulterated, as such glass. The foundations of the walls are adorned with precious stones, a different one for each foundation. Each gate is made of a single huge pearl, and even the streets of the city are gold as pure as transparent glass. It is magnificent beyond description.

e. There is no temple, no unique expression of God's presence, because the presence of God and the Lamb permeates the entire city. The presence of God that was

symbolized by the heavenly temple in 7:15 is now, in the heavenization of creation, described as universal and all-encompassing. The whole thing, the entire new creation, is the Holy of Holies!

f. The city has no need of sun or moon to shine because it is illuminated by the glory of God and the Lamb. There is no night, no darkness, but one eternal day.

g. As the home of all redeemed people, it will include the rulers and people of Gentile nations. They will have humbly come to God (brought their glory and honor in the sense of paying homage), and having done so, will live in the light of his presence. They must be redeemed people because only those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life may enter.

h. The city's gates are never shut, which symbolizes the absence of any enemies. So the one picture, the angels at the gates (v. 12), highlights the *exclusion* of God's opponents from eternal glory, whereas this image focuses on their *absence*. They are excluded permanently by having been removed permanently, having been cast into the eternal lake of fire. They are different emphases on the same reality.

i. Existence in the glory of this new creation, this ultimate Holy of Holies, is only for those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. They are contrasted to the unclean because they are clean, sanctified, by the blood of the Lamb. They are contrasted to those who engage in detestable things and falsehood because disciples of Christ are not like that. It is the pagans, the unbelievers, who engage in idolatry, wallow in sin, and deny the truth of who Jesus is.

3. The river of the water of life (22:1-5)

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and ^chis servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

a. The river of the water of life flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the city. The faithful will share in this life-giving stream that proceeds from God himself. It is a fitting symbol of eternal life that is provided by God, as water is absolutely essential for physical life. A permanent supply of crystal clear and flowing water would speak more powerfully to ancients than to modern westerners who have always been able to get water from a tap.

b. The river is bordered on either side by the tree of life that bears fruit continually throughout the year.

(1) This clearly is a reference to the tree of life from the Garden of Eden which symbolized God's continuing provision of life to mankind. Access to this tree was cut off when Adam and Eve sinned (Gen. 3:22), meaning humanity would now be mortal, would now suffer death, because God would no longer sustain our lives forever. Because of sin, he withdrew what otherwise would have been a permanent provision. So on the day Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they did indeed die in the sense they from that moment became mortal. They were dead people walking.

(a) That is why Paul says in Rom. 5:12 that death entered the world through sin. That this includes physical death is the clear implication of 1 Cor. 15:21, where the *bodily* resurrection brought by Christ is contrasted to the death brought by Adam. The parallel breaks down if one denies the causal link between Adam's sin and physical death. Romans 5:21 likewise contrasts the death brought by sin with the eternal life brought by Jesus Christ, an eternal life that includes bodily resurrection.

(b) Physical death is an intruder into God's creation, something foreign and hostile. Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:26, in his discussion of bodily resurrection, that death is an enemy to be destroyed (see also 2 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 20:14, 21:4).

(2) So the fall of mankind into death, into mortality, is reversed in the end through the gift of resurrection life, life in bodies that are immortal and imperishable (1 Cor. 15:52-54). Death is defeated, swallowed up in victory. And as the fall into death was indicated by exclusion from the tree of life, so the restoration of immortality (now unconditional) is indicated by regaining access to the tree of life.

(3) The singular "tree of life" presumably is a collective singular that refers to many trees lining both banks of the river (since the tree is on both sides of the river there obviously is more than one). If that is correct, we have the river of life flowing down the middle of the street and multiple expressions of the tree of life lining both banks. It is Eden transcended, Eden made even more blessed and glorious.

(4) The statement in 22:2b that "the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" probably means the leaves symbolize the physical and spiritual healing that God *has provided* in consummating the kingdom, in bringing about the eternal state.¹⁸⁶ It does not mean that healing will still be needed. There is no sin, no hunger, no disease, no death, and no suffering in the eternal state. Beale writes:

Does the tree's fruit continue to heal throughout eternity even as it continues to produce fruit? The answer must be negative since there will be no more death or pain to be healed from in the new creation (21:4). Just as the tears that God will wipe away refer not to pains being endured throughout eternity but to a once-for-all relief from such pains (see 21:4; 7:16-17), so it is likewise here.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Osborne, 772.

¹⁸⁷ Beale, 1108.

c. The curse to which God subjected creation at the time of Adam's sin, the curse from which creation has been longing to be freed (Rom. 8:19-23), is finally lifted. "No longer will there be anything accursed" (22:3a). All things have been made new; all the brokenness has been healed.

d. The redeemed shall worship God, see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Jesus said in Jn. 1:18 that no one has ever seen God. In Jn. 6:46 he makes clear that he is the only exception, being one who came from God. The notion that no human has seen God was standard fare in Judaism. Even Moses was not allowed to see God's face (Ex. 33:20; see, 33:23). The seeming exceptions are always qualified in some way. Carson states:

No-one has ever seen God, John writes, as if to remind his readers not only of a commonplace of Judaism, but also of the fact that in the episode where Moses saw the Lord's glory (Ex. 33 – 34), to which allusion has just been made (1:14), Moses himself was not allowed to see God (Ex. 33:20). 'We should perhaps say, less anthropomorphically but equally metaphorically, that Moses saw, so to speak, the afterglow of the divine glory' (Bruce, p. 44). In that diminished sense, God speaks with Moses 'face to face', and Moses 'sees the form of the Lord' (Nu. 12:8). The vision of the Lord seated on his throne that Isaiah saw was so vivid and terrifying, so close to the 'real thing', even though it was but the hem of the Lord's garment that filled the temple, that he could cry, 'Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips . . . and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty' (Is. 6:5). . . . The fact remains that the consistent Old Testament assumption is that God cannot be seen, or, more precisely, that for a sinful human being to see him would bring death (Ex. 33:20; Dt. 4:12; Ps. 97:2). Apparent exceptions are always qualified in some way.¹⁸⁸

e. God's name being on them reflects ownership and likeness. The process of transformation that is now under way (2 Cor. 3:18) will be brought to completion in that ultimate and ideal state. We will not be divine, but we will then be fully sanctified, redeemed people who are like the Lord Jesus, and we shall reign with God forever and ever. As indicated in 21:23, night has been eliminated because the glory of the Lord God will be a perpetual light.

XV. Epilogue and benediction (22:6-21)

⁶ And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." ⁷ "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." ⁸ I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, ⁹ but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." ¹⁰ And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹ Let the

¹⁸⁸ Carson (1991), 134.

evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." ¹² "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." ¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. ¹⁶ "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. ¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. ²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! ²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

A. The vision of the new Jerusalem really completes the prophecy. The final verses (vv. 6-21) function as a kind of epilogue that stresses the genuineness and authority of the book, the ever nearness of Christ's coming, and an appeal to heed the words of the prophecy so as to enjoy the eternal blessings that are in store for the faithful.

B. This section is peppered with statements that the fulfillment would be soon – what must soon take place (22:6); I am coming soon (22:7); do not seal up words of the prophecy for time is near (22:10); I am coming soon (22:12); I am coming soon (22:20). I offered my thoughts on this issue in the Introduction portion of the class.

1. Notice that the "coming" of which he speaks is when he will "repay everyone *for what he has done*" (22:12). This clearly is a reference to the final judgment in 20:11-15 when everyone is judged "according to *what they had done*." This judgment follows the general resurrection, when the sea and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them (20:13), and involves the creation of the new heavens and new earth as the eternal abode of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, the book that is opened during the final judgment (20:12, 21:27). So whatever "soon" means, it must fit with the fact it applies to the coming of the ultimate end at the return of the Lord Jesus, when he consummates the kingdom he inaugurated at his first coming and ushers in the final eternal state.

2. As I explained during the introduction of the book, the fact Jesus does not know the time of his return (Mat. 24:36; Mk. 13:32), which implies that God is not going to reveal it in advance, means this should not be taken as a statement of absolute timing. Rather, it is an indication of a perspective with which this future event of uncertain timing is to be viewed. It means something like, "The time of my coming is uncertain, so you are to live in the expectation that I am coming soon."

3. It is like someone saying to leaders of a city that must maintain levies to prevent flooding in the event of a catastrophic storm, "The storm is coming soon." That is not

intended as a literal assertion of timing, because nobody knows when such a storm will come. Rather, it is a warning, a statement about the need for constant readiness in light of the uncertainty as to when the storm will come.

4. To cite just one commentator, Keener states:

[T]he rhetorical function of the language [of imminent fulfillment in chapter 22] is not to give times or seasons (no date is offered), but to summon us to preparedness. The text teaches what many of us mean by imminence: Until he comes, Jesus' return is always potentially near, and we must always remain watchful, for inevitably he will come, catching the morally unprepared.¹⁸⁹

5. The seemingly absolute declaration that the things revealed are "what must *soon* take place" (Rev. 1:1, 22:6) is not an independent assertion but a reference to the LXX of Dan. 2:28, which speaks of God having revealed to Nebuchadnezzar "what must take place *in the last days*," a revelation that encompassed both the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom (Dan. 2:34-35, 2:44) without sharp distinction. Changing "in the last days" in Dan. 2:28 to "soon" in Revelation is a way of indicating the impact of Christ's having come. His coming ushered in the "last days" and from that time we have lived on the brink of his consummating return. As a result of his coming, the kingdom in its consummated form moved from distant to "soon," not in terms of absolute timing but in the sense it could now occur quickly at any time (as distinct from any moment). It moved from distant to soon perspectively, in terms of what our expectations are to be.

6. Does the fact Daniel is told to seal up the vision for it refers to many days from now (Dan. 8:26) whereas John is told *not* to seal up words of the prophecy for the time is near (Rev. 22:10) prove that John's prophecy must be fulfilled in a shorter time than Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled? In other words, if the time between Daniel's prophecy and its fulfillment was so great as to prompt sealing of his prophecy, how can a greater time between John's prophecy and its fulfillment not likewise prompt sealing of his prophecy?

a. First, Rev. 22:10 follows the clearly eschatological descriptions in 20:11 – 22:6, so the prophecy that is not to be sealed includes the consummation of the kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, unless one claims that Christ has already returned (hyper-preterists), which is almost universally rejected because of its insurmountable problems, one recognizes that the command not to seal the prophecy does not exclude a fulfillment more than 1900 years later.

b. The "nearness" of the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy and the "distance" of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Dan. 8:26 apparently relate to something other than a strict time measurement. That is, in some sense Christ's return was "near" despite, as it turns out, being more than 1900 years away and Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival was "distant" despite being only centuries away.

¹⁸⁹ Keener, 519.

(1) I believe Christ's return was "near" in the sense noted above. It was near as a constant expectation that shaped and reinforced Christian faith and ethics. Antiochus Epiphanes' arrival, on the other hand, was revealed as something that would not occur for centuries and which had no comparable devotional relevance.

(2) Whatever the correct solution, it must harmonize the fact that a complete fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy that exceeds 1900 years *is not* so long as to prompt sealing of the prophecy whereas a significantly shorter time in fulfilling the Daniel prophecy *is* so long as to prompt sealing.

C. In v. 7 the risen Lord says those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book, those who remain steadfast in their faith and resist the societal pull to lapse into sinful living, are blessed.

D. As in 19:10, John in vv. 8-9 again falls down to worship at the feet of the revealing angel. Perhaps John mistook the first-person statement in 22:7 being reported by the angel ("I am coming soon") as words of the angel himself, which led him to think this was a theophany of some kind. In any event, the angel makes clear that he is not divine and that worship of him is thus improper. God alone is to be worshiped.

E. In light of the Lord being ever "at the door" (Jas. 5:9), there is the somewhat enigmatic command in v. 11: "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

1. Blount comments:

The angel's words, spoken to John but certainly intended for John's audience, functionally resemble the frustrated comments of an annoyed parent who sees her child repeatedly testing her authority by refusing to cease his misbehavior. "Keep it up! Hear!" Though a child deaf to the tones of discipline could take the apparent command literally, the parent certainly does not mean that the child should indeed keep it up. In fact, she means, and urgently so, just the opposite. A contextual appropriation of her comments indicates that she has just issued a stern warning that her child should alter his course of behavior because intervention in the form of parental judgment is imminent. The command to keep it up in such a context is in reality a last-ditch call for repentance. The angel's context is comparable; he offers a glimpse of God's imminent intervention as a means of shaking up those who are not yet living a life that witnesses in word and deed to God's lordship. "If you're doing evil, well, keep it up!" Though a hearer or reader deaf to the apocalyptic tones reverberating throughout John's book of prophecy might take the command literally, the angel means, and urgently so, just the opposite. No doubt that is why he ends his remarks by encouraging those who are already living a life of witness, as well as those who take advantage of the time that is left and start living such a life, to really "keep it up": persevere in acts of justice,

courageous witness, and (thus) holiness, as people claimed and set apart for the realm of God.¹⁹⁰

2. Reddish expresses the meaning with this paraphrase: "Let those who are wicked continue in their wickedness if that is what they choose; but they must pay the consequences. On the other hand, let those who are righteous continue to do what is right because that is what God expects and demands from them."¹⁹¹

F. Verses 12-15 indicate that Jesus, who is God (compare vv. 13 with 1:8), will at his coming bless Christians with eternal life in a perfect reality represented by "the city" described in chapter 21. The unbelievers, characterized as "dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood," are excluded (see 21:27). Elsewhere it is clear that they not only are excluded from the blessing but receive eternal punishment (see 20:15 with 21:27).

G. In v. 16 Jesus identifies himself as "the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star."

1. As I noted with regard to 5:5, the title "root of David" was a stock Jewish reference to the Messiah that had developed over time from Isa. 11:1, 10. The "bright and morning star" was another familiar symbol of the messianic king based on Num. 24:17.

2. The Messiah was the long-awaited righteous king in the line of David that God had promised would rule supremely. And, of course, Jesus is the Messiah, God's ultimate anointed one. Indeed, the title "Christ" is from a Greek word (*christos*) meaning "anointed one," and "Messiah" is from a Hebrew word (*m'shiach*) meaning "anointed one." So they are equivalent terms; to say Jesus is the Christ is to say he is the Messiah. You will recall that Jesus flat out tells the woman at the well in John 4 that he is the Messiah.

H. In v. 17 the Spirit-empowered church calls the world to eternal life, and those who heed that call (who hear) join in calling others. Whoever is willing may take this life-giving water without charge.

I. Verses 18-19 is a grave warning to the *hearers* of the book not to misrepresent its content, not to claim it says something it does not say or deny it says something that it does say. We have no right to alter the word of God by adding our own words to it or by removing any part of it. The content is not ours to tamper with. Though this is addressed specifically to Revelation, the principle applies to all of Scripture because it is all God-breathed.

J. In verse 20b John prays for the Lord's coming (see 1 Cor. 16:22). The final verse is a benediction pronounced, in the first instance, on the churches to which the book was addressed. By extension, it is a request for the Lord's grace to be upon all his people.

¹⁹⁰ Blount, 406-407.

¹⁹¹ Reddish, 426.