

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Dave Hagelberg



The Revelation of Jesus Christ

to the Seven Churches and to us

by Dave Hagelberg



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With a grateful heart this commentary is dedicated
to my wife Barbara.

She suggested that this English version be written, she promised to help, and she fulfilled that promise with many valuable hours of biblical and theological insight, proof-reading and editing.

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Abbreviations

Bible Versions

ESV English Standard Version

HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible

KJV King James Version

NET New English Translation

NIV New International Version

NKJV New King James Version

RSV Revised Standard Version

Other Abbreviations

BDAG Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich Greek Lexicon

EBC-R Expositor's Bible Commentary-Revised

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

LXX Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT

NT New Testament

OT Old Testament

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Preface

Since I believed in Jesus Christ and received Him as my personal Savior in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia in 1975, the Book of Revelation has been an especially significant New Testament book for me. Later when I studied at seminary that attraction grew stronger with a deeper understanding of the structure and the contents of the Book of Revelation. This interest grew even stronger when I began to teach the Book of Revelation in a Bible school on Java and wrote a commentary on Revelation in the Indonesian language.

The importance of understanding, interpreting, applying, and then communicating the contents of the Book of Revelation is becoming increasingly obvious. Although separated by nearly 2000 years, there are remarkable similarities between churches today and the seven churches spoken of in chapters two and three. Certainly the persecution experienced by the congregation of Smyrna and Pergamum, the sexual immorality of Pergamum and Thyatira, and the materialism of Laodicea are painfully evident in too many churches today. In chapters two and three, the Lord Jesus Himself speaks specifically to each church. Then He reveals the secrets of the end of the ages with the intent of strengthening or rebuking each church according to their particular need.

It is my hope that this commentary will help readers to better understand the Book of Revelation so that they are equipped to face temptation, challenge, and suffering in the light of the return of the King. May the living God use His Word powerfully in all our lives

Dave Hagelberg

November 2013

Introduction

If the Book of Revelation is diligently observed, carefully interpreted, and faithfully applied, it certainly can bring great blessing to the reader. This process is made more difficult for two reasons: first, because many things in the book are hard to understand, and second, because the reader might come to the text more motivated by a curiosity about the future rather than a desire to conform to the truth about who the Lord Jesus is and what He has to say about the reader's heart and deeds.

Indeed many things in this book are hard to understand. However, the things that should concern our minds and hearts are not those we cannot understand, but those we can understand but are not applying in our personal lives and in the church of Christ.

Revelation is a great book. It almost goes without saying that it is visionary, but it is also intensely practical. However, before we look at it, this writer would like to suggest some practical "ground rules." In our daily lives we are always observing, interpreting, and applying. We do this as a matter of course. As we read this book we should observe, interpret, and apply rationally and skillfully. Good observations become the foundation for good interpretations, and good interpretations become the foundation for good application. Even so, these things do not actually happen one step at a time. As we read, think, and live the text we can continually improve our observations, interpretations, and applications, which in turn all help us to better observe, interpret, and apply. And the deep benefits of this book only come from good application!

Authorship

This writer's understanding is that the entire Book of Revelation is the product of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit working through the Apostle John,¹ as described in 2 Peter 1:21. That work of the Holy Spirit was accomplished in different ways in different parts of the book. For instance, the text tells us that the words of chapters two and three were dictated word for word to John by the Lord Himself, but in other parts of the book John experienced visions from the Lord which he, guided by the Spirit, wrote down. Therefore it is futile to compare the style of the language of the Book of Revelation to the style of the language of the Gospel of John or the Epistles of John. This is true despite the opinion to the contrary of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, in the third century. He observed that the vocabulary and grammar of Revelation are different from that of the Gospel of John or John's letters. He said that the Greek used in the Gospel of John and John's letters was refined and beautiful, but the Greek used in the Book of Revelation was not standard, including "idioms that were uncivilized."² It is true that the language used in the Gospel of John and his three letters is different from the language used in Revelation.³ Standard rules of grammar are often "violated" in the Book of Revelation but those "violations" are not random. The "violations" of the rules of grammar in the Book of Revelation are intentional, in accord with the author's purpose.⁴

Prior to Dionysius, Justin Martyr in Dialogue with Trypho (about 135 AD) affirmed that John the Apostle was the author of Revelation. That is particularly significant, because of that early date and because for several

¹ Despite his prominence in the Gospels and in Acts 1-8, surprisingly little is recorded in the rest of the NT about the Apostle John. All we know from the NT outside of the Gospels and Acts is that he was "recognized as a pillar" of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9), he wrote his three NT epistles, and on Patmos he received the Book of Revelation.

² Mounce, p. 29. Robert M. Mounce, Ph.D., dean of Potter College of Arts and Humanities at Western Kentucky University, wrote a commentary on Revelation that is balanced, complete, and detailed.

³ Mounce, p. 30, notes a few such differences. For instance "believe" is used 98 times in the Gospel of John but is not used at all in Revelation. In fact, one-eighth of the words that are used in Revelation are not used anywhere else in the NT.

⁴ Morris, pp. 29-30. This commentary by Leon Morris, M. Sc., M.Th., Ph.D., is short and concise.

years Justin lived in Ephesus,⁵ where strong tradition places John for many years. There is a tomb said to be the Apostle John's tomb, on a hill that overlooks the site of the Temple of Artemis of Ephesus. Eusebius, Irenaeus,⁶ Clement, Origen, Tertullian, and Hippolytus all affirm that the Apostle John wrote Revelation.

The book itself, in 1:1, 4, 9; and 22:8, claims to be written by "John." If another man named John wrote it, one would hope for clarification to that effect. With no clarification to the contrary, it is fair to say that the book was written either by the well-known Apostle John, or else by an impostor.⁷ It seems most unlikely that there was another John that was so well-known to the church in Ephesus and the entire Roman province of Asia that he could call himself "John" and expect to be understood.

Letter writers were often helped by a secretary. This custom is clear in 1 Corinthians 16:21, where the Apostle Paul writes, "With my own hand I write this: Greetings from Paul."⁸ The details of how the letter writer and his secretary worked together were not usually disclosed. If the owner of a business tells his secretary to prepare an invitation for a meeting the following week, the contents of that invitation could be fully written by the secretary and just signed by the owner. On the other hand, the owner might dictate the contents of the invitation word by word. Writers at the time of the Apostle John had a similar choice. Ladd⁹ brings up the possibility that the Gospel of John was written by John with the help of a secretary who was one of his disciples. This writer believes that Revelation may have been written without a secretary, because on the island of Patmos there was probably no secretary to help the Apostle John. The Lord Jesus appeared to him and began dictating to him and revealing things to him, apparently without a warning that would enable him to call a secretary to help him!

⁵ Mounce, p. 27.

⁶ The statement by Irenaeus that Revelation was written by "John, the disciple of the Lord" is weighty evidence because as a young man, Irenaeus knew Polycarp who probably knew the Apostle John (Mounce, p. 27).

⁷ If the newspaper says that Trump did something in the United States, we do not ask "Which Trump?" There may be several other people in Washington, DC named "Trump," but clearly President Trump is being referred to.

⁸ See also Rom. 16:22 (which notes that Tertius actually wrote the letter); 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; and Philem. 1:19.

⁹ *Commentary*, p. 8. Dr. George Eldon Ladd, who taught New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, held to post-tribulation theology. The commentary of Dr. Ladd is brief, but he mentions and evaluates the opinions of other scholars.

Further, the arguments of Dionysius and other scholars that do not believe the Apostle John wrote Revelation do not really make sense. What kind of Greek was written by a person who “fell at His feet as though dead”? Surely if a man is writing in such extraordinary circumstances about a topic that is so extraordinary, at the moments when he is not writing the exact words given to him by revelation, he will use vocabulary and grammar that are also extraordinary.

This writer takes the statements of Revelation 1:1, 4, 9; and 22:8 at face value, and understands the Apostle John to be the author of the Book of Revelation.

Date of Writing

The Lord’s message to the congregation in Smyrna indicates that they had been and would be persecuted. Antipas had been killed, according to 2:13. John had been exiled to Patmos (note especially 1:9, 2:10, 13, and 3:10). Even though Nero persecuted Christians in Rome, and several emperors were worshiped as divine, it was not until the reign of Domitian, who required that others address him as *Dominus et Deus*¹⁰ (“Lord and God”), that Christians outside of Rome were persecuted because they would not participate in the worship of the emperor.¹¹ This suggests that the book was written during his reign, which was from 81-96 AD.

¹⁰ Hemer, p. 9, cites chapter 13 of the Roman historian Suetonius’ work on Domitian. Concerning Domitian Suetonius wrote, “With equal arrogance, when he dictated the form of a letter to be used by his procurators, he began it thus: ‘Our lord and god commands so and so;’ whence it became a rule that no one should style him otherwise either in writing or speaking” (translation by Alexander Thomson).

¹¹ Mounce, p. 33. Eusebius, *Church History*, Book III, Chapter 17, reads, “Domitian, having shown great cruelty toward many, and having unjustly put to death no small number of well-born and notable men at Rome, and having without cause exiled and confiscated the property of a great many other illustrious men, finally became a successor of Nero in his hatred and enmity toward God. He was in fact the second that stirred up a persecution against us, although his father Vespasian had undertaken nothing prejudicial to us.” (Translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 1. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.) Eusebius died in about AD 340. Some modern historians reject Eusebius’ comments on this persecution, saying he is biased. But perhaps they are also biased! Although the historian Suetonius does not mention persecution against Christians, his descriptions of Domitian’s cruelty indicate that persecution of Christians was well within the pattern of his actions.

Besides the issue of persecution, there are several other factors that support dating the writing of Revelation late in Domitian's reign:

1. Irenaeus said that Revelation was written at the end of the reign of Domitian.
2. The seven churches of Revelation all had some history. They were not newly planted churches. If (as some suggest) Revelation was written during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD), there would not have been time for the decline of the congregations of Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea or the commended perseverance of the congregations of Ephesus, Smyrna, and Philadelphia which are all mentioned in chapters two and three. Specifically, if Revelation was written in 54-68 AD during the reign of Nero, it is doubtful that the congregation of Ephesus would have had time to leave their first love, considering that Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which gives no indication any spiritual problem, was written about 60 AD.
3. Although in 3:17 Laodicea is physically rich, the city was very badly damaged by an earthquake in 60 or 61 AD, and it would have taken some time for the city to rebuild itself.
4. If the book was written during the time that Paul was serving there, it is strange that neither he nor any of his coworkers were mentioned.

So for these reasons, conservative biblical scholars usually date the writing of this book at about 95 AD. It is usually placed during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, 81-96 AD. If John was born in 10 AD, he was about 23 years old when he walked with the Lord Jesus in Israel, and he would have been 85 years old in 95 AD. Although it is often said that John lived a long life, and was the only one of the apostles to die a natural death, that is far from certain. In fact, the historial sources that would confirm or deny this are divided.¹²

Recipients of Revelation

This book was written to seven specific congregations in seven cities in the Roman province of Asia in the western part of what is now called Turkey (1:11). Each of the seven cities was located on a certain postal road and each had a post office.¹³ The nearest two cities along that road were Philadelphia and Laodicea; they were 43 kilometers (27 miles) apart.¹⁴

¹² See R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, pp. xlvi-xlix.

¹³ Mounce, p. 76.

¹⁴ These distances are the actual distances between cities. Since the road was not straight, the distances for the traveler would have been quite a bit longer.

The longest distance between two cities on that route was 152 kilometers (94 miles), the distance from Ephesus to Laodicea. Each of these seven congregations had their distinct characteristics, and it is very interesting how the Lord draws upon those distinct characteristics as He sends the messages to those seven churches. These were real people in real churches in real cities.

As a part of the Bible, this book was also written to all Christians (Revelation 2:7, 17, 29, etc.).



Historical Context

Ethnic and Cultural Background

From back as far as 1000 BC, this region was dominated by various ethnic groups including the Lydians and the Phrygians. In 546 BC the victory of Cyrus the Great over Sardis, the Lydian capital, launched an era of Persian rule. Then in 334 BC the conquests of Alexander the Great brought in Greek culture and rule. His victories brought Greek settlers and influence. Greek language and culture grew more and more predominant. By 133 BC Rome controlled the entire region, but the Latin language and Roman culture did not overturn that Greek influence.

Social Background

The wealthy of that era were incredibly wealthy. Eating off silver plates was despised by the upper classes; gold plates were required. One emperor had a meal of peacock tongues. For a victory parade one

emperor clothed his entire army in silk, brought overland from China. In 18:11-17 the list of the great wealth of Babylon is very similar to the great wealth of the upper classes of Rome at the time the book was written. Many were also very poor. Instead of a middle class, there was an enormous gap between the rich and the poor. Slavery was common. A slave was not considered human; he was property.

Although Jews were already dispersed in the region, the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD increased that dispersion.

Political Background

In the Roman province of Asia the worship of the emperor was strong. Refusing to worship the emperor, to burn the incense, and to say “Caesar is Lord” could easily result in death or banishment to a prison island, depending on the official’s whim. The emperor Domitian enforced emperor worship, but we have no documents detailing how he enforced it. There had been persecution against Christians before the book was written (Antipas’s martyrdom is mentioned in 2:13) and directly after it was written (in 2:10 we read “what you are about to suffer... prison... suffer persecution”).

Early on the morning of July 19 in the year 64 AD there was a fire at the Circus Maximus (where chariot races were performed in Rome). For five days the fire burned. Some eyewitnesses reported seeing people add wood to the fire and hinder the firefighters. According to rumors, Nero had the fires started because he wanted to build Rome again according to his own dreams. Nero accused the Christians of starting the fires, and cruelly punished them. Some were crucified, some were dressed in animal skins and thrown to hungry dogs, and some were smeared with tar and lit like torches. According to strong tradition, the Apostles Paul and Peter were martyred during the persecution that Nero ordered.¹⁵

Nero died on 9 June in the year 68. For a year, between the death of Nero and the coming of Vespasian, there was a civil war in Rome in which four different men tried to take the throne. With the coming of Emperor Vespasian that political chaos ended and the Flavian dynasty, which would last 28 years, began. It was made up of the reigns of Vespasian (69-79) and his two sons, Titus (79-81), and Domitian (81-96).

According to the date of the writing of Revelation discussed above, Revelation was written at the end of the Flavian dynasty. During those years, the Roman Empire reached modern day Britain and Germany.

¹⁵ Bruce, pp. 399-402.

The emperor had absolute power.¹⁶ As discussed above, when Revelation was written, worship of the Emperor Domitian was required as a sign of political loyalty.

Religious Background

Jews – As General Titus was defeating a Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire, his soldiers destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The people of Israel were dispersed into surrounding countries where they were very often despised. Emperor Vespasian instituted a special tax upon the Jews, but they were not required to worship the emperor.

Romans – The Romans worshiped many gods including the Emperor Domitian himself.

Christians – Christians were considered atheists because they would not join in the religious practices of the Romans and did not worship the Roman gods. Some churches and some Christians were persecuted (1:9; 2:10 and 13).

Literary Background

As the Jews witnessed the apparent fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of "the abomination of desolation" (Daniel 9:27) by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC, they grew more and more desperate. Empire after empire oppressed them, but God was silent. Perhaps Antiochus Epiphanes sparked a renewed interest in the Book of Daniel, because Jewish writers around that time began writing what we now refer to as "pseudepigraphical apocalypses." They were "pseudepigraphical" because although they claimed to have been written by great biblical figures of the past like Enoch, Moses, and Baruch, they were in fact written by now unknown people who wrote about how all foreign oppressors will certainly be thrown off, and the Kingdom of God will be established in the near future.

¹⁶ Bruce, p. 413, tells of two events that showed the absolute power of the emperor. First, according to Eusebius, Emperor Domitian called in two of the grandchildren of James, the brother of Jesus, to see if they, as descendants of King David, would struggle to regain the kingdom. Evidently as two low-paid workers, they were not interested in politics, so Emperor Domitian freed them. Second, the nephew of Emperor Domitian, called Flavius Clemens, was accused of "atheism" and put to death by Domitian. In those days, Christians were called "atheists" because they would not bow to the gods of Rome. Many scholars think that Flavius Clemens was a Christian. With a similar accusation Flavius Clemens' wife was exiled to the island of Pandateria. According to church tradition, Clemens and his wife believed in the Lord Jesus. Long before this happened, their two children were chosen by the emperor Domitian as his heirs. Perhaps there was almost an emperor of Rome that was brought up in a Christian household!

They were “apocalypses”¹⁷ because they followed the style of Daniel and Zechariah. In a world in which evil seemed to prosper, this sort of Jewish literature spoke of the defeat of the Kingdom of Earth and the establishment of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸ These apocalypses were written between 300 BC and 100 AD. Scholars can only argue now about how popular they were in Jewish society.¹⁹ But even if the popularity of apocalyptic writings in Jewish society is debated, nevertheless they were almost certainly less popular outside of Jewish circles, in, for instance, the seven churches in the province of Asia!

Even so, connections with Old Testament prophets like Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are everywhere present. Reading the Old Testament prophets along with the Book of Revelation will significantly enrich the reader’s insight into the Book of Revelation.

Revelation as Literature

The entire Bible is given to us as literature. It is perfect literature, and at the same time it is literature written in literary forms²⁰ adopted from the local culture.²¹ The Book of Revelation connects with three usually distinct kinds of human literature. It is an apocalypse, it is a letter, and it is a prophecy.

It is similar, in some ways, to apocalyptic literature (1:1). John is shown, and relates to his readers, visions of the end times that have profound impact on the readers’ lives. Like much of apocalyptic literature, the reader is urged to stand strong, or perhaps repent, in order to be a part of a blessed future at the end of the age.²² John is not shown the future so that he and his readers can somehow escape it. Rather he is shown the future in which the purpose and plan of the Almighty will prevail

¹⁷ This term is from the word *ἀποκαλύψις/apokalupsis*, the first word of the Book of Revelation. It means “unveiling,” “disclosure.” Outside of the NT the word sometimes refers to the “uncovering” of a head (*BDAG*).

¹⁸ Mounce, p. 18. See also *Midrash Rabbah* on Is. 45:12 and *Pesiq* 5a.

¹⁹ George E. Ladd, “The Kingdom of God in the Jewish Apocryphal Literature” Part 3, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 109:436 (Oct. 1952), p. 325.

²⁰ Such literary forms, or “genres,” include psalm, proverb, letter, and apocalypse.

²¹ In the same way, the living God contextualized Himself into humanity, being fully God He also became fully human, a male Jewish baby.

²² Sappington, pp. 104-122, shows that the Jewish apocalypses bring “consolation/encouragement of the righteous, exhortation to continued obedience, and admonition of the unrighteous” (p. 122).

and bring about a glorious victory,²³ so that he and his readers can better understand the present, and live in it appropriately.²⁴

Although it is like apocalyptic literature, the Book of Revelation is unique in several ways:

1. Other apocalyptic literature had nothing like the seven messages to the seven churches. It does not call God's people to repent.
2. Other apocalyptic literature did not have nearly as much visual imagery.
3. Other apocalyptic literature often had long speeches by angels.
4. Extra-biblical apocalyptic literature was written as if by Moses, Abraham, or some other Old Testament figure.
5. Extra-biblical apocalyptic literature has no Gospel. Evil people will be destroyed, and good people (meaning the author and his readers) will be saved. It admits no need for redemption, because it does not admit that even "good" people need the Savior.²⁵

The Book of Revelation is also a letter, as is very clear from 1:4-6 and 1:11. In one sense it is all meant as a single letter "to the seven churches in the province of Asia," and in another sense it also contains seven distinct letters, one each to those seven churches. Letters could be addressed to specific individuals or communities, but sometimes "circular letters" were

²³ Beasley-Murray, p. 14. Dr. G. R. Beasley-Murray taught NT at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Before that he served as rector at Spurgeon's College in London.

²⁴ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 7-8. (Dr. Richard Bauckham, Professor of New Testament at St. Mary's College, University of St. Andrews in Scotland, examines the Book of Revelation as well-designed literature. His insights into the theology of Revelation are valuable. This writer wishes, however, that Dr. Bauckham might admit that even though the prophecies of Revelation express profound theology, they are also prophecies awaiting historical fulfillment. They speak of things which truly "will take place after these things.")

²⁵ Morris, *Apocalyptic*, pp. 84-86. He says, "Apocalyptic is not a good medium for expressing 'the cruciality of the cross' and in fact it does not express it." Concerning Christ's saving work, "apocalyptic is not helpful. The New Testament writers do not use it and we can see why. Apocalyptic is simply not suitable as a way of bringing out such truths. And since Christ's atoning work is the central doctrine of New Testament Christianity, apocalyptic fails us at the heart of the faith." This author, however, feels that Morris is mistaken here. It would be much better to marvel at the "Lamb standing, but looking as if it had been slain," and see the centrality of the Gospel in such expressions as "the Word of God and the testimony of the Lamb." Indeed, as the Lord's Apocalypse the Book of Revelation is the perfect apocalypse, and the perfect capstone of the NT, in which the mighty themes of redemption and the second coming are boldly intertwined.

meant to have a wide audience. In the case of the Book of Revelation, there are three sorts of recipients.

1. Revelation 2:1-7, for instance, was written to the church in Ephesus.
2. The whole book was written to the seven churches, as is clear from 1:4 and 1:11.
3. The entire book was written to all believers, as is clear from the repeated expression, “The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Letters were a means of communication between people, but they were also used as a means of guidance from wise and learned men.²⁶

Besides being an apocalypse and a letter, Revelation is also a book of prophecy. In 1:3 John says, “Blessed is the one who reads and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it.” The distinctive feature of prophecy which demands faith and obedience from the hearers (or the readers) is clearly visible in chapters two and three, which can be compared to the seven messages in Amos chapters one and two.²⁷

Interpretation

Because Revelation is so complex, because it deals with controversial eschatological issues, and because it contains many symbols, some of which are explained (1:20) and some are not (3:12), a wide variety of interpretations have been suggested. It is helpful to note the four major approaches to the interpretation of the book.

The “Preterist”²⁸ view is subdivided into a strict Preterist version and a modified Preterist version. In the strict Preterist view, all the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are fulfilled by the time the Romans destroy the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.²⁹ In the modified Preterist view most of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation are considered fulfilled by

²⁶ Beasley-Murray, p. 12, mentions the letter of guidance from Aristotle to Alexander the Great as an example. The letters of the NT could also be considered letters of guidance.

²⁷ Beasley-Murray, p. 22.

²⁸ The word “Preterist” is taken from a Latin word meaning “past” or “beyond.”

²⁹ This position is very difficult to defend. When in Rev. 22:20 John says, “Yes, come Lord Jesus” he certainly did not mean “come quickly and destroy Jerusalem and its temple”! He was yearning for the coming of the Lord Jesus in which all evil will be destroyed, and the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters fill the seas. He was not yearning for the “coming” of the Lord “in the clouds” to destroy Jerusalem which is hypothesized by some Preterists. The coming of the

the time of the “Cloud Coming” of the Lord in 70 AD, but the Second Coming described in chapters 19-21 is still yet to come. Preterists, in general, support their interpretation by referring to Matthew 24:33-34³⁰ “In this way you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the door. Amen, I say to you, this generation shall not pass away, until all these things happen.” The Lord Jesus must have meant that His return was very near, according to them, and would be experienced by the generation to whom He was speaking. So they say that the Lord Jesus “came in the clouds” when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD.³¹

Preterists also point to words like “near” and “soon” in Revelation 1:3; 22:7, 10, 12, and 20. They would say that the “cloud coming” to Jerusalem in 70 AD was near, and that the Lord could not have used these words for a coming that was at least 2000 years in the future.³²

The second view is called the “Historical” view. According to this view Revelation consists of prophecies explaining the history of western Europe until the second coming of Christ. The various interpretations of people following the “Historical” view are not consistent, and it is hard to understand why the Lord would focus on western Europe!

The third view is called the “Futurist” view. According to this view chapters one, two and three tell about a vision that John had of Christ, and about His seven messages to seven churches in that era. Then chapters 4-22 are prophecies mostly about the end of the age. Morris³³ and Mounce³⁴ criticize this view because, they say, chapters 4-22 would have no meaning for us, unless we live during the time of the Second Coming. However, this is a weak criticism. News about the coming of the Lord Jesus is relevant for each generation of God’s people because that news

Lord Jesus described in this book did not happen in 70 AD when the army of General Titus destroyed Jerusalem.

³⁰ See also Mk. 13:29-30 and Lk. 21:31-32.

³¹ Preterists do not understand that in biblical prophecy, promises made to one generation may be fulfilled only later, in the days of another generation. Deut. 18:15 was a promise, apparently spoken to the Jews of Moses’ day. “The Lord your God will raise up from among you, from your brothers, a prophet like me for you, to him you must listen.” However, that promise was not fulfilled until the Lord Jesus was born, about 1500 years later. Likewise the promise to “you” of Mt. 24:33-34 has not yet been fulfilled for any generation of Jews, but will someday, hopefully soon, be fulfilled. There is no need to make up an extra-biblical “cloud coming” in 70 AD.

³² See the discussion under 1:3 concerning this issue.

³³ *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 18.

³⁴ Pp. 42-43.

comforts God's people who are faithful, and brings fear to the unfaithful. Just as people do not go on a picnic as storm clouds are gathering, so also we do not live for ourselves when the Word of God says "Blessed is the one keeping the words of the prophecy of this book." The "Futurist" view is the one that is used in this commentary.³⁵

The fourth view is called the "Idealist" view. According to that view, Revelation is not about deeds or events. Instead it is meant to yield theological principles. Those principles are found through a process of allegorization.³⁶ However, we should look more closely at how listeners and readers know when figures of speech or allegories are being used. When people talk or write, they often³⁷ have the option of using figures of speech to make their words more interesting, colorful, dramatic, powerful, or even more accurate. And knowing that, whenever people hear or read, they must decide if any of the words they hear or read are intended to be understood with their straightforward or "normal" meaning, or if perhaps some figure of speech is being used. There are at least three ways that hearers and readers do that. Firstly, some figures of speech are explained by the speaker or writer (note Revelation 1:20). Secondly, there are some figures of speech that are so common that when they are heard or read, they are known to be intended figuratively. Native English users would immediately understand "stiff-necked" as a figure of speech. Thirdly, if an expression simply does not make sense when its words are understood with their "normal" meaning, the hearer or reader is forced to think about whether a figure of speech is intended, and what that figure of speech might mean. For instance, if we hear someone say, "As I bit into the food, the fire spread from the tip of my tongue through my whole mouth," we would immediately understand that the normal meaning of the word "fire" cannot be intended, and some figure of speech is intended. Then we would think through what the options might be. In this case we might understand that "fire" is a metaphor for the spicy hot taste of a chili pepper, but we might also misunderstand and think of it as a metaphor for actual high temperature. The point of all this in the context of our study is that, yes, the Book of Revelation has

³⁵ Mounce, p. 42, writes that often commentators who choose the Futurist view say that the seven letters symbolize seven ages in church history. That interpretation is invalid and not at all foundational to the Futurist view.

³⁶ The word "allegory" comes from the word *αλληγορεω/allēgoreō*, which is used in Gal. 4:24.

³⁷ This author does not know if this "normal" versus figurative option is universal among all human cultures, but it is certainly present in the Greek and Hebrew cultures of the OT and NT.

many figures of speech, and when we encounter one we must think about what it means, but as this commentary demonstrates, the overall flow of the Book of Revelation does make good sense. Excluding the distinct vision of chapter 12, the entire prophetic section of 4:1–22:5 can be read as a chronological foretelling of future events. Yes, the book is rich with figurative language, but that simply does not give the reader the right to reduce the entire book to his or her allegorical views. If someone today were to say, “I’m going to school this morning,” we would not have the right to say “Ah, I see that when you talk about ‘going to school,’ you are talking about ‘the school of life’ which we all experience everyday.”³⁸

Perhaps we can learn something from each view. The “Preterist” and “Historical” views remind us that Revelation was written during a particular historical period, a context that we should understand. The “Idealist” view reminds us that principles presented in the Book of Revelation are useful throughout the history of mankind.

However, it is the perspective of the “Futurist” view that gives us the appropriate framework to understand the book. Revelation 4–22 primarily consists of prophecies that will be fulfilled at the end of the age. As bewildering as the Book of Revelation might seem in some passages, the Futurist view follows the plain and simple approach to the book, as is

³⁸ Alan Johnson, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, unintentionally demonstrates that the results of the “Idealist” method can be drastically disconnected from the text. In his comments on Revelation 17:12–14 he brings up several options for the interpretation of the “ten horns” there. About those ten horns he writes, “the number ten should—like most of John’s numbers—be understood symbolically. Ten symbolizes a repeated number of times or an indefinite number. It is perhaps another number like seven, indicating fullness....” The only biblical texts that Johnson brings up to prove the idea that “ten symbolizes a repeated number of times or an indefinite number” are Neh. 4:12; Dan. 1:12; and Rev. 2:10. Furthermore, apparently Johnson believes that he has the right to interpret “most of John’s numbers” symbolically! The reader might then ask if there really were seven congregations in Rev. 2–3, or if the congregation in Smyrna was really going to suffer for ten days, or if there really will be seven trumpets, or five months (Rev. 9:5 and 9:10). Will there really be 42 months (11:2 and 13:5), or 1,260 days (11:3 and 12:6). Then one wonders how long the Thousand Year Kingdom might last! Johnson does not admit that any particular number may have both an literal everyday meaning and *at the same time* convey some other significance. For instance, we agree that there were twelve disciples, not eleven and not thirteen. This is the everyday meaning of twelve. Any yet, at the same time we understand that that number twelve is related to the twelve tribes of Israel. The Lord chose to have twelve disciples, and He had His reasons for choosing exactly twelve.

made clear from 1:19. It is the standard which guards the unity of the book's structure.

Early interpreters of Revelation like Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), Irenaeus (died about 202 AD) and Hippolytus (170-235 AD), wrote that Revelation prophesied about a literal thousand year kingdom, after which there would be a general resurrection, judgment, and a New Heaven and a New Earth.³⁹ It seems that they would have preferred the Futurist view. This commentary approaches the Book of Revelation with that understanding.

In Alexandria, the church fathers, including Origen (185-254 AD), developed the method of interpretation called "spiritual" or allegorical. This method does not emphasize the literal understanding. It "spiritualizes" passages, finding figurative meanings. Augustine carried this method further. For about a thousand years of church history the allegorical method was the preferred method. This view is similar to the fourth view above, the "Idealist" view.

In the 12th century Joachim, a Catholic from Florence, Italy, refused the allegorical interpretation which said that the present age was the thousand year kingdom mentioned in Revelation 20.

Nicolas from Lyra, a theologian from Paris who died in 1340, used the "Historical" interpretation that has been mentioned above to interpret Revelation.

At the end of the 16th century, a Spanish Jesuit named Alcasar came close to the "Preterist" method. According to Alcasar, chapters 20-22 became prophecy about the victory enjoyed by the church of Christ of that era, a victory that began during the reign of Emperor Constantine.

Even though Revelation contains many symbols, that does not mean that each text has to be interpreted figuratively or allegorically. A "literal interpretation" can acknowledge and even celebrate the use of symbols. So in this commentary the author uses the "literal interpretation," meaning that whatever can be interpreted in a literal way should be interpreted in a literal way. And whatever does not make sense to interpret literally has to be given a figurative meaning. For instance, the "seven stars" which the Lord holds in His hand cannot be interpreted as literal stars,⁴⁰ and

³⁹ Mounce, pp. 39-41.

⁴⁰ Stars are very large, so a hand that could hold seven of them would have to be unimaginably huge, and yet in the next verse the Lord places His hand upon John. It is better to take the idea that He holds the seven stars in His hand as a figure of speech.

Revelation 12 speaking about a woman clothed with the sun is clearly full of figures of speech.

This writer always seeks to interpret the text literally (as discussed in the previous paragraph) and in accord with the grammar the author employs. The historical and theological setting of the text should also be considered as we interpret a passage. Our interpretation can then be confirmed by the context in the passage and by the structure of the entire book.

Revelation and Systematic Theology

We know of course that the New Testament writers were not writers of systematic theology, but each of them presents truths about theology, expressed in the context of the Gospels or letters they were writing. In the same way, the Book of Revelation presents profound truths about God and His work, expressed in accord with its context, style, and purpose.⁴¹ Bauckham reminds us that “John has no vocabulary equivalent to later trinitarian talk of the divine nature which three persons share. But it is impossible for us to do justice to what he says without speaking somehow of a divine reality in which Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit... are included.”⁴² It could be added that even if the Lord Jesus directed John to write words like “trinity,” “nature,” and “person,” those words did not yet have the theological precision which later trinitarian discussions built into them.

Clearly the Book of Revelation reveals the Trinity, but it does so with its own vocabulary and its own style. Note, for instance, Revelation 1:4b-5a:

Grace to you and peace from
 God who is,
 and who was,
 and who is coming,
 and from
 the Seven Spirits before His throne,
 and from
 Jesus Christ,
 the faithful witness,
 the firstborn from the dead,
 and
 the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Using his own style, John gives a greeting of grace and peace from the Triune God. Placing God, the Seven Spirits, and Jesus Christ all parallel

⁴¹ Most of this discussion is taken from Bauckham's *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 23-26 and 109-113.

⁴² *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 25.

to each other in this blessing of grace and peace is certainly a reference to the Triune God. The Seven Spirits will be discussed below.

In 1:8 God the Father describes Himself as

the Alpha and the Omega,
who is,
and who was,
and who is coming,
the Almighty

And in 21:6, God the Father is

the Alpha and the Omega,
the beginning and the end

These expressions are rooted in Old Testament declarations about the Lord God of Israel.⁴³ In Isaiah 44:6, the Lord God says of Himself, “I am the first and I am the last; apart from Me there is no God.” But in Revelation 1:17; 2:8; and 22:13 it is the Lord Jesus who declares Himself to be “the First and the Last.” By using this exact expression about Himself, the Lord Jesus is saying that He is the Lord God of Israel. Note in this case that the idea that Jesus Christ could be some sort of secondary God apart from the Lord God of Israel is strictly excluded: “apart from Me there is no God.” Note also Isaiah 48:12. Somehow the Lord Jesus is included in the identity of the Lord God⁴⁴ who in Isaiah 44:6 says, “I am the first and I am the last; apart from Me there is no God.” Later theologians solved this puzzle with the wonderful doctrine of the Trinity, but in Revelation we are just given these texts, and expected to fully worship and fully obey the Lord Jesus, who is fully and absolutely divine.

This idea is confirmed by the expression, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” It is used by God about Himself in 1:8 and 21:6, and it is used by the Lord Jesus Christ of Himself in 22:13. Somehow both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ are “the Alpha and the Omega”! This is the Trinity, put in words before the theologians were able to systematize the idea.

The expression “Seven Spirits” should also be discussed in this context. It occurs four times, in Revelation 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6. This four-fold use of a seven-fold designation suggests a connection with the seven-fold repetition of the four-fold expression, “every nation, tribe, people, and

⁴³ These expressions were taken up by other Jewish writers as well. Josephus calls God “the beginning and the end of all things” (*Antiquities* 8.280, quoted by Bauckham in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 27).

⁴⁴ The helpful expression “included in the identity of God” is Bauckham’s.

language.”⁴⁵ Perhaps the connection is that the nations of the earth will only hear the witness of the Gospel by the power of the Spirit. However, some interpreters say that the expression “Seven Spirits” refers to seven special angels. That interpretation is very unlikely because as noted above, in Revelation 1:4b-5a the “Seven Spirits” are parallel to God (this refers to God the Father) and Jesus Christ in this text, but it would be hard to imagine a blessing of grace and peace from God the Father, seven special angels, and Jesus Christ.

The expression “the Seven Spirits” is connected to Zechariah 4:10b, which refers to the Spirit of God saying, “these seven are the eyes of the Lord, they go to and fro in the whole earth.”⁴⁶ The connection between this expression and Zechariah 4:10 is strengthened in Revelation 5:6, in which the Lamb’s seven eyes are called “the Seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” Thus there is a double connection between “the Seven Spirits” in Revelation and “the seven eyes” in Zechariah.⁴⁷ The seven-fold description of the Spirit of God in Isaiah 11:2 also supports the idea that “the Seven Spirits” in Revelation refers to the Holy Spirit.

God the Father is strangely hidden from us for most of the Book of Revelation. We do see the expression “seated on the throne” eleven times and once there is a similar expression, “...a great white throne, and the One seated upon it” (20:11). Until the Lamb of God completes His work in bringing God’s Kingdom to earth, the One who is seated on the throne, that is, God the Father, limits His revealed activity to speaking from His throne in heaven (and wiping away the tears of the victors). But once the devil and the beasts are removed, and the New Jerusalem comes down to earth, God the Father makes His dwelling with men. In 21:3 this is made explicit: “God’s home is with mankind, and He will live with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them.”⁴⁸

The Interpretation of Numbers and Repetitions

Philosophers in John’s era were very interested in numbers and the meanings of numbers. Their writings often discussed in great detail

⁴⁵ Note the discussion of this four-fold expression in the section “The Interpretation of Numbers and Repetitions,” and in the comments under 5:9.

⁴⁶ Hemer, p. 142; and Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 110. Colin J. Hemer’s commentary on Revelation 2 and 3 updates Ramsay’s older work. Both men sought to provide deeper insight into these two chapters through careful research into the historical background of the seven cities.

⁴⁷ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, pp. 110-113.

⁴⁸ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 140.

the significance of particular numbers. Pythagoras was considered the foremost thinker in this area. He was born about 570 BC, and lived in southern Italy. His followers considered the numbers 1, 2, 4, and 10 to be the most significant. By the end of the fourth century BC the number 7 also took on special significance, perhaps because of the influence of Babylon. By that time, Pythagorus's influence had declined somewhat, but his writings were still popular even into the second century BC.⁴⁹

At that time a Jew named Aristobulus taught in Alexandria. Probably because of the influence of the Old Testament, he emphasized the significance of the number 7. Philo, a Jewish philosopher that was born about 25 BC, considered 7 to be the most interesting number.⁵⁰

The following observations refer to the Greek text, not a translation.

There are seven Spirits-torches-horns-eyes,⁵¹ mentioned seven times (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6). The seven angels are always mentioned in connection with the seven trumpets or seven bowls. (Seven angels are not mentioned in connection with the seven seals, which are opened by the Lord rather than by angels.)

There are seven thunders, but what they say is sealed and not to be written down. Those seven thunders are mentioned three times.

The term “woe”⁵² is used 14 (that is 7×2) times.

The word “endurance” is used seven times.⁵³

The word spirit/Spirit⁵⁴ is used 24 times in Revelation: once for the breath of God (11:11), once for the breath given to the image (13:15), three times of evil spirits (16:13, 14; and 18:2), once for the spirits of the prophets (22:6), four times for the Seven Spirits of God (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6),⁵⁵ and 14 times for the Spirit of God.

⁴⁹ Collins, pp. 1253-1255.

⁵⁰ Collins, p. 1256.

⁵¹ The spirits and the torches are counted together in 4:5 and the spirits, the horns and the eyes are counted together in 5:6.

⁵² οὐαὶ/ouai

⁵³ ὑπομονὴ/bupomoneī

⁵⁴ πνεῦμα/pneuma

⁵⁵ The expression “the Seven Spirits of God” is discussed in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology” and in the discussion under 1:4.

The expression “I am coming”⁵⁶ is used seven times in Revelation, only by the Lord Jesus.⁵⁷ According to Bauckham,⁵⁸ the term “Lamb” is used of the Lord Jesus 28 times in the original language.⁵⁹ Seven times it is used in a way that connects the Lamb with God, as in 5:13, “...To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be praise...,” or 14:4, “...as firstfruits to God and to the Lamb...”

Given the many allusions to the Old Testament, there is also probably a strong connection between the number seven in the Book of Revelation and the seven days of creation in Genesis.

Collins⁶⁰ believes that the twelve signs of the zodiac are the source of the meaning of twelve in Revelation and the seven planets⁶¹ are the source of the number seven, but those are questionable assertions, given that the number twelve is used in Revelation 24 times, and seven or seventh is used 61 times!

In the Old Testament we get the strong impression that the number seven, whether chosen by man (Genesis 21:28-30, etc.) or by God (Genesis 4:15; 7:2-4, etc.) suggests the idea of completion or perfection, and the same would hold true at the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation. Bauckham⁶² notes how the Muratorian Canon “claims that both John (in Revelation) and Paul actually wrote to all churches by writing to seven.” According to Philo, the number seven “brings perfection.”⁶³

In contrast, terms like “devil” and “beast” are repeated a random number of times, without any good numbers of repetitions. For instance, the term “dragon”⁶⁴ is repeated 13 times, the Greek word for devil⁶⁵ is repeated

⁵⁶ ερχομαι/erchomai

⁵⁷ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 34.

⁵⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 34.

⁵⁹ This term, αρνιον/arnion, is used once about the second beast in 13:11. The term “lamb” is used 34 times in the NT. However, there is a textual problem in one of the relevant verses. Note the footnote under Rev. 6:9.

⁶⁰ P. 1286.

⁶¹ The understanding of what a planet is, and how many planets exist, in that era was quite different from today’s understanding of those issues.

⁶² *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 16.

⁶³ The term Philo uses in “On the Creation” 102-103 is τελεσφορεω/telesphoreō (Collins, p. 1277). But note that Collins himself does not agree that the number seven points to “perfection.”

⁶⁴ δρακων/drakōn

⁶⁵ διαβολος/diabolos

five times, and the Greek word for Satan⁶⁶ is repeated eight times. Bauckham⁶⁷ suggests that this gives the impression that meaningful numbers of repetitions are avoided in connection with evil figures in Revelation. Good numbers are only used of evil when the evil imitates the holy, as in for instance 12:3; 13:1; 16:13; and 17:3.

For more information on repetitions like this, see the Appendix.

Turning now to the repetition of phrases, Bauckham⁶⁸ explains that these fall into two different categories in Revelation. The first kind consists of the repetition of certain phrases, like “And to the messenger of the church in... write...,” or “The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Those two phrases are both given seven times, with exactly the same wording. These repetitions are used in Revelation to mark the structure of the book. In this way, the repetition of “to show his servants what must soon take place” (these expressions are identical in the Greek, in 1:1 and 22:6) shows that what was begun in 1:1 has been completed in 22:6.

The other kind of repetition of phrases includes some slight variation. This is also very frequent in Revelation. Pairs of phrases that are slightly different from one another become like cross-references (or “hyperlinks” on a website) that tie one passage to another, perhaps in order to emphasize a contrast.

Compare for instance 1:19, which has the expression “what will take place after these things,” with 4:1, and its expression “what must take place after these things.” This nearly exact repetition says to the careful reader, “Now we are coming to that third part of 1:19, the ‘what will take place after these things’ part.”

Also compare 4:8, which reads, “Each of the four creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’” with 14:11, which reads, “And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day and night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” In 4:8 the phrase is literally “And rest not they have day and night,” while in 14:11 the phrase is literally “And not they have rest day and night.” This repeated, but slightly changed, phrase surely highlights the utterly contrasting situation of the four creatures

⁶⁶ σατανᾶς/satanas

⁶⁷ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 36.

⁶⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 22-29.

worshiping God and the evil people worshiping the beast. The reader should also compare 14:11 with 19:3, or 14:10-11 with 20:10.

Collins⁶⁹ says that even though there are some series of sevens in extra-biblical apocalyptic literature, those series are not numbered as they are in Revelation (as in the sixth seal or the fifth trumpet). He also says that the use of numbers in the Book of Revelation is far more significant than in other apocalyptic literature.

The well-ordered and well-numbered design of the Book of Revelation gave early readers comfort and assurance that the world they lived in, as chaotic as it seemed, was actually in the hands of the sovereign God who was working out His good plan through the ages. Early readers were also comforted that God would mark the end of the age with the series of sevens, and that the characteristics of the place reserved for the faithful, the New Jerusalem, were being arranged according to His will complete with His signature, the number twelve.⁷⁰

The above discussion of numbers is not so specific that it becomes speculative. The intended meanings of specific numbers in Revelation are very difficult to identify, but it is informative to observe the intricate numerical design of Revelation.

These repetitions and numbers surely did not happen accidentally. The careful reader who is concerned with such matters – and there were many in those early centuries – would be very impressed with the incredibly intricate structure of the Book of Revelation. These intricate patterns might even have been considered a proof of the book's divine inspiration. Perhaps that is also true in some cultures today where the Gospel has yet to penetrate. If it is, then observations like these could help convince people that this book is indeed from God.

When Bauckham published his study on this in 1993 in *The Climax of Prophecy, The Bible Code* had not yet appeared. It should be clearly understood that these observations have nothing to do with the faulty methodology of *The Bible Code*. Neither Bauckham nor the present writer find hidden prophecies, and do not read texts backwards, vertically, or diagonally. (By the way, when you change the number of characters per line of text, that is when you make your columns wider or narrower, you get a whole new set of words that might "show up" vertically and diagonally, so it is not surprising that all sorts of sentences "appear." It is also less surprising that so many words "appear" when you realize that *The Bible*

⁶⁹ Pp. 1272-1273.

⁷⁰ Collins, pp. 1272-1273.

Code only deals with the consonants of the Hebrew text, and excludes the vowel pointing system.) By way of contrast, the observations made in this section about numbers and repetitions in the Book of Revelation are in accord with the interests and culture of its original readers.

The discussion here of numbers and repetitions in Revelation is not yet complete and must be examined more thoroughly. It is sincerely hoped that this and any further discussion of this subject be based on accurate observation in accord with the consistent principles of interpretation.

The Book of Revelation and the Biblical Canon

God not only revealed His Word to His people, He also ensured that only the books that He inspired were included in the Bible. This process is called the forming of the Canon. Guided by the Most High God, His people determined which letters and compositions were inspired and meant to be included in the Bible. Certain books were admitted into the canon sooner than others.

In the era of the church fathers, certain groups did not want to allow Revelation into the canon.⁷¹ Mounce⁷² explains that Christian leaders that opposed Montanism (which had many strange teachings, including the idea that the high mountain to which an angel took John in Revelation 21:10 was near the city of Pepuza in Phrygia) were ready to reject Revelation simply because Montanus used Revelation to support his teachings. Even though certain groups did not like Revelation, God did not ask our permission to put Revelation into our Bible. We are not to pick and chose from the Bible so that we only take what agrees with our individual tastes, or is convenient for our particular circumstances!

In the West, the Book of Revelation was consistently considered canonical by the middle of the second century, but in the East dispute over the book continued until Athanasius, who died in 373 AD, championed the book.⁷³

⁷¹ Eusebius, in his *Church History*, written about the year 330 AD, makes three lists of writings: 1. writings that are recognized as in the canon, 2. writings whose place in the canon is disputed, and 3. rejected writings that are not in the canon. He included the Book of Revelation in his list of recognized writings, and also, oddly, in his list of disputed writings. He did not include it in his list of rejected writings.

⁷² P. 39.

⁷³ EBC-R, in its discussion of Revelation's authorship and canonicity.

Key Verse

Revelation 1:3, which says “Blessed is the one who reads and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near,” is the key verse which points to primary theme and purpose of the whole Book of Revelation. The blessing will come to each individual and to each congregation that obeys the Book of Revelation. Those blessings or rewards are described in Revelation 2:7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 11-12, 21; and 6:11, among many other passages.

Overview and Structure

It is important to realize that every book of the Bible has an overall structure. God did not reveal His Word to us in a haphazard way. Knowing as much as we can about how a particular passage fits in that overall structure can be a great help in interpreting and applying the Word. If we desire to experience the blessing promised in Revelation 1:3, then we need to “keep those things written in it.” But this is not as simple as it might seem: only commands can be “kept.” In the Book of Revelation the commands are almost exclusively in chapters two and three. From chapter four to chapter 22 there are basically no commands for us to keep. This is what Martin Luther was complaining about when he wrote, “Again, they are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it.”⁷⁴

Indeed there is much in this book that we will not understand until it happens, but the things we do not understand are not the most significant problem for us as we read the Book of Revelation. That “problem” for us is instead chapters two and three where there are many commands which are very easy to understand but often hard to obey.

As is the case in several New Testament books, we are helped a great deal by a verse that reveals the structure of the book. Revelation 1:19 does that for us:⁷⁵

⁷⁴ This is quoted from Luther’s 1522 Preface to the Book of Revelation. The translation is from the American edition of *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), pp. 395-399.

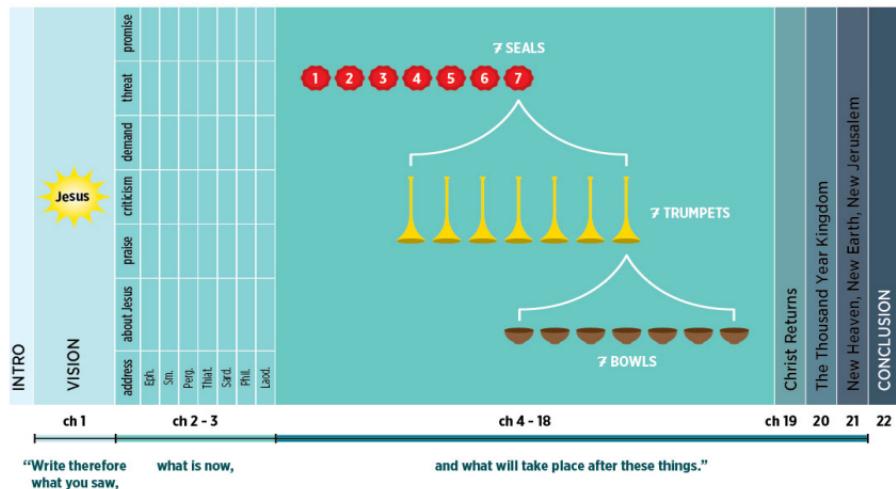
⁷⁵ A lists of commentaries that agree and disagree with this crucial statement would be far too long. Let it be enough to say that no less a scholar than R. H. Charles, in his commentary on Revelation (1.33) agrees. Ressegueie (Kindle location 1601) disagrees, saying “the three periods of time mingle throughout the book,” but his criticism misses the point. This view simply says that by the time the Lord spoke 1:19, John had *already* seen the vision of chapter one, in chapters two and three the present time *predominates*, and in the third section the future

"Write, therefore,
the things you saw,
and the things that are
and the things that will be after these things."

It is true that the word “and”⁷⁶ is on rare occasion translated as “even” or “that is,” but that translation is very hard to defend in this case.⁷⁷ The Lord is clearly telling John to write three things, and the book has three parts. That helps us a great deal as we interpret the book!

The following diagram shows this overall structure of the book. The most basic structural thing to remember about all this is that the first three chapters are about things in John's lifetime, and chapters 4-22 are about the end times.

The Structure of the Book of Revelation



According to 1:19 the third section is about the things that “will take place after these things.” Clearly 4:1, which speaks of the things that “must take place after these things,” is the beginning of that third section.

predominates. Chapters two and three are especially about the present situation of the seven churches despite the presence of 29 future tense verbs. Likewise chapters 4-21 are about the future, despite the fact that the vision in chapter 12 mentions the birth and ascension of Christ, and despite the ongoing command to the Lord's people, "Come out of her, My people, lest you participate in her sins" in 18:4.

76 *xai/kai*

⁷⁷ The NIV, RSV, KJV, NJKV, NET, and the HCSB all agree that *and* is the proper translation here.

The first section is the core of the book: it is the revelation of Jesus Christ, the vision of Him. It functions to remind us of the character of Jesus Christ. In order to live for the Lord Jesus we must understand who He is. We need to understand about His character and how it relates to our experiences. The second section is an application of His character to the seven churches in those seven cities of the province of Asia. In it He offers rewards to those who obey His demands. The third section shows many things, including how what has been said in the second section will work itself out in the future. It tells how some believers will be victorious over Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and by not loving their lives unto death, and how Jesus Christ will return to the earth and defeat “those who dwell upon the earth,” who have been oppressing the people of God. It functions to encourage the reader that “Jesus Christ is going to win.” His coming and His victory will prove the truth of all that is said about Him in the vision of Christ in chapter one. In His victorious return He will bring the rewards promised in the second section, the seven messages.

In summary,

1. chapter 1, The Vision that shows who Jesus Christ is
2. chapters 2-3, Seven Messages that demand obedience and promise rewards
3. chapters 4-22, The Prophecy of the victorious lives of some believers, the judgments on the enemies of God, and the victorious return of Jesus Christ

There is a logical flow from one section to the next. Chapter one, the vision of Christ Jesus, is the core and foundation of the Book of Revelation. In the same way, the character of the Lord Jesus becomes the foundation for all our actions and thoughts. Thus the Lord Jesus is to be the center of our existence.

Chapters two and three build on the foundation of section one. Each letter begins with a fact about Jesus Christ that was mentioned in chapter one. But the second section also has a close relationship to the third section, which tells about His coming and victory.

Chapters 4-22 have not happened yet. Even though it is difficult to live for Christ, and difficult to obey the seven messages, obedience is critical because – as the third section so powerfully reveals – the Lord will return with victory, rewards, and joy for those who obey.

Bauckham⁷⁸ suggests that the seven messages of chapters two and three are seven different introductions to the rest of the book! For instance, the message to the wealthy and self-satisfied Laodiceans serves as their personalized introduction to the prophetic section of the book, in which they will see what becomes of all their earthly treasures. And the message to the persecuted congregation in Smyrna serves as their introduction to the prophetic section, in which they will see the fate of their oppressors and the great rewards awaiting those that faithfully endure persecution.

⁷⁸ *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 14.

Outline

- I. “What you have seen” (1:1-20)
 - A. Introduction (1:1-8)
 - 1. Title and Introduction (1:1-3)
 - 2. Greetings (1:4-8)
 - B. The Vision (1:9-20)
 - 1. Background of the Vision (1:9-11)
 - 2. The Vision (1:12-20)
- II. “What is now” (2:1-3:22)
 - A. Message to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - B. Message to the church in Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - C. Message to the church in Pergamum (2:12-17)
 - D. Message to the church in Thyatira (2:18-29)
 - E. Message to the church in Sardis (3:1-6)
 - F. Message to the church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - G. Message to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22)
- The messages to the seven churches follow this basic pattern:
 - 1. The Recipient
 - 2. The Characteristic of Christ
 - 3. Praise for the Church
 - 4. Criticism
 - 5. Demand
 - 6. Warning
 - 7. Promise
- III. “What will happen after this” (4-22)
 - A. Vision of Throne Room (4:1-5:14)
 - 1. Transition (4:1-2)
 - 2. Throne and Surroundings (4:3-11)
 - 3. Scroll and Lamb (5:1-7)
 - 4. Praise to Him who takes the Scroll (5:8-14)
 - B. Time of Torment (6:1-20:3)
 - i. Seven Seals (6:1-8:6)
 - a. First Seal (6:1-2)
 - b. Second Seal (6:3-4)
 - c. Third Seal (6:5-6)
 - d. Fourth Seal (6:7-8)
 - e. Fifth Seal (6:9-11)
 - f. Sixth Seal (6:12-17)
 - g. Seventh Seal (8:1-6)
- First Insertion: 144,000 People Sealed (7:1-8)
- Second Insertion: Many people... out of the great tribulation (7:9-17)

2. Seven Trumpets (8:7-11:19)

- a. First Four Trumpets (8:7-12)
- b. Last Three Trumpets (8:13-11:19)
 - i. Fifth Trumpet (8:13-9:12)
 - ii. Sixth Trumpet (9:13-21)

Third Insertion: Scroll (10:1-11)

Fourth Insertion: Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

iii. Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

Fifth Insertion: The Woman, the Child and the Dragon (12:1-17)

Sixth Insertion: First Beast (13:1-10)

Seventh Insertion: Second Beast (13:11-18)

Eighth Insertion: 144,000 People (14:1-5)

Ninth Insertion: Three Angels (14:6-13)

Tenth Insertion: Harvest of the Earth (14:14-16)

Eleventh Insertion: Harvest of Grapes on the Earth (14:17-20)

3. Seven Bowls (15:1-16:21)

- a. Introduction of the Seven Bowls (15:1-16:1)
- b. Seven Bowls Poured Out (16:2-21)

4. Babylon as a Prostitute (17:1-18)

5. City of Babylon Destroyed (18:1-24)

- a. The Fall of Babylon Announced (18:1-8)
- b. Reaction of the World (18:9-19)
- c. Babylon Never Restored (18:20-24)

6. Rejoicing in Heaven (19:1-10)

7. Christ Returns (19:11-14)

8. Christ Defeats the Beast and his Army (19:15-21)

9. Satan Defeated (20:1-3)

C. The Millennium and Judgment (20:4-15)

- 1. Those who Reign with Christ for 1000 Years (20:4-6)
- 2. Final Rebellion (20:7-10)
- 3. White Throne Judgment (20:11-15)

D. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)

- 1. Introduction: New Jerusalem (21:1-8)
- 2. Walls and Gates of the New Jerusalem (21:9-21)
- 3. Glory of the New Jerusalem (21:22-27)
- 4. River of Life and Servants of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (22:1-5)

E. The Conclusion of the Vision (22:6-17)

F. The Conclusion of the Book of Revelation (22:18-21)

Purpose

Revelation was written and then sent to the Christians of seven congregations (and to all believers in Jesus Christ) to rebuke or encourage, as needed, so that the readers will live as victors, and so participate in the victory of the Lord Jesus. Dillow, writing about the Book of Revelation, agrees. He wrote, “The central theme of the entire book is to exhort the saints to persevere and to be victorious.”⁷⁹ If believers obey whatever is written in this book, they will be full of joy because of the Lord Jesus and His victory (Revelation 1:3; 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12 and 21). Chapters two and three are full of great challenges. In chapters 4-21 the visions about the second coming of the Lord Jesus explain that His victory will bring destruction to “those that dwell upon the earth” and rewards to the faithful. So, in an indirect way those visions support the challenges of chapters two and three. Christ the King will return in victory and will bring rewards for those who overcome the temptations and trials in the way that He overcame them. The careful reader will see that this book is very practical.

Revelation was not given to us for speculation about, for instance, “Who is the Anti-Christ?” or “What is the date of the Lord’s return?” That sort of useless speculation distracts us from the true purpose of the book, which is to bring us to repentance if need be, but in any case, to encourage us to stand firm in the heart, character, and deeds that please the Lord.

⁷⁹ Dillow’s book, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of The Servant Kings*, demonstrates that the entire NT teaches that only obedient believers will receive rewards. He shows that disobedient believers will be in the Kingdom of God, but they will not receive the rewards promised to, for instance, the victors of Rev. 2-3. This quote is from location 47% in his book.

Exposition of Revelation

I. “What you have seen” (1:1-20)

This section is the core and basis of the whole book, because it is the vision of the Lord Jesus. The other parts of the book connect back to this core. In effect, if you could just respond properly to what this vision shows us concerning the Lord Jesus, you would have no need to read any further. However, we will need help in responding rightly to this section, and that help will be found for us in the remainder of the book.

A. Introduction (1:1-8)

John orients his readers before he tells us the actual revelation. This is accomplished in the introduction, verses 1:1-8. The author tells us a little about himself and greets his readers.

i. Title and Introduction (1:1-3)

1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His slaves⁸⁰ what things must happen suddenly. He⁸¹ made it known⁸² by sending it through His angel⁸³ to His slave John,

This verse is a serious statement about the authority of the Book of Revelation: it comes from God and is given to His slaves via an entirely

80 Although often translated “servants,” this word, δουλος/*doulos*, really does refer to the harsh and sinful idea that some human beings become the “property” of others. It is best translated *slaves*. In 10:7 and 11:18 the term is used concerning God’s prophets. In 7:3 it is used of the 144,000 sealed of Israel, and in 19:5 it is used of those that fear God.

81 The discussion of this verse assumes that this *He* refers to *Christ*, and that makes good sense; *God gave the revelation to Christ* so that He would do something with it. He did, *He made it known....* However, that *He* could also refer to *God*; because the only Indicative verbs in this verse are *gave* and *made known*, and because the verb *gave* clearly refers to *God*, it is also possible that the second verb, *made known*, also refers to *God*.

82 σημαίνω/*sēmainō*

83 The expression *His angel* (του αγγελου αυτου/*tou anggelou autou*) points to an unnamed *angel*. This interpretation is made very clear by the fact that in 22:16 we see that Jesus Himself sent *His angel* to testify to these things for the churches. The same *angel* is mentioned in 1:1 and 22:16, which both tell of the mediating role of that *angel*. In that way, those texts form “bookends” or “inclusio” for the whole book, suggesting that the entire book was revealed via the mediating work of that *angel*.

reliable process. This verse tells the process of *revelation*: *God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ who made it known by sending it through His angel to His slave John who is to give it to God's slaves*, people who believe and obey Him, either in the seven churches or holy people of other times and places!

Note that the expression *to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly* is exactly repeated in 22:6, and 4:1 has a similar expression, “I will show you what must take place after these things.”

The Lord does not want the book to become merely a subject for academic study or debate. He reminds us that all these things *must happen suddenly*,⁸⁴ so we must be ready. In accordance with the primary purpose of Revelation stated above, *what things must happen suddenly* need to be shown to His *slaves* so their lives can be conformed to the truth of His character and coming.

1:2 who testified to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw.

This statement serves as a validating signature: John *testified* that this is a valid revelation, so to reject this revelation one must reject the Apostle John’s *testimony*. In John 21:24 he likewise *testified* to the validity of the Gospel of John.

The repetition of the words *testimony* and *word*, usually *the word of God*, in 1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:11; and 20:4 shows the importance, the pain, and the victory of the preaching of *the word of God*, especially in hostile situations. Here the expression *the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ* seems to

⁸⁴ This expression, $\epsilon\nu\ \tau\alpha\xi\epsilon\nu/en\ tachei$, is also used in 22:6. A related term, $\tau\alpha\xi\upsilon/tachu$, is found in 2:5, 16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20, and is discussed in the footnote under 2:16. These two terms originate from the noun $\tau\alpha\xi\omega\varsigma/tachos$, which means “speed,” so that $\epsilon\nu\ \tau\alpha\xi\epsilon\nu/en\ tachei$ can be translated “with high speed” or *suddenly*. In Acts 22:18 and 25:4 this word can be translated “soon,” but in Lk. 18:8; Acts 12:7; Rom. 16:20; Rev. 1:1; and 22:6 the translation *suddenly* is more fitting. The idea here of suddenness is also found in Is. 60:22, which reads “The insignificant will become a thousand, and the little a mighty nation. I, the Lord, in its time, will *basten* it.” He will make this promise happen *suddenly*, but only “in its time.” This does not mean “soon,” but when “its time” comes, it will happen *suddenly*. (Note the use of the same root word, *hūš*, in Deut. 32:35 and Judg. 20:37.) Thus we understand that the Word of God is not mistakenly saying that the Lord is returning soon, as in, during their lifetime. Indeed, He did not come soon (in that normal sense of soon), but His coming will happen *suddenly*. It is also possible that in a prophetic sense, it will be “soon.” Mounce, p. 65, says “in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent.” See the discussion on 1:3 for more about the concept of imminency.

refer to the Book of Revelation, but in the closely related passages (1:9; 6:9; 12:11; and 20:4) very similar expressions seem to refer to *the word of God* preached and perhaps also the spoken personal *testimony* of the speaker, who suffers because of that *testimony*.⁸⁵ Furthermore, there is more being repeated here than just that pair of words. In 1:9; 6:9; 12:11; and 20:4 the term *word* and the term *testimony* are consistently preceded by the preposition translated “on account of.”⁸⁶ It is clear that this pattern did not appear by itself.

The first and second verses do affirm, even testify, to the fact that this book comes from *Jesus Christ*, and from *God*. If this is considered normal, what is certainly not normal is the three-fold repetition of this assertion. In 19:9, we read “These are the true words of God.” In 21:5, “these are the faithful and true words of God.” And in 22:6, “These words are faithful and true.” This book is most emphatically from *God*, and not merely John’s writing. Let some dismiss vast portions as metaphors with meanings they themselves are free to assign, let the lazy dismiss it as impossible to understand, let the undisciplined do their wild things. Even so, the Apostle John, the disciple that Jesus loves, is telling you that this is the *word of God*, this is *the testimony of Jesus Christ*, and there is a blessing for you if you will hear it and keep it.

1:3 Blessed⁸⁷ is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep⁸⁸ those things written in it, for the time is near.

This theme of blessing is very important in the Book of Revelation. The blessing is for *the one who reads* the book to the congregation, and

85 Since the word here translated *and* (*καὶ/kai*) sometimes must be translated “that is,” it is possible that *the word of God* and *the testimony of Jesus Christ* refer to the same thing, but it is not possible to be certain.

86 δια/dia

87 There are seven blessings in Revelation that use the word *μακαρίος/makarios*. This pronouncement of blessing is almost the same as what the Lord said in Lk. 11:28. According to Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 30), the seven blessings of the book are the essence of the purpose of the book. The blessings are given seven times because the happiness of everyone that obeys this book is a perfect happiness.

88 The verb *τηρεῖν/tēreō* can mean to *keep*, “obey,” “guard,” “hold,” “fulfill,” or “observe.” In Mt. 19:17; 23:3; 28:20; Mk. 7:9; Jn. 8:51, 52, 55; 14:15, 21, 23, 24; 15:10, 20; and Acts 15:5 it means “obey.” It is used eleven times in the Book of Revelation. Nine of those passages concern commands or God’s will, and in those passages the clear meaning is always “obey.” In 3:10 (“keep you from the hour of testing”) and 16:15 (“guards his clothing”) it cannot mean “obey,” but instead means *keep* or “guard.”

for those that obey it. Of course, in that era a congregation would be privileged to have even a single copy of the text, and individual members would not have their own copies. The reading of the Word of God during Christian meetings was therefore all the more important.

This blessing, so early in the book and repeated with nearly the same words at the end of the book (22:7), establishes a very significant theme in the book. It refers to special end-of-the-age happiness for obedient people. Those that obey will be *blessed*. This is a key verse for the book. And the six other blessings should be interpreted to follow the theme established here. Further, each of the seven messages that make up chapters two and three includes a blessing for obedience, although the word *blessed* does not appear in chapters two and three. We are to obey this book because soon He that is revealed in its first section, that is, He that speaks in the second section, will return, be victorious, and give out the rewards that He has promised to His obedient ones, as is described in the third section.

If we yearn for this blessing, and continue to read this book in order to obey and be blessed, we may find ourselves very frustrated. So much of this book is about visions of the future, terrible judgments and heavenly events – what are we to obey? This simple question points us to the great importance of chapters two and three, for that is where the commands are found in this book. In obeying those commands we will be *blessed*.

Here are the seven times the word *blessed* appears in the book:

- 1:3 *Blessed* is the one who reads, and *blessed* are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near. (In English the word “*blessed*” appears twice in this verse, but in the Greek it is there only once.)
- 14:13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: *Blessed* are the dead that die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they can rest from their toil, because their deeds follow them.”
- 16:15 “Look, I am coming like a thief! *Blessed* is he who stays alert and guards his clothing, lest he have to walk about naked and people see his shameful state.”
- 19:9 And he said to me, “Write, ‘*Blessed* are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!’”
- 20:6 *Blessed* and holy is he that has a part in the first resurrection. Upon them the second death has no authority, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and they shall reign with Him for a thousand years.

- 22:7 “And look, I am coming suddenly! *Blessed* is the one keeping the words of the prophecy of this book.”
- 22:14 “*Blessed* are they that do His commands, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.”

Text	Conditions	Rewards (or Warnings)	References to ch. 2 & 3
1:3	keep those things written in it		2:26 keeps My deeds...
14:13	die in the Lord	rest from their toil	2:10 Be faithful until death...
16:15	stays alert and guards his clothing	(lest he have to walk about naked)	3:4 a few people in Sardis who have not dirtied their clothing
19:9		invited to the wedding...	2:17 eat of the hidden manna
20:6		a part in the 1 st resurrection, priests of God, reign 1000 yrs	2:26 authority over the nations 3:21 sit with Me on My throne
22:7	keeping the words of the prophecy of this book		3:3 keep what you have received & heard
22:14	do His commands	the tree of life enter... into the city	2:7 eat from the tree of life 3:12 I will write on him... name of the city

The above chart shows that five of the seven blessed statements also explicitly express conditions that must be fulfilled to receive the blessing. Because there are seven of these, it is most likely that they together all speak of one concept. Thus it is most likely that the same conditions are implied for the blessings of 19:9 and 20:6, even though there is no explicit condition. The corresponding elements in the far right column show that there is a close relationship with the demands or conditions for victors in chapters two and three. Note also that the blessed statements and

the victors' promises both include reigning with Christ, eating from the tree of life, and entrance into the New Jerusalem. This close relationship strongly suggests that the seven-fold blessing and the promises to victors all point to the same rewards that obedient believers will receive. In other words, these blessings are for victors. This is the happiness promised if you will do what is commanded in the Book of Revelation.

These blessings are all the more significant because the time is *near*.⁸⁹ This does not mean that it must happen within a certain number of years. In Hebrews 1:2 and James 5:3 we learn that we are in the "last days." In 1 John 2:18 it is even said that we are in the "last hour." The Lord could return at any time. In that sense, biblical prophecy speaks of His return as *near*. The theologians would say that His return is "imminent."

The idea that His return is imminent can be illustrated by a person running along the top of a short steep cliff, below which a cool lake offers a refreshing break from the exercise of running. How long will the runner run along the top of the cliff, before suddenly deciding that it is time to cool off in the refreshing water of the lake? A strong and dedicated runner might run for hours, and then suddenly jump into the lake. Another runner might only run for a few minutes, and then suddenly jump. He could jump at any time. And the Lord could return at any time.

As explained in the introduction to this commentary, the Preterist approach to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation claims support for its views from the word here translated *near*.⁹⁰ The Preterist would tell us that if the time is *near* in 1:3, then the coming of the Lord, as described in Revelation, must have been soon for those readers. They say that the coming of the Lord described throughout the Book of Revelation could not be a Second Coming that has been delayed nearly 2000 years. The Preterist says the coming of the Lord was a "cloud coming" which they suppose happened in Jerusalem in the 70 AD when the Romans defeated the rebellious Jewish forces and destroyed the temple. They say that at that point in history the Lord "came in the clouds" to judge Israel. But the Partial Preterist (i.e., the Preterist that says that the

⁸⁹ The declaration of the nearness of the coming of Jesus Christ (ὁ γαρ καιρός εγγυεῖ/bo gar kairos enggus) is repeated in Rev. 22:10 with terms that are almost the same. In Lk. 21:31 the Kingdom of God is *near* (εγγυεῖ/enggus) and in Heb. 8:13 "that which already became old and worn out is already *near* (εγγυεῖ/enggus) to its destruction." Other than these two uses about the last days this word is used in normal contexts (for instance Mt. 24:32 and Lk. 19:11). See the footnote under 22:10 for more about this term.

⁹⁰ εγγυεῖ/enggus

“cloud coming” in 70 AD fulfills some of Revelation’s prophecies but a still to come Second Coming will fulfill Revelation 19-21) deals with the word *near* inconsistently in 1:3 and 22:10. In both texts it should have the same meaning, since these two passages are clearly functioning as a pair of “bookends” for the entire book. The term *near* in both verses must refer to something that is *near* in the prophetic sense, imminent, something which we all should long for and await with an expectant attitude. Passages like Matthew 24:42, 44; 25:10-13; Mark 13:32-37; and 1 Peter 4:7 all remind us that because the Lord could appear at any time, we should live our lives accordingly. Note especially James 5:8-9, which speaks of the nearness of the coming of the Lord with the image of someone standing at the door. Someone standing at the door can enter the room at any time. His entrance into the room is imminent.

2. Greetings (1:4-8)

Although this is apocalyptic literature, it has elements of both prophetic and epistolary style. These verses look like the greetings of an epistle. Normally, the greetings in Greek letters were concise and plain. However, these greetings are full of meaning and worthy of careful study.

1:4 John, to the seven churches in the province of⁹¹ Asia;⁹² Grace to you and peace from God⁹³ who is, and who was, and who is coming,⁹⁴ and from the Seven Spirits before His throne,

According to these greetings, this book is addressed to the *seven churches* in the Roman *province of Asia*. In effect, the book is like a letter sent to them. They are *seven literal churches* whose locations are mentioned in 1:11; there is nothing in the context that suggests that they should be understood as *seven ages* in European or western church history. See the discussion of this issue in the introduction to section II., “What is now” (2:1-3:22).

There were other *churches* in the Roman *province of Asia*, for instance in Colossae, Troas, and Hierapolis, which were not mentioned as recipients of the Book of Revelation. The Lord’s reasons for including some and

⁹¹ The words *the province of* are added in the translation because this refers to the Roman *province*, not, of course, to the continent.

⁹² Ασία/Asia

⁹³ The majority of the Greek manuscripts have the word *God* here, but three very ancient manuscripts lack that word. In either case, the sense of the passage remains the same.

⁹⁴ This term, ερχομενος/erchomenos, uses the Present, not the Future Tense, so the word “will” is not used in this translation. For some reason this word is never used in the Future Tense in the whole Book of Revelation.

excluding others is not clear. However, we do know that the *seven churches* that were chosen were all located along a Roman postal road. Anyone wanting to communicate with the *churches of the province of Asia* would sail into the harbor of Ephesus, and then follow that Roman postal road from Ephesus to Smyrna, and on to each of the other *churches*, in the order given in Revelation 2-3. Furthermore, Ramsay⁹⁵ suggests that each of those *seven churches* was most likely well-situated as a distribution hub to further distribute copies that they would have made of the Book of Revelation to *churches* in their own “secondary districts.” In that way the *churches* of the entire *province of Asia* would have quickly and easily received copies of the Book of Revelation.

There may have been other reasons He selected those *seven churches*. Perhaps *John* had responsibilities in those *seven churches*. Perhaps representatives of those *seven churches* were on their way to visit *John* on Patmos. As discussed earlier, the number *seven* suggests perfection or completion.⁹⁶ In any case, all through the ages there have been *churches* like those *seven churches*. Perhaps those *seven* were selected as sufficient representatives of the spiritual conditions of Christ’s *churches*.

Most of Paul’s letters⁹⁷ also began with greetings that included *grace and peace*. If the greeting *grace* has a Greek sound to it,⁹⁸ the greeting *peace* has a Hebrew sound to it, as a translation of the Hebrew “shalom.” The blessings of *grace and peace* come from the triune God, much as in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

Concerning the expression *from God who is, and who was, and who is to come*, the Jerusalem Targum⁹⁹ translation of the name of God¹⁰⁰ in Exodus 3:14 is “I am He that is and that will be,” but in its comment on

95 Pp. 141-149.

96 Hughes, p. 18, mentions the completion of creation in *seven* days as support of the idea that the number *seven* suggests perfection.

97 Besides Rom. 1:7, Cranfield, p. 71, records 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4 and Philem. 3.

98 A normal greeting in a letter would have the word *χαιρειν/chariein* (“greetings”), as in Acts 15:23; 23:26; and Jms. 1:1, but here the word is *χαρις/charis* (*grace*). This shift draws attention to the significant idea of *grace*.

99 The Targums were expanded and free Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible that were common in Jewish worship during the era the Book of Revelation was written, because after the Babylonian Captivity most Jews knew and used Aramaic, rather than Hebrew.

100 This is the “Tetragrammaton,” the primary name of God in the OT, which Christian Bibles normally represent as LORD.

Deuteronomy 32:29 the Name is translated “I am He who is, and who was, and I am who will be.”¹⁰¹

Because ancient Greek did not have different uppercase and lowercase letters, we cannot be absolutely certain whether *the Seven Spirits* refers to the seven-fold Spirit of *God* or to *seven* creatures that were before God’s throne, but it is most likely that this is a trinitarian expression, and so the expression *the Seven Spirits* refers to the Holy Spirit.

In Revelation, *the Seven Spirits*¹⁰² are mentioned four times: here and in 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6. We often read that the four creatures, the twenty four elders, and the many angels all worship the Lord, but it is never said that *the Seven Spirits* worship the Lord. That makes sense if indeed *the Seven Spirits* is the Holy Spirit, who does not worship the Lord Jesus.

This is strengthened by the existence of *God* the Father and Jesus Christ in parallel form in the same sentence. It also seems appropriate that the Holy Spirit is meant here, because while angels might at times be a *channel of grace and peace*, they would never be the *source of grace and peace*. For these reasons it seems best to understand the expression *the Seven Spirits* to refer to the seven-fold Spirit of *God*, that is, the Holy Spirit.

1:5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn¹⁰³ from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and has washed¹⁰⁴ us from our sins by His blood,

Since this revelation is from Him (as in 1:1-2; 22:16, and 20), and it may demand a great deal from its readers, it is good to know that He is *the faithful witness* who has risen from the *dead*. If the believers in Smyrna

¹⁰¹ Beasley-Murray, p. 54. Mounce, p. 68, explains that the pagan god Zeus was sometimes called “Zeus who was, Zeus who is, and Zeus who will be.”

¹⁰² Note the discussion of the *Seven Spirits* in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

¹⁰³ πρωτότοκος/*prōtotokos*. This term, which literally means *firstborn*, is also used of the Lord Jesus in Col. 1:15 and 18. *Christ* is *firstborn from the dead*. Here the term *firstborn* indicates both preeminence and chronological priority. Although some people have been resurrected *from the dead*, He was the first to experience permanent resurrection. Normally this word has its simple and literal meaning of being the chronologically first one born in a family, but its use in the LXX in 2 Sam. 19:44 (verse 43 in our Bibles) shows that it can mean “first in importance” instead of “the one born first.” Likewise in Ps. 88:28 (Ps. 89:27 in our Bibles), we read “I will also appoint him as my *firstborn*, the most exalted of the earth’s kings.” In the LXX of that verse πρωτότοκος/*prōtotokos* is used.

¹⁰⁴ The majority of the ancient Greek manuscripts read *washed* (from the word λουω/*louō*), but a few manuscripts read “freed” (from the word λυω/*luō*).

have to be *faithful* all the way to death, they will be greatly assured to know that *Jesus Christ is the firstborn from the dead.* 1 Corinthians 15:20 would also be a great comfort to the persecuted congregation.

Since it is often *the kings of the earth* that persecute people, it will also be a great comfort to know that, despite all appearances, the Lord Jesus is *the ruler of the kings of the earth.* When the name of the Lord Jesus is mentioned, praise overflows from John's heart.¹⁰⁵ Further, it is He that *loves us and has washed us from our sins by His blood.* In the original language the word "love" is in the Present Tense, meaning that the Lord Jesus continually loves us.

His love was most perfectly proved when He *washed us from our sins by his blood.* This is the Gospel, a Gospel not only of forgiveness, but also of cleansing *from our sins.*

The theme of redemption is frequent in this book. See, for instance 5:9, 12; 12:11; 13:8; and 14:3-4.

1:6 and has made us to be a kingdom, priests before God, even His Father – to Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever!
Amen.

This introductory passage will briefly bring up many of the important themes John will describe later in more detail. Here John is following the example of the four creatures and the twenty four elders in worshiping the Lord Jesus. John's praise here is very similar to the praise in 5:10, which reads, "And for our God You made them kings and priests, and they shall reign upon the earth."

The expression *a kingdom, priests before God* comes from Exodus 19:5-6, "And now if hearing you hear My voice, and you keep My covenant, then you will be My possession out of all the peoples which are Mine in all the earth. And you will be for Me a Kingdom of priests and a holy people."

We know, however, that the nation of Israel did not obey Him fully, and they did not keep His covenant. Now, to a people whose hearts have been transformed from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh, the offer is renewed. See the comments on "You made them kings and priests" in 5:10.

¹⁰⁵ Note also, for instance, 4:11; 5:9, 12; 7:10.

1:7 Look,¹⁰⁶ He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes¹⁰⁷ of the earth will mourn because of Him. Yes, amen.¹⁰⁸

This verse draws upon two Old Testament passages, Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10.¹⁰⁹ In Daniel 7:13 the prophet sees the Messiah coming “with the clouds of heaven.” *Clouds* are often associated with the coming of God, as in Deuteronomy 33:26; Psalm 104:3; and Isaiah 19:1.

In Zechariah 12:10 it is written that all the people of Jerusalem “will see Him whom they pierced and mourn for Him...” The mourning limited to the people of Jerusalem in Zechariah 12:10 here extends to *all the tribes of the earth*. It is surely not a coincidence that we read of Jews and also people from every tribe that will repent and believe in the Lord Jesus.

When the Lord Jesus came the first time, He was seen by thousands of people in an area of the Middle East. But when He comes again, *every eye will see Him*, including *those who pierced Him*.

With a *yes* and an *amen*, John enthusiastically looks forward to the end of evil and the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth, just as he does in 22:20.

¹⁰⁶ The word here translated *Look* is *ἰδού/idou*. It is actually an imperative form of the verb *ἴδωμαι/boraō*, which means “to see.” The word *ἰδού/idou* is used to draw attention to what follows. In older translations it is translated “Behold!” If a casual modern English translation were written it would probably use “Hey!” It occurs 26 times in the Book of Revelation. In this translation it is translated *look*, except in 4:1; 14:1, and 14. The word *ἰδού/idou* is translated “see!” in those verses because those verses already have the verb *look* in them. This word is like the Hebrew word *binnē* in the OT.

¹⁰⁷ This word, *φυλή/phulē*, means “ethnic group,” “tribe,” or “people group.” In the LXX it often referred to the twelve *tribes* of Israel. The word which is translated *earth* (*γῆ/gē*) often means the land of Israel, so that it is possible the intent of this sentence is “And all the tribes in the land of Israel are going to lament Him” meaning they will repent and believe in Him who was wounded by their ancestors. Thomas, pp. 78-79, prefers the meaning of *tribes* and *earth* mainly because Revelation often stresses all the *tribes of the earth* (as in 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; and 17:2), and not only the *tribes* of Israel. It is difficult to be sure which interpretation is correct, but the two possibilities that are mentioned are not too different.

¹⁰⁸ In saying *Yes, amen*, John joins the Greek expression (*ναί/nai*) with the Hebrew expression (*אָמֵן/amēn*), just like in 1:4 “grace” is joined with “peace” (Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 50).

¹⁰⁹ See also Mt. 24:30.

1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,”¹¹⁰ says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty.”¹¹¹

The term *God* is, apparently, never used of the Lord Jesus in the Book of Revelation, though as was discussed in the section “Revelation and Systematic Theology,” He is clearly divine, in the highest sense of the word. This is *God* the Father speaking. Likewise in 1:4 the expression *who is, and who was, and who is coming* is used of the Father, and in 4:8 the title *the Lord God Almighty* is used of the Father. However, in 22:13 the Lord Jesus is *the Alpha and the Omega*, and His coming has just been mentioned in 1:7 above. Also, the Lord Jesus is “the Beginning and the End” in 1:17. These ideas are developed more in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

The use of *Alpha and Omega* clarifies that the sovereignty of *God* is for all ages throughout time. Perhaps today He would say “A and Z.” *God* already existed before the beginning and will still exist after the end. In 21:6 the same expression is used and is completed with the words “the Beginning and the End.” The expressions *the Alpha and the Omega* and “the Beginning and the End” seem to be rooted in the expression “I am the first and I am the last” in Isaiah 44:6; and 48:12 (note also the closely related Isaiah 41:4).

The expression *the Lord God Almighty* is used in the Septuagint to translate the expression “God of the Universe” in the Old Testament. The use of this expression speaks of the sovereignty of *God*. This emphasis on God’s sovereignty is closely tied not only to the judgment that will fall upon the earth in the last days, but also to the commands given to us in chapters two and three.

¹¹⁰ Jewish rabbis wrote that the Law must be obeyed “from aleph to tau,” or, in other words, from the first letter to the final letter (Beasley-Murray, p. 59).

¹¹¹ Outside of Revelation, this term, παντοκρατωρ/pantokratōr, is only found in 2 Cor. 6:18. In Revelation, the expression “The Lord God Almighty” is used seven times, in 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; and 21:22. (The expression here in 1:8 is broken up with the words *who is, and who was, and who is to come*.) Again we see the amazing intricacy of the Book of Revelation. In the LXX this term is often used to translate the common expression *YHWH s̄ebā’ot*, which means “the LORD of Hosts.”

B. The Vision (1:9-20)

1. Background of the Vision (1:9-11)

This event happened when John was on a certain island in the Aegean Sea. This is different from myths and legends, which have vague origins. This vision happened at a specific place.

1:9 I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction and kingdom and endurance in Christ Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ.

John introduces himself as their *brother and partner in the affliction and kingdom and endurance in Christ Jesus*. Perhaps theologians and interpreters of Scripture are disappointed that he did not use the more clear expression “*John, the Apostle*,” but perhaps to encourage the original readers, who were already suffering or would soon suffer persecution, *John* just uses his name, without any reminder of his high prestige as apostle. The Lord *Jesus*, who already suffered and won the victory over death, gives His word to the original readers through the Apostle *John*, who also suffered.

Although *John* never mentions his own name in the Gospel of *John*, the situation here is different. He gives us his name. Since we think he spent many of his last years in Ephesus, his name would have been especially well-known to these seven cities in the province of Asia.

The theme of *affliction* and *endurance* comes up here, and will be a major ongoing theme in the book. The word here translated *endurance*¹¹² occurs seven times in the Book of Revelation, once in the first section, four times in the second section, and twice in the last of the three sections.

The island of *Patmos* and its harbor are on the sailing routes between Rome and Ephesus. Its harbor is about 105 kilometers (65 miles) from Ephesus.¹¹³ *Patmos* is about 4100 hectares (16 square miles) in area.

John was there *on account of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus*. Some might say this means he was there to evangelize, but that is unlikely, given how out of the way the place was. In accord with later traditions,¹¹⁴ the most natural understanding of this text was that he

¹¹² The term ὑπομονή/*bupomone* is used seven times in Revelation, that is, in 1:19; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; and 14:12.

¹¹³ Hemer, p. 27.

¹¹⁴ Thomas, p. 87. Mounce, p. 75, notes that according to Eusebius (*Church History*, Book III, Chapter 20) *John* was later freed by the Emperor Nerva (96-98 AD) and was able to return to Ephesus.

was exiled there because of his Christian ministry, but actual historical evidence outside the Book of Revelation that people were ever punished by exile to the island of Patmos is lacking.¹¹⁵

By using the expression *on account of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus*, the Apostle links himself with the martyrs of 6:9; 12:11; and 20:4, all of who are said to have been martyred *on account of the word* and also *on account of the testimony*.¹¹⁶

1:10 I was in the Spirit¹¹⁷ on the Lord's Day, and behind me I heard a loud voice like a trumpet,

The expression *the Lord's Day* is only here in the New Testament and thus is hard to interpret. In the Old Testament (for example, Amos 5:18) the expression “The Day of the Lord” is used, referring to the end of the Age, but there is a better way to say that in Greek,¹¹⁸ and at this point in John’s experience he is only an apostle exiled on Patmos, not a time traveler into the Day of the Lord, which he will become! Mounce¹¹⁹ explains that just as the Romans celebrated Caesar’s Day, so the Christians celebrated *the Lord’s Day*, that is, Sunday.¹²⁰

1:11 saying “That which you see, write¹²¹ on a scroll 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.”

John is commanded to record the visions that he will see. This book is not the result of John’s environment or situation, nor is it the result of his deep

¹¹⁵ Hemer, p. 28.

¹¹⁶ See the discussion under 1:2 concerning the paired words *λογος/logos* and *μαρτυρια/marturia* (*word* and *testimony*).

¹¹⁷ Other than four texts mentioning the “Seven Spirits,” the word *Spirit* is used 14 times in Revelation about the Holy *Spirit*. The expression here translated in the *Spirit*, *εν πνευματι/en pneumati*, is used four times in Revelation (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; and 21:10), always preceding a vision (Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 3), and never with the definite article (“the”), and never with a modifier like “holy.” This expression can refer to the Holy *Spirit* (as in Eph. 5:18), or to the human spirit (as in Lk. 1:17 and Jn. 4:23).

¹¹⁸ This rare expression, *τη κυριακη ἡμερα/tē kuriakē hēmera* is not the same Greek expression as “The Day of the Lord,” *ἡ ἡμερα κυριου/bē hēmera kuriou*, (as in 2 Pet. 3:10) which refers to the end of the age.

¹¹⁹ P. 76.

¹²⁰ *The Lord's Day* refers to Sunday in *The Didache* and in Modern Greek.

¹²¹ The command *write* (*γραψον/grapson*) is used 12 times in Revelation: 1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; and 21:5. The repetition of the command clarifies that this book does not originate from man but from God.

spirituality or his great creativity. John did not “come up with” the Book of Revelation. It was given to him. It is the result of actual visions given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ. Understanding this significantly influences the interpretation of this book. It also reminds us of the divine authority of the book. These are the words of God, not the mere speculations of an aging apostle!

This is the first place the actual *churches* that were to receive this book are listed. See the comments under 1:4, where we first learned that *the seven churches* are the recipients of this revelation. This command to write will be repeated and elaborated upon in 1:19.

2. The Vision (1:12-20)

This is the core of the revelation of Christ, around which the entire book revolves. This vision is the most recent “portrait” of the Lord Jesus Christ, and is worth studying with great care. There are details of this “portrait” that are hard for us to understand, but some of them are clarified and applied in 1:20–3:22.

1:12 And there¹²² I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me.
And turning I saw seven golden lampstands,

We might find it odd that John writes as though he could *see a voice*. That may be true, but nevertheless it is a completely understandable expression.¹²³

As the Lord Himself explains in 1:20, the *seven golden lampstands* symbolize the *seven churches* mentioned above. They are *golden*, suggesting that those churches were precious to the Lord.

1:13 and in the midst of the seven¹²⁴ lampstands, someone like¹²⁵
a son of man, wearing a foot-length robe with a golden sash
wrapped around His chest.

The descriptions that the Lord uses of Himself at the beginning of all but one of the seven messages¹²⁶ of chapters two and three are taken

122 The word *there* is in most, but not the oldest, manuscripts.

123 According to Morris (*The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 52), the expression *see the voice* was not used in the Greek literature of that time period.

124 According to the majority of ancient Greek manuscripts the word *seven* is here.

125 This word, ὁμοιος/*bomoios*, here translated *like*, is used 19 times in this book, far more frequently than in the other books of the NT, perhaps because John is describing things for which he has insufficient vocabulary.

126 Of the seven letters, only the one to Laodicea does not begin with a characteristic taken from 1:13–18, but even in that case the characteristic is drawn from 1:5.

from 1:13-18. Each description is appropriate for the special needs or characteristics of the church it describes.

The interpreter has to be very careful so that his interpretation is not unfounded and random. What is clear and certain in this vision is that Christ is glorious, so glorious that the apostle John himself falls down at His feet. Do not let the discussion of the interpretation of the text take away from the sense of awe apparent in this text.

Verse 13 is interpreted with the help of verse 20 where the Lord Jesus says “the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” So this text means that the Lord Jesus is *in the midst* of His churches. He is *in the midst*. How true this is! The Lord walks *in the midst* of the churches, He is present.

The term *son*¹²⁷ used here often has a non-literal meaning, as in the following:

- “followers” in Matthew 12:27 (translated “your people” in the NIV, it is more literally “your sons”); and 1 Peter 5:13 (Peter refers to Mark as “my son”)
- “members of a large group” as in Mark 3:28 (“all the sins and blasphemies of the sons of men”); Acts 13:26 (“sons of the race of Abraham”); and Ephesians 3:5 (translated “other generations” in the NIV, it is more literally “the sons of men”)
- someone that very much resembles someone else can be called the “son” of that person, as in Matthew 13:38 (“The weeds are the sons of the evil one”) and Acts 13:10 (Paul calls Elymas the sorcerer a “son of the devil.”)

The Lord Jesus is called “the Son of God” 40 times in the New Testament with 23 of those in the Gospels (as in Matthew 26:63), “the Son of Man” 87 times in the New Testament with 83 of those in the Gospels (as in Matthew 8:20), and “the Son of David” 16 times in the New Testament, all of which are in the three Synoptic Gospels (as in Matthew 22:42-45).

This expression, *son of man*, is very difficult to interpret. It has various meanings in the Old Testament:

- “mankind” in Psalm 8:4
- the Messiah, Israel, or the King of Israel in Psalm 80:17
- the prophet Ezekiel himself over 90 times in Ezekiel
- the prophet Daniel himself in Daniel 8:17
- “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” in Daniel 7:13 (That same Person is mentioned by the Lord Himself

¹²⁷ ὄνος/bios

in Matthew 24:30, “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.”)

Clearly, this is the Lord Jesus Himself. Perhaps many of these possible interpretations merge together, because the Lord Jesus is a prophet, He is a *man*,¹²⁸ and He is Messiah. There is no contradiction in His three identities.

The expression here, *someone like a son of man*, does not use the same grammar as the expression “the Son of Man” in the Gospels.¹²⁹ The expression here in Revelation 1:13 is more like the expression in Daniel 7:13. That connection is further strengthened by Matthew 24:30 where, as noted above, the Lord quotes Daniel 7:13 as a reference to Himself, “the Son of Man.”

In Daniel 10:5-9 the prophet sees someone that closely resembles the vision of the Lord Jesus in Revelation 1:12-17. In these two passages the person is wearing a *golden sash* and has eyes like fire, feet like burnished bronze, and a thunderously loud voice.

Beasley-Murray¹³⁰ says the *foot-length robe* is a *robe* that is used by people of high status like the high priest (as in Exodus 28:4), but others besides the high priest might also wear such a *robe*.¹³¹

In Exodus 39:29, the *sash* of the High Priest was of “finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn,” but by the era of Josephus the *sash* of the High Priest was made of gold,¹³² so this furthers the impression that the Lord was clothed as High Priest. However, it should also be noted that the angel that appeared to Daniel in Daniel 10:5-21 was dressed in about the same way as the Lord is dressed in this verse.¹³³

¹²⁸ According to some of the Church Fathers (Ignatius, for instance), the expression “Son of God” emphasizes that He is truly God, and the expression *Son of Man* emphasizes that He is truly man. However, there are scholars today that do not accept that understanding.

¹²⁹ In the four Gospels we often see the expression ὁ θεός του ανθρώπου/*ho buios tou anthrōpou*, with the Greek definite articles, but in Rev. 1:13 and 14:14 the expression is ὁ οὐαὶ ανθρώπου/*huiō anthrōpou*, without the Greek definite article.

¹³⁰ Pp. 66-67.

¹³¹ Mounce, p. 78, is more certain that this *robe* refers to the Lord’s role as priest, because this Greek expression is used six times for the clothing of the High Priest in the LXX, and only once of someone else’s clothing.

¹³² Mounce, p. 78.

¹³³ Thomas, p. 100.

1:14 Now His head and¹³⁴ hair were white as wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like a flame of fire.

In Daniel 7:9 we read concerning the Ancient of Days, who is clearly God the Father, that “the hair of His head was as pure wool,” so this passage seems to connect the Father with the Son. *White hair* calls for respect in Leviticus 19:32 and Proverbs 16:31.

The congregation in Thyatira was warned that His *eyes* are *like a flame of fire*.¹³⁵ That was perhaps because the leadership there had tolerated sin, and needed to be told that He tests people’s hearts (2:23). So it would seem that *eyes like a flame of fire* emphasizes that He is able to see into people’s hearts.

1:15 His feet were like bronze¹³⁶ fired in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.

Metal that is heated and *fired in a furnace* is dangerously hot. The Lord Jesus is able to bring judgment. Just as His eyes can test the hearts of men, in the same way *His feet* can enforce the judgment He makes. For this reason, the congregation in Thyatira was warned concerning *His feet*, which were *like bronze fired in a furnace*. Individuals, leaders, and congregations that do not deal with sin are warned!

The *voice* of the angel in Daniel 10:6 was “like the sound of a multitude,” but the idea of a *voice like the sound of many waters* is an allusion to Ezekiel 43:2, where the *voice* of God is “like the roar of many waters.” Thus the One who is pictured in Revelation 1 is indeed God and not a mere angel.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ The word here is *καὶ/kai* which normally means “and,” but “that is” or “even” might be more fitting in this text.

¹³⁵ This is similar to Dan. 10:6 where an angel had “eyes like a flaming torch.”

¹³⁶ Concerning this term (*χαλκολίβανον/chalkolibanon*) *BDAG* says, “Since the word is found nowhere independent of Revelation, the exact nature of this metal or alloy remains unknown.” The word *χαλκος/chalkos* refers to copper, *bronze*, or brass. Hemer, p. 116, suggests that it probably refers to *bronze*, which is an alloy of copper and zinc. Hemer also states that the lack of information about this metal is probably due to the *bronze* workers’ guild wanting to keep the details of *χαλκολίβανον/chalkolibanon* production a secret from their competitors.

¹³⁷ Thomas, p. 102.

1:16 And in His right hand He had¹³⁸ seven stars, and coming out of His mouth there was a sharp double-edged sword. And His face was like the sun shining in its power.

The Lord Jesus has the *seven stars* in *His right hand*. In 1:20 we learn that the *seven stars* refer to the *seven messengers* from the *seven churches*. Having them in *His right hand* might mean He has power over them, or that He is protecting them.

The picture of a *sword coming out of a mouth* was not strange for the people of God, because in Isaiah 49:2 the prophet says, “He set my mouth like a sharp sword....” Also, in Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12 the Word of God is likened to a *sword*.

If the incident with the *double-edged sword* in Joshua 5:13-15 can be used to help interpret this passage, it means the Lord can help, and He can oppose, depending upon the character of the people He is dealing with.

The congregation in Pergamum needed to be reminded about this *double-edged sword* perhaps because they had the idea that the Lord was just their Savior, and would just let them sin now that He had forgiven them. Take care, that *sword* is *double-edged*, so it can be used against enemies or against followers, if there is need! Some among the congregation in Corinth had already died because they ignored this truth, according to 1 Corinthians 11:30.

We read here that *His face*¹³⁹ was like the sun shining in its power. Apparently His glory was so amazing that *His face* could not be looked upon any more than you might look upon the sun shining in its power. Similar things are also said of the Lord in Matthew 17:¹⁴⁰ and an angel in Revelation 10:1.

Thus the vision of the Lord Jesus has reached its climax. The rest of what will be said in the Book of Revelation has its roots in this vision of Christ. The commands in the Book of Revelation flow from the character and will of the Lord Jesus as revealed in this chapter.

¹³⁸ This verb (*εχω/echō*) is the normal word for “to have,” not “to hold.” A different verb that means “to grasp” is used in 2:1.

¹³⁹ This term, *οψις/opsis*, can mean *face* (Jn. 11:44), “expression,” or “appearance” (Jn. 7:24).

¹⁴⁰ At the transfiguration in Mt. 17; Mk. 9; and Lk. 9, John, along with Peter and James, bowed down just as John bowed in verse 1:17.

1:17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead, and He set His right hand on me saying, “Do not fear. I am the First and the Last.

This is the most appropriate response to the glory of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, others that have experienced something like this also have fallen *at His feet as though dead*.¹⁴¹

In the midst of this glorious vision we read, too, of the grace of our Lord. See how *He set His right hand on* John and told him not to *fear*. Here in one verse the glory and mercy of God are powerfully portrayed for us. This is indeed part of the uniqueness of our faith – that we should know such a glorious God, but a God that would approach us and put *His right hand* upon us. The same *hand* that holds the seven stars can be placed upon John’s shoulder in an assuring and comforting way. What a God of wonders we know!

The attitude of the Lord Jesus here is the same as His attitude in Matthew 17:7. This is also the attitude of the angel in Daniel 10:10-12.

The expression *I am the First and the Last*, also used in the Old Testament in Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12, is used of the Lord Jesus. It emphasizes His divinity. He is not merely an exceptional man, and He is not merely one of the many gods of the nations. This expression is like 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” 2:8 “the First and the Last,” 21:6 “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” and 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” If these four texts are summarized, we see that the Lord Jesus is the eternal God.

1:18 I am the Living One; and I was dead, and look, I am alive forever and ever, amen,¹⁴² and I have the keys of death and Hades.

The title “The First and the Last” is expanded in this verse: He is *the Living One*. This title is often found in the Old Testament¹⁴³ and New Testament,¹⁴⁴ as well as the writings of the rabbis.¹⁴⁵ He is *the Living God, the Eternal One*.

¹⁴¹ See for instance Josh. 5:14; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13; 43:3; 44:4; Dan. 2:46; 8:17; 10:7-9; Mt. 17:6; Lk. 5:8; and Acts 26:14.

¹⁴² The word αὐγῆς/amen is found in the Majority Text, though not in some of the oldest Greek texts.

¹⁴³ See for instance Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; and 84:2.

¹⁴⁴ For instance in Mt. 16:16; Acts 14:15; and Rom. 9:26.

¹⁴⁵ Beasley-Murray, p. 67.

The Living One has accomplished the incomprehensible: the Eternal One was *dead*, and now He lives, *forever and ever*. Because He accomplished this, He holds *the keys of death and Hades*. He has authority over *death and Hades*, which in the past had authority over us because of our sin. This verse is remarkable. In just a few words, the Lord gives the outline of all His work on the cross and in the now empty grave.

Besides that, this verse emphasizes the deity of Christ because in that era a Jewish leader wrote, “Four keys are delivered into the hand of the Lord of the world which He has given to no ruler: the key of life, the key of the graves, the key of food, the key of rain.”¹⁴⁶ This One who *was dead*, and is now *alive forever and ever*, has the *keys* that God never surrenders to any human ruler! Those readers that were threatened by the Roman Empire, fearing its power over their lives, need fear no longer, because their Lord and Savior holds *the keys of death and Hades*. For a few of the seven churches that would receive this Revelation, this would be vitally important.

All of this is glory enough for us to base our lives upon, but it is too hard to understand. In the next section, the Lord will take several of these descriptions about Himself, and use them in His messages to emphasize certain aspects of His character or being. So do not feel like all this is beyond you – it should be beyond you, but the Lord does want you to apply some particular parts of it in your life.

1:19 Write therefore what you saw, what is now and what will take place after these things.

As was discussed in the section entitled “Overview and Structure,” this verse gives the outline of the entire book. It was a command for John to *write* the vision that he just *saw*, as well as the revelation that was to follow, concerning *what is now and what will take place after these things*. As we shall soon see, that expression fits perfectly with what he will see about the situation of the seven churches in his day (chapters two and three) and the end time prophecies that follow (chapters 4-21). There are hard things to understand about the Book of Revelation, but the broad outline of the book and many specific applications to our lives are not at all hard to understand!

¹⁴⁶ Beasley-Murray, p. 68, quotes from the translation of Deut. 28:12 in The Jerusalem Targum.

1:20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

The term *mystery* refers to a truth that was unknowable in the past, but is now made known. The identity of those *seven stars*, *the messengers of the seven churches*, needs to be considered. The term here translated *messengers*¹⁴⁷ is the Greek word that the English word “angel” comes from. Very often in the Word of God, the messenger that is spoken of is in fact an angel, a heavenly being. However, that is not always the case. In Matthew 11:10 and Mark 1:2 this word is used of John the Baptist.¹⁴⁸ This word does not refer to angels here either. The word here is used of human *messengers*, rather than heavenly ones. There are at least two reasons for this. First, it is without parallel in Scripture that anyone would write to angels. The messages are clearly intended for believers. Second, in chapters two and three John is commanded to write to each of these *seven messengers*. If they were heavenly *messengers* (that is, angels), how would John deliver the scroll that he has written to them? If angels were intended here then somehow John, in exile on Patmos, would have had to ask those angels to carry the physical scrolls he had written to those churches. That does seem very strange, and is without biblical parallel. It is much simpler for us to take the basic literal meaning of this word here, and assume that *seven human messengers* will become available rather than that *seven angels* will somehow become available. Perhaps – and this is only speculation – there were *seven men* that had been sent by the *seven churches* to visit John. Perhaps they were pastors or church leaders. John would know what to do with what he had written. If these are indeed human *messengers* visiting John on Patmos, then they would be like Epaphroditus, who was sent from Philippi to serve and encourage Paul under house arrest (Philippians 2:25 and 4:18).¹⁴⁹

The symbol of the *seven golden lampstands* is a wonderful image, because *lampstands* do not shine, but they provide a place for the lamp¹⁵⁰ that

¹⁴⁷ αγγελος/anggelos

¹⁴⁸ Also in Lk. 7:24, 27; 9:52; and Jms. 2:25, the term αγγελος/anggelos refers to people that are sent, rather than heavenly beings. See also the LXX of Gen. 32:3 and Hag. 1:13.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas, p. 118.

¹⁵⁰ Mounce, p. 77, explains that in that era they did not yet have candles, so oil lamps were the easiest way to light up things at night. In Exod. 25:31-40 Moses was commanded to make a *golden lampstand* with *seven lamps*, and in Zech. 4:2 there was a *lampstand* with *seven lamps*.

does shine and fill the surrounding space with light. In the same way, Christ shines in the midst of the *churches*.

With this, this vision of the Lord Himself concludes. All that will be said in the remainder of the Book of Revelation has its roots here in this vision. The commands of the book are based on the Lord as He is revealed here. The most appropriate attitude for a follower of the Lord is to respond well to this vision.

II. “What is now” (2:1–3:22)

The function of this section

This section explains and applies the details of the vision we just read about, details that were hard to understand and apply on our own. The commands that must be obeyed in order for us to obtain the blessing promised in 1:3 are only found here in this section. This section is crucial for us to read, understand, and obey, if we are to be blessed, and if the Book of Revelation is to have its purpose fulfilled in our hearts.

The contents of this section

This section contains seven letters to seven churches. These are seven local churches, in seven different cities. In every age somewhere in the world, there have probably been churches very much like each of these seven churches. Certainly in this era there are churches that resemble each of these seven churches. That is probably why each message contains the exhortation, “The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The Lord is calling all who have “spiritual ears,” that is, all who have hearts open to Him, to listen to the messages to the seven churches. Many times in the Book of Revelation God’s people are called to discipleship, or called to be steadfast in discipleship. These words are one example of that repeated call. If you want to be blessed, you need to obey the commands of these messages.

The structure of this section

The seven messages of this section are structured according to a careful seven-fold pattern:¹⁵¹

1. The Recipient

¹⁵¹ The Study Bible version of the ESV has a chart on page 2465 that mentions these seven elements with the titles, “Church,” “Description of Christ,” “Commendation,” “Rebuke,” “Solution,” “Consequence of Disobedience,” and

2. The Characteristic of Christ
3. Praise for the Church
4. Criticism
5. Demand
6. Warning
7. Promise

There are, however, exceptions to this seven-fold pattern. Where we would expect to find a note of praise for the congregation in Laodicea, we find none. Where we would expect to find a note of criticism for the congregation in Smyrna, we find none.

Morris¹⁵² observes something like a chiastic¹⁵³ structure concerning the spiritual status of the seven churches. He notes that the first and the seventh churches are in grave danger, and the others as follows:

1. grave danger
2. excellent shape
3. middling
4. middling
5. middling
6. excellent shape
7. grave danger

Some interpreters say that each church represents a period in church history. For example, the church in Ephesus, with its accurate doctrine, represents the first church at the time of the apostles. This writer rejects this kind of interpretation for the following seven reasons:

1. Western church history does not actually fit well with the order of these seven messages.
2. There has probably been a church like each one of these congregations in every generation since Revelation was written.
3. An interpretation like this tends to draw our attention away from the application of these letters in our own lives and in our own churches.
4. Rather than reflecting supposed stages in church history, the order of the cities listed in this text simply reflects the order of those cities along a main road in their province.

“Promise for Conquerors.” This author agrees with those elements, but finds the title “Command” or “Demand” more specific and accurate than “Solution.”

¹⁵² *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 58.

¹⁵³ The word “chiasm” is from the Greek letter χ, simply because this structure can be diagrammed as an X shape. In this case the fourth church is at the center of the X.

5. There is not one indication within this text suggesting that the passage be interpreted allegorically.
6. There is no good answer to the question as to why western church history is prophesied in this passage, but Asian, African, and Latin American church history is ignored.
7. If this were intended, and if it were understood, then the believers in the middle ages, for instance, should have been able to look at the progression and realize that the Lord cannot come until several more “ages” of church history have passed, but we know that the Lord could have returned at any point in church history.¹⁵⁴

In all seven messages,¹⁵⁵ the very first words after the Lord introduces Himself are “I know your deeds.” These exact words are used each time.¹⁵⁶ These words probably had a different effect upon the various congregations. For those congregations whose heart and whose deeds were pleasing to the Lord, this would have been an encouragement.

Greek verbs and pronouns have different forms that show whether they are singular or plural, so in the Greek the word “you” clearly refers to one person or to more than one person. In Revelation 2-3 there are plural “yous” in 2:10, 13, 23, 24, and 25.¹⁵⁷ All of the other second person verbs and pronouns are singular. That can be observed with certainty from the text. The reason for this predominant use of the singular can be guessed, but not with certainty. Perhaps it is simply a stylistic matter.¹⁵⁸ Or perhaps the Lord is primarily addressing the “messenger” of the church, who is the leader, and He only addresses the congregation a few times. The idea that He is primarily addressing the leader of each of the congregations is

¹⁵⁴ See the discussion concerning the imminent return of the Lord in the discussion and footnote under 1:3.

¹⁵⁵ This is according to the text of the majority of the Greek manuscripts.

¹⁵⁶ There is a *very* slight change in the Greek word order in 2:2 and 2:13, but the same words are there.

¹⁵⁷ In 2:10, the following italicized words are plural: “the devil is about to throw some of *you* into prison so that *you might be tested*, and *you will have affliction* for ten days.” In 2:13 only “among *you*” is plural. In 2:23-25 the following are plural: “...I will give to each of *you* according to *your* deeds. But upon *you*, to the rest of *you* in Thyatira, as many as *do not hold* to that teaching and *have not learned* the so-called deep things of Satan’s, upon *you* I do not set another burden. In any case what *you have, hold on* to it until I come.”

¹⁵⁸ One stylistic example of a shift from plural, to singular, and back to plural is in Gal. 4:6-8. Verse 6 uses the plural “sons,” verse 7 has the singular “a son,” and then verse 8 shifts back to the plural, “you were slaves.”

appealing because it shows the importance of leadership, but against this idea is the fact that the rewards verses use the singular; Would that mean that only the rewards of the leaders are mentioned? That seems unlikely. It seems best to understand that the seven messages are directed to three types of readers. Firstly, and most directly, they are addressed “to the messenger of the church,” as the first words of each letter tell us. That is confirmed by the predominant use of the singular as described above. Secondly, according to 1:11, these messages were to be sent “to the seven churches: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna...,” where no messenger or angel is mentioned. Thirdly, these messages were “what the Spirit says to the churches,” referring to all real churches throughout the ages.

A. Message to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

i. The Recipient and the local situation (2:1a)

2:1a “To the messenger of the church in Ephesus write:

As noted above in the discussion of the previous verse, *the messenger of the church* is a better translation than “the angel of the church.”

Of the seven cities mentioned in chapters two and three, *Ephesus* was the wealthiest. It was second only to Rome during this period.¹⁵⁹ Concerning commerce, the city of *Ephesus* was well-situated and prosperous. Transportation is crucial for commerce, and *Ephesus* was located at the mouth of the River Cayster, which made an excellent harbor, except that silt from the river made the harbor shallower and shallower as the years passed, even though they deepened the harbor in 150 BC and again in 50 AD, and relocated the city several times. The people of *Ephesus* knew that their harbor, the economic lifeline of their city, was threatened by that silt. The buildup of silt continued through the centuries, so that today the present coastline is far away from the ancient ruins of *Ephesus*. At dave.hagelb.org click on the “Photos” tab (or go directly to www.flickr.com/photos/davehag/sets/) to view and download many photographs of ancient *Ephesus* and the other sites of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3.

Besides water transportation, three major roads met in *Ephesus*: one from Mesopotamia; another from Galatia; and a third from the Maeander Valley. The markets of *Ephesus* must have been filled with all sorts of local and foreign products.

¹⁵⁹ Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.24.

Roman governors arriving from Rome would use Ephesus' harbor. This became a point of pride for the Ephesians. When in the second century the harbor was silting up, the city of Smyrna took the opportunity to apply to be the new port of landing for official Roman visits, but their request was denied, and *Ephesus* retained that honor.

Two Roman coins from *Ephesus* express the pride they felt about that honor. The first has a Roman warship on it. Its oars are clearly visible. The writing, "First Landing," indicates that the ship carried the governor to the province of Asia, and his "first landing" was always at *Ephesus*. This particular coin was minted about 245 AD, but the right of "First Landing" was much older.¹⁶⁰



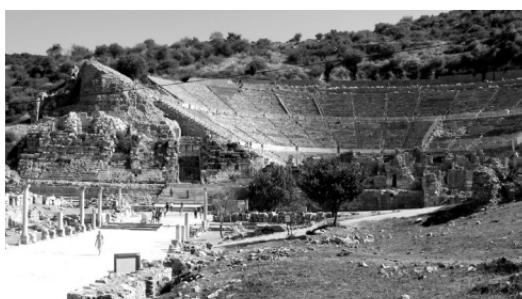
The second coin shows a merchant sailing

ship. The writing "Ephesus: First in Asia" expresses Ephesian pride. At that time the only cities of the province of Asia that had harbors were *Ephesus* and Smyrna.¹⁶¹ Only their coins had ships on them.

Concerning politics, *Ephesus* was foremost in the province. Political life was very stable there, and in appreciation the Roman government allowed them to govern themselves. *Ephesus* was given the status of

"free city," and Roman troops were not stationed there. Also, the Roman Emperor honored *Ephesus* on a routine basis because the Roman-appointed governor set up a routine court for the cases that were important to *Ephesus*. The city of *Ephesus* witnessed the luxury and activity of the Greek and Roman cultures.

The theater in *Ephesus* overlooked the harbor. It seated 25,000 people.



¹⁶⁰ Ramsay, pp. 172-173.

¹⁶¹ By that time the harbor of Miletus, which Paul used in Acts 20:15-17, had become unusable due to the accumulation of silt deposited by the river that met the sea there. It was about 70 kilometers (40 miles) south of *Ephesus*.

The photograph shows the theater as seen from the street that goes to the harbor. This theater and others like it had excellent acoustics, an important issue in an age with no sound amplification.

Concerning religion, the temple of Artemis¹⁶² was the great pride of *Ephesus*. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The origin of the first temple there is lost in history, but it was destroyed in the seventh century BC. It was rebuilt by the Lydian king Croesus around 550 BC. That temple was burned down by a fame-seeking arsonist on about July 21, 356 BC, at about the same time Alexander the Great was born. In 333 BC, as Alexander came through conquering the region, he offered to pay to complete the rebuilding of the temple, if they would carve his name into the temple. The great conqueror's offer was refused. According to Strabo the careful response of Ephesus was, "It is not fitting that one god should build a temple for another god." Starting in 323 BC the temple was again rebuilt, and it lasted until about 262 AD, when it was destroyed by the Goths, and rebuilt in the fourth century. Then as Christianity grew stronger, the temple grew weaker. In the year 401 AD John Chrysostom and some of his followers destroyed the temple, and it was never rebuilt.

Greeks would say, "As the sun crosses the sky it sees nothing more grand than the temple of Artemis." In Acts 19:23-40 we can get some idea of the local pride in the temple, especially verse 35, which reads, "Calming the crowd, the city clerk said, 'Men, Ephesians, who is the man that does not know that the city of Ephesus is the temple-keeper of the great goddess Artemis and that which is fallen from heaven?'"¹⁶³

There is some disagreement among ancient historians but even according to the smaller of the sets of dimensions of the temple it was an impressive 115 meters (377 feet) long by 55 meters (180 feet) wide. Its 127 columns were 20 meters (60 feet) high. In the temple there was a statue of Artemis. This statue was black, short, and very coarse. In Acts 19:35 we read of the popular belief that that statue fell from heaven. With fanatic devotion the citizens of *Ephesus* worshiped and honored an ugly statue.

In the past some people have written about temple prostitutes in the temple of Artemis, but better research indicates that the young women

¹⁶² "Artemis" became "Diana" in Latin.

¹⁶³ The expression "that which is fallen from heaven" can also be translated "that which is fallen from Zeus." This expression reflects their belief that the statue of Artemis in the temple fell from heaven.

that were priestesses in the temple of Artemis beside the city of *Ephesus* served their brief terms in that role “with piety and decorum.”¹⁶⁴

Some temples in that era had what was called “the right of asylum.”¹⁶⁵ People accused of crimes could flee to a temple with this right, and as long as they stayed within the clearly defined area of asylum, they could not be seized or harmed. Through all the centuries of its existence, the temple of Artemis just outside the city of *Ephesus* was a famous asylum. The safety which it offered was called “salvation.”¹⁶⁶ Rarely was this right violated, but in 88 BC Mithridates IV ordered the killing of some Romans within the asylum of Artemis. At one point in time the asylum area was defined by the distance of one bowshot from the roof of the temple, but for a time that distance was doubled. That brought some of the city of *Ephesus* into the area of asylum, with the result that leaders in organized crime could live comfortably there. Because of this, the “salvation” that the temple provided actually increased the crime rate for *Ephesus*!¹⁶⁷

The Ephesian enthusiasm for magic was well-known in the ancient world.¹⁶⁸ Acts 19:17-20 tells about how the new converts there burned fifty thousand drachmas worth of magic scrolls, the equivalent of about US\$ 10,000. Another way to understand the value given there was that a drachma was the cost of one sheep, so the value of the scrolls burned that day was the same as the value of fifty thousand sheep. This surprisingly high amount indicates that many valuable magic scrolls were burned that day by the new believers in *Ephesus*, which in turn suggests that their repentance was genuine and enthusiastic. They understood that their earlier involvement in the occult was evil, and they resolutely left it all, at great expense.

There were also temples in *Ephesus* dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor.

Concerning the population, there were several different ethnic groups in *Ephesus*. Many years prior to the writing of Revelation the local people were subjugated by some Athenians, whose descendants were still there.

¹⁶⁴ “Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal,” S. M. Baugh, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 443-460.

¹⁶⁵ The Law of Moses provided something similar in Exod. 21:13-14; Num. 35:9-34; Deut. 4:41-43; and 19:1-13. 1 Kings 2:28-35 suggests that there was some hope of asylum in the temple in Jerusalem as well.

¹⁶⁶ σωτηρία/sōtēria

¹⁶⁷ Hemer, pp. 48-51.

¹⁶⁸ See Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians, Power and Magic: the concept of power in Ephesians in light of its historical setting*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

There were probably many Jews as well.¹⁶⁹ *Ephesus* was an unusual city. As noted above, *Ephesus* was second only to Rome in the entire Roman empire. The citizens of *Ephesus* would be tempted to glory in the greatness and luxury of their city.

Ephesus, as an excellent transportation hub, would have been strategic for Paul. Note Acts 19:8-10. According to Christian tradition, several years after Paul sent Tychicus to *Ephesus*, John himself moved there, and served there until his banishment to Patmos. Tourists to *Ephesus* today can visit the traditional tomb of the Apostle John on a hill overlooking the site of the temple of Artemis, as well as the traditional house of Mary, not far from the city. We can read sense something of the extent of the Gospel ministry in *Ephesus* in Acts 18-20; 1 Corinthians 15:32; 16:8; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:18; and 4:12.

Today there are only ruins in *Ephesus*. The Cayster River brought so much silt that what had been a valuable harbor long ago became dry land. The place that was full of activity and wealth is now only a destination for tourists, many of whom, despite the former glory of *Ephesus*, are there simply to see where Peter and Paul walked. Would not the former residents of the city be surprised to know that?

2. The Characteristic of Christ (2:1b)

2:1b thus says¹⁷⁰ the One who holds¹⁷¹ the seven stars in His right hand and who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: As was discussed in the comments under 1:20, *the seven stars* were the *seven messengers* of the churches, and *the seven golden lampstands* were the churches themselves.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas, p. 129.

¹⁷⁰ The expression *thus says* introduces each of the seven letters in Rev. 2 and 3. This expression (*ταῦτε λεγει τάδε λεγει*) is taken from the LXX, where the expression *ταῦτε λεγει κυριος*/*tādē legei Kurios* is used over 300 times. It usually translates the expression *kō ἄmar YHWH*, which appears almost 300 times in the OT. That OT expression is translated “thus saith the LORD” in the KJV.

The seven-fold repetition of that OT expression strongly implies two things: firstly, that He that speaks in the seven letters of Rev. 2 and 3 speaks as the LORD, that is, as YHWH, secondly, that what He says in these seven letters is equated with the word of LORD spoken to the people of God in the OT.

¹⁷¹ In the vision of Jesus in chapter one John saw that Jesus “had” in his right hand seven stars and that he “was” in the midst of the seven lampstands, but here in chapter 2 it is written that He *holds* the seven stars and that He *walks* among the seven lampstands. What was said about the Lord Jesus in chapter one is made more active here in this text. “Had” becomes “holds,” and “was” becomes “walks.”

He holds the seven stars in His right hand. This seems to speak of protection and care, in accord with John 10:28-29. If these were church leaders sent as messengers from the churches to visit John, they would be encouraged by the fact that they are held in His right hand. They will need encouragement as they face the challenges that the Lord brings before them in these seven messages, chapters two and three.

The Lord walks among the seven lampstands, He is personally present. Whether the church is strong or weak, confident or afraid, large or small, He is there. By identifying Himself this way in this letter, He is saying that for some reason the Ephesians, and all other Christians that are like them, need to keep this truth in mind. As we read more of this message we will understand why this is so.

3. Praise for the Church (2:2-3)

2:2-3 I know your deeds, your labor,¹⁷² and your endurance, and that you cannot bear evil men, and that you have tested those who say they are apostles but are not, and you have found them to be liars. And you have steadfastness and have endured¹⁷³ for My name, and have not become weary.

The congregation is praised for their *labor* and for their rejection of false *apostles*. They held firmly to sound doctrine, and the Lord praised them for that. What the Lord Jesus says as praise for the Ephesian church is similar to what is said in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, but there is an important difference. The Thessalonian church had work produced by faith, *labor* prompted by love and *endurance* inspired by hope, but the Ephesian church only had their *deeds*, their *labor*, and their *endurance*.

What Paul prophesied in Acts 20:29-31 (that savage wolves would attack the congregation with false teachings) did happen. The false *apostles* realized the importance of the city of Ephesus as well. Some interpreters try to determine the identity of *those who say they are apostles, but are not*, but any certainty concerning their identity was lost many centuries ago. It is not impossible that “followers of Nicolaus” (2:6) are referred to here, but again there is no certainty about their identity or number.

In any case, this church has been steadfast and has *endured* for His *name*. They are active in service and pure in their doctrine. They have rejected false teaching and the teachers that brought it. The teachers in the church in Ephesus taught sound doctrine. The Lord Jesus praised their activity

¹⁷² This word (χοπος/kopos) refers to *labor* that is so difficult that the worker perspires. The Ephesians really worked hard!

¹⁷³ βασταζω/bastazō is translated *bear* in verse 2 and *endured* in verse 3.

and their *endurance*. But as Mounce notes, “Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.”¹⁷⁴

Sound doctrine is important, and their doctrine was sound. This does not go unnoticed by the Lord. Not only is sound doctrine important, but it is important for the leadership to protect the congregation from so-called *apostles* that bring their lies. The leadership in the church in Ephesus had also done well in this, and is praised accordingly. Many a Christian is looking for a church like this, and many a pastor would be delighted to pastor a church like this! However....

4. Criticism (2:4)

2:4 But I have against you, that¹⁷⁵ you have abandoned your first love.

The Lord’s words of praise were many and detailed, and His words of criticism were few. Even so, these few words hit hard, if we understand the importance of *love* in the Christian life. They left their *first love*. This was no small issue for the Lord; it was not something He wanted to overlook. They were like Martha, not Mary, in Luke 10:38-42. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is lacking. Now, Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

At *first* they doubtless had a deep *love* for the Lord, but as time went on they somehow made a subtle shift – their minds became more and more interested in sound doctrine, and their hearts became less and less interested in the Lord Jesus Himself.

So, the reason the Lord reminds this congregation that He walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands is so that they will remember that He is a real person in their midst, and not just the primary subject of their sound doctrine.

This *love* is probably especially a *love* for the Lord Jesus, but *love* of God is not easily separated from the *love* of man, as 1 John 4:20 reminds us, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for how can the one not loving his brother whom he has seen love God whom he

¹⁷⁴ P. 88.

¹⁷⁵ Four of the seven congregations got both praise and criticism from the Lord. Concerning the three congregations that are first praised, then criticized, Ephesus and Thyatira both have this exact same expression, *but I have against you that*. With slightly different wording in 2:14 the congregation in Pergamum is told, “But I have a few things against you, that....”

has not seen?” Any congregation or individual like this would do well to carefully read 1 Corinthians 13.

Every Christian that is serious about sound doctrine and serious Bible study should ask, “Have I lost my first love?” Indeed, being a careful student of the Word and of sound doctrine can be spiritually dangerous. It is good that we study the Scriptures, but at the same time we need to guard our hearts, that we do not abandon our *first love*. In the matter of *love*, we must not let ourselves become like these Ephesians.

5. Demand (2:5a)

2:5a Therefore remember from whence you have fallen, and repent and do those first deeds.

The demand or command that the Lord gives to the Ephesians is straightforward and simple. There is nothing here that is intellectually challenging, simply *remember, repent, and do*. However, this is not an easy thing to do, if you have left your first love. None of the things the seven churches are commanded to do were easy for that particular church.

We do not know *from whence* they had *fallen*, but the Ephesian congregation that Paul wrote to about three decades earlier seemed to be a healthy congregation.

It is clear this is spoken to real believing Christians. If it were spoken to people with a so-called “mere intellectual assent” but without “saving faith,”¹⁷⁶ the Lord would not have called them to *remember from whence you have fallen*, nor would He have spoken of *those first deeds*. The clear meaning here is that these are real born-again believers that have left their devotion to the person of Jesus Christ, and have grown in pure doctrine, and that these people need to go back to what they had in the earlier years. The command to *repent* here is not a call to come to saving faith in Christ, but to turn away from the spiritual coldness that has wrapped around their hearts.

¹⁷⁶ These expressions, “mere intellectual assent” and “saving faith,” are often used in the writings of Reformed theologians, but this writer does not accept them. As is clear in the Gospel of John, faith in Jesus Christ saves – there is no faith in Christ that does not save a person from eternal judgment.

6. Warning (2:5b)

2:5b But if not, I am coming to you suddenly¹⁷⁷ and will remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.

This text explains what will happen *if* the demand is not met, in other words, it explains what the threat is behind the demand. *If they do not repent*, this will happen. In these two chapters, the warnings seem to have their fulfillment in the present experience of the church, but the fulfillment of most of the promises will happen in the age to come.

Bauckham¹⁷⁸ observes that the expression *I am coming*, in this form,¹⁷⁹ is used seven times in the Book of Revelation, and each time it is spoken by the Lord Himself, and always in the context of promise or threat.

We know from 1:20 that the *lampstand* symbolizes the congregation. It is a place for the Light of the World. If they do not do as He requires, He *will remove* the church, and Ephesus will go dark. Perhaps the members of the congregation and their descendants will continue to gather on Sundays for generations to come, but in the years to come it will no longer be a *lampstand*; the Light will no longer shine from it.¹⁸⁰ The Lord could do this through persecution, or lack of effective evangelism even towards their own children, so that eventually there would no longer be a Christian congregation in Ephesus. Somehow or other, He will come and see to it that there is no longer a *lampstand* in Ephesus. That is how strongly He desires them to return to their first love!

What had become their pride, that the teaching of the church in Ephesus was so pure, would be taken away by Jesus himself if they did not repent. This is what happens to pure doctrine when it is not accompanied by love!

¹⁷⁷ The Majority Text includes the word *ταχὺς/tachus*, here translated *suddenly*. See the footnote under 1:1 concerning related terms.

¹⁷⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁹ This form is *ερχομαι/erchomai*, in the Present Tense, Middle, Indicative, first person, singular. In total, this word is used 36 times in the Book of Revelation, but this form is only used in 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, and 20, that is, seven times! Six of those seven times this expression is accompanied by the word *ταχύ/tachu*, (*suddenly*), and once, in 16:15, instead of *ταχύ/tachu* the expression “like a thief” is used.

¹⁸⁰ In a sense this is what happened to the temple in Ezek. 11:22-23.

The threat of having the Lord *remove* their *lampstand* may have been all the more vivid to the Ephesians, who had to move their city several times because their harbor was silting up.¹⁸¹

According to Ignatius'¹⁸² letter to Ephesus, they did repent, so that this threat was not realized, or its realization was postponed.¹⁸³

Praise (continued) (2:6)

2:6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Almost as though He does not want to end this assessment on a negative note, the Lord also praises them specifically in the matter of how they handled *the Nicolaitans*. Note that He does not say that He hates *the Nicolaitans*, but that He hates *the deeds of the Nicolaitans*.

The Nicolaitans' identity simply cannot be established with any certainty at all. Some speculate that they were followers of the Nicolas that was chosen for church ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5), who they say later embraced false doctrine. This is in accord with some traditions of the early church, but there were church fathers that did not agree with this. Others speculate that they were called *the Nicolaitans* because the term Nicolaitan is from two Greek words that mean “victory” and “people”¹⁸⁴ and this group defeats the people with false teachings. Both of these possibilities are very speculative. Perhaps *the Nicolaitans* were so named because they were followers of some otherwise unknown man named Nicolas, but we simply do not know,¹⁸⁵ and we do not need to know. The Ephesians knew, and took some comfort in this praise from the Lord, even as they faced His criticism.

¹⁸¹ Hemer, p. 36. Except for a brief period from 1090-1097 when it was under Turkish control, the city remained in the hands of people that considered themselves to be Christian until it fell to the Turks early in the 14th century.

¹⁸² Ignatius lived from about 35 AD to about 108 AD.

¹⁸³ Mounce, p. 89.

¹⁸⁴ The word νικος/nikos means “victory,” and λαος/laos means “people,” but it is far more likely that those people were called *the Nicolaitans* because they were followers of some now unknown Nicolas.

¹⁸⁵ According to Eusebius, who lived in the fourth century, the *Nicolaitans* did not last long (Mounce, p. 89).

7. Promise (2:7)

2:7 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the victor,¹⁸⁶ I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of My¹⁸⁷ God.

At the end of each of the seven messages¹⁸⁸ the exhortation *to the one who has an ear* is given. Perhaps this is just an exhortation to everyone, because everyone has a physical *ear*, but since the content to be heard is *what the Spirit says*, it seems more likely to refer to “spiritual ears,” like the ears of Ezekiel 12:2, in which Ezekiel is told, “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house which has eyes to see but they do not see; they have ears to hear, but they do not hear....” This connection is all the more likely because the Lord Jesus used that expression from Ezekiel in Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; and 14:35. Note also Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 43:8; and Jeremiah 5:21.

If this is the correct understanding, then this is a call to all whose hearts are open to these words in the Book of Revelation. Some may suggest that believers are to do this, to *hear what the Spirit says to the churches*, through meditation and quietude. Even though there doubtless are benefits in meditation and quietude, that does not seem to be what the Lord is referring to here. This is, after all, a command that is given seven times throughout the seven messages of the Lord to the seven *churches*. These seven messages are in fact precisely *what the Lord says to the churches*, and, in context, are what *the one who has an ear* should be “hearing.” Thus it is not meditation and quietude in general that is called for here, but meditation upon Revelation chapters two and three that is called for here! *The Spirit, through His Word*, is speaking objectively and precisely to all believers that have a receptive heart to *hear* what He is saying.

Furthermore, the command is to *hear what the Spirit says to the churches*, not just to the one church that we are in. What is said to the church in Smyrna needs to be heard also by the church in Philadelphia. All believers are to pay close attention to all seven of the messages. Perhaps only one of the seven is particularly applicable to you, but you are to listen to all of them, and know which letter is written, so to speak, directly to you.

¹⁸⁶ The verb translated *victor* here (*νικῶ/nikaō*), is used 17 times in all of Revelation. It is used like this in each of the seven rewards passages of the seven messages. It means “win,” “be victorious,” or “conquer.” See the explanation of this very significant concept in the Book of Revelation in the discussion of 5:5.

¹⁸⁷ The majority of Greek manuscripts include the word *My*.

¹⁸⁸ This exhortation is placed prior to the promise in the first three messages, and after the promise in the last four.

In 2:5b there was the warning, “if you do not repent.” On the other hand, if they do meet the demand of Christ, if they do remember from how far they have fallen, and repent and do the things they did at first, the Lord Jesus will give them something that is beautiful and pleasing. Once again, this promise is not automatically fulfilled in the lives of everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as their Savior, but only for each believer who obeys the commands of the Lord Jesus in these two chapters.

The reward offered here is *to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of My God*. Nowhere in the whole Bible is there a single verse that says that every believer, both those who have unwavering faith and consistent good deeds as well as those whose faith and deeds are weak, will *eat from the tree of life*. This is a special privilege of the victors. Although according to 22:2 the leaves of this *tree* are meant for the service of the nations, the fruit is exclusively for those that are victorious (see the discussion of 22:14). The contrast between that tree’s fruit and its leaves is striking, as is the contrast between the final setting of victors and that of believers that do not heed the warnings of these letters! *The tree of life* is mentioned in Genesis 2:9; 3:22 and 24.¹⁸⁹ Once Adam and Eve fell, *the tree of life* was guarded by cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth. However, when the Lord returns and distributes these gifts according to these promises, the fruit of that *tree* will be given to the victors.

In the Book of Revelation, *the tree of life* only appears here and in 22:2, 14, and 19. In 22:2 we learn that *the tree of life* is there in the midst of the New Jerusalem. In 22:14 *the tree of life* is part of the seventh blessing of Revelation. In 22:19 access to *the tree of life* is taken away from anyone who “takes away from the words of this book of prophecy.” The mention of *the tree of life* in Revelation is consistent with the view that eating from it is part of the rewards that will be given to believers that love and obey the Lord.

Here and throughout chapters two and three, victors are those that will gain the blessing that is promised in Revelation 1:3. They gain that blessing by “keeping those things written in the words of this prophecy.”

In the message of the Lord Jesus to the church in Ephesus, we read that He is pleased with the purity of their doctrine, and He also acknowledges their deeds, but those deeds do not spring from a heart full of love, as they ought. To motivate them, He threatens that if they do not return to their first love, He will remove the church from Ephesus, which would make

¹⁸⁹ *The tree of life* also is mentioned in Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; and 15:4 but the expression used in Proverbs is slightly different from that in Genesis. In Genesis the definite article is used, but in Proverbs the definite article is not used.

their labor useless. But if they return to their first love, then He will give them the special privilege – which will not be given to every believer – to eat from the tree of life that was long ago forbidden to Adam.

A Major Interpretational Issue:

The issue of rewards is crucial to the overall purpose of the book. We should all be victors. We should all be believers that actually obey Christ. This is required. It is imperative. No Bible teacher would deny this, but the difficulty appears as soon as we discuss what happens if believers do not obey. Some would say that if we do not obey, we are probably showing that we never really had “saving faith,” that our faith was “mere intellectual assent.” Others would say that if we do not obey, then sooner or later we might lose our salvation.

So many things are offered to victors at the close of each of these seven messages. Are they meant for all truly born-again believers, or are they special rewards for obedient believers?

Those that believe in the Perseverance of the Saints (that all true believers will certainly persevere in good works all their days, as strong Calvinism teaches), will tell us that there is no such thing as a born-again Christian that seriously sins, and does not get back on track and become a faithful Christian. They do not leave room for the idea of a carnal¹⁹⁰ Christian, as discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 we read “On account of that many among you are weak and sick, and quite a few have fallen asleep.” Those were believers that did not properly examine themselves before taking the Lord’s Supper, and they died without ever repenting. Those were believers that did not persevere. They were carnal Christians. Using the words of Revelation two and three, they were not “victors.”

Those that hold that serious sin causes loss of salvation tend to believe that if you can finish your life as a saved Christian you are also a faithful Christian, because if not you would have lost your salvation.

As different as those two positions are, neither of them allows very well for three kinds of human beings:

1. solid faithful born-again believers: they will be rewarded with the promises described in the Book of Revelation
2. saved believers not serving God, and full of unconfessed sin: they will be saved but not rewarded

¹⁹⁰ The KJV uses the word “carnal” in 1 Cor. 3:1, the NIV uses the word “worldly.” The Greek word is σαρκικος/sarkikos, which means “fleshly.”

3. unbelievers: they are neither saved nor rewarded

But verses like 3:11 “I am coming suddenly. Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown” (crowns can be taken, so beware, they are not guaranteed), 2:10 “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (death by martyrdom is not required of all Christians, but it is a mark of especially strong faith), 2:26 “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations,” and 3:4 “But you have a few people in Sardis who have not dirtied their clothing and they will walk with Me, clothed in white, because they are worthy,” say quite clearly that these rewards are not for all believers, but only for believers that faithfully follow the Lord Jesus.

The most difficult verses for this view are 2:11 “The victor will not in any way be harmed by the second death,” and 3:5 “The victor, he will be clothed in white clothing. And I will never ever blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and before His angels.” Both of these use the rather uncommon double negative, and 3:5 even provides the contrasting promise that (far from blotting their names out) Jesus will acknowledge their names before His Father and the angels. See those verses for more discussion on this.

Some would point out that John, who wrote the Book of Revelation, also wrote 1 John 2:13 and 5:4, in which all believers have “victory.” However, we should remember that 1 John and Revelation were written under very different circumstances, allowing for different definitions of the idea of victory. John, under the superintending work of the Holy Spirit, chose his vocabulary when he was writing 1 John, but the Lord Himself gave John the words to write when John penned Revelation 2 and 3. In other words, John’s meaning for “victory” in 1 John would not be very relevant to the meaning of that word in Revelation.

So, it is the view of this interpreter that victors here in Revelation are believers that do God’s will to the end, are faithful until death, and serve Him obediently. Not all born-again believers will be victors, but those that fulfill these requirements will be richly rewarded. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot lose our salvation, but we can lose these rewards. See Appendix B, New Testament Teachings on Rewards, at the end of the second volume of this commentary.

B. Message to the church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

i. The Recipient and the local situation (2:8a)

2:8a And to the messenger of the church in Smyrna¹⁹¹ write: The name *Smyrna*¹⁹² meant “myrrh.” Although there were various uses of myrrh, its main use was in embalming the dead.

The city of *Smyrna* is still inhabited today, but its name is “Izmir.” *Smyrna* had, and still has, an excellent harbor. In time of war it was easily defended because its opening to the sea was relatively narrow, and thus more easily defended against attackers. *Smyrna* was famous as a wealthy and beautiful city. And like Ephesus, it had good roads. According to Mounce,¹⁹³ the largest theater in the province of Asia was located there. They had beautiful streets, lined with many trees. The residents of *Smyrna* considered their city to be the most beautiful in the province. Hemer¹⁹⁴ notes that the idea of crowns¹⁹⁵ comes up often in the study of ancient *Smyrna*. Such crowns or wreaths were presented as awards for civic service, athletic victory, or other honors.

In *Smyrna* there were temples for the worship of Sybil, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, Zeus, and of course Caesar. In fact, they considered themselves to be the most committed to the worship of Caesar in the whole province. In 195 BC *Smyrna* was the first city to build a temple to the honor of “The Goddess of Rome,” and in about 23 BC *Smyrna* outdid ten other cities in the province to gain the permission of Rome to build a temple to the honor of Tiberius.¹⁹⁶ Believers there in *Smyrna* could see the extravagance of the religions of Greece and Rome all around their city.

The duty to worship Caesar was a serious threat for believers. Even before the worship of Caesar became mandatory, it was already fairly popular. Rome did not want its Caesars worshiped for religious reasons, but for political reasons. The Roman Empire was vast, and included many different nations and people groups. Although many were quite content under Rome (certainly there were benefits like peace, good laws, and good roads to distant markets) among so many there were others that wanted independence, and would fight to gain it. The Roman government took

¹⁹¹ A word-for-word translation of this would be “the church of Smyrnaens....”

¹⁹² σμυρναῖς/smurna

¹⁹³ P. 91.

¹⁹⁴ Pp. 59-60.

¹⁹⁵ στεφανος/stephanos. See the footnote under 2:10 concerning this word.

¹⁹⁶ Mounce, p.91, cites Tacitus, *Annals* iv. 55-56.

this as a serious problem, and Caesar worship was meant to help. Some people had been worshiping “The Goddess of Rome” spontaneously, and Caesar worship was simply a more concrete expression of the same worship.

As noted in the section titled “Date of Writing” in the Introduction, it seems that emperor worship became mandatory during the reign of Domitian. The Roman government did not require this to test the spirituality of its people, but to increase their loyalty to Rome. After doing the required worship, people were free to leave and worship any god or combination of gods they pleased. However, the congregation in *Smyrna* was not willing to use the title “Lord” for anyone but the Lord Jesus. They may have actually been the most loyal subjects of Rome, with whom Rome should have been very pleased, but the law demanded of them the one thing they could not give.

Polycarp was bishop of *Smyrna*, and in his youth he had probably been a disciple of the aged Apostle John. He may have been a young man in the congregation in *Smyrna* when they received the Lord’s message. His own letter to the congregation in Philadelphia repeatedly brings up the themes of suffering and resurrection, perhaps reflecting the emphasis of those themes in the Lord’s message to *Smyrna*.¹⁹⁷ About sixty years after Revelation was written, he became the twelfth martyr of *Smyrna* and Philadelphia.¹⁹⁸ It was a holiday in *Smyrna*, and a mob was calling upon the authorities to seize Polycarp and require him to worship Caesar. The mob, including Jews (even though it was a Sabbath day), gathered wood for the fire. He was told he must either burn the incense and say “Caesar is Lord,” or be burned alive. His response still echoes in the hearts of those that love the Lord Jesus: “Already eighty and six years I have served Christ, and He has never wronged me. How could I possibly blaspheme my King who has saved me?” After he was tied to the firewood, he prayed, “I praise You that You by Your grace consider me worthy to receive such as in this morning and at this hour is happening, so that I may be brought into the group of martyrs, in Your cup.”¹⁹⁹ Faithful Christians would die like Polycarp rather than worship Caesar. However there also were those that renounced Christ.

¹⁹⁷ Hemer, p. 65.

¹⁹⁸ Mounce, p. 91.

¹⁹⁹ Polycarp’s words were recorded in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, whose author is unknown. It seems to have been a letter sent from the congregation in *Smyrna* to the congregation of a place called Philomelium. Eusebius, who lived about 263-339 AD, accepted the document as genuine.

Look again at the words of Polycarp as he was dying, the words of this disciple of John. Did he think that all believers would be given to sit on the thrones of Revelation 20:4, which mentions the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus? Or did he understand that only those who were faithful until death would sit on those thrones?

The following two letters were written around 112 AD. The first letter was written to the emperor Trajan by Pliny, the governor of the province of Bithynia, in the north of Asia Minor.²⁰⁰

Pliny's Letter to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord,²⁰¹ 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.

²⁰⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, X. 96-97.

²⁰¹ Pliny used the Latin word *domine*, which is similar to *κυριος/kurios*, which was used by Christians to refer to the Lord Jesus, but also used by others to give honor to Caesar.

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.²⁰² They all worshiped 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.²⁰³ 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. 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

²⁰² Twenty-five years before Pliny wrote this letter, the emperor Domitian began broad persecution of Christians, and the Book of Revelation was written.

²⁰³ Rumors that Christians were practicing cannibalism in their Holy Communion is almost certainly the background for these words of Pliny.

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.

Trajan's Letter in Reply 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.

Passages that emphasize the theme of persecution include 2:10, 13; 3:9-10; 6:9-11; 7:14; chapters 12-13; 17:6 and 20:4.

Related to the worship of Caesar, the choices of God's people were very limited. They could deny Christ, but many of them knew they would lose their heavenly reward for doing so. Or they could attempt to flee. Even Polycarp left his home and went to a farm to hide, but he decided to flee no farther and was betrayed by a tortured slave. Too often the only valid choice for a faithful believer was to become a martyr.

So let us examine the attitude and faithfulness of the church in *Smyrna* and its conflict with inflexible idolatry.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (2:8b)

2:8b thus says the First and the Last, who was dead and who lives:²⁰⁴ He who was dead and who lives is a particularly vital expression to those that are facing martyrdom. This expression is also used in 1:17. Since He is the first and the Last, He existed before the world was created and will exist after the earth is destroyed. He will always exist and be worthy of

²⁰⁴ The word *lives*, ἐζησεν/ezēsen, is actually in the Aorist Tense. It is translated here as a “Gnomic Aorist,” but it might also be translated “has come back to life.”

their trust, even in the extreme pain of persecution. Their relationship with Him will outlast their pain.

To a person under persecution, it is very important to remember that the Lord Jesus was victorious over death. He is the One *who was dead* and now *lives*. Death is the final earthly result of persecution, a final result which He experienced and overcame.

If a preacher that has never suffered persecution calls upon us to stand firm and suffer for the name of Christ, he does so only with the authority of the Word of God. However, the Lord Jesus has even more authority than that. He has the authority of the Word, and He has the authority of personal experience. He has been through that very thing, so He is much more able to call others to it. He is asking them to do what He has already done.

3. Praise for the Church (2:9)

2:9 I know your deeds²⁰⁵ and afflictions²⁰⁶ and poverty²⁰⁷ – but you are rich! I know the slander of those saying they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

He knows their *deeds* and their *afflictions*. He knows all about the *Jews* that cause them trouble. These statements assure them that even though He is allowing them to suffer, He has not forgotten them. He knows.

Many have asked through the ages, if He knows, why does He not act to relieve the suffering? The answer that is given in the Book of Revelation is simply, “Be patient and faithful in your suffering, and you will receive a crown. Believe and prove your faith with steadfastness. You will reign with the King of Kings.” The Book of Revelation shows us all that it is worth it to believe this and act upon it.

Because the city of Smyrna was a rich city it is at first surprising that the congregation would be poor. Perhaps they became poor because of persecution, as in Hebrews 10:34.

²⁰⁵ Unlike the Critical Text, the Majority Text has the words *deeds and*.

²⁰⁶ This word ($\thetaλιψις/thlipsis$) is used in the NT for persecution (Mt. 24:9), the pain of childbirth (Jn. 16:21), hunger (Acts 7:11), and trouble in the household (1 Cor. 7:28).

²⁰⁷ This word ($\piτωχεια/pτōcheia$) is only used three times in the NT: here, in 2 Cor. 8:2, and in 2 Cor. 8:9. The other word for poverty, $\piενης/penēs$, refers to the state of having no extra to spare, but this word $\piτωχεια/pτōcheia$ refers to people that have nothing at all. That was the situation for the congregation in Smyrna.

According to the Lord Jesus, despite their *poverty* they are actually *rich*. He is referring of course, not to worldly wealth but heavenly wealth. Their being poor and yet *rich* is in stark contrast with the congregation in Laodicea, which was physically wealthy but spiritually poor. This same teaching is often found in the New Testament. Note Matthew 6:19-20; 19:21; Luke 12:21; 2 Corinthians 6:10; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; and James 2:5.²⁰⁸ Indeed, this heavenly perspective is an especially important aspect of the Book of Revelation, which teaches us the truth which is so often hidden by the lies of the world. Despite all that the world teaches us, *poverty* because of Christ means eternal riches; not Caesar, but Christ is Lord; dying for the Lord is victory; and powerlessness because of Him brings authority in the coming age.

The Lord acknowledges *the slander of those saying they are Jews and are not*, and says they actually *are a synagogue of Satan*. Apparently some or all of the Jewish population of Smyrna strongly opposed the Christians. As noted above, years later when Polycarp was martyred, the record shows that *Jews* were involved, gathering word for the fire that would burn Polycarp, even though in doing so they violated the Sabbath.²⁰⁹ Here the Lord rejects their Jewishness as inauthentic. This seems to be like the *Jews* of John 8:31-47 and Romans 2:28-29. Physically they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but in a spiritual sense they had abandoned their right to be called *Jews* when they rejected the Jewish Messiah. The Lord's criticism of them is quite emphatic: they are *a synagogue of Satan*.²¹⁰

4. Criticism

Smyrna and Philadelphia alone go uncriticized by the Lord Jesus Christ. Although this is not the same as saying they had reached some sort of sinless perfection, it is very encouraging to see that the Lord is satisfied with them, and does not see any need to bring up any of their sins. Godly, sensitive believers are sometimes troubled by the idea that the Lord Jesus is looking for any excuse to accuse them, even when they have confessed and repented from all their sin, and truly love Him. That idea is shown to be untrue here. The Lord is satisfied with this church, their deeds and their words.

²⁰⁸ This list is from Thomas, p. 163.

²⁰⁹ Persecution of Christians by Jews was not uncommon in the NT, as shown in Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 26:2; and 1 Thess. 2:14-15. Unfortunately, since then it has been people that call themselves Christians that have persecuted the Jews.

²¹⁰ In Rom. 2:28-29 being a true Jew is being one spiritually and physically.

5. Demand (2:10a)

2:10a Fear nothing of what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you might be tested,²¹¹ and you will have affliction for ten days. Be faithful until death...²¹²

This might seem like it is better called a warning, and placed in the next section, but it is not a warning because there is no “If you do not do what I demand, I will do this to you.” It is just a fact that they will have to *suffer*. The demand is brief: they are required to *be faithful, even to the point of death.*

The Lord Jesus tells them that they will *suffer* persecution. Some members of their church will be thrown *into prison*. In that era, if someone was put in *prison* normally they would be tortured, or they would be left there awaiting trial or execution.²¹³ Fines, exile, and execution were common punishments in the Roman world, but imprisonment was not a common punishment.²¹⁴

It is likely this persecution was related to the worship of Caesar in Smyrna. Their condition was difficult, but the Lord Jesus asks that they face it with faithfulness and that they not be afraid. The foundation of this command is the suffering of the Lord Jesus Himself. In other words, “How is Jesus so bold to ask them to be faithful until they are killed?” He is that bold because He Himself was *faithful until death* and He lives again. The Lord Jesus is all the more able to command faithfulness like this because of His death on the cross.

²¹¹ The word *ἰνα/bina* here is translated *so that*, and is usually followed by a purpose. But it can also speak of a result, as is the case here. The devil did not intend to test them; his purpose was to tempt them to deny Christ. But the result, in God’s hand, was to test them. The word here translated *tested* is *πειράζω/peirazō*. It can also mean “tempt.” The devil’s purpose might have been to tempt them, but the result was that their faith was *tested*. The Lord will use for His own purposes the persecution that the devil brings upon believers.

²¹² The faithfulness that Christ asks for with the words *until death* (*ἄχρι θανάτου/achri thanatou*) can have the meaning be faithful “as long as you live, until the moment of your death” (where *until* has to do with time, as in Rev. 2:25) or be faithful “in persecution until they kill you” (where *until* has to do with degree, as in Acts 22:4 and Rev. 12:11).

²¹³ Mounce, p. 93.

²¹⁴ Ramsay, p. 206.

Are we ready to be *faithful until death* if we are persecuted? We can be, if we remember that the Lord Jesus became the foremost example for us by submitting to *death* and then conquering *death*.

Even though there is a real supernatural person named Satan that is behind the persecution, God has a certain purpose in their suffering, that is *so that we might be tested*. The victors, those who will be victorious over their challenges and suffering, will be given great rewards; for instance, they will be seated with Christ on his throne (see 3:21). So it is fitting that they be *tested* to make certain they fulfill the conditions of faithfulness. The victors will be chosen by the Lord Jesus to rule the nations with Him during the Millennium. This is His promise: “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations” (2:26).

There are many interpretations of *ten days*,²¹⁵ but it is better for the student to stay with the basic normal meaning of an expression unless the context forces the reader into a figure of speech. The words *ten days* may simply mean *ten days!* If so, the Lord was warning them so they will understand that the suffering they will experience will be limited to *ten days*. He motivates them to endure the *ten days*, without being defeated or denying Him.

Anyone who obeys the command to *be faithful until death* is a “victor who keeps My deeds to the end” (2:26). The condition that must be met to receive the reward is faithfulness. This command is very difficult, but the various promises that accompany it are glorious and very beautiful.

6. Warning

Smyrna alone receives no warning or threat from the Lord (though the “warning” to Philadelphia is very mildly stated). There was no need to

²¹⁵ Thomas, pp. 169-70, gives some interpretations of *ten days* that show how diverse and wild interpretations can become when the interpreter too readily disregards a simple normal interpretation:

1. ten periods of persecution under the emperors of Rome
2. ten years of persecution
3. a long period of time
4. a short period of time

Furthermore, what would be the use of these words, if the persecuted congregation had to determine the meaning behind the so-called metaphor? It would become guesswork between at least four options, as noted above, and would neither comfort nor strengthen the congregation!

threaten the congregation in Smyrna with the negative consequences of ongoing disobedience, because they were not being obedient.

7. Promise (2:10b-11)

2:10b-11...and I will give you the crown²¹⁶ of life. The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor will not in any way be harmed by the second death.

There is irony here, because in exchange for their *death*, they will receive *the crown of life*. Furthermore, physical *death* will be painful for those that are martyred, but *the second death will not harm them in any way*. As people threatened with persecution, they were surely thinking about, and perhaps afraid of, the first *death*. The Lord's words here put those concerns into proper perspective.

Just as the church in Smyrna was considered poor by the world but called rich by the Lord, here He says if they are faithful until *death*, He will *give them the crown of life*. The city of Smyrna often held athletic competitions, and the victors received temporary crowns. But victors in the Lord receive a *crown* that does not fade. *The crown of life* is prepared specially for the believers that are “faithful until death.” The Lord did not promise this reward to believers who backslide because of persecution. He promises eternal life for each one who believes, but the *crown* here is for the believer who is faithful until *death*.

The crown of life is also promised in James 1:12, “Blessed is the one who endures in trials because when he is approved, he will receive a crown of life promised by God to whomever loves Him.” Both the Word of God and experience tell us that there are believers that do not “endure in trials” or love God. *The crown of life* is a reward for the believer who endures, who is faithful, who does the work of Christ to the end.

We see in 20:14 and 21:8 that *the second death* is clearly eternal hell. At first this verse seems strange to us, because we know that not a single believer in Jesus Christ will *be harmed by the second death*. However, as we look more closely at this passage, we see that the *not in any way* in Greek is a double negative,²¹⁷ so that it is very emphatic.

²¹⁶ This is the word στεφανος/stephanos, a *crown* or wreath given to bestow honor. The victorious ones in 2:10 and 3:11 are each given a στεφανος/stephanos. This term is also used in 4:4; 10; 6:2; 9:7; and 14:14. See the footnote under 12:3 concerning the term διαδημα/diadēma, which is also translated *crown*.

²¹⁷ The double negative, ου μη/ou mē, appears in Rev. 2:11; 3:3, 5, 12; 7:16; 9:6; 15:4; 18:7, 14, 21, 22, 23 (twice); 21:25, and 27. It is used about 95 times in the entire NT,

Loosely translated, this passage says, “The victor will not in any way be harmed by the second death. In fact, rather than being harmed by the second death, I will give him a crown of life!” This is a figure of speech used in the Greek language.²¹⁸ The Greek author that wanted to emphasize that something is big might say that it is not small. This figure of speech is used in English as well. When we say, “This meal is not cheap!” what we are really saying is that this meal is very expensive. In the same way, those persecuted believers in Smyrna did indeed face the first *death*, but they will certainly not experience *the second death*. On the contrary, they will receive joy that is beautiful and eternal with a *crown of life!*

Some interpreters in effect add to this verse the words “but if you are not a victor, you will be hurt by the second death.” (This would mean that disobedient believers that do not repent would go to hell.) The reader should clearly note that those words are *not* spoken by the Lord. They are considered, by some, to be a *logical* addition to His words, but they are an addition. They are not in the recorded words of the prophecy of this book. The reader that would like to add these words to the text should remember the words of 22:18, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, may God add to him the plagues written in this book.”

The church in Smyrna, faithful in hardship, is told that they are going to suffer persecution. The wealth of this world is not promised to them. They are asked to endure suffering. The Lord Jesus promises a beautiful reward, *the crown of life*, if they are faithful in that persecution, faithful until death.

This reward is specially worded for those who are facing persecution and perhaps even *death* at the hands of God’s enemies. He does not tell them how they might escape that pain. Instead He tells them that in giving up their physical life, they will gain a *crown of life*.

Other verses promising various crowns for special faithfulness would include 1 Corinthians 9:25; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:2-4; 2 Timothy 4:8; and Revelation 3:11.

including passages like Jn. 4:14; 6:35, 37; 10:28; 11:26; and Heb. 13:5. It always brings emphasis, and can frequently be translated “never ever.”

²¹⁸ The technical name of this figure of speech is “litotes.” Biblical examples of litotes include Neh. 9:32 “do not let all the trouble which has found us be small before You”; Jn. 6:37, “the one coming to Me I will not ever throw out”; Acts 12:18, “there was not a small confusion among the soldiers”; and “Rom. 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel.” Litotes is also used in Rev. 3:5. Note that Jn. 6:37; Rev. 12:11; and 3:5, all include the use of the emphatic double negative.

C. Message to the church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

1. The Recipient and the local situation (2:12a)

2:12a And to the messenger of the church in Pergamum²¹⁹ write:

In 133 BC King Attalus III died without an heir, and by his will he gave his kingdom to Rome. It became the province of Asia. His capital, *Pergamum*, competed with Ephesus and Smyrna to be the most important city in the province. In *Pergamum* they valued their place in the Roman Empire, and they worshiped Caesar with special diligence, especially in their huge and famous temple for him.

In the middle of the city there is a steep hill about 300 meters (1000 feet) high, which had temples all along the way up it. There was also a famous temple to Asclepios, “The Savior,” near *Pergamum*. The priests there said that anyone who slept the night in that temple and was touched by one of the snakes that crawled around freely in the temple would be healed.

The city of *Pergamum* was 16 kilometers (10 miles) from the sea. Their harbor was located there at a place called Elaia. *Pergamum* had a huge library of 200,000 scrolls. Now all that remains of the city is ruins, but the present-day city of Bergama is located at the base of the hill.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (2:12b)

2:12b thus says the One who has the sharp double-edged sword:

The sharp double-edged sword is in 1:16, in the vision of the Lord Jesus. The idea here seems to be that just as a *sharp double-edged sword* can cut in both directions, so the Lord can hurt friend or foe, if needed. This interpretation would be supported by the metaphor “a double-edged sword” in modern speech, but we do not know whether that metaphor was in use in the first century. However, Revelation 2:16, which reads “If you do not repent, I will suddenly come to you, and I will fight against them with the sword of My mouth,” might be good support for this interpretation. The relationship between a *sword* and the Word of God also comes out in Hebrews 4:12, which reads, “For the Word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

²¹⁹ The word *Pergamum* (*Περγαμος/Pergamos*) originally meant “fortress.” Later the name of the city was used for the writing material that came to be known as *περγαμενα/pergamenta*, which we call “parchment” (Mounce, p. 95; and Ramsay, p. 218).

If that is the reason *the sharp double-edged sword* is mentioned here, then the congregation in Pergamum should realize that even though they are children of God, He may discipline His children with painful discipline if they need it.²²⁰

3. Praise for the Church (2:13)

2:13 I know your deeds²²¹ and where you dwell – where Satan's throne is. And you have held fast to My name. And you did not deny your faith²²² in Me²²³ in the days in which Antipas, My faithful witness, was killed among you – where Satan dwells.

The Lord commends this congregation, assuring them that He understands how difficult their situation is, that they *dwell where Satan's throne* is located. Perhaps it is enough to say that the spiritual atmosphere of Pergamum was hard on the congregation. There are several different interpretations concerning just why the Lord would say that about Pergamum. Here are some possible interpretations:

1. Pergamum may have been the capital of the Roman province of Asia.²²⁴
2. The hill upon which the acropolis was located, with all its pagan temples, might have been *Satan's throne*.
3. Caesar worship was very strong there.

²²⁰ Ramsay, p. 220, suggests another possible interpretation: the Roman Proconsul was given “the right of the sword” by Rome. He did not need to ask permission to have people executed by decapitation. Perhaps the Lord Jesus says He has the sword in order to deny that the Proconsul had any real power over life and death. However, in light of 2:16, this interpretation seems unlikely.

²²¹ The Majority Text includes the words *your deeds and*, which are missing in the Critical Text. So, if the Majority Text is correct, the Lord says *I know your deeds* to each of the seven churches.

²²² This word, *πίστις/pistis*, means *faith* in Mt. 9:2, 29; Phil. 1:25; and Col. 1:23, but it means “*faithfulness*” in Rom. 3:3; Gal. 5:22; Tit. 2:10 (where it is translated “*trusted*” in the NIV); and Rev. 13:10 (where it occurs in a very similar expression). This same word also is found in Rev. 2:19 and 14:12. In fact it is often very difficult to decide between the translation *faith* and “*faithfulness*.” The translation *faith* seems slightly more likely here, because under persecution people are obviously tempted to deny their *faith*.

²²³ These words might be translated more woodenly, “you did not deny My *faith*.” The Critical Text adds the word *καὶ/kai* after the words “My *faith*,” but it is not there in a fourth century manuscript, nor in the vast majority of the later manuscripts.

²²⁴ Hemer, pp. 82-84, explains that it actually very difficult to determine which city was the capital of the province of Asia.

4. The worship of Asclepios was very strong there.
5. There was also a major temple of Zeus near the top of the acropolis there. Its foundations are shown in the photograph, with the modern city of Bergama in the background.
6. Perhaps it is to be taken literally, and *Satan* did have his *throne* there.

When they were commanded to worship Caesar and curse the *name* of Jesus, they refused. They *held fast* to His *name*. They were faithful, not denying the Lord Jesus even when *Antipas* was martyred.

According to tradition that *faithful witness* was slowly burned alive inside a hollow bronze statue of a bull.²²⁵ Perhaps the expression *killed among you* indicates that the church of Pergamum witnessed the death of *Antipas* with their own eyes. Surely this terrible event tempted them to fear, but they withstood that temptation. This faithfulness under extreme pressure was commended by the Lord, and His statement *I know* must have been a comfort to them. He did not forget their good *deeds*.

4. Criticism (2:14-15)

2:14-15 But I have a few things against you, that you have those there that hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to set a trap²²⁶ before the sons of Israel so that they ate meat offered to idols and committed sexual immorality. Further, in the same way you also have those holding to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

The Word of God is so balanced here. As a whole the congregation and its leader did well, but there were some serious problems that the Lord must bring to the attention of that leader. Unlike the leadership in Ephesus, the leadership of the congregation in Pergamum tolerated false teachers and their teachings. Although the specific details of the false teachings that the leadership tolerated are not provided in this text, it is referred to metaphorically as *the teaching of Balaam*, and there is the brief explanation that *they ate meat offered to idols and committed sexual immorality*.

²²⁵ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 67; and Mounce, p. 97.

²²⁶ The word σκανδαλον/*skandalon* literally means *trap*, but it is used here in a figurative sense of a trick that causes people to fail.



Numbers chapters 22-25 and 31:16 give the historical background of *Balaam* and *Balak*. *Balak* king of Moab hired the prophet *Balaam* to curse Israel, but *Balaam* was unable to help *Balak* because the Lord made him bless, and not curse, *Israel*. Then in Numbers 31:16 we see that *Balaam taught Balak to set a trap before the sons of Israel so that they ate meat offered to idols and committed sexual immorality*. In Pergamum, so many years later, some members of the congregation were captured by that very same *trap*.

Besides this reference to eating food *sacrificed to idols* and committing *sexual immorality*, the Lord rebukes the messenger for allowing people to hold to *the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. The difficulties of identifying the specifics of this false teaching are discussed under 2:6. Such difficulties should not divert us from the real difficulty, which is that the leadership in Pergamum (and in some churches today) needs to repent for their inaction, and expel the false teachers, as is clear in the next verse!

5. Demand (2:16a)

2:16a Therefore repent!

This call to repentance is made with a singular verb (as were all the rebukes in verses 14-15 above), so it appears that in this passage the Lord is calling the messenger, who seems to be the church's pastor, to repentance.²²⁷ He should *repent* for not taking action against the members of his congregation that were holding to the teaching of Balaam and to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. This is the best reason for the use of the singular verb, *repent*.

Some readers will feel that this is a simple thing, that the leader just needs to do his job, and crack down on the false teachers, demanding that they leave. However, for the church leader with a deep pastoral heart, this can be a difficult thing. Difficult as it may be, he must do this or else....

²²⁷ Note the comments on singular and plural verbs and pronouns in the introductory discussion on chapters 2 and 3.

6. Warning (2:16b)

2:16b But if not,²²⁸ I am suddenly²²⁹ coming²³⁰ to you, and I will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

The *you* in this verse is singular, and of course the *them* is plural. This does seem to mean that if the leader (the *you*) does not take action so that the congregation is rid of *them* (those members of the congregation that have followed the teachings of Balaam), then the Lord Himself will take action against that part of the congregation.

If it seems strange that the Lord *will fight against* His congregation with that *sword*, let this be a reminder that His *sword* is two-edged, and that He very much values the purity of His congregation.

Apparently *the sword of His mouth* is a metaphor for His words, which have great power. Note that in 19:15 and 19:21 His enemies are slain by the sharp *sword* that comes out of His *mouth*.

7. Promise (2:17)

2:17 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the victor, I will give to him to eat of the hidden manna, and I will give to him a white stone,²³¹ and upon that stone a new name is written, which no one knows²³² except the one who receives it.

The previous verse describes the results of disobedience. This verse describes the results of obedience. If they did not obey they would face the Lord Jesus and His sword, but if they repented and did what was commanded, they would enjoy a number of promises. The result of not obeying was not eternal punishment, but the discipline of the Lord. Also, the result of obeying was not entrance to heaven, but special status in the Coming Kingdom.

²²⁸ This exact expression, *but if not* ($\epsilon\iota\ \delta\epsilon\ \mu\eta/ei\ de\ m\bar{e}$), is also used in 2:5. In both cases it clearly shows that the words that follow are warnings to anyone that chooses to disobey the command that preceded these words.

²²⁹ This term ($\tau\alpha\chi\omega/tachu$) is similar to the word used in 1:1, and can be translated *suddenly*. This term is used in 2:5, 16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, and 20. See the explanation in the footnote under 1:1.

²³⁰ See the footnote under 2:5.

²³¹ This word, $\phi\eta\varphi\omega/spephos$, is used here and in Acts 26:10. There it refers, perhaps metaphorically, to the idea of a “voting pebble,” much like the first of the six uses listed.

²³² In the Majority Text the word *knows* is missing, but can be understood from the context. It is there in the Critical Text.

Manna is the heavenly “bread” described in Exodus 16. The *hidden manna* is perhaps related to Jewish teachings based upon 2 Maccabees 2:4-7²³³ that the ark with the jar of *manna* was taken and *hidden* in a cave under Mount Nebo, and that *manna* will be eaten at the Messianic Feast, which we call the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Here there is some irony because obedient believers that do not eat meat sacrificed to idols will enjoy this far better food, *the hidden manna*.²³⁴

They will also receive a *white stone*, with a secret *name written* on it. It is not clear what this is, but it is clear that the *stone* is from the Lord Jesus and the *new name* is only known by the one who *receives it*. In that era *white stones* were used as:

1. counters of judges’ verdict
2. counters of things and money
3. a symbol of the day of victory
4. “tickets” for a public entertainment event
5. magical amulets
6. a sign that a popular gladiator would no longer be forced to fight, but that he could retire alive²³⁵

History records those uses of *white stones*, but history does not identify for us which of those is connected to our text. Thomas²³⁶ prefers the fourth one. The victor will be allowed to attend a special ceremony when the Lord Jesus returns. The sixth one connects well to the theme of the victors who at the end of the age can “retire” from the struggles of this age, but some of the other uses may be related as well.

Ramsay²³⁷ suggests that none of the contemporary uses of *white stones* is intended. Instead, an object from the contemporary culture is given a new meaning. It is not a ticket to a passing event, it is an everlasting symbol of honor and privilege.

²³³ 1 and 2 Maccabees concern the history of Israel between the OT and the NT. These books are part of the Apocrypha. They are excluded from the Protestant Bible, but included in the Roman Catholic Bible. Even though these books are not a part of the Word of God, they can still be studied as historical records of men.

²³⁴ Mounce, p. 99.

²³⁵ Mounce, pp. 99-100, and Ramsay, p. 228, also mention this possibility, but note that none of those kinds of *white stones* have ever been found in the province of Asia. It was thought that there were no gladiator contests in Asia, but the discovery of a gladiators’ graveyard near Ephesus has disproved that.

²³⁶ P. 201.

²³⁷ P. 229.

Simcox²³⁸ says, “Possibly again the token gives the right to enter through the gates into the city (xxii. 14)—for the angels at the gates may suffer none to pass who cannot name themselves by the new name and shew the white stone.” Since it links the *white stone* reward to the reward of entrance to the New Jerusalem, this is an attractive, but not certain, interpretation.

Anyone who will receive one of those stones receives it from the Lord Himself, and shares a secret with Him. That *white stone* has a secret *name written on it*. It seems most likely that that *name* is a secret *name* of the victor, a *name* that only he and the Lord know, rather than a *new name* for Christ. This sounds very much like a close friendship.

The church in Pergamum had already suffered when they received this message from the Lord. He understands their difficulties and He values their determination. But in the same congregation there is false teaching that must be dealt with in order to avoid the terrifying discipline of the Lord. If the leader of the church does not deal with this, the Lord Himself will surely deal with it in some way. To those that are faithful, He promises rewards that involve a special friendship relationship with the Lord Jesus.

D. Message to the church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

i. The Recipient and the local situation (2:18a)

2:18a And to the messenger of the church in Thyatira²³⁹ write:

Little is known about the city of *Thyatira*. It was a small city, but indeed the church there received the longest of the seven letters of the Book of Revelation. The hills near *Thyatira* were not high and rocky enough to provide the setting for, and the building materials of, a strong fortress. Being on the road to Pergamum, every enemy that wanted to attack mighty Pergamum also had to conquer poor *Thyatira* on the way to their target city.²⁴⁰ Soldiers were first placed in *Thyatira* for the defense of

²³⁸ P. 18.

²³⁹ For some unknown reason the word *Thyatira* here is plural. The literal translation would be “And to the messenger of the in *Thyatira*s church, write.” Translated more smoothly that might be “to the messenger of the church among the *Thyatireans*.”

²⁴⁰ Ramsay, p. 243. Hemer, p. 107, notes that most of the literary references to *Thyatira* are about it being conquered, and that *Thyatira* reached its greatest prosperity in the second or third century AD. So at the time it received this message from the Lord it was an increasingly prosperous town that was benefiting from the Pax Romana, the peace that came from being a part of the Roman Empire.

Pergamum in the year 300 BC. *Thyatira* was built, destroyed, and rebuilt many times. It was a good place to be a stonemason, but a bad place to be a soldier! Today *Thyatira* is called Akhisar.

Labor guilds were the ancient world's equivalent of modern day unions, and their strong influence in *Thyatira* was well-known.²⁴¹ Those guilds' activities certainly included feasts that took place in temples and were in honor of their patron god, Apollo.²⁴² The required participation in the activities of the labor guilds must have made it hard to live and work in *Thyatira* as a Christian without compromise. Perhaps the one called Jezebel encouraged them to compromise in that area.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (2:18b)

2:18b thus says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like bronze:²⁴³

This expression, about the One who speaks to the messenger of the church in *Thyatira*, is appropriate because the Lord Jesus knows the hearts of men and is able to fulfill all that He speaks of in this letter, whether promises or warnings. Only here in Revelation is the Lord called *the Son of God*. The background of this expression seems to be in Psalm 2, especially verses 7-8.²⁴⁴ In the culture of the psalmist, the term *Son* can refer to the king that is set up to rule, and not just the physical descendant of a father. So, the term *Son*, like the term *Christ*, can refer to the King. This is a strong expression. He is the King appointed by God!

In 19:12, where He comes to the earth to judge and rule, we also read that His *eyes* are *like flames of fire*. With *eyes* like that He can see each sin. Those that sin cannot hide from Him.

Also, *feet like bronze* are strong to crush sin. In 2:27 we read likewise that "He will shepherd them with an iron staff; He will break them like clay vessels." The false teachers that the leadership has tolerated in the

²⁴¹ Ramsay, p. 244, says that local inscriptions have been found there that refer to "wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths." From Acts 16:14 we know that Lydia, a seller of purple fabrics, was from *Thyatira*.

²⁴² Hemer, pp. 108-109.

²⁴³ As noted in the footnote under 1:15, the exact meaning of this term, χαλκολιβανον/chalkolibanon, is not known to us. However, it was surely well understood by the *bronze* workers of *Thyatira*.

²⁴⁴ The promise to the *Son* in Ps. 2 is adapted to become a promise to victors at the end of this letter, in 2:26-27.

congregation are not hidden from His *eyes*, and they will not escape the wrath of His *feet*.

3. Praise for the Church (2:19)

2:19 I know your deeds and love and faithfulness²⁴⁵ and service and your endurance. And your deeds: the recent ones are greater than the early ones.

The messenger of the church in Thyatira was hardworking, loving, and faithful. The Lord told him that his *recent deeds* exceed his *early ones*. The Lord's praise here is impressive. Yet as we will see later in this letter, the congregation is divided.

4. Criticism (2:20-21)

2:20-21 But I have against you, that you permit your wife²⁴⁶ Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and to mislead My servants into committing sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols.²⁴⁷ I gave her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent from her immorality.

The congregation, or the leader of the congregation (the words *you* and *your* here are singular), is criticized for tolerating a woman named *Jezebel*. Most likely the name *Jezebel* is a figurative name, taken from 1 Kings 18, 19, 21, and 2 Kings 9.

The important thing to note here is that the Lord strongly rejects permissiveness towards *sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols*. These activities might be called “victimless crimes” in today’s secular society, but the Lord strongly rejects permissiveness towards either. They

²⁴⁵ See the footnote on this word, *πιστίς/pistis*, under 2:13. Here, in the context of *deeds*, *service*, and *endurance*, the translation *faithfulness* is slightly preferable.

²⁴⁶ The majority of the ancient Greek manuscripts, including the very early Alexandrinus and Ephraemi, have the word *your* (*σου/sou*) here, so that it literally reads “that woman of yours Jezebel,” or *your wife Jezebel*. (The word *γυνή/gunē* used here can mean “woman” or *wife*, depending on the context.) If the reading of the majority of Greek manuscripts including the fifth century Alexandrinus and Ephraemi is indeed correct, then the Lord is rebuking the “messenger” of Thyatira for allowing his own *wife* to teach those false doctrines! This would be in accord with the observation that the words *you* and *your* in this verse are singular. Note the comments on singular and plural verbs and pronouns in the introductory comments on chapters 2 and 3.

²⁴⁷ For some reason this verse echoes 2:14, in that the exact Greek words for *committing sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols* are used in this verse and in 2:14. Besides that, the word *teach* is used in both verses, though in different grammatical forms.

are not victimless. In both cases there is an unseen spiritual reality that brings real and destructive bondage.

The leadership of any congregation must decide just how narrowly they define allowable doctrines. So much theology has been discussed, and so many interpretations have been put forth, that it is not reasonable or godly for anyone to say that the only teachings that will be allowed in this church are the teachings that I agree with. In that case, each church would have only one teacher, and no member of a congregation would be allowed to read a passage and develop an opinion about what it means. Church leadership must define the boundaries of acceptable doctrine. For whatever reason, the leader in Thyatira did this very poorly, and received the rebuke of the Lord.

Those that this *Jezebel* misleads are called *My servants*. They are believers, believers that are making some very bad mistakes. They will not lose their salvation for this serious sin. Neither are they showing that they never had “saving faith.” They are born again and eternally saved, but they are sinning badly. Instead of receiving the rewards promised in these two chapters, they will receive the threats. They are saved, but they are not victors. Only if they repent will they become victors!

5. Warning²⁴⁸ (2:22-23)

2:22-23 Look, I am throwing²⁴⁹ her onto a bed,²⁵⁰ and those who commit adultery with her into great suffering, unless they repent from her deeds. And her children I will strike dead.²⁵¹ And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your deeds.

The Apostle Paul gave a similar threat in 1 Corinthians 3:17, “If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will defile him.” The Lord warns that He will take drastic action against this woman and her followers. There is still an opportunity to *repent* (in fact, the expression *unless they repent from her deeds* contains an implied demand for the sinful believers of the congregation) but the threat is very strongly expressed here, with expressions like *great suffering* and *strike dead*. The Lord had already

²⁴⁸ In the other letters the demand precedes the warning, but here the warning precedes the demand.

²⁴⁹ The verb βαλλω/ballō is in the Present Tense.

²⁵⁰ The word translated *bed*, κλινη/klinē, can also refer to a couch or a pallet. It is a place where someone reclines (κλινω/klinō is the verb “to recline”). She would suffer a sickness on her *bed*, just as she sinned on her *bed*.

²⁵¹ In Greek this is emphatic. The literal translation is “and her children I will kill in death.”

done something similar in Corinth, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. He will choose the time and means according to His wisdom, but judgment will fall on them *unless they repent of her deeds*, so they will be cleansed. Christ loves His church.

The expression *I am the one who searches minds and hearts* here confirms the interpretation given above: the reason the description of Christ at the beginning of this letter includes the fact that He has “eyes like a flame of fire” is that He is seeing all the supposedly hidden sin of the congregation.

The idea that He *will give* everyone *according to their deeds* is not unique to this passage. It is also stated in 20:12, 13; and 22:12, as well as in Romans 2:6. Only as we consider the doctrine of rewards can we understand how He can do this, and yet forgive all believers of all their sins.

6. Demand (2:24-25)

2:24-25 But to you I say, to the rest of you²⁵² in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to that teaching and have not learned the so-called deep things of Satan, upon you I do not set another burden. But what you have, hold on to it until I come.

There is a demand in this message, but it is not for the false teacher and her followers (except that the words “unless they repent” in 2:22 are an implied demand upon the false teacher’s followers). In verse 21 the Lord already explained that He “gave her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent....” His action against her is already decided, as is clear in verse 22. The demand here is specifically *to the rest of you in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to that teaching and have not learned the so-called deep things of Satan’s*. The Lord places a solemn demand upon them.

The false teacher named “Jezebel,” and her followers, were drawing the rest of the church to *the so-called deep things of Satan*. There are two ways to understand these words.²⁵³ First, possibly this is satire. According to this understanding, the false teacher here called Jezebel called this teaching or activity “the deep things of God” (this agrees with the practices of several false teachers during this age, that said that they taught about the secrets of their god, and uses an expression from 1 Corinthians 2:10). In this understanding the Lord is saying that those things are actually *the deep things of Satan*, not of God. Other interpreters say that the false teacher was actually encouraging her followers to investigate the secrets

²⁵² The word *you* in this verse is plural.

²⁵³ Mounce, pp. 105-106; Beasley-Murray, p. 92; Thomas, pp. 226-229; and Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 73.

of *Satan*. There were religions that taught their followers to enter what they called the fortresses of *Satan* in order to understand the limits of his power. If this interpretation is correct it could mean that the false teacher encouraged the church in *Thyatira* to join in pagan activities, for example, the idolatry and sexual immorality of the ceremonies of the labor guilds.

She may have taught them that in Christ they will not be defeated, and they will understand better how to oppose Satan. This way of gaining wisdom is forbidden by the Lord Jesus. In any case, He wants us to guard our holiness without such compromises.

The demand upon the faithful of the congregation is simply *what you have, hold on to it until I come*. This must have been some comfort to that part of the congregation: they were obedient, and simply needed to continue on as they have been doing. This is not to say that they had achieved a state of sinless perfection. It simply means that they were doing well, and the Lord was satisfied with their hearts, lives, and ministries. It is very encouraging here that the Lord does not bring up any of the day to day sins that beset all believers. They were faithful believers that knew to confess and be freed from any and all sin.

This demand is very similar to the demand in 3:11, which reads, “I am coming suddenly. Hold on to what you have so that no one takes your crown.” It is especially interesting that both of these passages, besides commanding that the readers *hold on to what they have*, also mention the return of the Lord. It is much easier to *hold on* when you know what you are holding on for!

Besides those explicit commands there are also implied demands in the expression “unless they repent of her ways” of verse 22, and in the expression “and does My will to the end” in verse 26. These passages have their various emphases: those that repent will escape the threatened action, and those that do His will to the end will gain the promised reward.

7. Promise (2:26-28)

2:26-28 And to the victor, even²⁵⁴ the one who keeps²⁵⁵ My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations. “And He will shepherd²⁵⁶ them with an iron staff; He will shatter them like clay vessels,” as I also have received this authority²⁵⁷ from My Father. And I will give him the morning star.

Ramsay²⁵⁸ notes the irony in the fact that the church of what was considered perhaps the least of the seven cities is offered so startlingly powerful a reward.

These wonderful rewards are not offered to those of the church that have followed Jezebel. In this context, which does not mention that they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, they are only promised sickness, suffering, and death. However, if the others will just “hold on,” or, in other words, if they will keep His *deeds to the end*, they will receive the promised reward.

The close connection between the expression *the victor* and the expression *the one who keeps My deeds to the end* shows quite clearly that victors here in these seven messages are believers that are obedient to Christ all the way to the end of their lives. In 2:25 the Lord gives the command “In any case what you have, hold on to until I come.” Verse 26 elaborates and adds the promise: *To the victor even the one who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations.*

²⁵⁴ Literally, “And the victor and the one who keeps My deeds....” However, the second “and” (*καὶ/kai*) in this expression is translated *even* or “that is,” indicating that *the victor* and the *one who keeps* the Lord’s *deeds* are the same people.

²⁵⁵ Note the footnote concerning the verb *τηρεῖν/tēreō*, *keeps*, under the discussion of 1:3.

²⁵⁶ This verb, *ποιμαίνω/poimainō*, means *shepherd*, but the additional phrase *with an iron staff* makes it clear that His shepherding will not always be gentle! In the Bible shepherding is sometimes a metaphor of ruling, as in 1 Chron. 11:2; Mic. 7:14; Jer. 23:2; and Mt. 2:6. There are some complicated differences in this text. The Critical Text has “break” in the Present Tense, but most Greek manuscripts have it in the Future Tense as above. The Hebrew of the original passage, Ps. 2:9, reads “*You shall break* with an iron rod, as vessels of a potter *You shall shatter*” (emphasis added). The LXX has “*You shall shepherd* them with an iron staff, like vessels of a potter *You shall shatter* them.” Even though quotation marks are used in the above translation of Rev. 2:27, this might also be considered an allusion to Ps. 2:9 rather than a quotation.

²⁵⁷ The words *this authority* are added to make the English sentence more clear. They are not in the original Greek.

²⁵⁸ P. 250. Ramsay adds that “Philadelphia... might vie with Thyatira for the last place on the list.”

The followers of the false teacher in that congregation were not victors, but they were called "My servants" in verse 20. Therefore they were believers that had been deceived, and were losing out on the rewards promised to anyone that *keeps His deeds to the end*. Whether or not this is in accord with some theologies, the text is clear: some people that are born again will obey and be rewarded, and other people that are born again will be deceived, they will sin, and they will suffer discipline from the hand of their Savior, with no reward.

In Psalm 2:8-9, which is clearly quoted here and in Revelation 19:15, we read that these things will be given by the *Father* to the Son, but now here we read that we are invited to join with the Son, if we meet this condition. The explanation *as I also have received from My Father* shows us that the Lord Jesus is extending the promise the *Father* gave Him to us, with the requirement that we be victors.

This promise of ruling *authority* for obedient believers is taught in other portions of Scripture as well. Note Luke 19:11-27, in which some obedient believers are given "authority over ten cities," and others "over five cities."

The last of the promises to the congregation in Thyatira, almost appearing to have been added as an afterthought, is *the morning star*. Various possibilities have been suggested for the meaning of this expression. Because in 22:16, the Lord Jesus is *the morning star*, perhaps the *victor* is given an especially close relationship with Him.²⁵⁹ In Babylonian and Roman mythologies, *the morning star* symbolizes victory. Perhaps that is the background of this promise. This connection is supported by 2:26-27, near verses which also speak of victory.²⁶⁰ Because in Daniel 12:3 and Matthew 13:43 this symbol suggests glory in the Kingdom, perhaps that is the intended meaning here.²⁶¹ This promise is hard to interpret. It is even possible that a combination of these ideas is intended here.

2:29 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

This message closes with the same exhortation that appears in all seven of the messages. Are you hearing this letter with an open heart? Is this letter describing your spiritual condition?

In this message, the Lord Jesus speaks to a congregation that has many healthy members, but is stained with the presence of a false

²⁵⁹ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, pp. 74-75.

²⁶⁰ Beasley-Murray, pp. 93-94.

²⁶¹ Thomas, p. 235.

teacher, her followers, and their evil practices. This message from the Lord is wonderfully balanced and just. Towards those that do evil, He is strict: He requires real repentance, and He threatens suffering. Yes, their sins are forgiven, but ongoing unconfessed sins do have ongoing consequences. And to those that have remained faithful, He brings encouragement, and He promises an extraordinary reward: authority over the nations. The great beauty of the city where spiritually healthy believers will live and exercise that authority is described in Revelation 21:9–22:5.

E. Message to the church in Sardis (3:1-6)

1. The Recipient and the local situation (3:1a)

3:1a And to the messenger of the church in Sardis²⁶² write: Mount Tmolus towered over the city whose church received this letter. Originally, the city was built up on its heights. That old city was on a very narrow mountaintop,²⁶³ high above the surrounding area. There were cliffs on all sides, except where that high point was connected to the rest of Mount Tmolus by a very narrow, rocky, steep ridge of land. It was extremely well-protected from attack. It was considered unconquerable. For many many years, even after John heard these words from the Lord, the expression “to capture the acropolis of Sardis” was a proverb that spoke of doing the impossible. “Acropolis” means “high city,” and refers in this case to the old city of *Sardis* located high on Mount Tmolus.²⁶⁴

That strong fortress city became capital of the Kingdom of Lydia.²⁶⁵ The photograph below shows what remains of the peak of Mount Tmolus and the remains of a second century AD temple to Artemis. This photograph and others are available for download in dave.hagelb.org under the “Photos” tab.

²⁶² The word *Sardis* here and in verse 4 is plural. Ramsay, p. 268, and *The Harvard Magazine* (1998, 03) explain that at first the city was a strong fortress built high up on Mt. Tmolus, but later (when the Roman Empire put an end to raids and intercity warfare) a lower city was built, so in effect there were two Sardises, and the plural form of the name endured, even though at the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation the upper city was no longer in use.

²⁶³ Hemer, pp. 129–130, explains that Mt. Tmolus is subject to serious cracking and erosion, so that the ancient city had much more area than the present mountaintop site because most of the mountaintop has crumbled away.

²⁶⁴ Hemer, p. 133.

²⁶⁵ Strabo, in his *Geography* (Book XIII 2:5), tells about *Sardis*.

Gold was discovered in the Pactolus River, which flows along the foot of Mount Tmolus.²⁶⁶ Around 700 BC King Gyges of *Sardis* produced the first minted coins there, made of an alloy of silver and gold known as electrum.²⁶⁷

By the time of this letter, the *Pax Romana* (the peace that the Romans brought about by conquering so vast

a territory) meant that a great fortress was no longer needed to be a great city, so the high and narrow little old city was long abandoned and fell into ruin. The new city was built down in the more comfortable valley at the base of the mountain.²⁶⁸

There is an interesting event in the history of this city that the Lord seems to be building upon as He sends this letter to them. The Greek historian Herodotus²⁶⁹ records that in about 546 BC Cyrus King of Persia (who is mentioned in 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Isaiah, and Daniel) was retaliating after a failed attack by King Croesus of Lydia. King Croesus had retreated up into *Sardis*, his “impregnable” fortress. Herodotus’ account is an

²⁶⁶ According to the myth of King Midas, whose touch made things turn into pure gold, when Midas realized he would soon starve to death, he prayed to Dionysus, who told him to go wash in the springs of Pactolus. The legend says that when he did that, he was freed of his magical powers, and the river was enriched with gold sand, which was often mentioned in the ancient stories of that region. Hemer cites Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, II.136-45, cf. 85-88 concerning that myth. In any case, the wealth of King Croesus of Lydia was legendary (Hemer, pp. 130-131). Hemer also notes that Strabo, who died in 24 AD, wrote that that gold was exhausted before his day.

²⁶⁷ Hemer, p. 131. Hemer adds that this King Gyges (*Γυγης/Gugēs*) seems to be the source of the word Gog, mentioned in Ezek. 38-39 and Rev. 20:8.

²⁶⁸ As the *Pax Romana* decayed, and raids and warfare increased, the need for a fortress high upon the mountain reemerged. In about 450 AD building materials from the lower city were used to build another fortress high upon Mount Tmolus, which was finally abandoned again in about 1425 AD, according to *The Harvard Magazine*, 1998, 03.

²⁶⁹ *The Histories* by Herodotus, Book 1, paragraph 84 (translated by G. C. Macaulay).



interesting blend of a superstition about a “lion that his concubine bore,” a former king, and the ingenuity of a Mardian soldier:

Now the taking of Sardis came about as follows: When the fourteenth day came after Croesus began to be besieged, Cyrus made proclamation to his army, sending horsemen round to the several parts of it, that he would give gifts to the man who should first scale the wall. After this the army made an attempt; and when it failed, then after all the rest had ceased from the attack, a certain Mardian whose name was Hyroiades made an attempt to approach on that side of the citadel where no guard had been set; for they had no fear that it would ever be taken from that side, seeing that here the citadel is precipitous and unassailable. To this part of the wall alone Meles also, who formerly was king of Sardis, did not carry round the lion which his concubine bore to him, the Telmessians having given decision that if the lion should be carried round the wall, Sardis should be safe from capture: and Meles having carried it round the rest of the wall, that is to say those parts of the citadel where the fortress was open to attack, passed over this part as being unassailable and precipitous: now this is a part of the city turned towards Tmolos. So then this Mardian Hyroiades, having seen on the day before how one of the Lydians had descended on that side of the citadel to recover his helmet which had rolled down from above, and had picked it up, took thought and cast the matter about in his own mind. Then he himself ascended first, and after him came up others of the Persians, and many having thus made approach, Sardis was finally taken and the whole city was given up to plunder.

Xenophon²⁷⁰ gives a slightly different account of that event:

When day broke Cyrus marched straight for Sardis, and when he came before the citadel he set up his engines as though for the assault and got out his ladders. But the following night he sent a scaling party of Persians and Chaldaeans to climb the fortifications at the steepest point. The guide was a Persian who had served as a slave to one of the garrison in the citadel, and who knew a way down to the river by which one could get up. As soon as it became clear that the heights had been

²⁷⁰ Book 7 chapter 2 of his *Cyropaedia*. This is Henry Graham Dakyns' translation.

taken, all the Lydians without exception fled from the walls and hid wherever they could.

Regardless of which of these accounts is more historically accurate, the story of the defeat of the unconquerable *Sardis* was told and retold many times.²⁷¹ That defeat marked the end of the great Kingdom of Lydia, which at that time covered the western half of what is now the country of Turkey.

In 214 BC the city of *Sardis* was again besieged, and a soldier named Lagoras serving Antiochus the Great was also able to lead soldiers into the “impregnable” *Sardis* using ladders up the steepest part of the cliffs, in an area that the defenders ignored, again thinking it was impregnable.²⁷²

Even if the actual events leading up to the conquering of *Sardis* were not quite like these ancient historians’ accounts, it is clear that *Sardis* was overconfident. *Sardis* had not learned. Both times the conquerors “came like a thief.”

It is ironic that the supposedly “impregnable” fortress city has, through the ages, become a crumbling rock now only visited by tourists.

With five roads intersecting in *Sardis*, there was prosperous trade, and the sheep in their fields produced good wool. The people of *Sardis*, though not as wealthy as the people of Laodicea, were known as a lazy people that liked to enjoy life’s pleasures. They were not known as a diligent community.

The situation of the Christian congregation was apparently as pleasant as the situation of the city. No false teachers threatened the church, and Caesar worship was not emphasized. It was a nice, relaxing place to live.

The village of Sart and many archaeological ruins remain there now. Almost all of those ruins, including a row of shops, the impressive synagogue, the temple to Artemis, and the school campus, were built after this letter was written.

²⁷¹ Hemer, p. 133, reports that there are too many such stories for him to include in his book! That defeat was very significant for the Lydian kingdom and the Lydian people, because although their culture reached back into the second millennium BC, they never recovered their previous glory. There is no evidence of a distinct Lydian culture by the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation.

²⁷² As recorded by Polybius in his *Histories*, Book VII, chapters 15-18.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (3:1b)

3:1b thus says the One who has the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars:

As was discussed under 1:4 above, *the Seven Spirits of God* is almost certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the expression *the seven stars* refers to the *seven* messengers from the *seven* churches, as we learned in 1:20. The Lord holds the Holy Spirit and He holds those messengers, perhaps the pastors of those churches, in His hand. They needed the work of the Spirit in their lives, and in the life of their congregations. The Lord had just what they needed.

3. Criticism (3:1c)

3:1c ...I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

Although there is clearly a standard order of elements, it is not followed precisely here. The criticism of the messenger preceeds any commendation. He has *a name*, a reputation among the other churches of the area that he is *alive*, but spiritually he was practically *dead*. This church was like fruit that appears good but inside is actually rotten. He was lethargic and happy to have a good reputation, even if that reputation was undeserved.

In Ephesians 5:14 believers that are not faithful and diligent are pictured as people that are sleeping and need to wake up. The same imagery is used here.

4. Demand (3:2a)

3:2a Wake up²⁷³ and strengthen what remains which you are about to cast off...²⁷⁴

If they were “dead” or “about to die,” or “asleep,” the obvious thing they needed to do was *wake up and strengthen* whatever life they have. This is a call out of lethargy and complacency.

²⁷³ This verb, γρηγορεω/grēgoreō, can mean either “be awake” or “be alert.” Either meaning is possible here and in verse 3. The verbs and pronouns here are all singular.

²⁷⁴ The Majority Text reads, *what remains which you are about to cast off*. The Critical Text reads “the things that remain which are about to die.”

Criticism (continued) (3:2b)

3:2b ...for I have not found your deeds complete before My God. He has evaluated their works. None of their *deeds* were perfect, mature, *complete*. All their works were colored by their sin. This is a strong criticism. Even though they have a reputation as a vital congregation, Christ is assessing them from the divine perspective, and from that perspective their *deeds* are incomplete.

Demand (continued) (3:3a)

3:3a Therefore remember what you have received and heard, and keep²⁷⁵ it and repent.

There is nothing complicated to understand here about what this means, but it might feel like it is tremendously difficult to actually do this. The Ephesians were also told to *remember* and to *repent*.

5. Warning (3:3b)

3:3b So if you do not wake up, I will come upon you²⁷⁶ like a thief, and you will not know at all²⁷⁷ what time I will come upon you.

The command to *repent* is put into the figure of speech that they should *wake up*. This strongly suggests that if they do *wake up*, if they do *repent*, they will be victors. Any and all the disobedient believers of these congregations can enjoy the wonderful status of being a victor, if they *repent*. There is no indication that they would then become “second class” victors.

There in Sardis the believers were self-satisfied, self-assured, and suddenly (assuming they did not *repent*) they would be totally surprised. And it would not have been a happy surprise! They had to guard themselves, even though there was no threat of an enemy from outside, and no false prophets on the inside, as was the case with some of the other churches.

If it sounds strange that the Lord would compare Himself to a *thief*, the reader should remember that the point of comparison is that both come unexpectedly and both bring trouble. This striking comparison is like the comparison of God and an unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8.

²⁷⁵ Note the footnote concerning the verb *τηρεω/tēreō*, here translated *keep*, under the discussion of 1:3.

²⁷⁶ The Majority Text includes the words *upon you*.

²⁷⁷ The passage is literally “and you will not not know at what hour I will come upon you,” so in order to show the emphasis which the double negative brings, “not not know” is changed to the more emphatic *not know at all*.

6. Praise for the Church (3:4a)

3:4a But you have a few people²⁷⁸ in Sardis who have not dirtied their clothing...

The Lord gave no commendation for the whole church, but He did acknowledge that there were *a few* there that were righteous. Again, this was a divided congregation. The statement “I know your deeds” was no generic commendation. He did know about their deeds but the quality of those deeds was acceptable on for *a few people* there.

In this verse the Lord Jesus says there were *a few people in Sardis who have not dirtied their clothing*. They guarded their holiness just like people who wear white *clothing* need to be careful to keep their *clothing* clean. They were faithful in a church that was less than faithful.

7. Promise (3:4b-5)

3:4b ...and they will walk with Me, clothed²⁷⁹ in white, because they are worthy.

The pronoun *they* here clearly refers to those few *worthy* ones. Is it not clear that these rewards are linked to Christian obedience?

Note the promise, *they will walk with Me*. Perhaps because these are such common words, their profound significance can at first escape our notice. Most likely none of us will every take a stroll with a prime minister or a president, but here we have a promise that if we are counted among the *worthy*, if we are victors, we *will walk with* the King of Kings, the Lord Jesus!

White clothes can symbolize holiness, joy in festivities, or victory. Roman citizens used their *white* clothing for major celebrations.²⁸⁰ Is this gift of *white* clothes a special distinction, or will everyone, including the “sleepy” believers in Sardis, receive it? The structure of these verses, as well as clear statements like verse 4, make it clear that these rewards are for *worthy* believers, and that not all believers will be counted *worthy*.

3:5 The victor, he will be clothed in white clothing. And I will never ever blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before My Father and before His angels.

The first promise is *white clothing*, which the Lord mentions both in verse 4 and in verse 5, perhaps for emphasis. Those who have not dirtied their

²⁷⁸ Literally, “a few names.”

²⁷⁹ The word *clothed* is not in the Greek, but it is supplied for clarity in the English.

²⁸⁰ Thomas, p. 258.

clothing with unholy things will experience great joy at the marriage supper of the Lamb as those who participate in Christ's victory. Often people think that in the age to come all believers will wear *white clothing*, but that idea is not based on the Word of God.

The second promise concerns *the book of life*. At first glance, this sounds like if someone is not a *victor*, then *his name* will get blotted out of *the book of life*. In other words, you will lose your salvation if you do not perform up to the standards of a *victor*. If that is the case, then it would be logical to say that all the things required of victors here in these two chapters are necessary for us to do to keep our salvation. That might be one way to motivate people to live faithful lives, but is that what this text actually means?

Anyone that answers that question with a “yes” ought to be consistent in his or her interpretation. That would then mean that believers that abandon their first love will also have their names blotted out *from the book of life*, and suffer eternal damnation! This author hopes that that view would be rejected. If someone’s name is written in *the book of life*, it will not be blotted out. The question is, will the Son *acknowledge* one’s name before His Father and before the angels or not?

A closer look at this text shows that the Greek translated *never ever* is a double negative,²⁸¹ which is incorrect English grammar (as in “not nohow” or “I ain’t got no money”) but perfectly good and emphatic Greek grammar. It might also be translated “certainly never.”

This might be loosely translated “Rather than ever in any way blotting out his name from the book of life, instead I will confess his name before My Father and His angels.” This is a figure of speech²⁸² in which rather than saying something directly, like “I will acknowledge this person’s name to My Father because of how well he has done,” (as in Matthew 10:32) the speaker denies the opposite, *I will never ever blot out his name*. Note too that the text does not say that anyone’s *name* will actually be blotted out.

The same caution concerning adding words like “but if you are not a victor, I will blot out your name from the book of life” that was given in the discussion of 2:10–11 should be given here. Remember 22:18, “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, may God add to him the plagues written in this book.”

²⁸¹ The double negative is οὐ μη̄/οὐ μῆ. See the comments and footnote on 2:11, which also uses this form.

²⁸² See the footnote under 2:11 concerning this figure is speech, which is called “litotes.”

A Roman master that wanted to free his slave could have that slave's *name* entered into the *book* of citizens of that city. Once that person's *name* was written there, he was no longer a slave; he was a citizen.²⁸³ On the other hand, if a criminal's *name* were erased from the *book* of the citizens, he lost his citizenship.²⁸⁴

In the Scriptures the *book of life* is mentioned in Exodus 32:33; Psalm 69:28 (that is verse 28 in English, and verse 29 in Hebrew); 139:16; Isaiah 29:18; Daniel 10:21; Malachi 3:16; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; and 21:27. In the Old Testament the *book of life* is a *book* containing the names of all living people. When someone physically dies, his *name* is blotted out of the Old Testament *book of life* because he is no longer alive. This is very clear in Psalm 69:28, in which King David prays that his enemies will die, not that they will lose their salvation! However in the New Testament, the expression *book of life*²⁸⁵ refers to a *book* that has the names of everyone who has or will have eternal *life*.²⁸⁶ They are citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The third promise is that He will *acknowledge* each victor's *name before His Father* and *before His angels*. What can compare to this? The Lord Jesus will rise from His throne, stand in front of the *Father*, and say, "Father, this is My servant, faithful and diligent, his name is...." His voice will be heard to the outer reaches of heaven. If we want such words to be spoken about us, we need to be victors. We need to be obedient to Him, even in difficult situations.

The Lord Jesus also gives this promise in Matthew 10:32. There He promises that the believer who courageously acknowledges²⁸⁷ the Lord Jesus before men will also be acknowledged in front of the *Father* in heaven.

²⁸³ Lyall, pp. 60-61.

²⁸⁴ Mounce, p. 113.

²⁸⁵ Two related words, βιβλος/biblos and βιβλιον/biblion, are used to refer to the *book of life* in the Book of Revelation. In the Book of Revelation the expression *book of life* is used six times. It is also used in Phil. 4:3.

²⁸⁶ Stanley, pp. 185-191 and Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 5, p. 285.

²⁸⁷ The word ὁμολογεω/homologeō is used here. It is also used twice in Mt. 10:32. It has a broad range of meaning, including "acknowledge," "promise," "admit something is true," "profess allegiance," and "praise."

3:6 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Again this exhortation is repeated, reminding us all that we do need to hear this message and decide whether it speaks to our heart condition.

We do not know whether the church of Sardis accepted this rebuke from the Lord Jesus so that He did not have to “come as a thief.” In any case, the lesson of the history of Sardis and of this letter still speaks to self-confident and complacent believers. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “So, the one that thinks he stands should watch out, lest he fall.”

The congregation in Sardis was thought to be spiritually mature, but the Lord had another “opinion.” He tells them that some of them are nearly dead spiritually, and He threatens to come as a thief in the night. On the other hand, to those in the congregation that are spiritually alert, He promises He will give them white clothing and He will confess their names to the Father. The spiritually lethargic there needed to become alert and get refreshed. His threat and His promise have the same intent: that they all have a healthy relationship with Him, so that their character and activities reflect His glory as portrayed in the vision in chapter one.

F. Message to the church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

i. The Recipient and the local situation (3:7a)

3:7a And to the messenger of the church in Philadelphia²⁸⁸ write: In the middle of the second century BC the founder of the city of *Philadelphia* was said to have died in Greece, so his younger brother took the throne. When that sad rumor turned out to be false, the younger brother gladly restored the throne to his older brother.²⁸⁹ It was indeed the City of Brotherly Love.

It seems that at one point in time the regions of Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia all met at one place, and at that place *Philadelphia* was founded to bring Greek civilization, which was highly valued, to the “barbarian” regions of Lydia and Phrygia.²⁹⁰ In that way, it originally had a “missionary” purpose – not to bring the Gospel to those areas, but to bring Greek language and

²⁸⁸ The name of the city, Φιλαδέλφεια/*Philadelphieia*, means “brotherly love.”

²⁸⁹ Mounce, p. 115. Eumenes II was the older brother, Attalus II was the younger.

²⁹⁰ Hemer, p. 154, explains that this idea was first stated by Ramsay, and that the route of the roads in the area and the coinage of Philadelphia support this concept.

culture. Goods from the port of Smyrna, as well as Greek culture, were easily taken up the road through *Philadelphia* into those eastern regions.

So as a transportation hub *Philadelphia* was well-situated, but in another sense *Philadelphia* was poorly situated, because of volcanoes and earthquakes. In 17 AD the worst of those earthquakes²⁹¹ destroyed twelve cities in the region, including *Philadelphia* and Sardis. The aftershocks were so frightening that many, fearing that their houses would collapse on top of them, preferred to remain in the countryside outside of *Philadelphia*.²⁹² The promise of the Lord Jesus that those who are faithful will be made into pillars might be connected to such fears.²⁹³

In *Philadelphia* and in many other areas there was a custom of putting up memorial pillars or statues, dedicated to the memory of faithful civic-minded citizens. *Philadelphia* still exists today, but is known as Alasehir. There is a small archaeological garden in the midst of the city, but there are no ruins from the first century city.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (3:7b)

3:7b thus says the Holy One, the True One, the One having the key of David, the One who opens and no one will close it (except the One who opens, and no one opens):²⁹⁴

The idea of *the key of David* is taken from Isaiah 22:22. *The Holy One* is the Messiah (see John 6:69). The Jews in *Philadelphia* (mentioned in 3:9) would reject Him as the True Messiah and as the One that holds *the key of David*. Despite their rejection, He *opens* the door of the Kingdom of God.²⁹⁵ He is the Almighty, who decides who will enter the Kingdom of God, and also what ministry the believers in *Philadelphia* may and may not have.

²⁹¹ Pliny the Elder, in *Historia Naturalis* Book II, chapter 84, considered that earthquake to be the worst in human memory.

²⁹² Mounce, p. 115; and Thomas, p. 271.

²⁹³ Beasley-Murray, p. 99.

²⁹⁴ There are many textual variants for this complicated verse, but this is the reading of the majority of manuscripts.

²⁹⁵ “The keys of death and Hades” in 1:18 speak of life and death, which are related to the *key of David*, which speaks of entrance into the Kingdom of God.

3. Praise for the Church (3:8)

3:8 I know your deeds. Look, I have placed before you an open door, which no one is able to shut, because²⁹⁶ you have little strength, and you have kept²⁹⁷ My word and have not denied My name.

Unlike the commendations in the other letters, this commendation emphasizes ministry opportunities. The *open door* that is *placed before* them seems to refer to opportunity for ministry, perhaps among the unreached.²⁹⁸ Just as Philadelphia was originally built to bring Greek culture to nearby regions that were as yet “barbarians” so the church in Philadelphia now has an opportunity to bring the Good News to unreached peoples. The Lord emphasizes that *no one is able to shut this door* or take away this opportunity from them. Even though they do not feel equipped to evangelize their area, they can still bear fruit, because the Lord Jesus has *placed before them an open door, which no one is able to shut.*

He knows that they have done well for Him, with *little strength*. Surely His comment about their *little strength* was encouraging to that congregation. He knew what it was to be weak, hungry, and thirsty. He acknowledges their *little strength*, and that they have remained faithful, and He is giving them even more opportunity to be faithful.

4. Promise (3:9)

The order of the various elements here differs from the standard order. Five different rewards are offered to this faithful congregation.

²⁹⁶ The Greek word ὅτι/*hoti* can mean “that” or *because*. If “that” is the meaning here, then this is a continuation of what the Lord knows. He knows *their deeds*, and He knows that they *have little strength*. However, it seems more likely that here it means *because*, so that what follows the word *because* are the reasons that He has given them their *open door*.

²⁹⁷ Note under 1:3 the footnote concerning the verb τηρεω/*tēreō*, here translated *kept*.

²⁹⁸ In 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; and Col. 4:3 *open doors* seem to have that meaning. Other than “the opportunity to evangelize” the word *door* can be used for general opportunities (Lk. 11:9), eternity (Mt. 24:33), the closeness of the Lord Jesus who is ready to fellowship with His people (Rev. 3:20), and Christ as Savior (Lk. 13:24).

3:9 Look, I will give those who are of the synagogue of Satan, those saying they are Jews, but they are not, instead they lie, look, I will make them come and prostrate themselves before your feet, and they will know²⁹⁹ that I have loved you.

The *Jews* who did not receive the Lord Jesus as their Messiah and Savior are called *the synagogue of Satan*, just like the *Jews* that persecuted the church in Smyrna. This is a powerful condemnation of the *Jews* that have not believed in the Lord.³⁰⁰ We see a similar attitude in Acts 17:5 and 13, when the *Jews* in Thessalonica were jealous of the success of evangelism in Thessalonica and Berea. Compare this attitude with 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16. If the *Jews* of Philadelphia were persecuting this church, this first promise would comfort and also strengthen those who were suffering.

The first promise is that He will *make them come and prostrate themselves before* their *feet*. Finally they will *know* that the Lord Jesus loves the Philadelphia church. This is a very strongly worded passage, and certainly not in conformity with today's ideas about respecting other religions.

When will this promise be fulfilled? If that *synagogue* repented and believed in Jesus, then that promise has already been fulfilled. If not, then its fulfillment will come at the end of the age.

Praise (continued) (3:10a)

3:10a Because you have kept³⁰¹ My command of endurance...

This is another praise from Him. They *kept* His *command* calling them to *endurance*. He does not go into detail here, but His meaning is very clear. This was a good church in His eyes.

Promise (continued) (3:10b)

3:10b ...I will also keep you from the hour of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who dwell upon the earth.

The second promise is that they will be kept *from the hour of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who dwell upon the earth*. In one sense this is very clear. Because they have been obedient, they will receive this reward. On the other hand, this is a very difficult passage, because there are several elements that are hard to interpret.

²⁹⁹ The verb γινώσκω/*ginōskō* usually means *know*. BDAG says this word can mean "to acknowledge," but it does not give a clear NT example of that.

³⁰⁰ Compare this with Jn. 8:44, where Jesus told the *Jews* that opposed Him, "you are from your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father...."

³⁰¹ Note under 1:3 the footnote concerning the verb τηρεω/*tēreō*, here used twice, and translated *kept* and *keep*.

In this sentence the Lord uses a word play. Because they have *kept* His command, therefore He will *keep* them.

The hour of testing is most likely the Great Tribulation prophesied in Revelation 4-18, that time of sorrow or distress described as the seventieth “week” of Daniel chapter 9³⁰² and “the coming wrath” in 1 Thessalonians 1:10, rather than one twelfth of a day.

In the Book of Revelation the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* is used nine times [in 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 (twice); 13:8, 14 (twice); and 17:8]. Very similar expressions are used in 13:12 and 17:2.³⁰³ It always refers to the people who do not want to believe in the Lamb of God, and instead decide to worship the beast. It is a key expression for the unrepentant of the *earth*, whose hardness of heart is a crucial element in the message of this book. Its use in Isaiah 26:21 is very similar to its use in Revelation.

The expression *the whole world*³⁰⁴ can refer to the Roman *world* as in Luke 2:1 and Acts 11:28, but can also refer to *the whole physical world* as in Matthew 24:14; Luke 4:5; Acts 17:31; Romans 10:18; Hebrews 1:6; 2:5; Revelation 12:9; and 16:14. If it refers only to the Roman Empire, perhaps it refers to some persecution that reaches throughout the Roman Empire, but if it refers to the entire *earth*, then it seems like it would be the judgment at the end of the age.

The expression *keep you from* might somehow possibly mean “protect you during” but the literal meaning is “keep out of.”

This promise of protection could refer to:

1. protection from persecution during the Roman era

The problem with this is that the fulfillment of all the other promises in chapters two and three has to wait for the victorious coming of the Lord Jesus, with the possible exception of 3:9. Is this (and possibly 3:9) the only promise to be fulfilled in their time?

2. protection for the church at the end of the age, on *earth*, during the seven year Tribulation, in line with the Post-Tribulational teachings

The problem with this is that according to Revelation 6:9-11 and 7:9-14, people who believe during the Tribulation will not be protected but will

³⁰² See the footnote that discusses Dan. 9:22-27 under the discussion of Rev. 11:2.

³⁰³ The expression in 14:6 is also very similar, but has a different verb in Greek.

³⁰⁴ τῆς οἰκουμενῆς ὀλης/τῆς *oikoumenēs holēs*

be killed. So the nature of this protection is vague, and this is a weak option.

3. protection only for the faithful, because they will be raptured right before the Tribulation, in line with “Partial Rapture” teachings
According to this interpretation, the promise will be fulfilled before the Tribulation, only for believers who are faithful during that time period. But support for the “Partial Rapture” view is very weak in Scripture.

4. protection for all believers, including the faithful, because all believers will be raptured before the Tribulation, in line with Pre-Tribulational teachings

This is like the promise to the victors, that they will not be hurt by the second death. See 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9.

This writer holds that the fourth explanation is to be preferred, but it is a difficult passage. There is also the possibility that this promise has a double fulfillment, so that the first and the fourth are both correct.³⁰⁵ In any case, in this passage in the original language,³⁰⁶ it is emphatic that Christ is going to protect them.

5. Criticism

There is none! This does not mean that the congregation achieved a state of “sinless perfection,” it simply means that our gracious Lord was satisfied with their spiritual growth and had no need to criticize them.

6. Demand (3:11a)

3:11a I am coming³⁰⁷ suddenly.³⁰⁸ Hold on to what you have...

This is the closest this letter comes to a demand. They need to keep at it, to maintain the attitudes and ministries that they have. For those in Smyrna and Philadelphia, the coming of Christ would be a comfort, but

³⁰⁵ In Dan. 11 there is a prophecy with a double fulfillment. That passage was fulfilled in the life of Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled in the Middle East about 160 years before Christ was born, but the passage will also be fulfilled by someone with the same character as Antiochus Epiphanes, who will appear in the end times. That person is referred to as “the beast” in the Book of Revelation.

³⁰⁶ The word order (*καὶ γω σε τηρησώ/kagō se tērēsō*), in which a personal pronoun (*εγω/egō* in *καὶ γω/kagō*) is moved forward in the sentence, emphasizes the importance of the word *εγω/egō*. The grammar emphasizes that Christ will do the protecting.

³⁰⁷ See the discussion of this word, *ερχομαι/erchomai*, in the footnote under 2:5.

³⁰⁸ See the discussion of this word, *ταχυ/tachu*, in the footnote under 1:1.

for those in Ephesus, Laodicea, and a portion of the congregations in Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis, words like *I am coming suddenly* should bring about fear. Note that a very similar command was given to part of the congregation in Thyatira in 2:25.

7. Warning (3:11b)

3:11b ...so that no one takes your crown.

This “warning” is not a threat. Here the Lord simply reminds them about the wonderful importance of their attitude and service, which – as long as they are faithfully continued – will bring them crowns. This warning to this good church is also different from all the other warnings in chapters two and three. In all those warnings, the Lord says, “I will...,” but here it is much more positive, *so that no one takes your crown*.

This brief verse teaches us something crucial about crowns, and by extension about the other rewards in these seven letters (and even other rewards in this whole book). Even assuming we are doing as well as this congregation was, at this point our crowns are not guaranteed to us. Someone might take them from us. The condition for keeping a *crown* is “hold on to what you have.” The race is not yet over. If they were tempted and fell, and no longer were living a life pleasing to the Lord, it could be said that whoever tempted them and caused them to fall has “taken” their *crown*.

Note carefully that this text does not say, “so that no one takes your salvation”! Our salvation is guaranteed by the blood of Christ; our rewards are not.

When the Apostle Paul wrote 2 Timothy 4:8, “Finally, there is stored away for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to me in that Day, and not only to me, but to all that have loved His appearing,” he was very near the end of his life. That is why he could have that calm assurance that he would receive a *crown* of righteousness. Believers that are walking in righteousness today, however, that are not at the end of their lives must still guard their hearts and minds, lest someone takes their crowns.

Note also 2 John 8, which says “Watch yourselves, lest we ruin what we have worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁹ Some Greek manuscripts read “Watch yourselves, lest you ruin what we have worked for, but that you may receive a full reward,” but in either case this verse is very much like *Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown*.

This is a good point for serious personal reflection. Who is it that might take *your crown* by drawing you away from our good Lord? Who, whether with a sweet or a cruel appearance, threatens your walk with Him? Are you on guard against that danger?

Promise (continued) (3:11b-12)

Included in this “warning” is a third promise, their crowns.³¹⁰ As long as they hold on to what they have, no one will be able to take their *crown*. As long as they remain at the level they have reached, as long as they remain obedient, their *crown* is secure. See the discussion on the message to Smyrna concerning crowns in 2:10. In Smyrna they had to “be faithful, even to the point of death” in order to get their crowns. In the same way, this congregation has to hold on to what they have to keep their crowns. These crowns are conditional.

Some would say that all believers persevere in good works (and therefore all believers will be given crowns), but that pushes a great deal of theology into a passage like this, rather than letting it speak for itself.

3:12 The victor I will make³¹¹ a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will 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 out of heaven from My God; and I will write on him My new name.

Fourth, each faithful member will be made *a pillar in the temple of our Lord's God*. This is clearly a metaphor. As noted above, in that culture they gave honor to citizens for their service by setting up pillars for them.

In 1 Maccabees 14:25-27 we read of Israel's gratitude to Simon for his heroic efforts. They said, “What gift shall we give to Simon and to his sons? For he and his brothers and the house of his father have strengthened Israel and made war against enemies and established freedom for them.” The text continues, “And they wrote on bronze tablets and they placed them on pillars on Mount Zion.”

Throughout the ages, people have set up various memorials to honor their honored citizens. Perhaps the members of this congregation had seen some of those memorials in Philadelphia, and thought, “I will never be honored like those important people.” But here the Lord is saying to them that they are important to Him, and He will honor them in this

³¹⁰ This is the word στεφανος/*stephanos*. See the footnote under 2:10 concerning this word.

³¹¹ This would be translated literally, “The victor, I will make him....”

way! The details may not be clear, but the intent is to honor His faithful servants in a public way, to be seen by all.

Those that receive the promise that *never again will he go out of it* will have the right to enjoy close fellowship with the Lord forever. This promise is very similar to Psalm 27:4, “One thing I have asked from the LORD, this I seek, that I might dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life....” The permanence in this promise can be contrasted with the condition of the buildings of Philadelphia that were ruined by destructive earthquakes.

As a fifth promise, each faithful member of the congregation will somehow be inscribed with *the name of our Lord’s God, the name of the city of our Lord’s God, the New Jerusalem, and the Lord’s new name.*

This reminds us of stone pillars inscribed with people’s names. Further, any writing material or any old book that had God’s *name* written in it was honored by the Jews. When it was no longer being used, it could not be thrown away like any common thing. Such materials were held in a special place called a *genizah*, until they could be properly disposed of.³¹² But in this case it is not a piece of writing material that will be so honored – it is the victors themselves.

See Isaiah 43:7; Jeremiah 23:6; and Ezekiel 48:35. In about 220 AD Rabbi Jonathan said, “Three are named according to the name of God, that is the righteous, the Messiah, and Jerusalem.”³¹³

The question of who will enter and live in *the New Jerusalem* is discussed just before the discussion of 21:1. It is enough here to simply note that these victors will certainly be allowed into the city whose name the Lord *will write on them*.

3:13 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Do you, reader, have *an ear to hear*? Is this letter describing you?

Some of these five promises may seem strange to us in the 21st century, but they are beautiful promises, and they are meant to motivate us to the life and ministry the Lord has for us, or to stand firm in that life and ministry. The congregation in Philadelphia did not feel that it was very

³¹² The Hebrew word *genizah* means “storage.” These storage places were located in synagogues and cemeteries. The most famous *genizah* is the Cairo Genizah, located in a synagogue in Cairo. It contained about 200,000 documents or fragments that were written between 870 AD and 1880.

³¹³ Beasley-Murray, p. 103.

strong, but it was given unusual opportunities to serve in an unreached area. They were faithful in the trouble they experienced, so they were not threatened or told to repent like most of the other congregations.

G. Message to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

i. The Recipient and the local situation (3:14a)

3:14a And to the messenger of the church in Laodicea write:

The city of *Laodicea* was founded by Antiochus II, a descendant of one of Alexander the Great's generals, who reigned from 261 to 246 BC. He named the new city after his wife, Laodice, whom he divorced in 253 BC.³¹⁴ After 133 BC that kingdom became part of Rome's empire, which usually brought many benefits. However, *Laodicea* suffered from unusually heavy taxation³¹⁵ and demands to open their homes and provide meals and spending money for government officials and military personnel.³¹⁶

Traveling east to Phrygia one went by *Laodicea* and Philadelphia.³¹⁷ The city's location, with three main roads meeting there, helped it develop into an important center for trade. Black sheep in the area yielded valuable soft and shiny black wool for clothing and carpets. The sale of wool, carpets, cloth, and clothing was a source of their wealth.³¹⁸

Laodicea became a banking center for the region, and some of its citizens were remarkably wealthy.³¹⁹ After the major earthquake in 60 or 61 AD they rebuilt their city with their own funds, refusing the financial assistance that Rome offered!³²⁰ They considered themselves wealthy. Although

³¹⁴ The location was originally called "Diospolis," prior to the time when Antiochus II founded Laodicea there (Hemer, p. 180).

³¹⁵ Concerning the actions of various men that Rome appointed over Laodicea, Hemer, pp. 202-203, writes that Sulla required the immediate payment of five years' worth of taxes, thought to be 20,000 talents. Before that was paid, Lucullus required a 25% tax on crops. Flaccus seized 9 kilograms (20 pounds) of gold from the Jews there. Soon afterwards, Cicero was so ashamed of this injustice that he declared that he and his staff there would not take anything from the Laodiceans, not even hay or firewood!

³¹⁶ Hemer, p. 202.

³¹⁷ Mounce, p. 123; and Thomas, p. 298.

³¹⁸ Hemer, p. 199.

³¹⁹ Hemer, p. 193.

³²⁰ Beasley-Murray, p. 103; and Mounce, p. 123. In about the year 107 AD Tacitus, in *Annals* 14.26, wrote "One of the famous cities of Asia, Laodicea, was that same year overthrown by an earthquake, and, without any relief from us, recovered itself by its own resources." Hemer, p. 193, considers the possibility that contrary

inscriptions describing how various public buildings and facilities were donated by wealthy citizens were common at that time, in *Laodicea* there are a greater number of such inscriptions.³²¹

They had a well-developed medical school there that produced the famous “Phrygian powder,” used in making eye salve.³²²

Laodicea’s physical location was chosen because of the highway system and trade routes, not for good defense or water resources. Since the nearby Lycus River (less than three kilometers/two miles away) could dry up during the dry season, water for *Laodicea* had to be piped in with a long series of stone water pipes which could easily be broken by enemies, so *Laodicea* knew it was vulnerable in case of attack.³²³

The neighboring cities of Colossae and Hierapolis had good water at hand. Colossae’s was cold and fresh; Hierapolis’ water was hot, and valued for its healing properties.³²⁴ In contrast, during the summer when the nearby river dried up, the best *Laodicea* could do for water was to use that series of stone pipes to bring in their water. It probably came from the hot springs of what is now called Denizli, about five kilometers (three miles) to the south, but too many of the stone pipes have been removed to be certain about the source.³²⁵ The heavy calcium carbonate deposits that remain to this day in those stone pipes indicate that their water

to custom, Rome decided not to offer help to *Laodicea*, but decides that it is more likely that Rome did offer financial assistance, but *Laodicea* proudly refused its aid.

³²¹ Hemer, p. 194, notes the inscription that states that a man named Nicostratus paid for the construction of a stadium amphitheater whose arena was 275 meters (900 feet) long.

³²² Hemer, pp. 196-199, gives the evidence for the location of the medical school and the source of the famous “Phrygian powder.” After thorough examination of all the evidence, Hemer concludes that it is most likely that the school was in *Laodicea* and the “Phrygian powder” for eye salve came from *Laodicea*.

³²³ Mounce, p. 123.

³²⁴ The hot springs of Hierapolis are today known as Pamukkale, which means “Cotton Castle” in Turkish. Spilling over a high cliff, they have created a very beautiful white cliff with cascading pools formed by the calcium carbonate deposited from the hot water. The bright white calcium carbonate cliff is about a kilometer wide, and 100 meters high (about 0.6 mile wide and 300 feet high). It can be seen clearly from *Laodicea*, about eight kilometers (five miles) away.

³²⁵ Hemer, p. 277, notes that the pipes certainly would not have come from the area of Hierapolis.

was not pleasant to drink.³²⁶ The water those pipes delivered was not refreshingly cool, like the water of one particular stream near Colossae, nor was it hot, like the water of the hot springs of Hierapolis. In fact, the water in that region was known to cause people to vomit!³²⁷

Rabbis in Israel complained that Jews would leave Jerusalem and live in *Laodicea*, with its elaborate public baths and good wine.³²⁸

Now all that remains of *Laodicea* are extensive ruins that silently attest to the physical wealth that once was the pride of this city.



2. The Characteristic of Christ (3:14b)

3:14b thus says the Amen, the faithful and true witness,³²⁹ the ruler³³⁰ of God's creation:

Only in this passage is the name *Amen* used as a name of Christ. Basically this word means “It is true,” and it is further explained with the

³²⁶ Hemer, p. 189, explains that calcium carbonate tastes bad in water. He also says that if that water had been cold, the calcium carbonate would not have deposited itself on the inside walls of those stone pipes. It was lukewarm water, and it was full of calcium carbonate!

³²⁷ Hemer, p. 189.

³²⁸ Mounce, p. 123. Hemer, p. 183, quotes the *Talmud*, Shabbath 147b, “the wines and the baths of Phrygia have separated the twelve tribes of Israel,” but also notes that the translation of that text is uncertain.

³²⁹ The words *faithful and true* are used four times in the Book of Revelation, twice about the Lord Jesus (in 3:14 and 19:11) and twice about the words of the Book of Revelation itself (21:5 and 22:6).

³³⁰ This term, *αρχη/archē*, can be translated “beginning” as in Mt. 19:4; 24:8; Mk. 1:1; 10:6; 13:19; Lk. 1:2; Jn. 1:1; 2:11; 6:64; and Heb. 7:3. But it is translated “ruler” in Lk. 12:11; 20:20; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; 2:15; and Tit. 3:1. If it points to an actual person, this word always means *ruler*, except in Rev. 21:6 and 22:13 (there the word must be translated “beginning” because it is contrasted with “ending”) and maybe in Col. 1:18. Therefore the translation “beginning” does not have strong support, but the translation *ruler* fits with what is said about the Lord Jesus in the NT. (See also Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; and Col. 1:15–16.)

expression *the faithful and true witness*. He is the one who can be believed. The emphasis is on His truthfulness, which this lukewarm church needs to believe and act upon in order to repent and eventually receive their reward. The Lord will not deceive them. The words *the faithful witness* are drawn from John's "trinitarian" greeting in 1:4-5.

3. Praise for the Church

This element is, painfully, completely missing!

4. Criticism (3:15)

3:15 I know your deeds, that you are not cold or hot. I wish you were cold³³¹ or hot!

The Lord Jesus says *I know*, as He says in the other six letters, but in this letter what He knows does not bring a commendation but an extensive criticism.

As noted above, drinking water was certainly an issue for the city. Their water, at least in the summer, tasted bad. The Lord uses the picture of unpleasant drinking water as a shocking rebuke. Just like their unpleasant drinking water, the congregation was neither *cold* nor *hot*.

The words *I wish you were cold or hot* are very emphatic. Being *hot* seems to refer to having great spiritual fervor, as in Acts 18:25 and Romans 12:11.³³²

5. Warning³³³ (3:16)

3:16 So, because you are lukewarm, and not hot or cold – I will spit you out of My mouth.

Their hearts were *lukewarm*, and He wants to *spit* them *out of His mouth*. Even if we know little about the beverage preferences for people in that region, the Lord's words are shocking and stinging. The Lord Jesus declares that He does not want to fellowship with them in their present state of sin. Their sins greatly disturb Him. This is among the strongest rebukes in the New Testament.

³³¹ We should be careful not to insert modern expressions like "cold-hearted" into this passage, because there are no biblical parallels for the idea of being spiritually *cold*, and no evidence that that figure of speech was used in that area and time period.

³³² In Acts 18:25 and Rom. 12:11 the verb ζεω/zeō is used for having fervor; here in Rev. 3:15 the related adjective ζεστος/zestos is used.

³³³ In the normal pattern of the other messages of Revelation chapters two and three, the demand is first, then the warning, but in this letter the warning is first, then the demand.

The verb translated *spit*³³⁴ could also be translated “vomit.” Even so, the translation *spit* should be preferred, if only because people *spit* out of their mouths, but vomit out of their stomachs.

Criticism (continued) (3:17)

3:17 You say, ‘I am rich’ and ‘I have gotten rich’³³⁵ and ‘I have need of nothing.’ And you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

They considered themselves *rich*, but it was the wealth of the world. In the Lord’s eyes they were *wretched, miserable, and poor*. How can the Lord Jesus, who is the “true witness,” say that they are *poor* when they have so much wealth? They had their famous eye salve, but the Lord says they are *blind*. They had their famous black wool, but the Lord says they are *naked*. Note the contrast with the congregation in Smyrna, which was physically *poor*, but spiritually rich.

6. Demand (3:18)

3:18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so that you may be rich; and white garments to wear, so that you are clothed and your shameful nakedness is not visible; and salve so you can anoint your eyes, so that you can see.

Jesus’ demand of the church in Laodicea, alluding to Isaiah 55:1-2, has three parts, in which three things that they were so proud of have been turned around and made into metaphors of their spiritual needs which the Lord Jesus offers to fulfill.

The Lord Jesus speaks with irony. The people of Laodicea were wealthy. They were experts in buying and selling. Perhaps the Lord is hinting to them something like “since you are so good at buying things, let Me tell you what you really should ‘buy’!”³³⁶

334 εὐεώ/emeō

335 According to Thomas, p. 311, their words, ‘I am rich’ and ‘I have gotten rich’ is a “hysteron-proteron,” a figure of speech in which the order of a pair of expressions is changed, so that the thing that happened first (*I have gotten rich*) is said after the thing that happened later (*I am rich*). Obviously they got *rich* first and then they were *rich*. The order of the expressions here seems to emphasize that they thought the wealth that they enjoyed was a result of their own labors. This literary device can also be seen in 4:11; 5:2, 5; and 10:9. In a few of these examples, some translations reverse the order of expressions so that the hysteron-proteron figure of speech in the original is not apparent.

336 Hemer, p. 196.

They are advised to *buy* from Him three specific things: *gold*, *white garments*, and *salve* for their eyes, and each of those three things is followed by a reason for them to buy those things.

They already have *gold*, but their *gold* is not pure. Heavenly *gold* is pure. Heavenly *gold* can be bought with obedience. That which is being offered for sale in this verse is not salvation.³³⁷ In the Book of Revelation, the offer of salvation is quite different. For example, in 22:17 there is an offer which clearly refers to eternal salvation: “And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wants receive the water of life freely.” What is offered for sale here in 3:18 is not salvation. They have already been saved, by grace. What is offered for sale is heavenly wealth, received according to our works. For our works we receive a reward. For our works we receive a crown. For our works we receive the promises offered to the “victors.” These must never be confused with what is free, which is eternal life. Eternal life is not based on our works, and it is not something that you can *buy*. It is based on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and it can only be given to people. Besides that, we should remember that the church in Laodicea is a real congregation of saved people, and one of the seven churches among which Christ walks. It is a church, not a merely human social institution.

They are advised to buy *white garments*. It is clear that these *white* clothes (like those mentioned in 3:4-5; 4:4; and 6:11) are rewards for righteous living, because they already have clothes that are made from their black wool. Also, they are advised to buy the eye *salve* so that they *can see*.

Warning (continued) (3:19a)

3:19a As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline.

Such a statement would not be made to unbelievers. These are beloved believers that are in need of *rebuke and discipline*. Indeed, this verse suggests that the *discipline* and the negative consequences of disobedience mentioned throughout these seven messages are for the good of the believers involved, and do not include any threat of damnation. This verse cannot possibly be understood to mean, “As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline, perhaps even sending them to hell, if their sin is bad enough and too often repeated, so be zealous and repent.” Because of His great

³³⁷ Beasley-Murray, p. 106, connects the offer of *gold* here to salvation. He supports this interpretation with Isa. 55:1. But Isaiah is far from Revelation. As the near context, Rev. 22:17 is stronger as a supporting text. Also, in Isa. 55:1-3 it is emphasized that what is offered is offered to people “who do not have any money.” That offer is made for those “without any money to buy.” That same emphasis is not seen in Rev. 3:18-19. Those addressed in Laodicea are not offered salvation, because they already have it.

love for the church in Laodicea, He rebukes and disciplines them, as a father disciplines a child so that the child will obey his father. He wants them to draw nearer in fellowship with Him.

This passage, with Hebrews 12:5-7, alludes to Proverbs 3:11-12, which reads, “My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD and do not loathe His rebuke, for whom the LORD loves He corrects, just like a father the son in whom he delights.” Such *rebuke* and *discipline* are signs of His *love*. The term *discipline*³³⁸ normally has the meaning of “training a child,” and is closely related to the word for “child.”³³⁹ The Lord Jesus is strict with any of His children that will not obey, and He will give beautiful rewards to the ones who will obey. This expression of His *love* reminds us that the members of the church in Laodicea, although lukewarm, have already believed and become children of God.

Demand (continued) (3:19b)

3:19b Be zealous therefore, and repent.

This is another clear demand the Lord makes upon this congregation. He does not want them to be discouraged or think that the God who rebukes them does not love them. He does love them. They were saved, and they had believed in the Lord Jesus, but they were not exercising their faith; they were not living as followers of the Lord.

7. Promise (3:20-21)

There are extensive rewards promised in this message.

3:20 Look! I am standing at the door and knocking. If someone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and I will eat³⁴⁰ with him, and he with Me.

The Lord Jesus is *knocking* on the *door* of their hearts. How far they have fallen! According to this metaphor He is *standing* outside and wants to fellowship again with them. This figure of speech of table fellowship is an expression full of life and warmth.³⁴¹

³³⁸ παιδεύω/paideuō

³³⁹ παιδίον/paidion

³⁴⁰ This verb, δειπνεῖω/deipneō, means “to eat a meal,” not just “to eat.” The Lord is not saying He will have a hurried snack with them. Instead He is offering to enjoy a full meal with those in that congregation that will repent (*BDAG*).

³⁴¹ Mounce, p. 129, explains that this table fellowship was already a symbol of the fellowship that will be enjoyed in the Kingdom of the Messiah. In 1 Enoch 62:14 this picture is given: “And with that Son of Man shall they eat and lie down and rise up for ever and ever.”

The idea that the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords would stand outside, knock on their doors, and ask to be invited in must have deeply touched the Laodiceans, resentful as they were of Roman overlords who would force their way into their homes and demand to be fed.³⁴²

This verse is often interpreted to mean that the Lord Jesus is *knocking* on the *door* of the hearts of the unsaved, offering salvation. But if we read this verse in its context, we see very clearly that it is simply not an evangelistic verse. There were seven golden lampstands, seven churches, not six churches and one group of unsaved people that called themselves Christians! The church in Laodicea was headed for the discipline the Lord gives disobedient believers, as He warned then when He said, “As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline.” The Lord did not urge them to freely receive the gift of the water of life. Instead He urged them to “buy from Me gold which has been refined in the fire.” That would be an inappropriate metaphor for the gift of salvation, but a very appropriate metaphor for the hard work of following the Lord as His obedient disciple.

They did not need to be evangelized, but they very much needed to be rebuked and be encouraged to repent. This verse is part of the encouragement their loving Lord gives them to repent from their self-assured attitudes.

3:21 To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne.

Of all the promises in chapters two and three this one is the most amazing: *to sit with Me on My Throne*. This is the climax of this section. *To sit with the Lord Jesus Christ on His throne!* The glory of this promise has no comparison. To serve God year after year faithfully is a challenge, but His *throne* is promised to the one who serves faithfully. This promise will be fulfilled in 20:4, and it will be further developed in the capital city described in 21:9–22:5.

This is very similar to the promise given in Matthew 19:28 to the first followers of the Lord: “But Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, I say to you that you who have followed Me will, in the Renewal when the son of Man sits on His glorious throne, be seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’” That is basically³⁴³ the same promise with the same condition. In Matthew the condition is to follow Him; in Revelation the condition is to be a *victor*. Likewise in Luke 22:28–30, “But you have

³⁴² Hemer, p. 202; and Mounce, p. 128.

³⁴³ In Rev. 3:21 there is only one throne, but in Mt. 19:28 there are 12 thrones, and in Rev. 4:4 there are 24 thrones. However, we should be careful about insisting that the design and number of thrones in heaven be clear to us now here on earth!

continued with Me in My trials. And I decree for you just as My Father decreed for Me a kingdom, so that you shall eat and drink at My table in My kingdom and you shall sit upon thrones, judging the twelve tribes.”³⁴⁴

The Lord here says the *Father* has given Him *His throne* because the Lord *was victorious*. He was faithful even to the point of death. This is very similar to what we read in Philippians 2:8-9, “And in appearance being found as man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God Him exalted, and gave to Him a Name which is above every name....” Because the Lord humbled Himself, God exalted Him. Here the Laodiceans (whose hearts are presently so lukewarm) are invited to join in on that same principle. If they humble themselves and obey Him, they will be given the right *to sit with the Lord on His throne!*

Because the Lord’s purpose is to persuade, not to give a full theological account of things, not much is said about what happens to those who choose not to accept this challenge from Him. At this point He is not interested in saying, “Well, if you are not willing to be a dedicated follower, I can still assure you that anyone that has accepted Me as his or her personal Savior will not go to hell.” This is true, but it is not a part of the encouragement that He wanted to bring to the Laodiceans. He did not want to give them the impression that it really did not matter whether they repented or not. We that have accepted Christ as our personal Savior are indeed eternally secure, but it may not be pastorally effective to remind lukewarm believers of that. It is more pastorally effective to tell them how repugnant their sin is, and how great the rewards are that await them if they will dedicate themselves to the Lord.

3:22 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Again, do you have ears to *hear what the Spirit is saying?* He, *the Spirit of God*, is speaking these words to you. Is He describing your life?

In the last of the seven messages we are reminded that the witness of Christ is always true and faithful (a very appropriate reminder for those of us that doubt the goodness of His will). Based on the pattern used in all these letters, the reader expects the congregation to be praised for something. But in Laodicea the Lord found nothing for which to praise them. They were harshly rebuked (but reminded that this rebuke was a sign of His love). Like the other churches, the rebuke was accompanied

³⁴⁴ Beasley-Murray, p. 107, also mentions 2 Tim. 2:12 which says quite specifically, “if we endure, also we shall reign with Him...,” and Jms. 4:10 which says in a more general way, “Be humbled before the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

by a demand. They were commanded to face their spiritual poverty. The worthlessness of the worldly wealth that they prided themselves on was pointed out to them. He threatened that He would spit them out of His mouth. Finally, in a promise that is similar to but more beautiful than the other promises, they were told that if they became faithful they would sit with Him on His throne. God is patient and good, even in dealing with those who have disappointed Him.

In these messages the Lord makes it clear that He understands the local situation and the heart attitudes of His people. As He does, His presence there among them is powerfully illustrated. To each of the congregations He says, "I know...." He knows our hearts and our situations.

We should imitate the Lord's approach to speaking to the churches. We have seen how He used various elements of their lives and settings to speak effectively to them. Like Him, as we draw near to a certain area or ethnic group, we can also use elements of their lives as we communicate with them, so that our ministries can likewise be effective.

In the beginning (Genesis 1:28), God gave Adam and Eve their task: to be fruitful, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule it as His images, His representatives. Adam and Eve did badly, and we his descendants have done badly. Now another, a true Son of Adam, is going to fulfill the task God gave so long ago to the first Adam. And we, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice and given glorified bodies at the resurrection, will be invited to join Him in that task – if we are faithful now! In that way, what has seemed like the dreadful failure of God's plan to create a wonderful world shall, in fact, turn out not to be dreadful at all, but wonderful³⁴⁵ – and especially wonderful for every believer who decides to reject and turn away from that ancient serpent, and instead follow the Second Adam in obedience and in victory. Will you be there, standing among the victors, enjoying the fulfillment of God's design for this earth? That is the goal and purpose of chapters two and three: be a victor!

Consider for a moment the theological implications of the seven messages. What do they teach us about the idea that our eternal salvation can be lost? Was the congregation in Laodicea, which the Lord scolded so severely, ever threatened with hell? What about "backslidden Christians"? What is their situation in these letters? Or, in other words, what is the

³⁴⁵ As Wright, p. 195, says, "The whole Bible could be portrayed as a very long answer to a very simple question: What can God do about the sin and rebellion of the human race? Genesis 12 through Revelation 22 is God's answer to the question posed by the bleak narratives of Genesis 3-11."

situation of the fleshly³⁴⁶ Christian, like those in Corinth? These and other very practical theological questions are spoken of very clearly in the seven letters. They might be called backsliders, fleshly Christians, carnal Christians, or lazy believers, but unless they return to a healthy spiritual life, they will lose their rewards, not their salvation.

Some may say that church members that are not victors have never really had “saving faith.” But the Ephesians were exhorted to “remember from whence you have fallen.” Clearly they had slipped from a status that was pleasing to God. They were saved, they were real believers who earlier had lived lives pleasing to the Lord. They did have, and live in, “saving faith.” Likewise to Sardis the Lord said, “Therefore remember what you have received and heard, and keep it and repent.” The members of the church in Sardis had “received and heard” the Gospel. Those “sleepy” believers needed to return to a status that they had earlier enjoyed. There is no exhortation for them to come to “saving faith.”

Although not a single believer in Ephesus or Laodicea escaped the rebuke of the Lord, and all the people of both congregations are called to repent, and unless they repent they will all suffer the threats expressed to them, those congregations are nevertheless two of the seven churches. They are real churches, not groups of people without “saving faith.” These messages are to a wide variety of believers, all of whom will enter the Kingdom, but some of whom need to repent to gain the wonderful status that the victors will enjoy in that Kingdom.

³⁴⁶ In 1 Cor. 3:1 Paul says the believers in Corinth are *σαρκινος/sarkinos*. In 3:3 he says they are *σαρκικος/sarkikos*. Both words are derived from the word *σαρξ/sarx*, which means “flesh.” The NIV translates both these words rather loosely as “worldly.” The ESV more accurately translates these words with the expression “of the flesh.” “Carnal” is an older term with the same meaning.

The Seven Letters to the Seven Churches

Address	Christ is...	Praise	Criticism	Demand	Warning	Promise
Ephesus	with them	pure doctrine	left first love	remember and repent	remove lamp- stand	tree of life
Smyrna	alive again	you are rich!		be faithful		crown of life
Pergam.	sword	you did not deny	Balaam	repent	sword	hidden manna
Thyatira	eyes, feet	doing more	Jezebel	repent/ hold on	she will suffer	author- ity
Sardis	7 spirits	only a few	you are dead	strengthen	thief	white clothes
Philadel.	holy and true	kept His word		hold on	crown be taken	write on him 3 names
Laodicea	Amen		luke- warm	buy gold	spit out	throne

III. “What will happen after this” (4-22)

Revelation 1:19 reads, “Write what you saw, what is now, and what will take place after these things.” Revelation 4:1 reads, “After these things I looked – and see! – an open door in heaven. And the voice which I first heard like a trumpet was speaking to me saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’” In the Greek the words “after these things” in both verses are the same. The only difference is that 1:19 uses the verb “will,” and 4:1 uses the verb “must.” Thus we are indirectly told that the third section of the book begins here. We enter now into the long section of the Book of Revelation that tells the story of the end of the age.

The first section, chapter one, was the vision of the Lord Himself. If only we had sufficient spiritual insight, we would understand and apply that vision to our lives, and we would need to read no further. However, we need some help. That vision was too difficult for us to understand and apply in our lives and our ministries. The second section, chapters two and three, helped us apply what was there in chapter one. If only we had sufficient spiritual insight and dedication, we would understand and consistently apply those seven letters appropriately to our lives and the lives of those we serve, and we would need to read no further. However, we still need more help. This third section will help us to see that the promises of chapters two and three were not empty words, but indeed shall be fulfilled. This section will encourage the persecuted among us, as also it encouraged the congregation in Smyrna, to be faithful. It will help those indulging in sexual immorality and idolatry, as in Pergamum and Thyatira, to see that these activities are not “victimless crimes,” they are instead a participation in the great prostitute’s “abominations and unclean things.” It will also help those who are trusting that their wealth will bring them satisfaction, as the Laodiceans trusted, to see that physical wealth is of mere temporary and failing value, and those who love it will certainly be dismayed. In fact, reading and meditating on this section will help each of us who have sensed a spiritual kinship with any of the seven churches to realize that each and every word spoken to each of those churches is to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

We are now living in the time between the third and the fourth chapters of the Book of Revelation. The seven churches are history (although there are many churches like them today), and the visions of the end times are yet to come.

The long prophetic section of Revelation is given not merely to educate us about the order of events at the end of the age, but more importantly to encourage us to godliness. The insight we gain in reading this section should touch our hearts and encourage us to do what is necessary to be counted among the victors, so we can join the ranks of the victors on those thrones described in 20:4. (Again, we join the redeemed by faith in Christ, but we join the victors by works that come from a vital living faith.) Let there be no doubt that He will make good on His promises to the victors, in a way that on the one hand is well-described here in the Book of Revelation, and on the other hand is more amazing than we can imagine. In this life victors have difficult things they have to do, but the rewards offered are well worth that pain.

Victors are offered thrones and authority to rule. But will they rule this earth, as it is now? In many parts of the world, perhaps in every part of the world, that would be an undesirable reward. Corruption and lawlessness unite with materialism and false religions to make ruling well seem impossible. Are the victors to inherit the world as it is, and have to straighten it out themselves? Certainly not! But what will the Lamb of God do to make this world a wonderful place to rule? That question is answered in this longest section of the Book of Revelation.

This section has the following parts:

- A. The Vision of the Throne Room 4:1-5:14
- B. The Time of Torment 6:1-20:3
- C. The Millennium and Judgment 20:4-15
- D. The New Jerusalem 21:1-22:5
- E. The Conclusion of the Vision 22:6-17

This section is followed by the Conclusion of the Book of Revelation, in 22:18-21.

A. Vision of Throne Room (4:1-5:14)

Right at the beginning of this section, John is transported to heaven. He is not taken to the edge of heaven, or to an intermediate level of heaven, he is taken to the very center of heaven, to the throne room of God. And he describes to us what he sees there.

Just as the seven letters to the churches began with a vision of the Lord Jesus, so also this section begins with a vision of God on His throne, and the Lord Jesus there beside Him. What John experienced, what he wrote about in chapters four and five, is a kind of “hinge” section in the structure of the Book of Revelation, joining the seven letters

with the opening of the seven seals of the scroll. On the one hand, these two chapters are strongly connected with the seven letters, especially regarding the rewards that are promised. In both sections, there are thrones, white clothes, and crowns. On the other hand, there are strong connections with the opening of the seals, because in this section the scroll and its seals are introduced.

In chapter four, the One on the throne, who is surrounded by thrones and four creatures, is praised as the Creator. In chapter five the Lamb of God, who comes to the One on the throne, is praised as the Redeemer. The taking of the scroll from the hands of the One on the throne bridges these two chapters. The meaning of the scroll is very important and will be discussed in the following section.

The experiences of the churches of chapters two and three show us that enemies of the church freely threaten and oppress the churches of Christ on the earth. But according to the perspective of the throne room, pictured in chapters four and five, the One who has absolute power is the Lord God, not evil powers on the earth.³⁴⁷

All of chapter four tells us about the setting: what the throne room is like, who is there, and the activity there, which is worship.

i. Transition (4:1-2)

4:1 After these things I looked – and see! – an open door in heaven. And³⁴⁸ the voice which I first heard like a trumpet was speaking to me, saying “Come up here, and I will show you what things must happen after these things.”

As was noted above, the wording of this verse, especially *what things must happen after these things*, clues us in that we have left the second section and are in the third section that was given to us in 1:19. Therefore, this verse moves us into the part of the Book of Revelation that tells about the future.

John is brought to *heaven* to see *what things must happen after these things*. The term *must* is important here. Prophecies, which are included in this section, are not just something that *will* happen. These prophecies

³⁴⁷ Mounce, p. 131.

³⁴⁸ Many many times in this section of the Book of Revelation, the word *καὶ* / *kai* is used to connect one sentence to the previous sentence. This word is normally translated *and*, but in some passages it could be translated “but” or even “therefore.” In this translation it is translated as *and* if at all possible. This results in an odd English style, but it more accurately reflects the style of the original.

must happen, because the One on the throne has already determined them.³⁴⁹

Other apocalyptic writings also tell about doors *open in heaven*.³⁵⁰ However, as noted in the Introduction, it is far from certain that the early readers in the province of Asia had read or heard very much of apocalyptic literature.

Some Bible teachers will say that the words *come up here* somehow refer to the Rapture, but the evidence for that interpretation is very weak. It is a command to John in the first century, not to the entire church at the moment of the Rapture.

4:2 And right away I was in the Spirit,³⁵¹ and look, a throne in heaven (with Someone seated on it),

If we compare this verse with 5:7 we see that the *Someone* sitting on the *throne* is God Himself, but we also observe that very little is said about Him until the New Heaven and the New Earth in chapter 21. Note the comments about the One *seated* upon the *throne* in the section entitled "Revelation and Systematic Theology."

The word *throne*³⁵² is used 62 times in the Greek New Testament, 47 of which are in the Book of Revelation. God's *throne* is mentioned in many passages of Scripture, including Psalm 45:6; 47:8; Ezekiel 1:26; Matthew 5:34; and Hebrews 12:2.

2. Throne and Surroundings (4:3-II)

4:3 which³⁵³ was like the appearance of jasper³⁵⁴ and carnelian,³⁵⁵ and a rainbow was all around the throne, like the appearance of an emerald.

How hard should we try to interpret these things? We read about *jasper*, *carnelian*, and the emerald-like *rainbow*. As is true in many

349 Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 86.

350 1 Enoch 14:25, and *The Testimony of Levi* 5:1. See also 3 Macc. 6:18.

351 Note the footnote under 1:10 concerning the expression *in the Spirit*.

352 θρόνος/thronos

353 Hodges, in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April 1962, pp. 137-138, suggests that all of verse 3 describes the throne of verse 2. Stones are never used to describe God or people in Revelation, and this verse is no exception. Hodges also explains that the words καὶ ὁ καθημένος/kai ho kathēmenos, which would have required verse 3 to refer to the One seated on the throne, are not in the best manuscripts.

354 ιασπίς/iaspis

355 σαρδίων/sardion

passages in this book, different interpreters have different levels of boldness in stating their interpretations, but the data available upon which those interpretations are based are very limited. Different teachers express different levels of certainty about an interpretation, but sometimes that level of certainty is tied more to the personality of the teacher than the strength of the evidence of the interpretation. It is truly the student's responsibility to ask, "Why do you hold that interpretation?" He or she should be able to ask "What principle of interpretation supports that view?" A good commentary and a good teacher should have good answers to those questions. It is easy to give very interesting explanations about all these obscure things, if indeed nobody dares ask questions about the facts that provide the basis for such explanations!

Exodus 24:10; 1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1; Ezekiel 1:26-28; and Daniel 7:9 describe visions with similar elements.

The stone named *jasper* is hard to identify. The stone here called *carnelian* is a red stone which in that era was often engraved.³⁵⁶ It may be the same as the stone now known as *carnelian*.

There is no substantial biblical support for giving any particular spiritual or allegorical meaning to particular stones. Perhaps they are listed simply to help the reader understand that His *appearance* was glorious. Notice that He simply had the *appearance* of these stones. The stones themselves are not actually present, but the One seated on the throne was *like the appearance of jasper and carnelian*.

4:4 And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and upon the thrones were seated twenty-four elders, clothed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads.

Very soon in the description of the *throne room* we are told of the *twenty-four elders*. They are on *twenty-four thrones*. They are dressed in *white*. They wear *golden crowns*.

The reader ought to ask, where else have we recently read of *thrones*, *white clothes*, and *crowns*? The nearer the context, the more important it is for interpreting. These elements are all mentioned in the very near context, that is, in chapters two and three! Who therefore are these *elders*? The best understanding is that they represent victors, who will all be receiving what was promised in such detail to them back in chapters two and three. These are the ones who obeyed and were "faithful until death."

³⁵⁶ In Exod. 28:9 a different precious stone was engraved with the names of the sons of Israel.

There are three problems with this interpretation:

1. There are only *twenty-four elders*, but there should be many more than *twenty-four victors*.
2. They are on their own *thrones* around the one *throne*, but the victors in chapters two and three are said to be seated on the Lord Jesus' *throne*, not their own *thrones*.
3. The *twenty-four elders* appear here in chapter four, but rewards like *crowns*, *thrones*, and *white clothes* are not awarded until much later in the Book of Revelation.

By way of response, it should be noted:

1. It is very reasonable to assume in such a context that these *twenty-four elders* are *representative* of all the victors, perhaps twelve from the Old Testament era (note that in 21:12 the New Jerusalem will have “twelve gates, and ...on the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel”) and twelve from the New Testament era (note that in 21:14 “the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb), or twelve from Israel, and twelve from the church. Also, since we do hope that there will be many millions of victors amongst more than a billion believers in the Kingdom, it is understandable that all those millions of victors/elders were not shown to John, because if he saw millions of victors he would get the idea that those people were all the redeemed. How could he have been visually shown that those millions are only a part of the billion? The human eye can only see a certain amount of detail, and then things get blurry!
2. It is also very reasonable to minimize the distinction between sitting on the Lord Jesus' own *throne* and sitting on one of the *thrones* that surround His *throne*, since we have not yet seen any of these *thrones*. Perhaps there is a sense in which the many *thrones* are a part of the one *throne*.
3. Although it is true that this interpretation seems to go against the chronology of this section, it is hard to prove that no rewards are given ahead of time. In fact, not all victors receive their rewards at the same time. Note that “the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God” were each given *white robes* in 6:9-11. Likewise also the martyrs of 7:9-17 had *white robes* and various other rewards for their faithfulness. It is therefore reasonable that the representative *twenty-four elders* could receive their rewards earlier than other victors.

The *elders* are again mentioned in 4:10. They are also mentioned in passing in 5:5-14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; and 19:4. Since they come up so soon

in the description of the *throne* room, it is likely that they will be an important part of the book.

Isaiah 24:23 speaks of the LORD Almighty's glorious end-time reign in Jerusalem, "before its elders."³⁵⁷

One alternative interpretation is that the *elders* are angels. However, both the designation "elder" and the *thrones* suggest that these are rulers, but angels do not rule over humans. In fact in 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul says just the opposite: "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" Also, in Hebrews 2:5 we read, "for it is not to angels He subjected the world to come, of which we speak." Also, nowhere else in the Bible³⁵⁸ do angels sit on *thrones* or have *crowns*. Furthermore, in the Book of Revelation, the *elders* are always distinguished from the angels.³⁵⁹ The context indicates that the best understanding is that the *twenty-four elders* represent all the victors that were highlighted in chapters two and three.

4:5 From the throne came lightning, roaring,³⁶⁰ and thunder. And seven torches of fire were burning before His throne. They are the Seven Spirits of God.

Such *lightning* and *thunder* is also in Exodus 19:16 when the Lord came down to Mount Sinai. The words of Ezekiel 1:13 are also used in this verse. Psalm 18:14 and Hebrews 12:18-19 also use words that are almost the same about the glory of God in the Old Testament.

The judgments of Revelation are similar to the ten plagues on Egypt before the people of God are freed and the theocratic kingdom of Israel is set up under Moses. This, with other indications, suggests that Revelation

³⁵⁷ According to the traditions of the Jews, the *elders* of Isa. 24:23 are the leaders of the people of Israel; according to some church traditions, the *twenty-four elders* in Rev. 4 come from the 12 tribes of the people of Israel and the 12 apostles, which is an interpretation supported by Rev. 21:12-14 (Beasley-Murray, p. 113). Beasley-Murray, p. 114, and Mounce, pp. 135-136, disagree, suggesting that the *elders* are angels.

³⁵⁸ Bauckham (*Jesus*, p. 163) give a few very rare examples of angels on *thrones* in literature outside the Bible, some of which may be Christian, not Jewish.

³⁵⁹ Thus Larry Hurtado, in "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 25 (1985): 105-24, according to Resseguie loc. 2434.

³⁶⁰ This word, φωνή/*phōnē*, frequently means "voice" (as in Rev. 4:1), or "sound" (as in Rev. 18:22, "the sound of a millstone"), but in Rev. 19:6, which has "like the sound of strong thunders," this word is associated with *thunder*. However, it cannot mean *thunder* in this or the parallel passages, because *thunder* is already one of the elements of the lists. It seems to refer to other sounds of storms, and so is here translated *roaring*.

describes a “new Exodus.” When God met Moses at Mount Sinai, there were *thunder*, *lightning*, and earthquakes according to Exodus 19:16-18 and Psalm 68:8. According to Isaiah 13:13 when the Lord comes to the earth, the sky and the earth will tremble and shake.³⁶¹

As the following chart shows, this is the first of four times this set of terms appears.

Rev. 4:5	Rev. 8:1-5	Rev. 11:19	Rev. 16:17-21
“came from the throne”	“prayers... went up before God”	“the temple of God in heaven was opened”	“from the temple of heaven from the throne”
in the throne room	the opening of the seventh seal	the blowing of the seventh trumpet	the pouring out of the seventh bowl
lightning	thunder	lightning	lightning
roaring	roaring	roaring	roaring
thunder	lightning	thunder	thunder
	an earthquake	huge hailstones	a great earthquake
			huge hailstones

In 4:5 there are only *three* of these elements (in the *throne room*).

In 8:5 there are *four* elements (at the opening of the seventh seal).

In 11:19 there are *four* elements (at the seventh trumpet).³⁶²

In 16:18-21 all *five* elements will appear and be developed (at the pouring out of the seventh bowl). According to Bauckham,³⁶³ this suggests that 16:18-21 is the climax of 4:5; 8:5; and 11:19.

Revelation 4:5 tells about the *throne room* of God. All the disasters in the chain of judgments originate from there. In 8:5 we see the results of opening the seventh seal. In 11:19 we see the results of the blowing of the seventh trumpet. In 16:18-21 we see the results of the pouring out

³⁶¹ With these verses and others (Hab. 5:4-5; Joel 2:10; Mic. 1:4; Ps. 77:17-19; Ps. 114; and Heb. 12:26-27) Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 199-201) says there is a connection between earthquakes and the coming of the Lord Jesus to the earth.

³⁶² The few oldest Greek manuscripts and some others add “an earthquake” here, but the majority of manuscripts do not include that element.

³⁶³ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 8 and p. 202.

the seventh bowl. In 16:18-21 all five of the elements are included and expanded upon. There are four stages in the development of these judgments. The first of these has the three elements, the second and the third stages have four elements, and the fourth stage has all five elements. Thus the judgment from God is more clearly seen as one united judgment which originates from God Himself. It is not a random collection of coincidences, but carefully orchestrated judgment by the living God. This is one example that shows the careful structure of this book.

As a side note, this three – four – four – five element development also encourages the telescopic view of these chapters rather than the reiteration view, all of which is discussed in the comments prior to 6:1. If the reiteration view were correct, then the same intensity of judgment should be observed through all these chapters. Instead, we see a carefully designed indicator of increased intensity.³⁶⁴

The text tells us that these terrifying things come *from the throne*. This expression, in the context of the Book of Revelation, means “from God.” Note the comments about “the One seated on the throne” in the section, “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

The expression *Seven Spirits of God* refers to the Spirit of God, as is discussed in that same section. Here He is also referred to as *seven torches of fire*.

4:6 And before the throne there was something like³⁶⁵ a sea of glass,³⁶⁶ like crystal. And in the center of the throne, and around the throne, were four creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.

According to Morris,³⁶⁷ John could not find words to exactly describe what he saw, so he does the best he can, and uses expressions such as *something like*. The interpreter needs to remember that whatever it was that John saw *before the throne* was not simply a *sea of crystal-clear glass*. It is something more awesome than that, but John could not find words to be more precise, so he has to say that it was *something like....*

³⁶⁴ See also the comments on this structure in the discussion of 11:19.

³⁶⁵ In the original language the word is ὡς/*hōs*, which means *like*.

³⁶⁶ This word, ὑαλινος/*hualinos*, and the word it is based upon, ὑαλος/*hualos*, can refer to *glass* or “*crystal*.” In this case, because of the clarifying expression, *like crystal*, the meaning *glass* is most likely the intended meaning. These terms probably maintain that same meaning, *glass*, throughout the book.

³⁶⁷ *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 89.

We do know that most of the *glass* of John's era was not clear (only the wealthy could afford clear *glass*), and it most certainly was not *like crystal*, so this must have been even more amazing to him and to his ancient readers.

The words *something like a sea of glass, like crystal*, along with "lightning, rumblings and thunder" and "seven lamps of fire" give the impression that human beings could not get close to *the throne*,³⁶⁸ because *the throne* was so very glorious. Compare this passage with Exodus 24:10; Ezekiel 1:22, 26; and Revelation 15:2-3.

The *creatures* are *covered with eyes, in front and in back*. They are *in the center of the throne and around the throne*. Other than the *creatures* only the Lamb of God could stand so close to God (Revelation 5:6 and 7:17). These *creatures*, separately or all *four* together, are mentioned twenty times in the Book of Revelation.³⁶⁹

4:7 And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like an ox, and the third creature had a face like a man, and the fourth creature was like an eagle flying.

The four creatures are similar to the seraphim of Isaiah 6:1-3 and the cherubim of Ezekiel 10. The creatures in Ezekiel 1:10-11 each have four faces. These in Revelation 4 each have one *face*, but the faces in both texts are the faces of a *man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle*. This might somehow symbolize that they are appointed over or represent *man*, all wild animals, all domesticated animals, and all birds, but it is not appropriate to be dogmatic about this interpretation. Some have tried to make parallels with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but there is no biblical support for that connection.

4:8 And the four creatures each had six wings. All around and underneath they were full of eyes, and they had no rest day and night, saying:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God, the Almighty,
Who was and who is, and who is to come!"³⁷⁰

In Isaiah 6:2 there are seraphim who also have *six wings*, "with two he covers his face, with two he covers his feet, and with two he flies."

³⁶⁸ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 90.

³⁶⁹ They are called *ζωον/zōon*, "living ones," a term related to the verb *ζω/zāō*, "to live."

³⁷⁰ In 6:1, 3, 5 and 7 the same *creatures* have a task which is very different from what is written in 4:8. This is not a contradiction. This verse means that they do not *rest*, either *day* or *night*, and if they are not busy with another duty, they

According to Thomas,³⁷¹ this means that the seraphim are amazed and ready to obey the commands of God. In this text John mentions their eyes, which he also mentioned in 4:6.

See the comments under 14:11, where the same expression, *no rest day and night*, is also used of the torment that will be experienced by the unbelievers that worship the beast. This repetition is an intentional contrast. There are those that will have *no rest day and night* in joyful worship, and there are those that will have *no rest day and night* in agonizing punishment.

Concerning the expression, *Who was and who is and who is to come*, see the comments in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

4:9 And whenever the creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the One who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever,³⁷²

This verse reveals that *the creatures* are the leaders of heavenly worship.³⁷³

4:10 the twenty-four elders will throw themselves down before the One who is seated on the throne and they will worship the One who lives forever and ever, and they will throw their crowns before His throne, saying:

The four creatures *worship* God, and in response *the twenty-four elders will worship the One who lives forever and ever*. As part of their worship *they will throw their crowns before Him*.

This event is repeated “whenever the creatures give glory... to the One who is seated on the throne,” so somehow there are many *crowns* involved. Since these elders represent all victors, there will be plenty of *crowns* to throw before the *throne*. The word here translated *throw*³⁷⁴ is sometimes

praise Him. This is similar to what is written in 1 Thess. 2:9 and 2 Thess. 3:8, that the Apostle Paul worked *day and night* as a tentmaker so as not to be a burden to those he served. If the Apostle Paul had an opportunity to preach the Word of God he would stop tent making to do so. So it is with the *creatures* who do not ask for a *rest*; they continuously praise God, unless they have a special assignment from God.

³⁷¹ P. 360.

³⁷² The expression *who lives forever and ever* is used four times in the Book of Revelation, in 4:9, 10; 10:6; and 15:7.

³⁷³ Mounce, p. 138.

³⁷⁴ βαλλω/ballō

better translated “place”³⁷⁵ or “set,” but it more often means *throw*.³⁷⁶ On the other hand, the translation “place” may be better because perhaps in the *throne* room of God no one would dare to *throw* anything at all.

4:11 “Worthy You are, the Lord our God, the Holy One,³⁷⁷
 to receive glory and honor and power,
 because You created all things,
 and because of Your will they exist and were created!”³⁷⁸

The praise here focuses more upon *God* as Creator, but the praise after the scroll is opened will focus more on Him as Redeemer.

The scene of the throne room is awesome, glorious and beyond human understanding. The activity of the throne room is worship. As a part of the continuing worship described here, the twenty-four elders cast (or perhaps “place”) their crowns before the throne. This is not a one-time event. They somehow can do it whenever the four creatures praise Him, and those four creatures are doing that continually! Why they do not run out of crowns is not explained to us, but this may help us not to hold too strongly to the idea that there are only a literal twenty-four elders.

Chapter four orients us to the throne room, so that we are ready for chapter five.

3. Scroll and Lamb (5:1-7)

Chapter five is about the Scroll and the Lamb who is in the center of heaven, who is worthy to open the scroll.

In John’s era, wills or inheritance documents were written on papyrus scrolls that were sealed with seven seals.³⁷⁹ Anyone preparing a will

³⁷⁵ See also Mt. 9:2; Mk. 7:33; Jn. 5:7; 18:11; and Jms. 3:3.

³⁷⁶ See also Mt. 3:10; 4:6; 7:6; 13:47; Jn. 8:7; 19:24; 21:6; Rev. 8:8; 12:4, 9, 13; 18:19, 21; and 20:15.

³⁷⁷ In the majority of Greek manuscripts, this expression is literally “the Lord and the God our, the Holy One.” Some early manuscripts omit the *Holy One*, and some precede those words with “Oh Lord.”

³⁷⁸ This is another example of the figure of speech called “hysteron-proteron,” in which the order of a pair of expressions is changed, so that the thing that happened first (*were created*) is said after the thing that happened later (*they exist*). Note the footnote under the discussion of 3:17 which discusses this figure of speech in Revelation.

³⁷⁹ Although Kittel (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:941) says an inheritance scroll might be sealed with six seals, Emmet Russell’s article, “A Roman Law Parallel to Revelation Five,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115:459 (Jul 58) p. 260,

would call seven trusted friends, and they would bring their signet rings (rings that each had a small stone on it, carved in some special way, perhaps with the owner's portrait, as in the illustration). The signet rings of those seven witnesses were then used to seal the rolled up scroll. Then when the man died, those seven trusted friends were called, and they each testified about whether that seal was truly his own untampered seal or not. Then the scroll could be opened and the inheritance distributed according to the will.³⁸⁰

The illustration³⁸¹ shows four carved stones that were set in signet rings.

The upper left shows a man from the fifth century BC. The upper right is a Greek field marshal of the Hellenistic period. The lower left is a wealthy Hellenistic man. The lower right is a very vigorous man, possibly a Roman. Such rings were used to place a unique mark upon the wax or clay that would become the seal, much like a signature on a legal document today.

Anyone who had ever seen a will or who ever received an inheritance in those

days in the Roman empire would surely remember the use of the seven seals to close and seal the scroll. Therefore the meaning of this seven-sealed scroll was very clear to them: someone would soon be given an inheritance.

refers to the Roman jurist Gaius, who says "for if the seals of seven witnesses are attached, the testamentary heir is entitled to demand possession in accordance with the will" (*Institutes of Roman Law* by Gaius, translated by Edward Poste). David J. MacLeod, in "The Lion Who Is A Lamb: An Exposition Of Revelation 5:1-7," in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:655 (July-September 2007, pp. 327-328) confirms this.

³⁸⁰ Rengstorf (mentioned in Collins, p. 1275); and Thomas, p. 377.

³⁸¹ Illustration from *A New Introduction to Greek*, third edition, by Alston Chase and Henry Phillips, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965, p. 118.



At first the idea that “victors” will somehow “inherit” the earth seems difficult, because we think that someone has to die for an inheritance to be granted. But Psalm 2:8, “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your *inheritance*,” makes the use of an inheritance document especially appropriate here. In fact, in the New Testament the idea of inheritance is used to describe special promises for those that believe and obey the Lord. In Matthew 5:5 the Lord said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Remember that the meek are parallel to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. All of that becomes a rather complete picture of the ones that are called “victors” in chapter 2-3. In fact in 21:7 the connection between the victors of chapters two and three and the heirs that will enjoy the inheritance of this inheritance document is made explicit: “The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.” The victors are also the heirs!

In Galatians 5:21³⁸² we read, “...envy, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I say ahead of time to you, just as also I have said ahead of time, that those doing such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.” 1 Peter 3:9 says “not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult; but instead blessing, knowing that for this you were called, so that you might inherit blessing.” These two passages do not say that born-again people that behave that way will not enter the Kingdom, only that they will not inherit it. One can enter a place, a home, for instance, without owning it. Indeed, those that have believed in the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior but have not gone on to follow Him, to be a victor as described in chapters two and three, will enter the Kingdom of God because they are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, but they will not be seated on any thrones, and will not be given any authority there. The congregation in Laodicea did not need to repent to gain admission into the Kingdom of God, but they needed to repent if they were going to sit with the Lord on His throne.

So, the book centers on the victors and their rewards. In chapters two and three we learned about the demands that had to be met to be a victor, and we learned about the many promises made to victors. There were threats about the loss of rewards to those who would not repent and start living as victors.

³⁸² Eph. 5:5 is similar to Gal. 5:21. In both cases the reader should note it does not say “such people will not *enter* the the Kingdom of God,” but only that such people will not *inherit* the Kingdom of God. Surely these are not the same thing!

Now here in this transition to the opening of the seals, the setting has been described (chapter four). We see the 24 elders (representing all victors) already in possession of some of their rewards (crowns, white clothes, and thrones), but not yet ruling over the earth. And then the inheritance document is taken up by the Lord Jesus, and in chapter six the opening of the seals begins. After the series of seals, trumpets and bowls, we will see the faithful on thrones (20:4).

Since the scroll is an inheritance document, this event has great significance for believers who are truly faithful and who obey what is written in chapters two and three. God has an amazing inheritance planned for the “overcomers,” the victors. All that remains is that the scroll of inheritance be opened and that the inheritance be given to the victors. The Roman practice of sealing an inheritance document with seals is used by God as an important element in the structure of the Book of Revelation.

In 5:1-3 the scroll is introduced. It was crucial to find someone that could open that scroll (5:4-5). When the Lamb takes the scroll He is worshiped (5:8), and the opening of the seven seals actually becomes the outline of the Book of Revelation, all the way through chapter 18, as will be explained below.

5:1 And I saw in the right hand of the One who was seated on the throne a scroll written on the front and back, sealed³⁸³ with seven seals.

See the comments in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology” concerning *the One who was seated on the throne*.

Writing was normally only on one side of the papyrus.³⁸⁴ It was harder to write on the *back* side of papyrus, because of the “grain” of the material.

383 This word, κατασφραγίζω/katasphragizō, means “to seal.” In the ancient world signatures were not used to authenticate letters and other documents, but a seal was used, as in Gen. 41:42; 1 Kings 21:8; Neh. 9:38; and Esther 8:8. High status Greeks and Romans used signet rings, whose precious or semi-precious stones would be carved with an image, to seal a document. Earlier in Mesopotamia a small carved cylinder would be used to make a seal (as in Gen. 38:18). Merchandise that was sent was also sealed, to prevent tampering or theft. The seal could not be broken by anyone without authorization. This term, with the prefix κατα/kata, is only used here in the whole NT, but the word σφραγίζω/sphragizō (without the prefix κατα/kata) is used also in Mt. 27:66; Rom. 15:28; Eph. 1:13; 4:30 and Rev. 22:10.

384 In Ezek. 2:9-10 there is also a scroll which has writing *on the front and back*.

Perhaps the fact that this *scroll* is *written* on both sides speaks of unusual fullness or abundance.

5:2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming in a loud voice: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?”³⁸⁵

It was illegal for unauthorized people to *break* a seal. People would only do that if they wanted to tamper with the will. (Remember that Jesus’ tomb was sealed, so that others could not *break* that seal and steal the body in the tomb.) They all understood that not just anyone could *break* those *seals* and *open the scroll*.

5:3 And no one in heaven above or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into³⁸⁶ it.

This highlights the importance of this particular *scroll*. In all of God’s creation there was not one person worthy to *open the scroll*. God’s creation is here divided into three parts: *heaven*, *earth*, and *under the earth*. This passage also proclaims that there is no one in all creation like the Lord Jesus, and there is no one that can take His place.

5:4 And I was weeping a great deal because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

It was painful for John that there was *no one* that could *open the scroll*. This means that he knew what the *scroll* was, and he very much longed for it to be opened. If indeed it is the inheritance document for all the victors, John’s tears are understandable. He longed for the end of the age, when God’s Kingdom would at last be established and this inheritance would be made available!

5:5 And one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep; look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered. He is the One that opens³⁸⁷ the scroll and its seven seals.”

Somehow John apparently had not understood that the Lord Jesus was in the throne room of God.

³⁸⁵ Of course the *seals* must be broken before the *scroll* is opened. This is another example of the figure of speech called “*hysteron-proteron*,” in which the order of a pair of expressions is changed. Note the footnote under the discussion of 3:17 which discusses this figure of speech in Revelation.

³⁸⁶ The word *into* is added in verses 3 and 4 for clarity. The phrase could be translated “or look at it,” but since John saw *the scroll* in verse 1, that seems unlikely.

³⁸⁷ A word-for-word translation of the majority of Greek manuscripts would be “the Root of David, the Opener of the scroll and its seven seals.” As in the very similar 5:2, this is an example of the figure of speech *hysteron-proteron*, in

The word *conquered* and the word “victor” in Revelation 2-3 are the same Greek word in different grammatical forms. In fact, besides its use seven times in chapters two and three, this same verb, translated “to conquer,” “overcome,” or “be victorious,”³⁸⁸ is used in the following passages:

- 5:5 And one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep; look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has *conquered*. He is the One that opens the scroll and its seven seals.”
- 6:2 And look, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and he was given a crown, and he went away *conquering*, even so that he might *conquer*.
- 11:7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them and be *victorious* over them and kill them.
- 12:11 And they were *victorious* over him
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
and they did not love their lives until death.
- 13:7 And it was given to him to make war against the saints and to be *victorious* over them. And authority was given to him over every tribe, and people, and language, and nation,
- 15:2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who were *victorious* over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing by the sea of glass, holding zithers from God.
- 17:14 They will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will *conquer* them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.
- 21:7 The one who *conquers* will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

In these verses we see two radically different ideas about victory (or perhaps “success”), and the reader is in effect forced to choose one or the other definition of victory or success in his or her life. On the one hand the Anti-Christ is victorious, 13:7. On the other hand Christ was victorious on His cross, and the saints can be victorious if they follow His example in loving obedience. Do you accept the devil’s definition or the saints’ definition of victory? Remember, the victory of the saints is by “loving not their lives even until death” (12:11). If you accept that

which the order of a pair of expressions is changed. Note the footnote under the discussion of 3:17.

³⁸⁸ νικάω/nikaō

definition, what does it mean about your own values? Are you moving towards victory? According to which definition?

Remember Revelation 3:21, “To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Because the Lord Jesus was victorious, He gained His throne, and He can *open* the *seals* of the *scroll* that contains the victors’ rewards! The Victorious One is about to *open* those *seals* and give the victors the right to sit on His throne with Him.

The expressions *the Lion from the Tribe of Judah* and *the Root of David* are messianic titles³⁸⁹ that go back to Genesis 49:9-10 and Isaiah 11:1.

It is the Lord that must *open* each of the *seven seals*, but later we will see that there are *seven angels* that each blow their trumpet, and *seven angels* that each pour out their bowl.

5:6 And I saw, between the throne and the four creatures, and among the elders, a Lamb standing, but looking as if it had been slain.³⁹⁰ He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the Seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Finally John sees the Lord. John describes Him metaphorically as a *Lamb*,³⁹¹ not a Lion. With figures of speech that are easy to understand and also carry profound Christian truth about Jesus and about our lives and ministries, the Lion triumphed by being a *Lamb*. His death as a *Lamb* is likened to the Old Testament sacrifices made to God. He is *standing*, risen from the dead.

The use of the word “horn” in, for instance, Deuteronomy 33:17 and 1 Samuel 2:10 indicates that a horn is a symbol of strength. With *seven horns* He is perfectly powerful.

Likewise the use of the word *eyes* in Genesis 3:5 and Zechariah 4:10 tells us that *eyes* speak of knowledge or wisdom, so with *seven eyes* He is perfectly wise.

The *seven horns and seven eyes* also represent *the Seven Spirits of God*, or the sevenfold Spirit of God. See the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

³⁸⁹ Mounce, p. 134; and Beasley-Murray, p. 124.

³⁹⁰ The words *but looking as if it had been slain* are literally, “as having been slain.”

³⁹¹ This is the word *αρνιον/arnion*. In Revelation it is used metaphorically of Jesus Christ 28 or 29 times, depending on whether it is found in Rev. 6:9, where the manuscripts are quite divided.

Christ's death and resurrection are metaphorically presented in 5:6. His victory is mentioned in 5:5. Anti-Christ's near death and near resurrection are mentioned in 13:3 and his victory is mentioned in 13:7. Revelation seems to be comparing them, and emphasizing the comparison by highlighting it with these repeated terms. In fact, 5:6 and 13:3 use almost exactly the same exact expression in Greek for *as if slain*. In 5:6 it is used of Christ, and in 13:3, it is used of the Anti-Christ. See the section on "The Interpretation of Numbers and Repetitions." These terms are thus repeated to show an intentional contrast between Christ and Anti-Christ.

5:7 And He came and took³⁹² the scroll³⁹³ from the right hand of Him who is seated on the throne.

Nobody else can approach God like this! Even the seraphim of Isaiah 6:1-3 have to use two of their wings to cover their feet and two of their wings to cover their faces. This is a very important moment.³⁹⁴

When the Lord takes *the scroll*, He is finally doing what the Father invited Him to do in Psalm 2:8.

2:7 I tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, "You are My Son; today I have become your Father.

2:8 Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance, the ends of the earth Your possession.

2:9 You will dash them with an iron staff; You will shatter them like a potter's vessel."

It is clear that this is an important psalm for Revelation, because verse 9 was already quoted in 2:27. But Psalm 2, written about 1000 BC, was not the only time in the Old Testament that this event was foretold. In about 550 BC, Daniel wrote, in Daniel 7:13-14, "I was seeing in a night vision, and look! – with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming even up to the Ancient of Days He reached and before

³⁹² In this verse and in verses 8 and 9 the word λαμβάνω/*lambanō* is used, which can mean either "take" or "receive." Thus there is an interesting ambiguity here. Did the Lord Jesus take *the scroll* from God, indicating initiative on the Lord Jesus' part, or did He receive it from God, indicating initiative from God? The Greek verb λαμβάνω/*lambanō* gives no indication on this.

³⁹³ The words *the scroll* are not in the Greek text, but are added to make a better English sentence.

³⁹⁴ The tense used for these two verbs also emphasizes the importance of this event. He *came* uses the Aorist Tense, and *took* uses the Perfect Tense. At that moment He *took the scroll* and the result can still be felt, for example, in all the disasters described in the Book of Revelation.

Him He was brought, and to Him was given eternal dominion which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom which shall not be destroyed."

About 600 years later, John, prisoner of the Gospel on the island of Patmos, saw the vision of the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, coming and taking *the scroll* from the One seated on the throne. The Lamb is about to become the Lion. The Savior is about to rule as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

This is the event that godly people throughout the earth and throughout the ages have longed for. After so many years, He finally asks, He finally approaches the Ancient of Days, asking for the nations to be made His inheritance.³⁹⁵

He takes *the scroll*, and that brings worship and song, expanding out from the Lamb in ever widening circles until all creation is worshiping.

1. in the near circle around the throne 5:8-10
2. in a greater circle around the throne 5:11-12
3. in all creation 5:13

4. Praise to Him who takes the Scroll (5:8-14)

Every person mentioned in this passage worships the Lord because He has taken up the scroll. At the moment He takes up the scroll the uncertainty about the timing of His coming and the establishment of His kingdom is gone. There is no more uncertainty about when His Kingdom will come. The faithful ones are going to be given their inheritance soon. They are going to soon rule over the nations. But first the righteousness of God requires the nations to be purged of evil through terrifying judgments. Then the Kingdom of God will be established on this earth.

³⁹⁵ Evidently this event is different from what is spoken of in Mt. 28:18 and Phil. 2:9. Since He was raised from the dead, our Savior has been given the Name "Lord" and He has been lifted up. But until this moment, the Lord Jesus has not yet asked the Father for the nations as His inheritance.

5:8 And when He took the scroll, the four creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each with a zither³⁹⁶ and golden bowls³⁹⁷ full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.³⁹⁸

As He takes *the scroll*, the ones we have already met in the throne room even more actively worship Him. This dramatic response also indicates how important it is that the seals of *the scroll* be opened.

Though *the prayers of the saints* are considered lowly on earth they are valued in heaven.³⁹⁹ For years and years, godly men and women have prayed, “Come quickly, Lord.” Those *prayers* did not just blow away in the wind, or echo pointlessly against the ceiling. They are being gathered up in *golden bowls* in heaven. In Revelation 8:3-4 *incense* is also offered, and it is also associated with *the prayers of the saints*. As the Lord takes the scroll, those *prayers* are being answered.

5:9 And they sang a new song, “Worthy You are, to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased us⁴⁰⁰ for God from every tribe and language⁴⁰¹ and people and nation.⁴⁰²

The song they sing is not just *new* from the point of view of time.⁴⁰³ In its essence, it is *new*. Before this there was never a *song* like this *new song*.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁶ This word, κιθάρα/kithara, is often translated “harp” or “lyre.” This and related words are also used in 14:2; 15:2; and 18:22. J. Daryl Charles translates the word as *zither*. He writes, “The kithara, an instrument having from thirty to forty strings stretched over a shallow horizontal soundboard and played with the fingers or a plectrum, was related to the lyre and associated with hymns since the time of Homer” [“An Apocalyptic Tribute To The Lamb (Rev 5:1-14),” *JETS* 34:4 (December 1991) p. 470]. Imagine a neckless guitar with 35 strings! Other sources suggest that some of these instruments had seven or eight strings.

³⁹⁷ This word, φιάλη/phialē, was used of bowls which are flat and shallow, which were used for drinking or for pouring out offerings (Mounce, p. 146). In this text the word is in the plural form.

³⁹⁸ The plural of the word ἀγιος/bagios, *saints*, is used fourteen times in Revelation to refer to the people of God. It might also be translated “holy ones.”

³⁹⁹ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 98.

⁴⁰⁰ The word *us* is missing from three manuscripts, but present in the majority of manuscripts, including Sinaiticus, the oldest manuscript involved.

⁴⁰¹ The word *language* is literally “tongue,” γλωσσα/glōssa.

⁴⁰² The word *nation* is εθνος/ethnos, which refers to an ethnic people group, not a sovereign country.

⁴⁰³ “New” in time is νεος/neos.

⁴⁰⁴ “New” in essence is καινος/kainos.

God the Father is praised as *worthy*⁴⁰⁵ in 4:11 because He created everything. Then in this text, the Lord Jesus is praised as *worthy*,⁴⁰⁶ because He has become the Savior. Other than the One who *purchased* mankind from sin, there was no one *worthy* to prepare the inheritance of the victors, no one *worthy* to lift them up to reign with Him.

Their *song* emphasizes that the Lord Jesus is the Redeemer of not only Israel, but of all people *from every tribe and language and people and nation*. This salvation is for all people from all backgrounds.

This list of four words, *tribe*, *language*, *people*, and *nation*, are repeated seven times, never in the same order, never in the reverse of one of the orders. The seven texts that contain those four words are 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; and 17:15. There is slight variation in 10:11 ("kings" instead of *tribe*) and 17:15 ("multitudes" instead of *tribe*). According to Mounce,⁴⁰⁷ there is no point in trying to figure out how the four words are different from one another. Used together like this, they point to the totality of mankind, not something in particular. The Lord Jesus is the Savior of all peoples of the earth, not just the Jews.

Because the numeral four suggests the world and the numeral seven suggests completeness, the repetition of four words (*tribe*, *language*, *people*, and *nation*) seven times emphasizes that what is said about the tribes in Revelation covers all of mankind.

But there is more to this seven-fold repetition of these four words. Bauckham⁴⁰⁸ connects these seven phrases with the victory of the Lamb of God mentioned in 5:5-9, right before the phrase was used the first time in 5:9. We observed in the discussion of 5:6 above that the idea of "victory" and the expression "as though slain" were used in 5:5-6 about the Lamb of God and in 13:3 and 7 about the Anti-Christ. These two passages also include the repeated four words. The relationship between 5:9 and 13:7 emphasizes the contrast between the Christ and the Anti-Christ. The Lamb of God conquers by His own death, so that every "tribe, language, people and nation" will worship Him, and they will become the "kings and priests for God." Similarly, Anti-Christ is almost dead, healed and then is worshiped. Anti-Christ conquers the saints and he becomes a ruler over every "tribe and people and language and nation."

⁴⁰⁵ αΞΙΟΣ/axios

⁴⁰⁶ The term αΞΙΟΣ/axios is also used here. According to Mounce, p. 147, the saying *you are worthy* was also shouted when the people of the Roman Empire welcomed their emperor.

⁴⁰⁷ P. 148.

⁴⁰⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 34.

Expressing this in present-day language, one might say that the Christ and the Anti-Christ are in a global competition, one against the other, with very different goals.

5:10 And for our God You made them kings⁴⁰⁹ and priests,⁴¹⁰ and they shall reign⁴¹¹ upon the earth."

In verse 9 the words of the song were "You purchased *us...*" but here in verse 10 the words are "You made *them....*" Perhaps the simplest solution to this seemingly odd wording is that verses 9 and 10 are antiphonal, meaning one group sings one part, and another group sings the other part. In this case, verse 9 is sung by the twenty-four elders ("with Your blood You purchased us for God") and verse 10 is sung by the four creatures ("for our God You made them kings and priests").⁴¹²

This view makes perfect sense. Indeed, the elders, who are victors, were "purchased for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." And as the four creatures proclaim in their part of the song, the Lord "made them," the twenty-four elders and all the victors they represent, "kings and priests, and they shall reign upon the earth."

The Anti-Christ intimidates, kills, and gains unworthy worship, but in marked contrast the Christ dies to provide redemption for all people, draws people of "every tribe and language and people and nation" to Himself, and invites them to become *kings and priests*, who will ultimately *reign upon the earth* and worship Him. The Christ is good and wonderfully worthy of worship!

⁴⁰⁹ One ancient manuscript reads βασιλειαν/basileian meaning "kingdom," and another reads βασιλιαν/basilian (a misspelling), but the majority of the manuscripts have βασιλεις/basileis from the word βασιλευς/basileus, meaning king.

⁴¹⁰ Note the repetition from 1:6.

⁴¹¹ Note the repetition in 20:6. In fact, the verb here, βασιλευω/basileuō, is used seven times in the Book of Revelation, in 5:10; 11:15, 17; 19:6; 20:4, 6; and 22:5. In the Book of Revelation, the subject of this verb is limited to God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the victors.

⁴¹² David J. MacLeod, ("The Adoration of God the Creator: An Exposition of Revelation 4," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164:654 April-June 2007, p. 211) cites Moses Stuart (*A Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart, 1848, p. 525) as the source of this view, and offers Ps. 24 as another example of antiphonal praise. Ps. 107 and 136 are probably also antiphonal.

5:11 And I looked, and I heard something like⁴¹³ the voice of many angels, encircling the throne and the creatures and the elders, and they numbered ten thousands of ten thousands, and thousands of thousands,

According to Beasley-Murray⁴¹⁴ the numeral 10,000⁴¹⁵ is the highest numeral in the Greek language. Literally, John is saying that there were *ten thousands of ten thousands* added to *thousands of thousands of angels*, but maybe what John means is that the total of *angels* cannot be counted. In Daniel 7:10 and Hebrews 12:22 we read about similarly uncountable numbers of *angels*.

In 5:11-13 the circle of those praising the Lamb gets bigger and bigger, until it includes all creation.

5:12 saying in a loud voice, “Worthy is the slain Lamb, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.”

Once again, the word *worthy* is emphasized in the praise of the *Lamb*, and once again He is praised because He became the sacrifice for us. He is praised with seven terms. The first four terms refer to His essence and the last three refer to the attitude of men and angels towards Him.⁴¹⁶

5:13 And every creature which is in heaven and upon the earth and under the earth, and upon the sea, and those in them, I heard them all saying “To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and power into the ages of ages. Amen!”

In 5:6 John’s vision is expanded to see the Lord Jesus. In 5:11 his vision is expanded further to see an uncountable number of angels in heaven. In this verse, John is able to hear *every creature*. In including *heaven, upon the earth, under the earth, upon the sea, and those in them*, the text emphasizes that God and the *Lamb* are praised by the whole creation. We should meditate on this verse. These are not merely details far removed from the purpose of this book. This verse is the climax of the praise that is like the ripples in a pond, going out wider and wider until it reaches

⁴¹³ The word ὥστε/bōs, here translated *something like*, is present in Sinaiticus and the majority of manuscripts, but it is missing in some manuscripts.

⁴¹⁴ P. 128.

⁴¹⁵ Note the footnote on 9:16 concerning this term, μυριας/murias.

⁴¹⁶ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 101. Morris notes the similarities between this text and 1 Chron. 29:10-12.

all creation. Because His redemption reaches all of His creation, praise to Him will come from all of His creation.⁴¹⁷

In chapter four, God (*the One seated on the throne*) is praised. In 5:1-12, the Lord Jesus (*the Lamb*) is praised. In 5:13-14, both *the One seated on the Throne* and *the Lamb* are praised. There may be students of the Bible and theologians on earth these days that are unsure of the relationship between God the Father and the One who is here called *the Lamb*, and some of them may wonder whether *the Lamb* is really deity, and whether He should be worshiped, but in the Book of Revelation there is no doubt about these things! Praise and worship are offered both to *the One seated upon the throne* and to *the Lamb*. In this passage there is no hesitation in giving jubilant worship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

5:14 And the four creatures were saying “Amen!” And the elders fell and worshiped.

In 4:8-10 all the praise that is pictured in the throne room of God begins with the *four creatures* and the twenty-four *elders*. Now in this verse that praise is closed by them.

From chapters two and three readers understand that they will possess the wonderful rewards that were promised to them if they do the will of God until the end of their days. In chapters four and five readers come to understand that the day will come when our Redeemer and King will ask of God the Father that the world be prepared as an inheritance for them through terrifying cleansings, so that our King can establish His kingdom and His faithful ones can rule with Him.

B. Time of Torment (6:1-20:3)

The Structure of this section

The opening of the seven seals of the scroll, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring of the seven bowls provide the outline or backbone of the events of the seven year Tribulation. Eleven other events are told, but they are inserted into this “backbone.”

There are two ways to look at that backbone. One is that the events of the Tribulation are told three times. The seals, the trumpets, and the bowls are all talking about the same time periods, three times over. This “Reiteration” view is possible, and is held by many. The angel’s words in 10:5-7 that there will be no more delay would be good support of this view. However, it is hard to explain the change in attitude of

⁴¹⁷ Mounce, p. 150.

6:9-10, the fifth seal, and 16:4-7, the third bowl, if the same time period is “reiterated,” or told three times. Why do the souls under the altar go from a “How much longer until we are avenged?” attitude in 6:10 to a “Yes, You are just for giving those people blood to drink” attitude in 16:6? That would be hard to explain according to this threefold retelling idea.

Also, if the Reiteration view were correct, one would think that in 8:1-2 when the seven trumpets are introduced, there would be a clue to the reader that we are now going back in time to the time that was first described in 6:1-2, but there is no such clue for us.

The following interpretation is the simplest and the most natural:

The seventh seal contains all seven of the trumpets,⁴¹⁸ and the seventh trumpet contains all seven of the bowls.⁴¹⁹ This might be called the “Telescoping View.” It is illustrated in the chart just before the discussion of Revelation 1:1.

This “Telescoping View” emphasizes the severity of the judgments. When we read of the dreadful judgments of the first through the sixth seals, perhaps we will think, “Since there are only seven seals, there is only one more judgment left.” But we are surprised because the “one more judgment” *includes* seven judgments (the seven trumpets). Then after the sixth trumpet, maybe we will think, “Finally, only one more judgment,” but we are again surprised because the “one more” *includes* seven more judgments, the seven bowls.⁴²⁰

Here are some arguments in support of this “telescoping” view of the seals, trumpets, and bowls:

- i. The order and the content is different in each of the three series of seven. (There is some similarity between the second trumpet and the second bowl, between the fifth trumpet and the fifth bowl, and between the sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl, but other than that, they are all very different.)

⁴¹⁸ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 14.

⁴¹⁹ Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 122.

⁴²⁰ If somehow those who dwell upon the earth are aware of the fact that seven seals are being opened, then they will be shocked and dismayed when they learn that the seventh seal contains seven trumpets, so seven more judgments are coming upon them, but the Book of Revelation does not clarify whether they will know about those heavenly events.

2. In 7:3, during the seal judgments, we learn of the sealing of the servants of God, and then later during the fifth trumpet (9:1-11) we learn of the enemies of God “who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads,” so the trumpets seem to be after the seals.
3. In 8:1-2 it certainly sounds like the seventh seal’s judgment is the seven trumpets: “And when He opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.”
4. The bowl judgments are explicitly called “the last plagues,” and by them God’s wrath is “completed.”
5. The words “It is done” are only spoken after the seventh bowl is poured out, 16:17.⁴²¹

The seals, trumpets, and bowls become a narrative chain through the book. Into this narrative chain a few other things have been inserted. Each “insertion” becomes another motivation for the seven churches of chapters two and three to be victorious.

This section tells of the “Tribulation,” the 70th “week” in Daniel 9, a period that covers seven years.⁴²² Other texts, such as Amos 5:18-20 and Isaiah 2-3, tell of the suffering which will be experienced by the people of Israel during that time.

By content (not structure) these chapters are quite similar to Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21 where the Lord Jesus prophesies about the end times. Beasley-Murray⁴²³ lists the similarities as follows:

Mark 13	Revelation 6
1. Wars	1. Wars
2. International Strife	2. International Strife
3. Earthquake	3. Famine
4. Famine	4. Plague
5. Persecution	5. Persecution
6. Eclipse, falling stars	6. Earthquake, eclipse, falling stars

Psalm 79:12 also mentions a sevenfold judgment upon the earth: “And return upon our neighbors *sevenfold* to their chests the reproach which they have thrown at You, Lord.”

⁴²¹ These arguments for the telescopic view are adapted from *EBC-R* on Revelation.

⁴²² See the discussion of Dan. 9:22-27 under Rev. 11:2.

⁴²³ P. 130.

I. Seven Seals (6:1–8:6)

As each seal is opened, there is judgment upon those who live on the earth. This judgment originates in heaven, not from Satan or from the beast. God judges the earth. The scroll, which is the last will and testament for “the victors,” is opened by the Lord, not by Satan.

a. First Seal (6:1-2)

6:1 And I saw that the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four creatures saying, with a thunderous voice,⁴²⁴ “Come and see!”⁴²⁵

It is *the Lamb*, the One who was slain, the One who was worthy, the Lord Jesus, that opens the first *seal*. This is in line with what was already explained by John in chapter five. Only the Lord Jesus can open the *seals*.

One of the four creatures around the throne responds by calling out, apparently to the rider of the white horse, for him to *come* forth.

6:2 And look, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and he was given⁴²⁶ a crown,⁴²⁷ and he went away conquering, even so that he might conquer.

It seems that these four horses are related to the four chariots which are prophesied in Zechariah 6:1-8. The four colors of the horses in Zechariah 6:1-8 represent the various directions the four chariots there will go, but here in Revelation the four colors of the horses relate more to the kind of disasters their riders bring.⁴²⁸

It is difficult to identify the *rider* on the *white horse*. In Revelation 19:11-12 Christ Himself rides a *white horse*, so some would say that it must be Christ on this *white horse*. However, the other riders are not divine, so it

⁴²⁴ Literally this is “...saying like the sound/voice of thunder....”

⁴²⁵ The majority of the Greek manuscripts include *and see* at the end of this verse and in the middle of verse 5.

⁴²⁶ Three of the four *riders* are given various kinds of authority. These expressions are examples of what is called “The Divine Passive,” because it is most likely that God gives them that authority, but God is not mentioned. This is in accord with the general pattern we see in the Book of Revelation: little is said about God until in chapter 21 we read that He dwells among His people in the New Jerusalem. Note the comments on this in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology.”

⁴²⁷ The *crown* here is a *στεφανος/stephanos*, a *crown* of victory and honor. It is not a *διαδημα/diadēma*, the kingly *crown*, which is in 19:12. See the footnotes under 2:10 and 12:3 concerning these two terms.

⁴²⁸ Beasley Murray, p. 131.

would be difficult to have Christ be parallel to those other riders. Also, it is difficult to see how one of the four creatures could command the Lord to come forth. The *rider* on the *white horse* is probably not Christ, but it is unclear whether it is Anti-Christ, an unidentified agent of judgment, or terrible warfare in general.

b. Second Seal (6:3-4)

6:3-4 When He opened the second seal, I heard the second creature say, “Come!” And another horse came out, a fiery red one,⁴²⁹ and to its rider was given to take peace from the earth, so that they might slay one another. And a large sword was given to him.

The *rider* on the *fiery red horse* has power to take peace from the earth. This is in line with Matthew 24:6-7 where there are “wars” and “rumors of wars” and “nation will rise against nation.” For the first *rider* the emphasis was that he was conquering, but the emphasis here is the state of warfare among men.

c. Third Seal (6:5-6)

6:5 And when He opened the third seal, I heard the third creature saying, “Come and see!” And look, a black horse! Its rider had a pair of scales⁴³⁰ in his hand.

One of the results of war is famine. This *black horse* and *its rider* bring famine on the earth. The *pair of scales* is a symbol of famine, as is clear from the next verse.

In times of famine, there is less food to buy, so prices go up. The price of these ingredients for bread given in this verse is about twelve times the normal price.⁴³¹ The silver Roman coin called a *denarius* was a normal daily wage. The bread an adult would eat each day would be made from a *quart of wheat*. Thus the wage of an adult would only buy enough bread for him to eat, and he would have nothing left over for other needs, or for his family. In that culture the poor might mix *wheat* and *barley* for cheaper bread of lower quality, because pure *wheat* would be too expensive for them. This is in accord with Matthew 24:7, in which the Lord prophesied war, famine, and earthquakes.

⁴²⁹ Literally, “And another horse of fire went out....”

⁴³⁰ This word, ζυγος/zugos, can refer to a “yoke” or a *pair of scales*. Here the meaning *a pair of scales* seems more appropriate, because of the following words about the price of *wheat* and *barley*.

⁴³¹ EBC-R cites Beckwith for this figure.

EBC-R offers two possible interpretations of the expression *do not harm the oil and the wine*. Perhaps it means that the rich are still comfortable, enjoying plenty of food, with *oil and wine*. Or perhaps it means that the drought which damages the *wheat* and *barley* harvests is not severe enough at this point to damage the more hardy olive trees and grape vines. Probably there is a figure of speech here, in which the effect (*oil and wine*) is mentioned in place of the cause, or source (the olive orchard and the vineyard). Thus the intent of the command would be “but do not harm the olive orchard and the vineyard.”⁴³²

There are interpreters who look for a spiritual meaning for the words *oil* and *wine* (for instance, the *wine* represents the Lord’s Supper so somehow this verse promises that believers will not suffer persecution at this time) but there is no indication in these verses that *oil* and *wine* have a symbolic meaning. Beasley-Murray⁴³³ wisely writes, “The commentators’ lust for identification must be resisted.”

d. Fourth Seal (6:7-8)

6:7-8 And when He opened the fourth seal I heard⁴³⁴ the fourth creature saying, “Come and see!” And look, a green⁴³⁵ horse! And the one who rode it was named Death,⁴³⁶ and Hades was following it. And authority over a fourth of the earth was given to him, to kill with the sword, and with famine, and with plague,⁴³⁷ and by the beasts of the field.

With *the fourth seal*, out rides *Death*. Besides those who died of *famine* and warfare as mentioned above, a *fourth* of humanity dies here. They die from *the sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts*.

⁴³² BDAG.

⁴³³ P. 132.

⁴³⁴ The word “voice” is not in the Greek of the majority of manuscripts, but is added in some ancient manuscripts.

⁴³⁵ This adjective, χλωρος/*chlōros*, means *green*, but it can refer to any *green* from that of grass (Rev. 8:7) to the greenish gray of a very sick person, according to BDAG. That sickly *green* seems to be intended here.

⁴³⁶ θανατος/*thanatos*

⁴³⁷ The words και εν θανατῳ/*kai en thanatō*, literally “and in death” or “and by death,” seem to mean *and with plague*, because θανατος/*thanatos*, although it normally means “death,” can sometimes refer to deadly *plague*. Note that Job 27:14 mentions death by the *sword*, and lack of food (that is, *famine*), and the next verse says “death” will bury his survivor. The LXX translation of Job 27:14 uses εν θανατῳ/*en thanatō* just like this verse in Rev. 6:8. Likewise Jer. 15:2-3 seems to speak of judgment by *plague*, the *sword*, and *famine*, and *wild beasts*, and uses θανατος/*thanatos* to refer to *plague*.

These four types of suffering, *the sword, famine, plague, and the beasts of the field*, are also prophesied in Ezekiel 14:13-21.

If this judgment happened now, 1.75 billion people would be killed. In 9:18 it says one-third of mankind will be killed, but it is not clarified whether that is one-third of the original population, or one-third of the survivors.

The first four seals' judgments are carried out by riders on horses. Except for the connection with Zechariah 6:1-8 mentioned in the discussion of 6:2, it is not clear why there are horses involved in these four judgments. However, the modern reader should remember that in a world without automobiles, motorcycles, tanks, and trains, a *horse* would indeed suggest power, and perhaps even danger.

e. Fifth Seal (6:9-11)

6:9 And when He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony⁴³⁸ of the Lamb⁴³⁹ which they were holding on to.⁴⁴⁰

This *seal* is different from the others because the opening of this *seal* does not bring judgment. With *the fifth seal* our attention is turned to the martyrs, who are very important in the Book of Revelation, as was already suggested in the letter to Smyrna, where the suffering church is asked to be faithful until death and thus receive a crown of life.

Though they are strange to us, some of the elements from this text were familiar in Jewish literature at that time. For example, having the *souls of the martyrs under the altar* would not be foreign to the Jews.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁸ The use of this word (*μαρτυρία/marturia*) in Revelation is interesting. Because of his *testimony*, John himself was exiled to Patmos (1:2, 9). The ones that were killed because of their *testimony* were crying out under the *altar* of God (6:9). After they are finished with their *testimony*, the two witnesses will be killed (11:7). There are those who defeat Satan with the blood of the Lord and the power of their *testimony* (12:11). Those holding on to their *testimony* are attacked by Satan (12:17). Finally, those who are martyred for their *testimony* for Jesus are going to reign with Him for a thousand years (20:4). In summary, the *testimony* about the Lord Jesus has unfathomable power, and it brings suffering along with rewards.

⁴³⁹ Though many manuscripts have *of the Lamb* here, many others read “*of Jesus Christ*,” and the oldest have neither. If *of the Lamb* is not in the original reading, then the word *Lamb* is used of Christ 28 times in the Book of Revelation.

⁴⁴⁰ The Imperfect Tense of *εχω/echō* here is translated *they were holding on to*.

⁴⁴¹ Beasley-Murray, p. 135, supports this assertion with Lev. 4:7; Phil. 2:17; and 2 Tim. 4:6 along with several rabbinic passages.

Mounce⁴⁴² explains that from the viewpoint of those of us on the earth martyrdom is an accident, but from the viewpoint of heaven martyrdom is worship offered in ministry. The connection between ministry and personal sacrifice is also in Philippians 2:17, where Paul uses metaphors that suggest that he is like a drink offering completely poured out upon a grain offering, which is their sacrifice: “But if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and I rejoice together with you all.”

In Matthew 24:9 the Lord told His disciples about persecution and martyrdom in the end times, telling them “Then they will deliver you into tribulation, and they will kill you; and you will be hated by all the nations on account of My name.”

6:10 And they cried out with a loud voice, saying “How long, Master,⁴⁴³ holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?”

When Stephen was killed (Acts 7:54-8:1) he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When the Lord Jesus was crucified (Luke 23:34) He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” But these martyrs under the altar are not asking that their persecutors be forgiven. They ask instead, *How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?* Perhaps this striking difference is a matter of the heart motivation. When we on earth reject forgiveness for those that persecute us, and instead seek to be avenged, it is most likely motivated by our self-interest. But these martyrs in Revelation 6:9-11 left all selfishness behind the moment they died. They are instead purely concerned with the glory of the *holy and true* One, and they long for His holiness and righteousness to be displayed to the whole earth. As long as He has not yet judged evil on the earth, there are people who can say that the Almighty One is not *holy and true*. These martyrs long for the Kingdom of God to be established on the earth so that the earth is full of God’s holiness and righteousness like the water covers the sea. In 19:2 their prayer is answered.⁴⁴⁴

In Jewish literature like 1 Enoch 47⁴⁴⁵ we often see that:

⁴⁴² P. 157.

⁴⁴³ The term *Master* (*δεσποτης/despotes*) refers to a *master* that has a slave (1 Tim. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:21; Tit. 2:9; and 1 Pet. 2:18). When this term is used of God (Luke 2:29) or of the Lord (2 Pet. 2:1; and Jude 4) it emphasizes His sovereignty.

⁴⁴⁴ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 109.

⁴⁴⁵ 1 Enoch is a non-canonical Jewish book. It is hard to know for sure when it was written, and it is possible that it was written after the Book of Revelation,

1. The martyrs demand vengeance.
2. God has already chosen the number of martyrs.
3. The prayers of the martyrs will be answered when the Kingdom of God is revealed.⁴⁴⁶

Isaiah 61:2-3 contains several similar themes.

See the comments on the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* in the discussion of 3:10.

6:11 And to each was given a white robe,⁴⁴⁷ and it was said to them to rest yet a while,⁴⁴⁸ until their fellow slaves and their brothers⁴⁴⁹ and those that are about to be killed, as also they were killed, have completed⁴⁵⁰ the number.⁴⁵¹

The reader will remember where he has read about *white* clothing already, and who it was that will be wearing it. It was given to the 24 elders and the “victors.” These are the ones that were “faithful until death” which are mentioned in 2:10. Death is not the end of man, and believers that are faithful until death are given something special to show their faithfulness. When reading this, surely the members of the church in Smyrna were encouraged. When we understand the importance of but it is clear that these elements were not foreign to the writings of the Jewish people.

446 Beasley-Murray, p. 134.

447 Perhaps the word *robe* (*στολὴ/stolē*) refers to a kind of special clothing, because this word is used less often than the word *ἱματιον/himation*. The word *robe* (*στολὴ/stolē*) is only used in Mk. 12:38 (clothing of the scribes); Mk. 16:5 (clothing of the angels); Lk. 15:22 (party clothing); Lk. 20:46 (clothing of the scribes) and Rev. 6:11; 7:9, 13, and 14.

448 Most Greek manuscripts read *yet a while* (*ετι χρονον/eti chronon*), but the oldest manuscripts read *yet a little while* (*ετι χρονον μικρον/eti chronon mikron*).

449 Because the Greek term *ἀδελφος/adelphos* can certainly include women, some recent translators have translated it “brothers and sisters.” However, the Greek term *ἀδελφοι/adelphoi* does not stress the specific inclusion of women like the expression “brothers and sisters” would. Therefore the translation *brothers* is retained, with the note that the Greek term here can include women.

450 The majority of Greek manuscripts use the active form of this verb, *πληροω/pleroō*, but the two oldest manuscripts use the passive form.

451 The words *the number* are added to make a better English translation. The Greek verb, *πληροω/pleroō*, suggests that something like the number, or “their course,” is implied. Note that BDAG’s entry on this verb says that “complete a number” is one of this verb’s normal meanings, even if that often or always requires the passive form of the verb.

rewards in this book, we are assured that they are very satisfied with what they receive from the Lord, because it is a token of their status as victors.

The total *number* of martyrs has been determined by God. That total *number* needs to be *completed* first and then the Lord will come to earth to establish His Kingdom. The Lord is not interested in lowering the *number* of those that will be *killed* for Him. He gives the high privilege of this victory to a certain *number* of people whom He values, and whom He will reward.⁴⁵²

Even though the events of the fifth seal might seem to be far from the experience of the majority of readers, we all have seen things that do not appear fair (if not martyrdom, some lighter form of suffering) but we do not yet see the judgment of the “Master, who is holy and true.” Through His word He reminds us that He is arranging everything according to His glorious plan, and He asks that we be patient in faith.

f. Sixth Seal (6:12-17)

This judgment is truly terrifying. It seems like the earth is about to be utterly destroyed. At any rate, that would be the impression of those who dwell upon the earth. Earthquakes, the sun, stars, the sky and mountains are related to Judgment Day in the Old Testament (Joel 2:31; 3:15; Haggai 2:6; Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; and Jeremiah 4:23-28). The ones that must experience the disasters prophesied in these verses surely will think that the final judgment has already come. According to some commentators, this text, and 11:15-19 concerning the seventh trumpet, and also 16:17-21 concerning the seventh bowl, tell about the end of the disasters prophesied in the Book of Revelation.⁴⁵³ But the earthquake prophesied in 6:12 is also recorded in Matthew 24:7-8. There the earthquake is said to be “just the beginning of birth pangs.”

As was explained earlier, the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet contains the seven bowls. The earthquake in 6:12 is less terrifying than the earthquake that is prophesied in 16:18 in connection with the seventh bowl.

⁴⁵² Outside the canon of the Bible, note also 1 Enoch 47:4, “And the hearts of the holy were filled with joy; Because the number of the righteous had been offered, And the prayer of the righteous had been heard, And the blood of the righteous been required before the Lord of Spirits” (translated from the Ethiopian by R.H. Charles, 1906). That Jewish text also suggests that there is a fixed number of people that will be granted the privilege of martyrdom.

⁴⁵³ See the discussion about the “Reiteration View” and the “Telescoping View” in the discussion about the structure of this section.

6:12 And I saw when He opened the sixth seal, a huge earthquake happened, and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair,⁴⁵⁴ and the whole moon became as blood,

We need to be careful in interpreting symbols, figures of speech, and literal words in the judgment of *the sixth seal*. There are some commentators that say that the elements of this judgment are only symbols. According to them, there is no literal *earthquake*. Some say that the *earthquake* is a symbol meaning the powerful on the earth will be overthrown. This kind of symbolic approach is very subjective. Even though there are no indicators in the context, the interpreter says, “this is a symbol” or “that has a spiritual meaning.” If the context does not tell the interpreter that something is not to be taken literally, how does he know? It is better to interpret things as literally as possible. If the context requires a symbolic meaning, then we take it as symbolic, but otherwise we should try to leave it literal.

So, it is better that we understand the judgments connected with *the sixth seal*, including the *huge earthquake*, to be literal. So it is also with *the sun* becoming *black*, and *the moon as red as blood*. A literal interpretation does not mean that all figures of speech are rejected. However, in 6:14 John wrote that “the sky was separated like a scroll rolling up” which is a figure of speech that pictures the terror of the disasters in the sky. This is clear because there is still a sky in 20:11. So also with “the mountains and islands,” there are still mountains in 6:15.

Events such as *the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair* were already prophesied in texts about Judgment Day. Note for instance Isaiah 13:10; Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9; and Matthew 24:29.

6:13 and the stars of heaven fell upon the earth like a fig tree dropping its summer figs when shaken by a strong wind.

We know that *stars* are actually far larger than *the earth*, and that if a planet like *the earth* were to get too near a star, the star’s stronger gravity would pull that planet into a fiery destruction. So a possible way of understanding this verse is that the term *star*⁴⁵⁵ has a wider meaning than the usual meaning of this word today. Perhaps the word can refer to what we now call meteors or “falling stars,” meaning that there will be terrible meteor showers, likened to *a fig tree dropping its summer figs when shaken by a strong wind*.

454 Mounce, p. 161, and BDAG explain that *sackcloth made of hair* is made from the wool of sheep or camels and is usually dark in color. It was used by people in mourning.

455 αστηρ/aster

This and the next verse are from Isaiah 34:4 which says that all the *stars* will fall “like withered leaves from a vine, and like withered fruit from a fig tree,” and that the sky “will be rolled up like a scroll.”

6:14 And the sky was separated like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place.

Ancient scrolls were made of sheets of papyrus or properly treated animal skins. Those sheets were glued together to form a *scroll*, which would be rolled up at both ends. If the glue holding any two of the sheets of an open *scroll* came undone, then the *scroll* would suddenly roll up to the right and left, and the two sheets of the scroll would need to be glued back together again.

Those interpreters that hold to the Reiteration View described above say that these verses here describe the end of the Tribulation, and that these events will be retold as the trumpets are sounded and the bowls are poured out. That interpretation does seem strong, because these verses do sound like the end of the world. However, as has been described above, that view does not really work very well.

Certainly these are terrible calamities in *the sky* and on the earth, and they may even appear to be the end of all things. However, the reader soon realizes that no, God is not finished, He still has more judgment to pour out upon those that dwell upon the earth.

There were terrible meteor showers, and there were earthquakes so terrible that *every mountain and island* was shifted *from its place*. The cosmic calamities were so terrible that it seemed like even *the sky* was destroyed. We know, however, that more judgment remains to be poured out. We also know that at the very end of the age, in 20:11, there is still a *sky* that will flee from the presence of the One seated on that Great White Throne.

6:15 And the kings of the earth, and the nobles, and the commanders, and the rich, and the powerful, and everyone – slave and free – hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

The seven types of people listed here reach all levels of mankind with an emphasis on the upper levels of society who resist the work of God on the earth. The list of people is repeated in 19:18 where the judgment that they fear actually befalls them. See also Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21 about hiding from God’s judgment.

Earlier, members of the church of Smyrna had reason to be afraid of *kings*, *nobles*, *commanders*, *the rich*, and *the powerful*. They were persecuting

them, and seemed to have great authority over them. Now, reading about this punishment, that congregation and congregations like them today, need fear no more. When the Lord opens those seals and sends His judgments upon the earth, these “important” people will no more terrorize the people of God. They will hide themselves *in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.*

6:16-17 And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of His⁴⁵⁶ wrath has come, and who is able to stand against it?”⁴⁵⁷

Again, imagine how the congregation in Smyrna, and the faithful members of the congregation in Pergamum, might have reacted to this prophecy. Their persecutors seemed so bold and powerful, but here in their desperation they are begging *the mountains and to the rocks* to fall upon them!

It is ironic that such powerful people should be so afraid, and it is ironic that they would be afraid of *the wrath of the Lamb*, since lambs are normally such gentle animals. These words are only here and in 14:10.

The Eleven “Insertions”

In all of the Book of Revelation there are about eleven “insertions” that the Lord placed into the framework of the book, that is, the series of seals, trumpets, and bowls. Do not understand the term “insertion” to mean that these passages were inserted by a later author. John is writing down what he was being shown. There is a series of seals, trumpets, and bowls, but he also saw events that seem to be independent from the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

These first two “insertions” are very relevant to the judgments that are being described, and also very relevant to the seven churches of chapters two and three.

456 The majority of Greek manuscripts read *His* rather than “their.”

457 In the ancient manuscripts there are no quotation marks, but because modern languages require quotation marks, the translator is forced to decide exactly which words are meant as quotations. Clearly, 6:16 has a quotation, but 6:17 could be a quotation, or it could be an explanation from John. It seems better to take 6:17 to be a part of the quotation, but one cannot be certain. Clearly, in 7:1 we return to the words of the Apostle John, and not a quotation from those “mighty” men.

First Insertion: 144,000 People Sealed (7:1-8)

This text, 7:1-8, is the first of those insertions. It is about the 144,000 Jews that will be sealed. There is a wide diversity of interpretation concerning this passage, partly because some interpreters hold that the church is the “New Israel,” a view this writer does not accept.

7:1 And after this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind would blow upon the earth, nor upon the sea, nor upon any tree.

According to Bauckham,⁴⁵⁸ in the Book of Revelation the numeral *four* refers to the natural world. Note Revelation 20:8, “...to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth.” The praise expressed in 5:13 (when *four* different parts of *the earth* will praise God) has *four* parts, but all the other praise in the Book of Revelation has seven parts (5:12 and 7:12) or three parts (4:9, 11; and 19:1).

The expression *the four corners of the earth* suggests that this will be a world-wide disaster. Comparing this text with Jeremiah 49:36-38 suggests that *the four winds of the earth* speak of an inescapable and complete judgment.

However, for the moment that judgment is withheld. We do not read anywhere else in the Book of Revelation concerning these *winds*,⁴⁵⁹ so perhaps they represent the trumpet and bowl judgments of God, which is withheld for the moment.

7:2-3 And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he shouted out with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given permission to harm the earth and the sea, saying “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the slaves of our God upon their foreheads.”

In Ezekiel 9:3-6 there is a similar judgment. People that grieve over the sins of Jerusalem are marked with a “tau,” the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet, on their forehead, and all that do not have that mark are to be killed.

The nature of this sealing in chapter seven is debated. Some say that this sealing in Revelation 7 is a spiritual sealing and thus spiritual protection, so that all the *sealed* will certainly have eternal life, much like the sealing of Ephesians 1:13. In Revelation 14:1 they are standing on Mount Zion

⁴⁵⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 31.

⁴⁵⁹ EBC-R

with the Lamb. In 14:3 and 4 they are said to be redeemed from the earth. In Revelation 14:1 and 22:4 it seems like the mark of these seals is the Lamb of God's name and the name of the Father. Most likely the sealing provides physical protection for those believers, because in this context it is physical disasters that threaten them and are held back so they can be sealed. It seems best to say that this *seal* protected them from the coming trumpet judgments. In Revelation 9:4 we read that the "locusts" that appear out of the smoke that came out of the abyss are given power to torture people with terrible agonies, but they are only allowed to harm "the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads." So, again, we see from that passage that the seals in this passage provide protection from God's judgment that will fall upon those that dwell upon the earth.

7:4 And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty four thousand, sealed from all the tribes of the sons of Israel.

Some commentators⁴⁶⁰ say that the 144,000 represent all of God's people or church, despite the mention of each of the twelve *tribes of Israel* by name. They make several objections to the interpretation that this text is about the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the literal Old Testament *tribes of Israel*:⁴⁶¹

1. The New Testament, especially Ephesians 2:11-19, teaches that there is now no difference between Jews and gentiles. The answer to that objection is that Ephesians 2:11-19 is about the relationship between believing Jews and believing gentiles during this age, in the church, not during the age to come. But Revelation 4-21 is about the age to come, not the church age. This long section of the Book of Revelation is about the era in which the promises that were made long ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants will finally be fulfilled. Again, see Romans 11:11-32.
2. Since the Captivity, many or most Jews have not known to which tribe they belong. This is actually an odd objection, because in Revelation 7 those Jews do not seal themselves, so they do not have to know their tribal ancestry. That is a problem the angels will be able to sort out!

⁴⁶⁰ Note Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, pp. 176-177; Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 191; Mounce, p. 270; and Beasley-Murray, p. 223.

⁴⁶¹ Mounce, p. 168.

3. The number 144,000 is twelve times twelve times 1000, and that is sometimes given as proof that the number is exclusively symbolic. Certainly 144,000 is a highly symbolic number, but it would be odd to say that if the Lord were sealing literal descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the number of them that He would have chosen would have no symbolic importance. For example, the Lord chose 12 apostles, literally 12, but 12 was also a highly symbolic number, as in the 12 *tribes* of Israel.
4. The order of *the tribes* in this list is different from the order of *the tribes* in the Old Testament, but that is really not a problem, because in the Old Testament there is no particular order for the listing of *the tribes*. According to Mounce⁴⁶² there are actually 18 different orders for the listings of *the tribes* in the Old Testament.

- 7:5-8 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand sealed,
 from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand sealed,
 from the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand,
 from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand sealed.

In the entire New Testament this is the only list of the tribes of Israel. This list does bring up a fundamental interpretational and theological problem. Does the church then *permanently* replace the people of Israel? Is the church then the New Israel? If so, then the promises given to Israel concerning the future Kingdom of God, the Messianic Age, as in Isaiah 4:2-6, must already be, or shall be, fulfilled in the Church. And so this verse must also be interpreted in that way. Those that hold this view would say then that this is about the church. They would use Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 as support for this approach. However, those verses only say that the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that do not believe in Jesus Christ are not true Jews. That is different from saying that there are no more special promises for the physical descendants of

⁴⁶² P. 170.

Jacob. Those interpreters would also turn to James 1:1 and Matthew 19:28. But those verses only prove that there are twelve tribes of Israel, and a part of them have believed in Jesus. Galatians 3:28 might be offered in support of their idea, but it only says that in this age there is no spiritual difference between Jew and gentile; it does not say that there will be no difference after the church age closes. In fact the best and the most complete discussion of this issue in the New Testament is Romans 9-11, and particularly 11:11-32.⁴⁶³ These verses clearly say that there is a future full of hope in which the Old Testament messianic kingdom promises will be fulfilled for an entire generation of the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all of whom will believe in the Lord Jesus. Part of that fulfillment is described in Revelation 7.

In Numbers 1:21-43 and 26:4-51 the numbers of the tribes of Israel are irregular numbers, but when the Lord fulfills His promise to redeem all of Israel the numbers of each *tribe* will be uniform and perfect.

The *tribe* of Dan is not listed, apparently because of their idolatry (Judges 18:30) and also because they built an unauthorized place of worship (1 Kings 12:29).⁴⁶⁴ Even though Dan is not listed, there are still twelve tribes, because *Joseph* and *Manasseh*, his son, are both listed.

Second Insertion: Many people... who come out of the great tribulation (7:9-17)

This great multitude is not the same as the 144,000 Jews in 7:1-8. This is clear because they are specifically “from every nation, tribe, people, and language,” and this group cannot be numbered, but the 144,000 are numbered.

7:9 After these things I looked – and see!⁴⁶⁵ – a great multitude that no one was able to count, from every nation, tribes, peoples, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes, and with palm branches in their hands.

To show that this vision is distinct from the one in 7:1-8, John begins this section with the words *after these things*.

463 Wright, pp. 195 and 328.

464 Mounce, p. 169.

465 This translation, *After these things I looked – and see!* – a great multitude is a word-for-word translation. The NIV reads “After this, I looked and there was before me a great multitude....” See the footnote under 1:7 concerning the translation of the word *tōou/idou*.

This group was so large that *no one was able to count them*. They were *from every nation, tribes, peoples and languages*. This does not mean that *everyone from every nation* is gathered there. In stark contrast, 11:9-10 tells us that people from “every people, tribe, nation and language” celebrate the death of God’s two witnesses.⁴⁶⁶

Surely as we see people *from every nation, tribes, peoples, and languages* worshiping the Lord, we are witnessing the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3, “through you all nations of the earth will be blessed.”⁴⁶⁷ That same promise is repeated in Genesis 28:14, with the additional words “and through your seed.”

Here in 7:9 their *white robes* remind us of the *white robes* given to victors in chapters two and three. The *palm branches* they hold are connected to victory and purification in 1 Maccabees 13:51 and 2 Maccabees 10:7. See also John 12:13.

7:10 And they are shouting out in a loud voice, saying “Victory to our God, seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Their cry is often translated “salvation to our God,” but a better translation would be *victory to our God*.... This is for three reasons: firstly, because *our God* simply does not need salvation; secondly, because *victory* is implied in the palm branches of 7:9; and thirdly, because it is appropriate for them to yearn for and call out for the *victory of our God*. This term⁴⁶⁸ means *victory* or “deliverance” in Luke 1:71; Acts 7:25; Hebrews 9:28; Revelation 12:10; and 19:1.

7:11-12 And all the angels were standing around the throne and the elders and the four creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and they worshiped God saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

The praise that is given to *God* in these verses is similar to 4:8-11. The *angels*, the *elders* and the *four creatures* agree with and continue the praise of the unnumbered multitude.

⁴⁶⁶ Thomas, p. 488. Note the comments on this four-fold expression in 5:9.

⁴⁶⁷ Wright, pp. 195 and 328.

⁴⁶⁸ The Greek noun here is *σωτηρία/sōtēria*, related to the verb *σωζω/sōzō*. That verb often translates the Hebrew *ysh'*, which although usually translated “to save,” usually speaks of a physical deliverance, rescue, or *victory* for the people of God. The word *σωτηρία/sōtēria* is found in the LXX of Ps. 14:7; 20:5; 21:1, 5; and 53:6, all of which speak of *victory*.

7:13 And one of the elders responded saying to me, “These clothed in white robes – who are they and where did they come from?”

Among the twenty-four *elders*, there is *one* who speaks to John and shifts his focus back to the huge group from every nation. This verse is similar to some passages in the prophets (*Jeremiah 1:11, 13; 24:3; Amos 7:8; 8:2; and Zechariah 4:5*) in which a heavenly person asks questions of the prophet.⁴⁶⁹

7:14 And I said to him, “My lord⁴⁷⁰ you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the Great Tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb!

The expression, *the Great Tribulation*,⁴⁷¹ could also be translated “the great suffering.” The use of the article (the word *the*) shows us that the meaning is not suffering in general which God’s people experience from age to age, but *the Great Tribulation* that will happen at the end of the age. It is the time that is covered by Revelation 4-19, the seven year period that begins with the Rapture of the church, and ends with the coming of the Lord Jesus to establish His Messianic Kingdom.

It is worth considering the relationship between those *coming out of the Great Tribulation* and those who are killed “on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb” that are “under the altar” and given *white robes* in 6:9-11. They must be the same people, martyrs that were killed in the *Tribulation*,⁴⁷² especially since martyrs do play a large role in the Book of Revelation. How else will so many people “come out of” the *Great Tribulation* except by martyrdom? Those that would say that the people of 7:14 are not *Tribulation* martyrs would have to give an alternative explanation for how they came out of *the Great Tribulation*.

⁴⁶⁹ Mounce, p. 173.

⁴⁷⁰ Just like the English word “lord,” the word κυριος/*kurios* can certainly be used of the *Lord* Jesus or the *Lord* God, but it can also simply be a term of respect like *lord* or “sir.” The respect John gives in this verse is also seen in Rev. 19:10 and 22:8-9 (Mounce, p. 173).

⁴⁷¹ ἡ θλιψις τῆς μεγάλης/*hē thlipsis tēs megalēs*

⁴⁷² But Mounce, p. 173, and Morris (*The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 118) say they are believers who come out of the *Great Tribulation* because they die a normal death, not because they are killed because of their faith and testimony. However, it would seem that in that age, when persecution will be so intense, there would not be many faithful believers who would have the opportunity to live peaceful lives and die in peace.

If indeed these are *Tribulation* martyrs, then their attitude in 7:10 is very interesting: they are not crying out about their own sufferings, but about the victory of the *Lamb* of God.

The statement *they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* is very rich and powerful. If indeed these are martyrs, then their clothes were not stained with sin.⁴⁷³ Rather they were stained red with their own blood when they were, like Antipas mentioned in Revelation 2:13, killed for their testimony. From a human perspective they appeared horrific. But by being *washed in the blood of the Lamb* who Himself was slain, and was victorious, those horrific-looking clothes become *white*. With the *white robes* of the victors of chapters two and three, they can stand “before the throne and before the Lamb.” Here we see them standing in front of the throne upon which God the Father is seated, and in front of Jesus Christ, but later in Revelation 20:4 we will see them seated upon thrones, to rule and reign with Christ for a thousand years.

In chapter six, especially verse 16, the wrath of the *Lamb* of God is stressed, but in these verses His grace is emphasized.

7:15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they are worshiping⁴⁷⁴ Him day and night in His temple, and the One seated upon the throne will dwell with them.

Their right to be in the *temple* of God reminds us of the right of the victors in 3:12, who “never again... go out of” the *temple*. In chapters two and three we read promises given to the believers who are faithful to death, and in these verses we read of some of the fulfillment of those wonderful promises.

As was discussed in the section entitled “Revelation and Systematic Theology,” we are told little about the *One seated upon the throne* until the end of the Book of Revelation. It is as if His face is turned away from us. But here, for these Tribulation martyrs, He is more personal. He *will dwell*

⁴⁷³ It is true that Isa. 1:18 says, “If your sins are as scarlet, as snow they shall be made white; if they are red like purple, like wool they shall be.” But even in that passage in Isaiah there is no mention of clothing being *made white*. It is better to connect this passage to the special status that martyrs have in the Book of Revelation, rather than to the forgiven status of all believers.

⁴⁷⁴ The verb λατρεύω/*latreuō* can mean “serve,” especially outside the LXX and NT. The translation “serve” is certainly possible here too, but the translation “worship” is better. Thus these martyrs, *worshiping Him day and night*, are like the four creatures in 4:8 that have no rest *day and night*, calling out “Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is, and who is to come!”

*with them.*⁴⁷⁵ He does not hide His face from them. In fact, in verse 17 it is He that wipes away every tear from their eyes. Note also that in the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21:3 His “home is with mankind, and He will live with them.” The closeness that these martyrs enjoy with *God* during the remainder of the Tribulation will be enjoyed by all the victors, living in the New Jerusalem, as described in Revelation 21:3.

In the Old Testament, God’s tent or dwelling was closely related to His *throne* and His protection. This can be seen in Exodus 40:34; Leviticus 26:11-12; and Isaiah 4:5-6.⁴⁷⁶

7:16 They will hunger no longer, neither will they thirst any longer, nor will the heat⁴⁷⁷ of the sun fall upon them, nor will any burning heat,

During the persecutions they suffered in the Great Tribulation they had to flee their homes, and were subject to *hunger, thirst, and the heat of the sun*. All that is now past for them. These words surely comforted those of the seven churches enduring persecution, and should be a comfort today to all persecuted believers.⁴⁷⁸

7:17 because the Lamb in the middle of the throne shepherds them and leads them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

This is a well-known reversal of roles. Normally a shepherd would lead a lamb, but in this case *the Lamb shepherds*⁴⁷⁹ the people. He *shepherds them* with so much goodness and kindness. Despite His exalted position *in the middle of the throne*,⁴⁸⁰ He *leads them to springs of living water*.

The idea that the Lord *God* or the Messiah will be like a shepherd for His people is not limited to the well-known Psalm 23. In Isaiah 40:11 the

475 In Rev. 7:15 and 21:3 exactly the same verb is used, σκηνωσει/*skēnōsei* from σκηνωοι/*skēnoō*.

476 Thomas, p. 501.

477 The words *the heat of* have been added to the translation for clarity. A literal translation would be “neither might fall upon them the sun.”

478 The four parts of this promise were taken from a promise made to Israel in Isa. 49:10.

479 Note the footnote under 2:26-28 concerning shepherding.

480 These words, *in the middle of the throne* (ανα μεσον του θρονου/*ana meson tou thronou*), are different from those in Rev. 5:6, (εν μεσω του θρονου/*en mesō tou thronou*). Normally, ανα μεσον/*ana meson* means “in between.” The same word is used in Mt. 13:25 “between”; Mk. 7:31 “in the middle of”; and 1 Cor. 6:5 “from.” The meaning of the words *in the middle of the throne* cannot be defined exactly, because we do not know the shape of *the throne*.

prophet says of the Lord God, “like a shepherd His flock He shepherds.” Likewise in Ezekiel 34:23 the Lord says, “Over them I will make one shepherd stand, and he will shepherd them, My servant David; he will shepherd them, and he will be for them a shepherd.” In Ezekiel 37:24 the Lord God promised about Israel, “And My servant David will be king over them, and there will be one shepherd for all of them, and they will walk in My judgments, and they will keep My statutes, and they will do them.” Note also Psalm 78:52.

Isaiah 49:9-10 not only describes the people of Israel as well-tended sheep, but also mentions promises like those of Revelation 7:16, and the idea that He will lead them to *springs of water*.

In John 10 it is very clear that the Lord Jesus is the One who was promised in all those Old Testament promises. He is the Good Shepherd. He fulfills the promises made about “My Servant David.”

In 2:7 there is a special promise for the victors, that they will be given “to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of My God.” Most likely these *springs of living water*, offered to those who come “out of the Great Tribulation,” are also located in that paradise. Indeed 22:1 speaks of “the river of the water of life... coming out from the throne of God.”

Mounce⁴⁸¹ writes that the tears that will be *wiped away* by God from their eyes are not tears of repentance for a life wasted on what was fleeting. On the faces of ones who come out of the Great Tribulation there are still tears from the heavy suffering that they experienced in the world before they were killed because of their witness. As noted above, God Himself will *wipe* these tears *away*. He is not distant and removed from those heroes, the martyrs from the Tribulation. And when He *wipes away* every tear He will bring deep comfort and joy.

If indeed these are martyrs, then this statement is significant. Two things are strongly implied in these words: one, the special blessings offered to victors are really worth pursuing at any and all cost, and two, failure to gain those special blessings, while certainly not like eternal hell, is very much to be avoided. See especially Luke 19:11-27, and the difference between the shamed servant that just buried the mina, and the enemies of the king that are killed in front of him. That servant who is ashamed represents believers who will be ashamed at His coming – they receive a rebuke rather than a reward; the enemies of the king represent those that never believed in Jesus – they will be thrown into eternal punishment.

See also 1 John 2:28, which strongly implies that some of the readers, addressed as “dear children,” will be ashamed before Him at His coming. See 1 John 2:12-14 for proof that those “dear children,” and all the readers that John is addressing in 1 John, are believers.

See also 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, and note that in verse 15 the believer that has “built upon the foundation” using “wood, grass, and straw” will indeed “suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire.” He will be in the Kingdom of God, but not with the high status there that the victors will enjoy.

Chapter seven tells about two of John’s visions, called “insertions” because they are not a part of the chain of judgments that accompany the opening of the seven seals. The first vision is of the 144,000 Jews who were sealed, and the second is of the great multitude too great to count. They are related to the judgment of opening the seventh seal. They also have a close relationship to the seven churches of chapters two and three.

g. Seventh Seal (8:1-6)

The judgments of the seventh seal are the seven trumpets and their “contents.” This seventh seal is opened and seven angels receive and prepare the seven trumpets.⁴⁸² If somehow those that dwell upon the earth could see these heavenly scenes, they might have thought that there is just one more seal to open, so maybe they could survive, but once the seven angels and their seven trumpets appear, those hopes are dashed. The judgments falling on those who dwell upon the earth are still heavy, with many to come.

8:1 And when He opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

Finally, after the two insertions that tell about God’s people, our attention is turned again to the last *seal* that must be opened.

There will probably be a great feeling of suspense during that *half an hour*, and no one will dare to say a thing. What will the Lamb do now? Are these judgments upon those that dwell upon the earth complete? Is the Kingdom of Earth (as the rabbis used to call it) about to be “invaded” by the Kingdom of Heaven?

⁴⁸² As was discussed in the comments concerning the structure of this section, some interpreters think that the series of seven trumpets is a repetition of what was given in chapter six and not a continuation; but in this text, 8:1-2, there is not even one indicator leading us to that conclusion. Seven angels are each given a trumpet to bring the judgments accompanying the opening of the last seal.

This is the first of the “telescopic extensions” mentioned just before the discussion of 6:1.

8:2 And I saw the⁴⁸³ seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

Once they see that *the seven angels standing before God* are *given seven trumpets, trumpets* that will each have to be sounded, those that will be watching when these things unfold will know the answer to the question, “What is the Lamb going to do now that the seven seals have been opened?” In the previous verses each judgment began with the opening of a seal, but here each judgment begins with the sounding of a trumpet.

In Numbers 10:1-10 the LORD instructs Moses on the crafting and use of *trumpets* for Israel. Those *trumpets* sound to signal to the community the time to depart, to get the community to gather before the Tent of Meeting, to get the heads of the community to come to Moses, and also to go into battle.⁴⁸⁴ *Trumpets* are also sounded during the feasts for certain sacrifices. In other Bible passages we learn that *trumpets* are sounded to celebrate the ascension of a king of Israel to his throne (1 Kings 1:34, 39; and 2 Kings 9:13). They are also used in the context of the Judgment Day (see Zephaniah 1:14-16; Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; and 1 Thessalonians 4:16), because the coming of the Messiah to establish the Kingdom of God on the earth brings difficulties such as war for some (see Amos 5:16-20) and joy for others (see Isaiah 40). Departure, gathering before God, joy, warfare, and the ascension of a king are certainly relevant themes in this setting, so it is no wonder *trumpets* are prominent in the Book of Revelation!⁴⁸⁵

Those *seven angels* are said to *stand before God*. This means they are ready to serve Him.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸³ In the original language there is a definite article here, so it is translated *the seven angels*. Even so, which *angels* the author is speaking about is not clear. Maybe these *seven angels* are the same *seven angels* that will be given the bowls to pour out (15:6).

⁴⁸⁴ In Josh. 6:1-16 *seven trumpets* are blown by *seven priests* prior to the miraculous destruction of the walls of Jericho.

⁴⁸⁵ Beasley-Murray, p. 152, compares the opening of the seals and the sounding of the *trumpets* in Jewish literature. He says that only in the Book of Revelation are seals opened in connection with the coming of Messiah, but in many Jewish writings a trumpet is blown in the context of the arrival of the Messiah.

⁴⁸⁶ In 1 Kings 17:1; 18:15; 2 Kings 3:14; and 5:16 “stand in front...” means “ready to serve....”

8:3 And another angel came and stood beside the altar holding a golden censer. And a great deal of incense was given to him so that he might offer it up, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.

Exodus 30:1-10 tells about *the altar of incense* where the priests serve in the Old Testament. In the Tabernacle, the censers were made of bronze⁴⁸⁷ (Exodus 27:3), whereas those used in the Temple were made of gold (1 Kings 7:50).

Note also Revelation 5:8 where *incense* and *the prayers of the saints* are also closely connected.

8:4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the hand of the angel.

So often we pray against evil, but we wonder if our *prayers* are even heard. Probably the church in Smyrna felt that way too. Some of our *prayers* seem to be stored up in heaven waiting for the day described here, because they mix with the *smoke* of some heavenly *incense*, and they rise up to *God*. *Incense*, as a powerful picture of how *God* experiences our *prayers*, is also present in Psalm 141:2, “May my prayer be established before You as incense.” Our *prayers* are like the powerful smell of *incense* rising up, which cannot be ignored.

8:5 And the angel took the censer, and filled it from the fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth, and there were thunder, roaring, lightning, and an earthquake.

Apparently as an answer to the prayers of the saints, God has that *angel* take *the censer* of incense, which is somehow metaphorically related to our *prayers*, and that *angel* sends that fiery *censer* crashing down on *the earth*. It is as though God has gathered the *prayers* of His people, *prayers* against wickedness, into a great fiery ball, and finally sends that blazing ball down upon the wicked! Your *prayers*, oh suffering congregation, will be answered. And you in Laodicea (or in other places...), make sure that nobody needs to pray against you for lack of kindness to the poor, or lack of Christlike tenderness to those less fortunate!

Our *prayers* are not just being heard; our *prayers* are being answered. In 6:10 those whose souls were under the altar asked “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who

⁴⁸⁷ The word used in Exod. 27:3 can mean “copper,” but it is probably a copper alloy that we might call “bronze,” which is copper alloyed with some tin. In the ancient world the metals that were alloyed with copper could vary considerably, so Hebrew could use one word for what we call “copper,” “bronze,” and also “brass.”

dwell upon the earth?" In this verse their prayers come before *God* and their prayers are answered. Apparently in response to the prayers of the saints, *God* who sits on the throne judges and avenges their blood with *thunder, roaring, lightning, and an earthquake*.

Just as the seal judgments were preceded by incense and prayer in Revelation 5:8, so the trumpet judgments are preceded by incense and prayer. This text is similar to Exodus 19:16-18 and Ezekiel 10:2.⁴⁸⁸

8:6 And the seven angels having the seven trumpets prepared themselves so that they might blow them.

Of course we do not know what sort of preparations these *seven angels* might need to make before sounding their *trumpets*, but this verse adds a feeling of suspense as our attention is focused again on the *seven angels* who are about to bring judgment upon the earth.

2. Seven Trumpets (8:7-11:19)

These Trumpet Judgments are somewhat parallel to the ten plagues on Egypt in Exodus 7-11,⁴⁸⁹ but the Bowl Judgments are even more closely parallel. Just as God judged those that oppressed His people before He inaugurated a new age, the age of Israel, so He will judge those that have oppressed His people before He inaugurates the age of the Messianic Kingdom.

These judgments are full of strange elements. But once again, we will assume that an interpretation should be as literal as possible, just as we would interpret any written material. For example, in 8:10 there is a "huge star" which strikes the earth. As noted in the discussion on Revelation 6:13, it could not be taken literally because stars are thousands of times larger than the earth. This is a figure of speech showing a terrifying event; perhaps "huge star" can refer to a very large meteor.

a. First Four Trumpets (8:7-12)

Just as the first four seals were grouped together, so also the first four trumpets form one group.

⁴⁸⁸ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 203.

⁴⁸⁹ Beasley-Murray, pp. 155-156.

8:7 And the first⁴⁹⁰ blew his trumpet, and there was hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was thrown to 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.

Part of the judgment of the *first trumpet* is that *a third of the earth was burned up*. This dividing of *the earth* for judgment is similar to what is prophesied in Ezekiel 5:12 and Zechariah 13:8-9. This *first trumpet* judgment is like the seventh plague on Egypt, in Exodus 9, with its *hail* and lightning.

For some reason, the judgments that come forth as a result of all the trumpets (except the fifth and the seventh) include the destruction of a *third of something*.

8:8-9 And the second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a huge burning mountain⁴⁹¹ was thrown into the sea. And a third of the sea became blood, and a third of the living creatures⁴⁹² in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

If the *first trumpet* brought disaster to the earth, the *second* brings disaster to *the sea*. John can only use the expression *something like* because human language, or specifically the Koine Greek language, just did not have terms for what he saw. The result of *a third of the sea* becoming *blood* is similar to the first plague on the Egyptians in Exodus.

8:10-11 And the third angel blew his trumpet, and a huge star burning like a torch fell from the sky; and it fell upon a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. (And the name of the star is Wormwood.) And a third of the waters became wormwood,⁴⁹³ and many of the people died from the waters because they were made bitter.

As noted under 6:13, a *star* falling to earth is probably a meteor. In Jewish writings, meteors were a sign of the suffering of the last days.⁴⁹⁴ This

⁴⁹⁰ The word “angel” is not in the Greek text, but *the first* is clearly *the first* of the seven angels mentioned in 8:2 and 8:6.

⁴⁹¹ The eruption of Mount Vesuvius, its ash suddenly obliterating the city of Pompeii, probably happened about 20 years before Revelation was written. But what was the meaning of that disaster compared to the disaster here that ruins a third of the earth?

⁴⁹² This expression, *living creatures*, is very different from the term used for the “four creatures” near the throne of God. The expression, *living creatures*, could also be translated “creatures that have life.” The term creature here is *κτισμα/ktisma*. Note the footnote under 4:6 concerning the “four creatures.”

⁴⁹³ This word, *αψινθος/apsinthos*, is a kind of plant that is very bitter. See Jer. 9:15 and 23:15.

⁴⁹⁴ Mounce, p. 187.

third trumpet's judgment is also like the first of the ten plagues in Egypt recorded in Exodus 7, where the waters of the Nile River became blood.

The first three trumpets brought judgment using fire, in accord with the censer full of fire from the altar which was thrown down in 8:5.

8:12 And 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 them were darkened. And a third of the day did not shine and likewise a third of the night.⁴⁹⁵

This *fourth trumpet's judgment of darkness* is like the ninth plague of three days of darkness mentioned in Exodus 10. It is probably not a coincidence that there were three days of darkness then, and here we see one *third of the sun darkened*, one *third of the moon darkened*, and one *third of the stars, a third of the day, and a third of the night*.

In Amos 5:18 the prophet says, “Woe to those that long for the Day of the Lord! Why is it so for you, the Day of the Lord? It will be darkness, and not light!” In that text, as here, darkness is related to the judgment coming at the end of the age.

b. Last Three Trumpets (8:13–11:19)

i. Fifth Trumpet (8:13–9:12)

8:13 And I saw and I heard one eagle⁴⁹⁶ flying high in the sky, saying with a loud voice, “Woe! Woe! Woe to those who dwell upon the earth⁴⁹⁷ because of the remaining sounds of the trumpets of the three angels who are about to blow them!”

The eagle's announcement of *woe to those who dwell upon the earth* signals a difference between the first four trumpet judgments, which were upon earth, sea, waters, sun, moon, and stars, and the last three trumpet judgments, that are against mankind.

The first four *trumpets* are covered in just six verses, but the fifth and sixth *trumpets* are so serious that takes 21 verses to tell about them. The *eagle* says *woe* three times, which corresponds to the *three trumpets* still to be blown.

495 Literally, “and the day did not shine a third of it, and the night likewise.”

496 This word (*αετος/aetus*) is only used five times in the NT. The use of this word in Mt. 24:28 and Lk. 17:37, and comments in Aristotle and Pliny (according to *BDAG*), show that the word can include vultures who eat carrion. However, the *αετος/aetus* here in Rev. 8:13 and in Rev. 12:14 are strong fliers, and so the English translation *eagle* is appropriate.

497 See the comments on this expression in the discussion of 3:10.

9:1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star, fallen from the sky to the earth, and the key to the pit of the abyss⁴⁹⁸ was given to him.

How strange that *a star* be *given a key*. We think of stars as physical objects in outer space, but apparently they have personality in the Book of Revelation. This seems to be a figure of speech, *star* being a metaphor for “angel.” In Isaiah 14:12; Judges 5:20; Job 38:7; and Revelation 12:4 the word *star* seems to be used in a similar way.

9:2 And he opened the pit of the abyss, and smoke rose out of the pit like smoke from a burning⁴⁹⁹ furnace.⁵⁰⁰ And the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit.

Just as *the sun* and moon became dark because of locusts in Joel 2:10, here in Revelation 9:2 *the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit*.

9:3 And out of the smoke came locusts onto the earth, and to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power.⁵⁰¹

This judgment is related to the plague of *locusts* in Exodus 10:1-20, but it is even more closely related to Joel 2:4-10. *Locusts* come from the wilderness, sometimes in a huge mass, looking for farmland where they can strip fields of their crops, devastating the livelihood of the farmers. In 1866, 200,000 people in the area of Algiers died of famine because their crops were eaten by *locusts*.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ This word (*ἀβύσσος/abussos*) is used nine times in the NT. In Lk. 8:31 the demons are afraid of being thrown there, in Rom. 10:7 it is the place of the dead, and in Rev. 9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, and 3 there are demons there, and it is the place where Satan is thrown as punishment. It is possible this place is the same as the “prison” (*φυλακή/phulakē*) in 1 Pet. 3:19, which is in itself a rather mysterious text

⁴⁹⁹ The oldest manuscripts have the word “large” rather than the word *burning*.

⁵⁰⁰ This word, *καμίνος/kaminos*, can also mean “oven” or “kiln.”

⁵⁰¹ 1 Enoch has a long explanation about the demons imprisoned in the pit of the abyss as punishment for their works that are mentioned in Gen. 6:1-7, where they are called “sons of God.” Remember that 1 Enoch is not the Word of God, but simply an ancient book in the traditions of the Jewish people.

⁵⁰² Mounce, p. 194.

9:4 And it was said to them that they must not harm the grass of the earth, nor any greenery, nor any tree, but only the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.⁵⁰³

As noted in the discussion under 7:2-3, those who *have the seal of God on their foreheads* are protected from the judgments of *God*.

The passive expressions “was given to him” in 9:1, “was given power” in 9:3, *it was said to them*, and “was given to them” in 9:5 are more examples of “the Divine Passive” discussed in a footnote under Revelation 6:2. Here these expressions remind us that these judgments are arranged by the Lord *God*.⁵⁰⁴

Usually locusts ruin crops but do not *harm* people; not so these “locusts.”

9:5 And it was given to them so that they do not kill them, but that they be tormented for five months; and their torment is like the torment of a scorpion, whenever they strike a person.

This disaster is indeed horrific. An adult stung by a *scorpion* experiences unusually strong pain, but he will not die. But if the scorpions can fly like locusts and they are as numerous as locusts, and if the tormenting sting lasts for *five months*, this is far more horrific than natural locust plagues.

9:6 And in those days people will seek death, and they will certainly not⁵⁰⁵ find it; and they will desire to die, and death will flee from them.

The description of their terrible suffering continues in this verse.

9:7 And the appearance of the locusts was like horses equipped for battle.⁵⁰⁶ And on their heads were something like gold crowns, and their faces were like the faces of men.

These are not ordinary *locusts*! The rest of the “woe” pictures the form of their terror. This verse suggests that these are not just unusual *locusts* but actual demons.

⁵⁰³ Mounce, p. 194, observes that the similarities of these disasters to the plagues of Egypt are strengthened because in Exod. 8:22; 9:4, 26; 10:23; and 11:7 the people of Israel did not experience those plagues at all, just as here the sealed 144,000 are not harmed.

⁵⁰⁴ Mounce, p. 194; and Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, pp. 126-127.

⁵⁰⁵ The Greek double negative οὐ μηδ/ou mē is here translated *certainly not*. See the footnote under 2:11 for more on the Greek double negative.

⁵⁰⁶ The Greek expression here is unique in the NT. See the footnote on the word *like*, ὅμοιος/homoios, under 1:13.

As in Joel 2:4, these *locusts* are compared to *horses*, perhaps because the shape of the head of the *locusts* is similar to that of *horses* and because an attack from the ranks of war *horses* is similar to an attack of these *locusts*.

There is an Arab saying that *locusts* have *heads* like *horses*, *breasts* like *lions*, *feet* like *camels*, *bodies* like *snakes*, and *antennae* like the hair of a maiden.⁵⁰⁷ Normal *locusts* have nothing resembling *gold crowns*, and their *faces* are not *like the faces of men*. Such *faces* leave the impression that these “*locusts*” have intellect and are not like normal insects. Verse 11 also suggests that they are demons, but it is not possible to be certain about this.

9:8 And they had hair like the hair of women, and their teeth were like lions' teeth.

Their long *hair* makes some commentators think of the long-haired Parthian horseback-riding soldiers.⁵⁰⁸ At any rate, these are terrifying and overwhelming enemies. In Joel 1:6 the locusts' *teeth* were also *like lions' teeth*.

9:9 And they had breastplates⁵⁰⁹ like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the noise of many chariots and horses running into battle.

Those “*locusts*” could not be resisted, not just because there were so many of them but also because of their *breastplates of iron*. All of this is made worse by their *noise*, perhaps the most frightening sound in all the ancient world, that of *chariots and horses running into battle*.

9:10 And they have tails like scorpions, and stingers. And in their tails they have the power to harm people for five months.

Here we learn some more about the “*locusts*,” as John repeats the explanation about the strength of their sting and tell us that their *stinger* is in the *tail*, just *like scorpions*.

⁵⁰⁷ Mounce, p. 196.

⁵⁰⁸ Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 133.

⁵⁰⁹ This term, ($\theta\omegaραξ/thōrāx$), which occurs twice in this verse, can also refer to their chests.

9:11 They have a king over them, the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he has the name Apolluon. These “locusts” are not like normal locusts. They have a *king* whose name is *Abaddon*⁵¹⁰ and *Apolluon*⁵¹¹

9:12 The first woe has passed. Look! Two woes are still coming after these things!

This verse marks our progress through the three *woes* announced by the eagle in 8:13. The next *woe*, the one connected to the sixth trumpet, is the second *woe*. The third *woe* is not the same as the seventh trumpet because that trumpet is not followed by punishment, but by the seven bowls. So, the seven bowls are the third *woe*.

ii. Sixth Trumpet (9:13-21)

In the disasters brought by the fifth trumpet no one died because the “locusts” were only given power to torture. In the next disaster, one-third of mankind will die!

9:13 And the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar that is before God,

In 6:9 John “saw under the altar the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb.” In 6:10 they cry out: “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?”

In 8:3-5 the prayers of the righteous before the *altar* begin to be answered. Apparently in this passage, those prayers continue to be answered. Again here the seven churches in Asia are reminded of the power of prayer, and again the source of the *voice* is not clearly explained.

9:14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels binding the great River Euphrates.”

The identity of these *four angels* is not revealed to us. In 7:1-3 there are *four angels* who are forbidden to act before the 144,000 servants of God are sealed. These may be different *angels*, *binding the great River Euphrates*.

In any case, the location of these *four angels* is a frightening place. In the Old Testament era, this was the area of the Assyrian Empire (Isaiah 7:20;

⁵¹⁰ Αβαδδων/*Abaddōn* is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *'abaddon*. That Hebrew word can be translated “destruction.” Once in the OT it is parallel to “grave,” and twice it is parallel to *she'ol*. The word *she'ol* is similar to the “world of the dead” (*άδης/badēs*) in Rev. 1:18; 6:8; and 20:13, 14.

⁵¹¹ This word, Ἀπολλυων/*Apolluōn*, is only found here in the NT. It means “destroyer.”

8:7; and Jeremiah 46:10),⁵¹² and in the New Testament era the *Euphrates River* was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Beyond it were the Parthians. They were a terrifying enemy. The worst defeat Rome had experienced was at their hands in 53 BC at Carrhae, in northern Mesopotamia, in which General Crassus was defeated by the Parthians.

During that battle, the legions of Rome formed squares with twelve men on a side, standing so close their shields overlapped. They were protected by nearby cavalry. But the Parthians were all mounted on horses, with tremendously powerful composite bows and long arrows. The Parthians covered their impressive armor, but when they drew near to the Roman legions they threw off the covers and showed steel helmets and breastplates. Even their horses were armored. Their composite recurve bows, a technological development that Rome did not have, were so powerful that their strong arrows went further than the Roman arrows, and pierced Roman defensive shields.⁵¹³ Their arrows literally nailed some of the Romans soldiers' hands to their shields. Other Roman soldiers' feet were nailed to the ground. Sometimes, two Roman soldiers were pierced by a single Parthian arrow. Furthermore, at the height of the battle, at noon, with their drums sounding, the Parthians unfurled their astounding banners. The colors of those banners were intense, shining and shimmering in the sun, and the weakened Romans fled in terror. In the years to come Rome would fight and win great battles for that shimmering fabric, but on that day none of them had ever seen silk before!

Of those 40,000 Roman soldiers, 20,000 died, and another 10,000 were taken prisoner. This was a horrific loss to Roman pride. General Surena of the Parthians had won such a great victory over the huge Roman army that the Parthian emperor had General Surena murdered for fear that the popular victorious general would usurp his throne.

So it is easy to understand that any reference to the *Euphrates*, to long-haired mounted warriors with iron breastplates and frightening sounds, would certainly frighten people in the Roman Empire that had heard of Crassus' defeat not too many years past.⁵¹⁴ All of that does not mean that these prophecies are mere historical allusions to Crassus. They are about

⁵¹² Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 136.

⁵¹³ Those composite bows were invented on the steppes of Central Asia about 1500 BC. A composite bow is made of several materials like wood, horn, and animal tendon that are glued together, making a stronger, more flexible, and therefore more dangerous, bow.

⁵¹⁴ Beasley-Murray, p. 164.

a future judgment upon those that inhabit the earth, and they are terribly frightening to any reader, but especially to the Romans!

9:15 And the four angels that were prepared for that hour and for that day and month and year were released, so that they would kill a third of mankind.

God had already *prepared* this punishment. (Again we see “the Divine Passive” discussed in a footnote under Revelation 6:2.) The sovereignty of God is emphasized again.

As in 8:7-12 the term *a third* appears again. Note the comment about *a third* under the discussion of 8:7. This sixth trumpet brings the worst of all the judgments involving the expression *a third*.

9:16 And the number of soldiers⁵¹⁵ mounted on horses was ten thousands of ten thousands; I heard their number.

The *ten thousands of ten thousands*⁵¹⁶ surprises the reader. Where do they come from? That question is simply not answered in Revelation.

These seem to be different from the locusts/scorpions of Revelation 9:3-11. These are from the sixth trumpet, those are from the fifth trumpet. These have colorful breastplates, those have iron breastplates.

515 The word for *soldiers* here, στρατευμα/strateuma, can also be translated “army.” It can refer to a single soldier or an entire army. This word is also used in 19:14 and 19:19, where the translation “army” is more appropriate.

516 There are two problems with the *number of soldiers* given here. First, there are different readings in the ancient manuscripts. One very old manuscript, as well as one other manuscript, uses the word δισμυριαδες/dismuriades, which means “two μυριαδες/muriades,” but the other manuscripts, including two that are very old, do not include the prefix δισ/dis. The second problem concerns the actual translation of the term μυριας/murias. It can mean “ten thousand,” but it can also mean “a very large number, not precisely defined” (BDAG). The fact that this term, which is used twice, is in the plural makes translation very difficult. If indeed the exact number ten thousand is intended, then the translation *ten thousands of ten thousands* is appropriate. Note that even that translation is not a specific number, because the text does not tell us how many *ten thousands* are intended! But if the meaning of the term is taken as “a very large number, not precisely defined,” then the actual number is incalculable. Clearly, a very very large number is intended. In 5:11 the word μυριας/murias is also used.

9:17 And this is how I saw the horses in the vision: those seated on them had breastplates the color of fire, hyacinth, and sulfur,⁵¹⁷ and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire and smoke and sulfur.

This is all we know about those who rode those *horses*. In the terrifying cavalry of the Parthians, *the horses* and the riders would both be wearing *breastplates*.⁵¹⁸

Some say that these *horses* are modern tanks, maybe because *out of their mouths came fire and smoke and sulfur*. However, some other elements of the description do not fit well with the tanks of modern warfare, so it is best not to indulge in speculation like that.

These *horses* and their riders, like the locusts/scorpions in 9:3-11, do seem to be supernatural beings that are assigned to bring the punishment of God to those who dwell upon the earth.⁵¹⁹

There are some prophecies in the major prophets (see Isaiah 5:26-30; Jeremiah 6:22-26; and Ezekiel 38:14-17) in which soldiers from unbelieving nations will attack Israel, but this passage seems to prophesy that supernatural beings will attack the enemies of God.

9:18 From these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, from the fire and the smoke and the sulfur that was coming out of their mouths.

The first woe brought torture, and the second brought death.⁵²⁰ As in 9:15, the term *a third* appears. Perhaps only *a third* are *killed* so that those who dwell upon the earth repent – it is not yet the time that all will die. *A third of mankind is killed* as a reminder to those who still live,⁵²¹ but according to 9:20 they are not willing to repent.

⁵¹⁷ Literally, this could be translated “breastplates of fire color, of hyacinth color, and sulfurous,” meaning those are the colors of their *breastplates* and not the materials of which they are made. So the colors of the *breastplates* are the colors of what comes out of the *mouths* of the *horses*.

⁵¹⁸ Mounce, p. 202. The term θωραξ/*thōrāx* also appears in 9:9. See the footnote there.

⁵¹⁹ In 1 Sam. 16:14-15; 18:10; and 19:9 God sends demons to King Saul. So also in this passage, God sends demons in the form of *horses* and locusts/scorpions.

⁵²⁰ Mounce, p. 203.

⁵²¹ Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 134.

9:19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails were like snakes, having heads, and with them they harmed people.⁵²²

The demons that are described in this passage are horrifying. Not only are *their mouths* dangerous, but *their tails*, which are *like snakes*, also have power to harm *people*.

9:20-21 And the rest of humanity, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent⁵²³ of the deeds of their hands; they would not stop worshiping⁵²⁴ demons and idols made of gold, and silver, and bronze, and stone, and wood, which are not able to see or hear or walk. And they did not repent of their murders, or their sorcery, or their sexual immorality, or their thievery.

Here their deep sin and their lack of repentance is emphasized. This reminds us of Pharaoh's hardness of heart in Egypt. This lack of repentance becomes a key theme in the judgments upon those that dwell upon the earth.

In this passage we learn something about effective evangelism today. Experiencing the miraculous may help some people to believe the Gospel (note Revelation 11:11-13), but some that even experience amazing miracles do not *repent*, as is emphasized in this passage.

We read in the Old Testament (for example, in Deuteronomy 4:28 and Psalm 115:5-7) that *idols* cannot *see or hear or walk*. God's Word also emphasizes (Deuteronomy 32:17 and 1 Corinthians 10:20) that what is offered to *idols* is given to *demons*. So in fact those who are not killed by those demonic horses and their riders will *not stop worshiping demons!*⁵²⁵

Those in the congregations of Pergamum and Thyatira that ate meat sacrificed to *idols* would be reminded of the evil involved in any participation with *idols*. Hopefully this reminder helped them to repent of their involvement with *idols*.

The sixth trumpet has already sounded, but there are two insertions before we hear the seventh trumpet.

522 The word *people* is not in the original, but was added because the English verb *harm* requires an object in this sentence.

523 The word *repent* ($\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\nu\omega/metanoeō$) is used eight times in chapters two and three, where it calls believers to *repent*. Other than that, in the Book of Revelation this term is only used in 9:20, 21; 16:9, and 11, where it calls unbelievers to *repent*.

524 A literal translation of the original would read "...repent of the deeds of their hands, that they would not worship demons...."

525 Mounce, p. 204.

Third Insertion: Scroll (10:1-11)

This passage emphasizes the Apostle John's role as a prophet who has to proclaim what must be proclaimed and be silent about what must not be proclaimed. This role brings joy, but it also brings grief.

10:1 And I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, encompassed by a cloud, and a rainbow was on his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs were like pillars of fire.

Although the elements of *cloud*, *rainbow*, *sun*, and *pillars of fire* remind us of the Son of God,⁵²⁶ the expression *a mighty angel* would not be used of the Son of God, though there are commentators that take that view. Also, the Lord Jesus returns to the earth in chapter 19. It seems unlikely that He would come temporarily in chapter ten, but come again in chapter 19. It is better to understand this as an *angel*, not the Lord Jesus.

This is an unusual *angel*. This seems to be the most detailed description of any *angel* in the book. Even though he is so well-described, the things this *angel* does are hard to interpret.

10:2 And he had in his hand a scroll⁵²⁷ that was open, and he put his right foot on the sea and his left on the land.

The meaning of the *scroll* and the placement of his feet *on land* and *sea* is not explained to us. Perhaps the placement of the angel's feet *on land* and *sea* indicates that his message is for all of mankind, for those *on land* and those *on the sea*.⁵²⁸

This *scroll* is *open*,⁵²⁹ unlike the *scroll* in 10:4 that John is told to seal up. It is also different from the *scroll* in chapter five which was closed and sealed. Apparently this *open scroll* symbolizes John's role as a prophet of God.

526 In Acts 1:9 *clouds* covered the Lord Jesus from their view when He ascended to heaven. In Rev. 4:3 a *rainbow* surrounded God's throne. In Rev. 1:16 the face of Christ shone intensely like the *sun*. In Num. 14:14 the presence of God was made known by a *pillar of fire*.

527 This *scroll* is mentioned four times in this passage, sometimes as a *scroll* (Βιβλιον/biblion), and sometimes as a "little scroll" (Βιβλιδαριον/biblidarion). There are several textual variations among the Greek manuscripts for these terms.

528 Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 137.

529 The word *open* is a perfect participle, giving the impression that the *scroll* has been opened and will remain *open*.

10:3 And he shouted in a loud voice like a lion roaring, and when he shouted, the seven thunders spoke with their own voices.⁵³⁰

His *loud* shout seems to be an invitation to *the seven thunders*, who then speak. The *seven* seals were opened, and judgments followed. Likewise the *seven* trumpets were sounded, and judgments followed. The *loud* shout seems likewise to precede judgments. Indeed, *the seven thunders spoke*. Having read about the *seven* seals and the *seven* trumpets, we expect that the *thunders* would also bring judgments upon the earth.

10:4 And when the seven thunders spoke I was about to write, and I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up the things that the seven thunders spoke and do not write them.”

Once *the seven thunders spoke*, John was ready *to write*, but instead he is told *not to write* what he heard. Although it might seem strange to *seal up* something that was not even written down, the expression *seal up* here clearly has the figurative meaning of “keep secret.”

Commentators give various opinions regarding the idea that the *thunders* are not included in what John wrote for us. Leon Morris⁵³¹ suggests that this, like 2 Corinthians 12:4, is a personal message for John alone. Ladd⁵³² says that message is kept secret, but will be revealed at the right time in the future. Bauckham⁵³³ says there should only be three in the chain (seals, trumpets, and bowls), so the *thunders* are excluded. Mounce⁵³⁴ agrees, and adds that there is no need for another series of judgments like the trumpets, because men have shown that they will not repent under judgments like that. This author would agree, and add that the Lord God here demonstrates that He could have added further judgments. One remembers Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:22, “And if those days were not shortened, no flesh would be saved, but because of the elect those days will be shortened.”

⁵³⁰ The word here translated *voices* (*φωνή/pbōnē*) can also mean “sound,” and the word translated *spoke* (*λαλεῖ/laleō*) here and twice in verse 4 can also refer to sounds that inanimate things make, so this might also be translated “the seven thunders sounded with their own sounds.”

⁵³¹ *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 139.

⁵³² P. 143.

⁵³³ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 7.

⁵³⁴ P. 209.

10:5 And the angel which I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven,

In the Old Testament the raising of one's *right hand to heaven* was a customary action when making an oath, as in Genesis 14:22⁵³⁵ and Deuteronomy 32:40. The next verse makes it clear that that is what happens here. Further, this passage is related to Daniel 12:6-7, which tells of an *angel* who took an oath that the plans of God would be accomplished in an orderly predetermined time.

10:6 and swore by the One who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, and the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, “There will be no more delay!

Speaking for God, who orders all of time, the *angel* swears that the end of the ages will not be postponed any more. This is very different from “yet awhile” in 6:11.

10:7 But in the days of the sound⁵³⁶ of the seventh angel, when he shall blow his trumpet, the mystery of God is completed, as He has proclaimed to His slaves the prophets.”

At the time of the events in this verse, *the days* of the blowing of the *seventh trumpet*, that *trumpet* must be blown and the seven bowls must be poured out because the seven bowls are “contained within” the *seventh trumpet*.⁵³⁷ The completion of those days is described in 11:15, where we are told there is joy in heaven as the *seventh trumpet* is blown.

In the New Testament the term *mystery*⁵³⁸ refers to truth which is not known except by revelation from *God*. This does not mean there is a new *mystery* in this passage, because the *mystery* meant here *He has proclaimed to His slaves the prophets*. In all of time, *God* has had one purpose, to see that “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Perhaps the expression *mystery of God* in this passage refers to God's purpose that the Kingdom of *God* will fill the earth.⁵³⁹

535 Translated woodenly from the original language, Abram said, “I have raised my hand to the LORD God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth....” The words “and have taken an oath” are added by the NIV translators as clarification.

536 As noted above, the word φωνή/*phōnē* often means “voice.” Here it seems to refer to the *sound* of the *trumpet*.

537 Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 145. This “telescoping” understanding of the structure of this part of Revelation was explained at the beginning of this section.

538 μυστηριον/*mustērion*

539 Mounce, p. 212.

10:8 And the voice which I heard from heaven was again speaking to me and saying, “Go, take the little scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.”

After the seven thunders are sealed up, our attention is drawn again to *the little scroll that is open in the hand of the angel*, which John must *take*.

10:9-10 And I went to the angel, asking him to give me the little scroll.

And he said to me, “Take and eat it up, and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.”⁵⁴⁰

And I took the scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it up, and in my mouth it was as honey, sweet, and when I ate it, my stomach was made bitter.

This is one of the few times where John becomes involved in the narration. It is hard to be certain, but it appears *the little scroll* represents the Word of God which John must pass on, and this experience is a confirmation of John’s own call as a prophet of God. This passage is very similar to Ezekiel 2:8-3:3, where the prophet Ezekiel is told to *eat a scroll* that is *sweet in his mouth*. The expression *sweet as honey in your mouth* is also similar to what is written in Psalm 19:10 and 119:103.

The bitterness in John’s *stomach* is more difficult to understand, and various commentators make various suggestions. Morris⁵⁴¹ and Ladd⁵⁴² say the *bitter stomach* means that God’s Word will concern His judgment on those who refuse to believe in the Lord Jesus, and telling about that judgment will be a *bitter* task for John. According to Beasley-Murray⁵⁴³ the *sweet taste* represents the joy the Word of God conveys, and the *bitter* taste represents the pain that the Word of God conveys. According to Mounce,⁵⁴⁴ the *sweet* and *bitter* tastes represent the final triumph of the church along with the difficulties the church of Christ will face in the final days.

10:11 And they said to me: “You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

Because this statement follows directly after John’s experience with the angel and that little scroll, it seems like it must be related to it. Somehow eating the scroll relates to John’s prophetic ministry *about many peoples*

⁵⁴⁰ This is another example of the figure of speech *hysteron-proteron*. Note the footnote under the discussion of 3:17 which discusses this figure of speech.

⁵⁴¹ *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 142.

⁵⁴² *Commentary*, p. 147.

⁵⁴³ P. 175.

⁵⁴⁴ P. 216.

*and nations and languages and kings.*⁵⁴⁵ This is a command to *prophesy*, with a warning that this ministry will be both bitter and sweet for him.

Fourth Insertion: Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

We have already noticed in the insertions in chapter seven that there were elements of witness and martyrdom. Then, the insertion in chapter ten told about a prophet's proclamation with its bitterness. In this next insertion also, there are elements of witness and martyrdom. This passage describes the two witnesses' empowerment, as well as their ministry, their martyrdom, and their resurrection.

11:1 And a reed⁵⁴⁶ like a staff was given to me, and I was told, "Arise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those worshiping there."

Again John is invited to actually participate in the revelation. He is given a *reed* for a measuring rod. These reeds grew along the Jordan River, and could be as long as 6 meters or 20 feet. Because they were straight and light, they were often cut to the appropriate length and used as measuring rods. John is told to *measure the temple and the altar and those worshiping there*. It is unusual to *measure* people with a measuring rod.

One important issue here is whether indeed there will be a *temple*⁵⁴⁷ in Jerusalem when these things happen. Unless this passage has an extended metaphorical meaning, verses like this, as well as Daniel 9:26; 11:31; 12:11; and 2 Thessalonians 2:4 would suggest that the Jewish *temple* will be rebuilt in Jerusalem before these things happen.

In Zechariah 2 Jerusalem is measured. In Ezekiel 40-41 the wall around the *temple*, and the *temple* itself, are measured in great detail. In Revelation

545 Note the comments on this four-fold expression in the discussion of 5:9.

546 This word, καλαμος/kalamos, means *reed*, but such reeds were often used as measuring rods. See for instance Ezek. 40:3, which uses this word in the LXX.

547 The word used is ναος/naos, which refers to the *temple* itself, but not the courtyards. The other word that might be used is ιερον/bieron, which also refers to the *temple* but includes the courtyards. (In Lk. 2:37, Anna never left the ιερον/bieron, but of course she was never allowed into the ναος/naos. In Lk. 23:45 it is the curtain of the ναος/naos that is torn.) Often in the NIV when the word ιερον/bieron is used, it is translated "temple courts," but that gives the impression that it is only the courts. A better translation would be "temple precincts" or "temple complex." The word ναος/naos is used 45 times in the NT, and ιερον/bieron is used 72 times in the NT, but never in Revelation. So whenever you see the word *temple* in Revelation, it does indeed refer to the *temple* itself, excluding the courtyards.

21:15-17 the walls of the New Jerusalem are measured, but there is no *temple to measure* there.

In Ezekiel 40-42 the prophet saw a man who was bronze-looking that measured the *temple* and its surrounding courts and gates. That seems to lead up to Ezekiel 43:4-5, where the glory of the Lord entered and filled the *temple*.

There are various interpretations of the meaning of the measuring of the *temple*. Ryrie⁵⁴⁸ says it means that *God* knows what will happen to His people, and He sets limits to what will happen to them. Ladd⁵⁴⁹ says it refers to God's protection of His people. That interpretation would be supported by Revelation 11:2, because there John is told not to *measure* the outer courtyard, which somehow is not protected, and is given over to the gentiles. Perhaps measuring something with a *reed* is a way to emphasize that it is real, but that explanation would not help us understand why the outer court, because it has been given to the gentiles, was not to be measured.

11:2 And disregard the outer courtyard of the temple; and do not measure it, because it has been given to the gentiles,⁵⁵⁰ and they will trample on the holy city for forty-two months.

The *outer courtyard*, which he is told *not to measure*, was the Court of the Gentiles, which consisted of about 26 acres or 10 hectares. Literally he is told, "and the courtyard that is outside the temple itself, exclude it...." The reason given is that it has been *given over to the gentiles*, who *will trample on the holy city for forty-two months*.

This time period, *forty-two months*, is the same as the "1,260 days" mentioned in 11:3 and 12:6 (assuming a month is 30 days⁵⁵¹) and the "times, time, and half a time" mentioned in 12:14 (assuming "times" is two years and a "time" is one year). A comparison of 12:6 and 12:14 shows that these are reasonable assumptions, because both clearly refer to the same three and a half year period, but 12:6 uses the expression "1,260 days," and 12:14 uses the expression "a time, times and half a time."

This is the second half of the 70th seven year period of Daniel 9:27. Comparing Revelation 12:14 with Daniel 7:25 and Daniel 12:7 shows that there is a strong connection between Daniel and Revelation in this area.

⁵⁴⁸ P. 72.

⁵⁴⁹ *Commentary*, p. 152.

⁵⁵⁰ This term, εθνος/ethnos, is also used in 16:19. Note the footnote there.

⁵⁵¹ In Gen. 7:11, 8:4, and 7:24 five months were equal to 150 days, so we can fairly assume that for Israel, a month had 30 days.

Those familiar with the angel Gabriel's statements to Daniel in Daniel 9:22-27 will see that these verses in Revelation fit right into what Daniel was told. In Daniel 9:24 the angel Gabriel tells Daniel that "seventy sevens have been decreed upon your people and upon your holy city." The term "sevens" there might possibly refer to seven days (as in one week), but given the context of Israel's punishment by exile into Babylon for seventy years, in connection with Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10, and given that whenever in Daniel 10:2 Daniel uses the term "sevens" to speak of seven days, he makes it clear by saying "sevens of days," Gabriel in Daniel 9:24 means "seventy periods of seven years each," or 490 years. In Daniel 9:24 Gabriel gives six things that will be accomplished during those 490 years. Not all of those things have been accomplished. In 9:25 Gabriel explains that the time from the proclamation to rebuild Jerusalem to the coming of Messiah will be 69 of those seventy sevens (since 69 times 7 is 483, he means 483 years). The "clock will run" for 483 years. The Messiah will come to Israel 483 years after the proclamation to rebuild Jerusalem.

But Gabriel explains something quite strange in Daniel 9:26. After the sixty-two sevens, that is, after 434 years, the Messiah will be "cut off." Gabriel tells us the Messiah will "have nothing." The angel Gabriel does not explain, but we know that He was rejected and crucified. And "the clock stops." Then after an unexplained period of time, "the clock starts running again." The final seven, the last seven years, then begins. In Daniel 9:26 there is someone called "the leader who will come." In 9:27 that man makes a covenant strong "for one seven," for seven years, the last of the seventy sevens mentioned in 9:24. In 9:27, right in the middle of those last seven years, that man sets up "the abomination of desolation." How long will it be from the middle of that seven years until the end? Yes, it will be *forty-two months*, as it is written in Revelation 11:2. It will also be 1,260 days, as it is written in Revelation 11:3. It will also be three and a half years, as the "times, time, and half a time" of Daniel 7:25; 12:7; and also Revelation 12:14 suggest! And then, as Daniel 9:25 tells us, "the Messiah, the ruler, comes." See also Psalm 79:1; Isaiah 63:18; and Luke 21:24.

The man who in Daniel 9:26 is called "the leader who will come" is in Revelation referred to as "the beast." In Matthew 24:15 the Lord clearly refers to Daniel 9:27.

11:3 And I will give My two witnesses even that they will prophesy for 1,260 days, dressed in sackcloth."

In the midst of Jerusalem being trampled by the gentiles, God empowers *two witnesses to prophesy* for Him three and a half years. Jerusalem is being trampled by the gentiles, but the Lord is doing His great work through

these two men. In fact, the end of 11:13 describes great fruit from their ministry, in contrast to the lack of repentance from all the judgments that are poured out on those that inhabit the earth (note 16:9). Here we see the important idea that judgment does not bring people to faith, but Gospel witness does.

The identity of the *two witnesses* is often debated. In Malachi 4:5 there is the promise of the return of Elijah, the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord, so it is very possible that one of these miracle-working *witnesses* is Elijah. The other might be Enoch or Moses. Neither Enoch nor Elijah has died yet! It is also possible that they are ordinary people called and given a special assignment in that era. Their ministry follows the pattern of Moses and Elijah, especially in 11:6, when they do things that Moses and Elijah did. However, since the Lord did not clarify their identity, discussions concerning the identity of the *two witnesses* are speculative. Their clothing emphasizes their roles as prophets (Zechariah 13:4) calling people to repent (Jeremiah 4:8 and Matthew 11:21).

Bauckham⁵⁵² suggests that the *two witnesses* are spoken of as a parable to encourage the people of God to do the ministry of prophecy and witness, calling the nations to repentance. In the Book of Revelation, the witness of faithful believers is powerfully effective. Without any witness, judgments have brought about little repentance throughout the book. Bauckham may be saying that there never will be *two physical human witnesses*, but that they have a purely symbolic meaning. But it would be better for us to say that there will be *two physical human witnesses*, and that they will also have that symbolic meaning. Those *two physical human witnesses* will come, they will serve as described here, and they will also be symbols of effective evangelistic witness; these prophecies about them encourage the people of God to witness, to share the Gospel. Witness and martyrdom are certainly major themes in this book. See 7:9-17 and 10:11 as well.

11:4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that are standing before the Lord of the earth.

They are called *olive trees* and *lampstands*, terms also used in Zechariah 4. In the same way as Joshua and Zerubbabel in Zechariah were reminded of God's resources as they completed their tasks, so we are reminded that the two witnesses will have God's resources as well.⁵⁵³ Just as *olive oil* makes the lamp produce light, so also the two witnesses of God can serve "not by strength, and not by might, but by My Spirit" (Zechariah

⁵⁵² *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 273-283.

⁵⁵³ EBC-R.

4:6). This verse seems to emphasize that the *two witnesses* serve in the power of the Spirit.

11:5 And if anyone wants to harm them, fire comes out of their mouths and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, they must be killed in this way.

No one can stop God's servants until He decides that their ministry is completed. Their ability to call *fire* down upon any who would *harm them* is like Elijah's power in 2 Kings 1:10-14, though the *fire* did not come out of Elijah's mouth.

11:6 These men have the power to close the sky so that rain does not fall during the days of their prophecies. 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 might want.

Their *power* to cause a drought reminds us of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1. Their *power to turn the waters into blood* reminds us of Moses in Exodus 7. Whatever these men of God do to confirm their witness to the nations may be even more terrible than what was done by Moses or Elijah in the Old Testament, but Moses and Elijah become good models for the ministry of the witnesses of God in the final days.

Bauckham⁵⁵⁴ observes that the plagues or judgments by themselves will not bring repentance, as emphasized in 9:20-21. However, in the ministry of the two witnesses there are two distinct elements that are not in the chain of judgments of the seals and the trumpets: the death of the witnesses, and the news that they tell. Plagues from God, if not accompanied by the witness of people ready to die, will not bring unbelievers to repentance.

11:7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them and be victorious over them and kill them.

Without a lot of explanation, John introduces *the beast that comes up out of the abyss*. It seems that this person is the same as *the beast* which is "coming up out of the sea" in 13:1, known in other parts of the New Testament as the Anti-Christ.

The two witnesses will not be killed until they have *finished* their ministry. In fact, as the Lord explained in John 11:7-10, they could not be killed until they *finished* their ministry. This is comforting! We too will not be killed a moment before our ministry from God is completed. This was especially important for the congregation in Smyrna, and is today especially important for all persecuted churches. But witnesses like this,

⁵⁵⁴ *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 277.

who according to 11:13 will be very fruitful, must be willing to die, just as the church in Smyrna was encouraged to “be faithful until death....”

11:8 And their corpses will be⁵⁵⁵ in the street of the great city that is spiritually called “Sodom” and “Egypt,” where their Lord was also crucified.

To not bury a corpse is a terrible offense, both in the Greek culture (as the stories of the death of Patroclus and of Hector in *The Iliad* make very clear) and in the Hebrew culture (as is clear in Deuteronomy 28:26; 1 Samuel 17:44-46, 1 Kings 21:23-24; Jeremiah 7:33; 14:16; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Yehezkiel 29:5; and 39:17-20.)

The *city* where their bodies lie exposed and unburied is *spiritually called “Sodom” and “Egypt”* because it is the unrepentant Jerusalem, *where their Lord was also crucified*. If they are not two individual human beings, and if the text is only parabolic, then, with some difficulty, this verse must also be interpreted figuratively. Perhaps the idea would be that any city that martyrs God’s witnesses is figuratively *called “Sodom” and “Egypt.”*

Note that this city is *spiritually called “Sodom” and “Egypt.”* The use of allegory here is clearly indicated by the expression *spiritually called*. The reader should not generate his or her own allegories, but we clearly understand the use of allegory here.

11:9 And for three and a half days those from the peoples, and tribes, and languages, and nations⁵⁵⁶ look at their corpses, and they will not permit their corpses to be placed in a tomb.

If the two witnesses are two actual individuals, then this verse could be an indirect prophecy of television or the internet. However if the activity of the two witnesses is intended solely as a parable, then the many witnessing martyrs will be seen laying in streets all over the world, and people all over the world would see them in their own streets without any need for television or the internet.

Perhaps the *three and a half days* that their bodies are exposed to public and worldwide view is parallel to the *three and a half years* of their ministry, but this is not clear from the text.

⁵⁵⁵ The words *will be* are added to make a better English translation.

⁵⁵⁶ Note the comments on this four-fold expression in the discussion of 5:9.

11:10 And those who dwell upon the earth⁵⁵⁷ rejoice over them and they will be delighted, and they will give gifts to one another, because these two prophets had tormented those who dwell upon the earth.

Bauckham⁵⁵⁸ notes that this text is reminiscent of Esther 9:19 and 22, even though in that text it is the Jews rejoicing over a victory against evil, but in Revelation 11:10 it is Jew and gentile rejoicing over an apparent victory over God's two witnesses.

11:11 And after three and a half days a breath of life from God entered into them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell upon those who were watching them.

If Bauckham's idea is correct, and this passage is solely a parable, it is hard to understand what this verse might mean. Because of that, this verse might be the best support for the idea that there really will be two witnesses, and the passage is not solely a parable, as Bauckham suggests. However, it is also possible that there will be two witnesses, and besides that there is a parable in this future event for us to understand: the witness that is ready to die for his or her faith is a very powerful instrument in God's hands!

This event is similar to that written in Ezekiel 37. Surely this verse would impress those in Smyrna to whom the One "Who was dead and Who lives" said "be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life."

11:12 And I⁵⁵⁹ heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them: "Come up here!"⁵⁶⁰ And they went up into heaven in a cloud and their enemies watched them.

Note that just as the Lord Jesus ascended into a *cloud* while others looked on, so the two witnesses went up into *heaven in a cloud* while their *enemies watched them*. It might also be significant that "Elijah went up in a windstorm to the heavens" while Elisha *watched* (2 Kings 2:11).

⁵⁵⁷ See the comments on the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* in the discussion of 3:10.

⁵⁵⁸ *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 281-283.

⁵⁵⁹ Three old manuscripts read "they heard," but the majority of manuscripts, including the oldest manuscript (from early in the third century), read *I heard*.

⁵⁶⁰ The command *Come up here!* is almost the same as the command given to John in 4:1, except that in 4:1 it is singular, and here in 11:21 it is plural.

11:13 And in that day⁵⁶¹ there was a major earthquake and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people⁵⁶² were killed in the earthquake, and the rest became afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Note that just as the resurrection of Jesus was accompanied by an *earthquake*, so the resurrection of His witnesses is accompanied by an *earthquake*.

The *earthquake* causes a *tenth*⁵⁶³ of the city of Jerusalem to fall and *seven thousand* to die. Other disasters were more destructive, as in chapters eight and nine where one third of everything was destroyed.

To give *glory to the God of heaven* is to truly repent and believe. See Revelation 4:9; 14:7; 16:9; and 19:7. It often means that in the Old Testament. See Joshua 7:19 and Jeremiah 13:16. See also Psalm 96:7-8; Isaiah 24:15-16; and 42:12. Never in the Book of Revelation is *glory* given to *God* in any superficial sense. These were people that really repented, really believed, and really worshiped *God* in Christ.

To properly understand this passage we must understand that it is as though 1 Kings 19:18 were rewritten! In that passage only *seven thousand* are righteous, but here all *except seven thousand* are righteous. Having only *seven thousand* die, and the rest repent, is really wonderful when it is compared with the corresponding events in 1 Kings 19:14-18. In that passage, during Elijah's ministry, *seven thousand* believed, and all the rest were idolaters. Besides that, a *tenth* is also used in the Old Testament (Amos 5:3 and Isaiah 6:13) about the remnant of the people of Israel who did not experience judgment. But now *seven thousand* die, and wonderfully all the rest repent! This is the climax of the witness theme in the book, and highlights the value of being a witness who is willing to die.⁵⁶⁴

In summary, as opposed to the lack of results when judgments fall upon those who dwell upon the earth, when there is a witness that is willing to die and the power of God is present, the Old Testament pattern is turned upside down: rather than a few believing but most perishing, we see many believe and only a minority die. This is a great encouragement to Smyrna

⁵⁶¹ The majority of the Greek manuscripts, and Sinaiticus of the fourth century, say the *earthquake* happened *in that day*, but the other old manuscripts read “*in that hour*.”

⁵⁶² The expression here translated *people*, ονοματα ανθρωπων/ονοματα ανθροπον, could be woodenly translated “names of people.”

⁵⁶³ It underscores the uniqueness of this event that this is the only use of the term *tenth* in the entire book.

⁵⁶⁴ *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 278-279.

and Philadelphia – and us – to witness in the power of God, and see great results. It is also part of the on-going theme of martyrdom in this book.

11:14 The second woe has passed; the third – look! – it is coming. This announcement is a continuation of 9:12. This verse marks the close of 11:1-13 (the fruit of repentance from the witness and martyrdom of God's people) as an insertion of the Book of Revelation.

With this announcement about the *third woe*, we return to the chain of plagues that are the backbone of this section. Because the seventh trumpet is not followed by a special disaster but instead is followed by the seven bowls, it may be said that the *third woe* is the seventh trumpet, and it *contains* the seven bowls.

iii. Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

The seventh trumpet is blown, bringing voices from heaven and from the twenty-four elders. Both of these responses to that trumpet emphasize an important theme in Revelation, the transfer of authority: the Kingdom of God is coming. After this there is a description of the Temple in heaven.

11:15 And 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 will reign for ever and ever.”

The *seventh trumpet* is blown, followed by *voices* celebrating the transfer of authority⁵⁶⁵ from the *world* to the *Lord*. Their joy seems to come too soon, because there are still seven bowls to be poured out. But because the final *trumpet* contains the seven bowls,⁵⁶⁶ they celebrate the completion of the judgments here. They are right to rejoice because with the sound of the final *trumpet*, the final events will follow immediately.

Normally in the New Testament the term *Lord* refers to Jesus Christ, but in this passage the term is referring to God the Father.

When the *seventh seal* was opened, there were no judgments; there was silence for half an hour. The blowing of the *seventh trumpet* is similar. There are no judgments, only joyful news.**11:16** And the twenty-four

⁵⁶⁵ This transfer is also a theme in the OT, as in Dan. 2:44 and Zech. 14:9.

⁵⁶⁶ Walvoord, p. 184; and Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 160.

elders who are seated on their thrones before the throne of⁵⁶⁷ God fell upon their faces and worshiped God

Since chapter seven we have not seen *the twenty-four elders*, but here again in this section they are praising *God*. Revelation 7:11 and 11:16 are very similar, but in 7:11 it was the angels that *fell upon their faces and worshiped God*, while here in this verse the *elders fell upon their faces and worshiped God*.

11:17 saying,

“We give thanks to You, O Lord, God Almighty,⁵⁶⁸
the One who is and who was,
because You have received⁵⁶⁹ Your great power
and begun to reign.⁵⁷⁰

Perhaps *You have received Your great power* refers to the fact that He *received* the scroll from the One seated upon His throne in 5:7, or, more likely, that expression is parallel to the words *begun to reign*.

As we saw in chapters four, five, and seven, when the elders or angels speak together, they are always praising *God* the Father or His Son.

In 1:4 and 1:8 we read about “*God who is, and who was, and who is coming*,” but in 11:17 and 16:5 the expression “*and is to come*” is not used, because it is as if He has already come.⁵⁷¹

11:18 And the nations were enraged,⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁷ The majority of manuscripts read *before the throne of God*, but the oldest manuscripts read “*before God*.”

⁵⁶⁸ This word, παντοκρατωρ/*pantokratōr*, is frequently used in the translation of expressions like “*the LORD of Hosts*” in the LXX.

⁵⁶⁹ This term ειληφας/*eilephas*, from the word λαμβανω/*lambanō*, is in the Perfect Tense. At the moment this will be said, it shall have already happened and the results will be ongoing (Morris, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 153).

⁵⁷⁰ The verb translated *begun to reign* is the term εβασιλευσας/*ebasileusas*, which uses the Aorist Tense. Mounce, p. 231, rightly mentions that this is an example of what grammarians call the “*Inceptive Aorist*.” An Inceptive Aorist describes action that is just beginning. As an “*Inceptive Aorist*” it is translated *begun to reign*. Note the comments on the verb here, βασιλευω/*basileuō*, in the footnote under 5:10.

⁵⁷¹ Beasley-Murray, p. 189; Mounce, p. 231; and Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 29.

⁵⁷² Although this verb, οργιζω/*orgizō*, is not the same as the verb used in the LXX of Ps. 2:1, φρυασσω/*phruassō*, this verse seems to be an allusion to Ps. 2:1 and 2:5.

but⁵⁷³ Your wrath⁵⁷⁴ has come,
 and the time for the dead to be judged,
 and the time⁵⁷⁵ to give wages to Your slaves, the prophets,
 and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small
 and the great,⁵⁷⁶
 and to destroy those who destroy the earth.”

In a short but packed verse, their song explains the meaning of the coming of Christ, which is for them a coming full of joy.⁵⁷⁷ This brief song might be considered a summary of the whole Book of Revelation. Note the emphasis it puts on reward!

The Lord comes with His terrifying *wrath* and His rich *wages*. Since the expression *the dead* refers to those who died without Christ, the phrases following the expression *Your wrath has come* uses three Greek infinitives to present a structure that is beautiful and balanced: first, judgment for those who oppose God (this is marked by the infinitive, *to be judged*); second, rewards for all of God's various *slaves*, *prophets*, and *saints* that have lived for Christ (this is marked by the infinitive, *to give*); and third, the destruction of those who opposed God (this is marked by the infinitive, *to destroy*).

The Book of Revelation is teaching us that God's judgment is not at all random. He left *the earth* in the care of mankind (Genesis 1:26-28), but man destroyed that which was given to him. Because of this, unrepentant man will be destroyed.⁵⁷⁸

573 Because of the context, the word *καὶ/kai* here is translated *but*.

574 From the noun *οργή/orgē*.

575 The words *the time* are used only once in the original, but are repeated in the translation to make the meaning more clear.

576 *The small and the great* that fear the Lord are also mentioned in 19:5, in a call to praise which also mentions His *slaves*.

577 Beasley-Murray, p. 190.

578 Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 163.

11:19 And the temple of God in heaven was opened, and the ark of the covenant of the Lord⁵⁷⁹ was visible in His temple. And there were lightning, roaring, thunder,⁵⁸⁰ and huge hailstones.

The blowing of the seventh trumpet is not followed by a judgment upon the earth. Instead, it seems that the end is at hand. But in 15:7 we see that there are still seven bowls of judgment to be poured out. All that hoped that 11:15-19 was the end are disappointed to hear that the “telescope” is to be extended out again, just as they were disappointed when it turned out that the seventh seal’s judgment consisted of the seven trumpets. They will learn soon enough that the seventh trumpet’s judgment consists of the seven bowls.

This short vision closes this section. In this verse *the ark of the covenant* is *visible*. In the Old Testament *the ark of the covenant* symbolized the presence of God among the people of Israel,⁵⁸¹ but only the High Priest could see it and then only once a year. According to Jewish tradition (2 Maccabees 2:7), *the ark* will be found among the people of Israel when the Messiah comes.⁵⁸² What is said by symbols here in this verse later will become clear in Revelation 21-22, especially in 21:3.

The *lightning, roaring, thunder and huge hailstones* here point to the presence of the Lord God. At Mount Sinai there was “roaring, lightning and thick clouds” (Exodus 19:16), and the Psalmist says “the earth shook” (Psalm 68:8). In the Book of Revelation, the day of the Lord’s coming is often spoken of in terms that remind the reader of the freeing of God’s people from Egypt. As noted above, the plagues that strike the earth are similar to the plagues of Exodus. According to Isaiah 13:13, at the time of the coming of the Lord God to the earth, the sky and earth will tremble, and there will be very destructive earthquakes.⁵⁸³

In this verse there are *lightning, roaring, thunder and huge hailstones*. Note the discussion under 4:5 in which this verse is described as the climax of a carefully constructed series of passages. The Book of Revelation stresses

⁵⁷⁹ There is a textual problem among the manuscripts of this verse. The earliest manuscript and some other manuscripts read “the ark of the covenant of God,” many manuscripts read *the ark of the covenant of the Lord*, and some early manuscripts read “His covenant.” In any case, the intended meaning is clear.

⁵⁸⁰ The few oldest Greek manuscripts and some others add “an earthquake” here, but the majority of manuscripts do not include that element.

⁵⁸¹ Mounce, p. 232.

⁵⁸² Mounce, p. 233.

⁵⁸³ Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 199-201) mentions these verses, as well as Joel 2:10; Mic. 1:4; Ps. 77:17-19; Ps. 114; and Heb. 12:26-27.

that the chain of plagues are connected: they are one judgment which originates from *God* Himself. At this point in the Book of Revelation, the coming of the Lord is already very near! The seven trumpets have been sounded, and the corresponding judgments have struck those who dwell upon the earth.

Comments Summarizing Chapters I-II

We have read Revelation chapter one, the words John recorded about the vision that he saw of the Lord Jesus while he was on the island of Patmos. We know that if we could make those words the cornerstone of our lives, our attitudes, our words, and our deeds, then our lives would be pleasing to the Lord, and He would give us His blessing. But we ourselves experienced some bewilderment as we wondered how to understand those words, and how to live them. What are we to do with the fact that His eyes were like a flame of fire, and a sharp double-edged sword came out of His mouth? It was too much for us, we did not understand, or were afraid to understand.

As we read chapters two and three, we saw that some of us did not need to apply the fact that a sharp double-edged sword came out of His mouth, but we need to apply the truth that He walks among the seven golden lampstands. This was not to ensure our salvation – He has already done that on the Cross – but to ensure our rewards. Others of us realized that we need to act upon the fact that He was dead, but He was victorious over death, and is now alive. As we continued to read those seven amazing messages, we perhaps saw that one of them gave us more insight into our own deepest heart than we had ever dared to ask. And we saw that He did not ask a great many things of us, but what He did ask us was very difficult. We dared to wonder what it would be like to be a victor with Him, to overcome the all too real temptations and challenges we face, as He overcame death. But we were still disturbed, even frightened, and we needed more help.

We read on into the visions that began in chapter four, and learned that the Day will come when He will open the seven seals of an inheritance document, so that the victors will inherit the earth. We read of how high and how wide His praise will be on that great Day. We read of such terrible judgments that will fall on those that have never trusted Him as their Savior, once He begins to open the seven seals. Those judgments continued relentlessly as one by one the seven angels blew the seven trumpets, and the Lord God showed His great power and perfect justice by judging those that have hated and opposed Him. We read of “the wrath of the Lamb,” and of the victory of those that died faithfully serving Him. We read about how our prayers are to Him like sweet-smelling incense that rises up to Him, and how He does answer those prayers. And in all this we were strengthened to make our stand as victors, to give up those

B. Time of Torment part 2 (12:1–20:3)

Fifth Insertion: The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1–17)

There is no transition into this section (chapters 12–14, which is a series of seven insertions) perhaps because the events of the first insertion take place long before the other events of the Book of Revelation. This insertion speaks of events far separated in time: Satan's rebellion in heaven, Jesus' birth, and the hostility between Jesus Christ and Satan. Even though there is no structural connection between the beginning of this section and other parts of Revelation, there is a strong structural tie between the closing of this section and the continuation of the judgments of God through the seven bowls,¹ which will be analyzed at the end of this discussion.

Even though the rest of the book is in chronological order, this insertion, and perhaps other portions of chapters 12–14, break that order, providing a broad heavenly perspective, portrayed in symbolic language, of the war between God's people and His enemies, and also the victory of God's people who witness and are faithful to death. We have already seen this in two of the previous insertions, and some terms used in those insertions are also used here as well: 144,000 (7:4 and 14:1); the time period three and a half years (11:2–3; 12:6, 14; and 13:5); and a beast (11:7 and 13:1–18).²

This vision in Revelation 12 has some similarity to Isaiah 26:16–27:1 where the nation of Israel is compared to a woman in labor, and God kills the dragon who lives in the sea in the end times.

This vision also has some similarities to a pagan myth of a woman who gives birth, and a dragon that opposes her.³ A dragon named Python is told that he will be killed by the child of the goddess Leto. The dragon pursues Leto to kill her before she can give birth. The god of the sea, Poseidon, helps Leto by putting her on the island of Ortygia. To further

¹ Bauckham, pp. 15–16.

² Bauckham, p. 17.

³ Beasley-Murray, pp. 192–193. Beasley-Murray also tells of an Egyptian myth about the goddess Hathor (also known as Isis), who is the wife of the god Osiris. They are attacked by the red dragon (who is also a serpent or a crocodile), named Typhon. The dragon Typhon kills the god Osiris, and pursues the goddess Hathor as she is about to give birth to the sun god Horus. The goddess Hathor miraculously bears her child and escapes in a papyrus boat to an island named Chemnis. Her child Horus later overcomes the dragon, and imprisons him. Later the dragon is destroyed by fire, much as the dragon in Revelation is destroyed in a lake of fire.

protect her, Poseidon lowers the island into the sea. Leto then gives birth to the god Apollo, who immediately becomes full grown, and after four days finds and kills Python.

There are scholars who say that John adapted this pagan myth for his own needs. However, it is better to say that the Lord, as He formed this vision, decided to build upon an old Greek myth to teach these lessons (about the role of Israel in His plan). If so, then we have an adaptation of a Greek myth to teach about a Hebrew nation's past and future!

Chapter 12 tells about war: war on earth (12:1-6), war in heaven (12:7-12), and again war on earth (12:13-17).

War on Earth (12:1-6)

12:1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown⁴ of twelve stars.

The word *sign*⁵ is prominent in this section. Its use reminds us that this chapter is full of symbols.

Some say that the *woman* symbolizes Mary, but that interpretation is difficult to defend, because verse 6 indicates that that *woman* will still alive on earth during the Tribulation. It is better to say the *woman* represents Israel, with the *twelve stars* representing the *twelve tribes*. In Genesis 37:9, the *sun*, the *moon*, and the eleven *stars* represent Jacob, Rachel, and eleven of the sons of Jacob. This is a beautiful vision: *a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet*. This *woman* is greatly honored in the eyes of the Lord God: the *sun* is her clothing and the *moon* is like a footstool for her *feet*.

12:2 And being pregnant, she was screaming in labor pains, and struggling to give birth.

The woman is in *labor*. Israel is also pictured experiencing *labor pains* in Isaiah 66:7-11 and Micah 4:10. In Hymn E from Qumran⁶ there is a woman in *labor* that is about to deliver the Wonderful Counselor that will save many people.⁷

⁴ This is the word στεφανος/*stephanos*. See the footnote under 2:10 concerning this word.

⁵ This word (*σημειον*/*sēmeion*) is used seven times in the Book of Revelation (12:1, 3; 13:13, 14; 15:1; 16:14; and 19:20).

⁶ Qumran is a place near the Dead Sea where many ancient Jewish manuscripts were found, stored in clay jars that were hidden away in caves.

⁷ Beasley-Murray, p. 194.

12:3 And another sign appeared in heaven: look!⁸ A huge fiery dragon⁹ having seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads seven crowns.¹⁰

As is made very clear in 12:9, this is the devil. See Revelation 17:9-13; Daniel 7:7; and 7:24 concerning the *seven heads and ten horns*.

On its heads are seven crowns, even though it is not proper for the *dragon* to wear a crown at all. This *dragon* is a presumptuous liar.

12:4 And his tail sweeps¹¹ away a third of the stars of heaven and he threw them to the earth.¹² And the dragon stood before the woman as she was about to give birth, so that whenever she gave birth he could devour her child.

In Job 38:7 and Revelation 9:1 angels are called *stars*. Another closely related text is Daniel 8:10 which speaks of the little horn that grew out of one of the goat's four horns. It says "and it grew until the host of the heavens, and it threw to the earth some of the host and some of the stars and trampled them." Apparently this text indicates that the devil brought one *third* of the angels with him in his fall from *heaven*. If so, then this verse tells about something that happened before Adam and Even fell in the Garden of Eden, *and* it tells about something that happened in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus Christ!

From the beginning there was enmity between God's people and Satan, but this enmity reached a climax when the *Child* was about to be *born*. This is told in detail in the Gospel of Matthew, especially in the account of how King Herod sent the soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all male children under two years of age. In this vision the language is dramatic and terrible.

8 Literally, "And Look!"

9 The Greek term δρακων/drakōn, here translated *dragon*, is not used in the NT except here in Revelation, where it is used 13 times.

10 The word διαδημα/diadēma is only used three times in Revelation (12:3; 13:1; and 19:12). This sort of crown speaks of royal sovereignty, which the *dragon* falsely claims. Ptolemy illustrated the meaning of this word for us in that he set two *crowns* on his head to indicate that he had sovereignty over Egypt and "Asia," meaning the area that would become the Roman province of Asia (see 1 Macc. 11:13). There is another word, στεφανος/stephanos, which is also translated "crown." See the footnote under 2:10 concerning the word στεφανος/stephanos.

11 This verb is in the Present Tense.

12 According to Beasley-Murray, p. 193, there is an Iranian myth that also tells of a beast throwing *a third of the stars to the earth*.

12:5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who will shepherd all the nations with an iron staff.¹³ And her child was snatched away to God and to His throne,

The *male child* is clearly Jesus Christ. He will become King of kings. He *will shepherd all the nations with an iron rod*, and according to Revelation 2:26-27 the victors will be given the right to reign with Him. In this one brief verse the *birth* of Christ is mentioned, and His ascension, and His future reign, but this present age is totally omitted! The focus of this passage is the war between Christ and Satan.

The expression *shepherd all the nations with an iron staff* is taken from Psalm 2:9, and is also mentioned in Revelation 2:27 and 19:15.

12:6 and the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there they¹⁴ could care for her for 1,260 days.

The *woman*, Israel, will be cared for in the desert, apparently during the second half of the Tribulation. See also Revelation 7:1-8; 11:2, 5-7; and 12:13-17, but especially 11:2 and the comments and footnote concerning that verse.

War in Heaven (12:7-12)

In this section John tells about the war from the heavenly perspective. One difficulty in interpretation that needs to be addressed is whether 12:7-12 summarizes all of the history of the world, as does 12:1-6, or whether it tells of one special battle at the end of the age. The joy and praise of 12:10 seem to be parallel to the joy and praise of 19:1-9. If so, then the battle of 12:7-9 is a special heavenly battle at the end of the age.

12:7 And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels battled¹⁵ against the dragon, and the dragon battled, with¹⁶ his angels.¹⁷

The angel named *Michael* appears in Daniel 12:1 as a protector of the people of Israel. It is interesting that the struggle to throw the devil and *his angels* out of *heaven* seems to be more fierce than when in 20:1-2 the devil is captured by an unnamed angel and bound for a thousand years,

¹³ See the footnote on this expression under Rev. 2:27.

¹⁴ The text does not clarify who *they* are that will *care for her*.

¹⁵ According to Mounce, p. 241, the form of verb used in this verse means that *Michael* took the initiative to fight Satan.

¹⁶ The word translated *with* here is *καὶ/kai*, which is normally translated “and.”

¹⁷ The noun *πολεμός/polemos* and the verb *πολεμεῖ/polemeō* can refer to a single battle or an entire war.

but we are not told why this is so. It is better to resist the urge to speculate when the Word gives us no clarification.

12:8 And he was not strong enough to prevail;¹⁸ neither could a place be found for him¹⁹ in heaven.

At some point in the war in heaven, Satan and the fallen angels are so beaten back that they can find no *place*, perhaps meaning no *place* to stand and fight.

12:9 And he was thrown – the great dragon, the ancient snake, the one called devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown to the earth, and his angels with him were thrown.²⁰

Isaiah 14:12-14 speaks, at least indirectly, of the fall of an angel from heaven. The Lord said in Luke 10:18, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” But during Old Testament times, the *devil* still entered heaven, not with the status of legitimate resident, but to accuse, as in Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; and Zechariah 3:1-2. Whether he still has that access now cannot be demonstrated with certainty in the New Testament, but John 12:31; Romans 8:31-34; and Ephesians 4:8 suggest that the *devil* can no longer come before God and accuse believers. In any case this verse tells of a point in time when the *devil and his angels* will have no further access into heaven. They will be completely ejected from heaven, and then, later, be completely ejected from *earth* as well.

In this vision, *the great dragon* is called *the ancient snake*, *devil*, and *Satan*. The term *devil*²¹ is from the Greek word “accuser” or “slanderer.” The name *Satan*²² is from a Hebrew word meaning “adversary.”²³

The use of the expression *the ancient snake* reminds the reader that the one *thrown to the earth* is the same one that deceived Eve, and was cursed by the LORD God in the Garden of Eden.

¹⁸ The words *enough to prevail* are supplied in the translation for clarity.

¹⁹ The oldest manuscripts read “for them,” but the majority of manuscripts read *for him*.

²⁰ This literal translation preserves the interesting flow of thought in this climactic verse. Much of this verse is repeated with almost exactly the same wording in 20:2, where *the devil* is locked up for a thousand years.

²¹ διαβόλος/*diabolos*

²² Σατανᾶς/*Satanas*

²³ This term, *sātān*, is used elsewhere in Num. 22:22; Job 1:6-9 (4 times); 1 Kings 11:14, 23, 25; and Zech. 3:1, 2. When it is used concerning the devil (in Job and Zechariah) it always has the article, so it might be translated “the Adversary.” When it is used of human adversaries (in 1 Kings) it never has the article. In Num. 22:22 it is used for “the angel of the Lord,” and it does not have the article.

12:10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying,

“Now the victory and the power and the Kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down,²⁴ the one who accuses them day and night before our God.

When the devil is *thrown from heaven*, the *victory of God* is that much more obvious, and the *Kingdom of God* is that much nearer. They are also praising *God* because the *accuser* can no longer accuse the people of *God*. The source of the *loud voice* is not clear. Maybe it is from the twenty-four elders (as in 5:9-10 and 7:12), or maybe from those who are “coming out of the Great Tribulation,” mentioned in 7:14. Angels do not call men their *brothers*, so it seems the one speaking here is not an angel.²⁵

The word which is here translated *victory*²⁶ is often translated “salvation,” but here, and the other two places it is found in Revelation (7:10 and 19:1), the translation *victory* is more appropriate. Certainly God does not need salvation.

12:11 And they were victorious²⁷ over him by the blood of the Lamb and by²⁸ the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives unto death.²⁹

After hearing about one aspect of Satan’s defeat, in heaven, we now read of another aspect of his defeat, on earth. It is interesting to see these two aspects side by side. Not only were he and his fallen angels thrown down out of heaven in their warfare with Michael and his holy angels, but at least some of the very people he accused were *victorious over him*. The

²⁴ The word *down* has been added to make the meaning clear. Many, but not the best, manuscripts use καταβαλλω/kataballō here, which means “throw down” or “strike down,” rather than the word, βαλλω/ballō, which simply means “throw.”

²⁵ Likewise in 19:10 and 22:9 the angel does not call himself a brother of John., but “a fellow slave of yours and of your brothers.”

²⁶ This is σωτηρια/sōtēria. Paul Ellingworth, in “Salvation to our God,” in *The Bible Translator* (pp. 444-445, Oct. 1983), demonstrates that σωτηρια/sōtēria means victory all three times it appears in Revelation.

²⁷ This word, νικάω/nikāō, is not related to the word translated “victory” in the previous verse. It is the verb used seven times in chapters 2-3 for the victors.

²⁸ The Greek preposition δια/dia is here translated *by*, but as noted in the footnote under 1:2, it is the same preposition that is used in 1:9; 6:9, and 20:4. These passages all highlight the role of the *word* and *testimony* in the lives of Christian martyrs and the exiled John.

²⁹ This phrase, translated literally here, indicates that they were willing to die for their faith.

relationship between 12:7-8, the victory of Michael over Satan and his angels, and 12:11 where bold believers witness even to *death* and overcome Satan, is important. Chapter 12:7-9 is a report of what happens in heaven while 12:10-12 is a voice celebrating victory. Satan is defeated on two fronts, on two places of battle in the war. He is defeated by the angels in heaven, and he is defeated on earth by the believers who boldly witness. Holy angels and bold believers both have their roles in this war!

This explanation of how people defeat the devil is very important in the Book of Revelation. Note the discussion of the word “victory” under 5:5. Here the devil is defeated:

by the blood of the Lamb: the Gospel is primary

by the word of their testimony: this is their declaration, the Gospel in their lives

and they *love* the Gospel and its declaration more than *their lives*.

All three of these elements were illustrated by the ministry and *death* of the two witnesses in 11:3-10.

This strange victory is a very significant theme in Revelation. In *death* they gain victory over the devil. What kind of a victory is that? It is a victory that means nothing to the cynical of this age that can only live for this life. It would sound very hollow in Sardis and Laodicea, but the congregation in Smyrna would understand exactly what this means. They must have been greatly encouraged to learn that not only are they spiritually rich even though they are physically poor, but also they can be spiritually *victorious* while they are physically defeated.

This theme, that Satan will be defeated if believers are faithful, if they do not turn away, and if they do not worship the representative of Satan, will come up again in 15:2-3.

Those who defeat the adversary do not see their victory on earth. What they see with their eyes is only that they are killed because of their faithfulness and their witness. Awareness of the victory spoken of in this verse never comes by sight, but by faith. Perhaps that is why we see expressions like “these are the true words of God” (19:9), “these are the faithful and true words of God” (21:5), and “these words are faithful and true” (22:6). Without a firm conviction that these words are the “true words of God,” who would be willing to be killed in order to obtain that unseen victory?

12:12 Therefore rejoice, you heavens³⁰ and those dwelling in them! Woe to the earth and to the sea because the devil has gone down to you with great anger, knowing that he has little time!"

Heaven should *rejoice*, not only because it is purged of *the devil* forever, but also because of the victory of the martyrs. But *woe to the earth, the devil* is not finished there yet. This does sound like the Tribulation! Because *time* is very limited for him, *the devil* will work intensely and fiercely. Apparently, the *little time* in this verse is the same as the "forty two months" mentioned in 13:5. Chapters 13 and 17 tell how *the devil* gives vent to his fury in this *little time*.

War on Earth (12:13-17)

Here our attention is brought back to the war on earth. Israel, which has come to faith in the Lord Jesus, is opposed by the devil, but helped to escape. At that point the devil turns to attack other believers. He targets gentile believers.

All these signs are written so the reader will understand that God has power over all of history, especially over the devil. This truth comforts His church as it is struck by Satan's violence.

12:13 And when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he pursued³¹ the woman who had given birth to the male child.

It is not made clear here, but this does seem to be believing Israel, mentioned in Revelation 7:3-8. This fits with what Paul wrote in Romans 11:11-36. The day will come when the nation of Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. That generation of Israel will be "grafted back into their own olive tree" (Romans 11:24). And they will then be *pursued by the dragon*, who will at that point be unable to accuse the saints before God because he will have been cast out of heaven. He will try to kill off all believing Jews, but he will not succeed, because God has made eternal promises to the Jews. The fulfillment of those promises is about to be described here

³⁰ This word, οὐρανός/ouranos, appears 54 times in the Book of Revelation, always in the singular, except in this passage. Both the plural and the singular are common in the rest of the NT. On the other hand in the OT, the word *shamayim* is always plural.

³¹ Normally this word, διώκω/diōkō, means "persecute," as in Mt. 5:10, 11, 12, 44; 10:23; 23:34; Acts 7:52; 9:4, 5; 22:4, 7, 8; 26:11, 14, 15; 1 Cor. 4:12; 15:9; 2 Cor. 4:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; 4:29; 5:11; 6:12, and so on. This word can also mean "pursue" (as in Rom. 9:30; 14:19; Phil. 3:12, 14; 1 Pet. 3:11). Here both meanings seem to be included.

in the Book of Revelation, but first Israel must be protected from the onslaught of *the dragon*.

12:14 And the two wings of a great eagle³² were given to the woman so that she might fly into the wilderness, to her place so that she can be cared for there for a time, and times, and half a time, away from the presence³³ of the snake.

The image of a rescuing *eagle* is also used in Exodus 19:4, in which the Lord has Moses tell Israel, “you yourselves saw what I did to Egypt and that I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to Myself.” Again we have a connection between Revelation and Exodus. Just as Israel was protected in *the wilderness* for forty years, so also believing Israel will also be *cared for in the wilderness*.

This *place in the wilderness* is also mentioned in 12:6. In fact, this verse seems to be an expanded repetition of 12:6.

The expression *time, times, and half a time* is quoted from Daniel 7:25 and 12:7. As is clarified in the comments and the footnote under Revelation 11:2, this is the three and a half years, or forty two months, or 1260 days, the second half of the seven year Tribulation.

12:15 And the snake spewed³⁴ water like a river out of his mouth after the woman so that she might be swept away by a flood,

The devil tries to destroy Israel in the wilderness by spouting a *flood of water out of his mouth*. These are strange metaphors for us, but perhaps not as strange for readers used to apocalyptic literature. Maybe the *water* mentioned here is a literal *flood*, which could kill the people of Israel if they were in a valley in the wilderness.

12:16 and the earth came to the aid³⁵ of the woman, and the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

The people of Israel who believe in the Lord Jesus are pursued by Satan, and then saved by a miracle, so that the water coming out of Satan’s *mouth* does not destroy them.

³² In the context of this verse, it is better to translate this word *eagle*, and not “vulture.” See the footnote under 8:13.

³³ Literally “from the face of the snake.” This word, προσωπον/prosōpon, literally means “face,” but in expressions like this it refers to the *presence* of a person.

³⁴ The word here is βαλλω/ballō, which often means “throw,” but in this and the next verse it is translated “spew.”

³⁵ The word translated *come to the aid* is the word βοηθεω/boētheō, which is used eight times in the NT. It means “help.”

In Exodus we read about how God held back the waters of the sea until Israel was safe on the far side, and then let the waters return to their place, so that Pharaoh's army was *swallowed* up by the waters. Here *the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed the river* so that Israel was safe.

12:17 And the dragon became enraged at the woman and went away to make war on the rest of her offspring, those keeping³⁶ the commandments of God and holding to the testimony of Jesus.

The *dragon*, unable to destroy Israel because she is miraculously protected, turns to destroy *the rest of her offspring*. The *dragon* would destroy all believers, but the Jewish believers are out of his reach, so he tries to destroy other obedient believers. It seems like the expression *the rest of her offspring* is a figurative way of describing obedient non-Jewish believers, the “other sheep” that the Lord Jesus mentions in John 10:16. They are further described as *those keeping the commandments of God and holding to the testimony of Jesus*.

The expression *the testimony of Jesus* is used in 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; and 20:4.

According to Walvoord,³⁷ this passage, 12:1-17, prepares the reader for the two beasts of chapter 13.

One interesting note about 12:17 is that it strengthens the idea that during the time period being described there is a difference between believing Israel (here called *the woman*) and non-Jewish believers (here called *the rest of her offspring, those keeping the commandments of God*). Some would say that the church is the “New Israel,” totally and permanently replacing Israel in God’s promises and plans, but that idea is hard to defend here. Note the explanation of this issue under the discussion of 7:5-8.

See the second footnote under 13:1 concerning Revelation 12:18.

Sixth Insertion: First Beast (13:1-10)

Here in chapter 13 the dragon’s two principal agents are introduced (although one of them was already mentioned in 11:7): the beast out of the sea, and the beast out of the earth. In this section Satan, who is called “the dragon,” is only mentioned in verses 2 and 4, but the beasts represent him.

³⁶ Note the footnote concerning the verb *τηρεω/tēreō*, here translated *keeping*, under the discussion of 1:3.

³⁷ P. 196.

13:1 And I³⁸ stood on the sand of the sea,³⁹ and I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns ten crowns,⁴⁰ and on his heads a blasphemous name.

According to Bauckham,⁴¹ the expression “I saw” followed by a place (as in 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1 and 2) points to a structural shift which those who heard the reading of the Book of Revelation would easily observe.

This first *beast* is the Anti-Christ.⁴² He seems to be an extraordinary human being who lives during this time period and serves the devil. Somehow he comes from the *sea*, and will be “thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur,” according to 19:20.

The first *beast’s* description is remarkably similar to the dragon’s description in 12:3; both have *ten horns and seven heads*. But the *beast* has *ten crowns*, while the dragon has *seven crowns*. The number *seven* is often connected to the idea of “perfection” or “completion.”⁴³ Here it may suggest that the Anti-Christ is completely evil, or it may suggest that he is an imitation of perfection.

³⁸ According to three very ancient manuscripts, John writes, “And he stood on the sand of the sea.” The majority of manuscripts say, “And I stood on the sand of the sea.” The reading “he stood” is εσταθη/estathē. The reading “I stood” is εσταθην/estathēn. Thus the textual problem in this particular phrase revolves around one Greek letter! The word “dragon” is not in any Greek manuscript. It is supplied by the translators of the NIV for clarity, since they chose the reading, “And he stood.”

³⁹ If the original reading is “And he stood on the sand of the sea,” then this phrase is the last verse of chapter 12. But if the original is *And I stood on the sand of the sea*, then this phrase should be the beginning of 13:1. If the correct reading is *And I stood*, then it is about John. If the correct reading is “And he stood,” then it is about the dragon. From the perspective of the development of the account John is recording, both readings could be supported, and both make sense. This author feels that because there are many more manuscripts reading *And I stood on the sand of the sea* that is stronger than the three oldest manuscripts which say “And he stood on the sand of the sea.”

⁴⁰ See the footnote under 12:3 for an explanation of the word *crowns*. The word used here is διαδημα/diadēma.

⁴¹ P. 18.

⁴² The term “Anti-Christ” (αντιχριστος/antichristos) is never used in the Book of Revelation. It is only used in 1 Jn. 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 Jn. 7, which speak of false teachers and a certain evil one that is coming in the future. That particular evil one is also called “the man of rebellion” (2 Thess. 2:3), the “little horn” (Dan. 7:8), “king” (Dan. 9:26; 11:36), and “beast” (Rev. 11:7; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 16:2, 10, 13; 17:3-17; 19:19-20; 20:4 and 10).

⁴³ Bauckham, p. 405.

Perhaps his *horns* are like the *horns* in Daniel 7:7-8 and 7:19-25. In those passages *horns* can represent kings, but certainly the fact that this *beast* came *up out of the sea* reminds us of Daniel 7:3, “And four great beasts came up from the sea, this one different from that one.”

His *heads* may represent hills and kings, as in Revelation 17:9-10. This may mean that the coming evil one will control *seven* kings.

His *crowns* may be in imitation of Christ, because in Revelation 19:12 Christ wears many *crowns*.

About the time the Book of Revelation was written, the Emperor Domitian had himself officially named “Lord and God” (*Dominus et Deus*),⁴⁴ so the readers might have connected him with this *beast* and his “blasphemous names,” but if they did, they were not quite correct. Using the wording of 1 John 2:18, the Emperor Domitian was *an* anti-Christ, but not *the* Anti-Christ.

This evil figure is already mentioned in Daniel 7. Apparently the prophecy in Daniel about the “little horn” was initially or partially fulfilled in the person of Antiochus Epiphanes, but the complete fulfillment of this prophecy is foretold in Revelation, beginning with this verse. The deeds of this *beast* are also prophesied in Matthew 24:15 and Luke 21:20.

A few commentators on Revelation say that the *beast* here represents the Roman Empire or a certain emperor.⁴⁵ According to Walvoord,⁴⁶ this verse talks about the Roman Empire that will be restored in the end times, and this *beast* will lead the restored Roman Empire. That may be correct, but we should not be dogmatic in such a mysterious passage. As discussed in the Introduction, it is best to understand this as a yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy.

13:2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, and his feet like a bear’s, and his mouth like a lion’s mouth. And the dragon gave him his power, and his throne, and great authority.

This description of the *beast* is similar to the beasts of Daniel 7:3-6. Daniel saw a *beast* that was like a lion but with eagle’s wings and the mind

⁴⁴ Beasley-Murray, p. 209.

⁴⁵ Gentry, a Preterist interpreter of the Book of Revelation, says that Nero was the *beast* (according to Mark L. Hitchcock in “A Critique Of The Preterist View Of Revelation And The Jewish War”). This author holds to the Futurist approach to the Book of Revelation, as explained in the Introduction, and holds that the Book of Revelation speaks of a *beast* that is yet to come. Nero committed suicide in 68 AD. He was *like* the *beast* in many ways, but he was not the *beast*.

⁴⁶ P. 197.

or heart of a man, another that was like a bear, and another that was *like a leopard*, but with four wings and four heads. The *leopard* in Daniel's vision was also given *authority*.

Even though the devil has been thrown to the earth, he can still give *his power, and his throne, and great authority* to the *beast* from the sea.

13:3 And one of his heads was as if lethally slain, and his lethal wound was healed. And the whole world marveled after the beast,

In 13:14 we read that this *wound* was from a sword. This is the apparent resurrection which parallels Christ's resurrection as discussed in the comments under 5:6.

Perhaps *the beast* will truly die, and then be resurrected from the dead as a miracle of Satan, but the use of the expression *as if* adds an element of doubt about whether *the beast* will really die from that *wound*.

This text speaks either of a faked "miracle" or a demonic miracle. In either case it is an imitation of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God.⁴⁷

13:4 and they worshiped the dragon who⁴⁸ had given authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast?" and "Who is able to make war against him?"

The devil and *the beast* do not just seek political power, they want to be *worshiped*. The devil still wants to be like God, as was written in Isaiah 14:14. Because of their sin, those who live on the earth do not want to worship the Lord Jesus, but they will worship *the dragon*, who is the devil, as well as *the beast*, who is the Anti-Christ. And indeed their power is amazing.

In asking *Who is like the beast?* they give him the praise which should be given to the LORD God, as in Exodus 15:11; Psalm 89:7; Isaiah 40:25; and Micah 7:18.⁴⁹

Governments sometimes demand worship, but any government that requires worship is a partner of the devil. This is not in contradiction to the teachings of Paul in Romans 13, where believers are obliged to

⁴⁷ The words used in this verse are almost (but not precisely) the same as the words used about the Lamb of God in 5:6. This is another example of the repetition of slightly modified phrases which is discussed in the Introduction.

⁴⁸ The oldest manuscripts read "because he had given," but the majority of manuscripts read *who had given*.

⁴⁹ Beasley-Murray, p. 211.

“submit to the higher authorities” because believers must give “the things of Caesar to Caesar” (Matthew 22:21). If a government demands worship for itself or for gods that it chooses, it is asking for something that it should not, something which we must only give to God. It has demanded something beyond its reach. Perhaps few governmental leaders these days are demanding that their subjects worship them, but the same principles would apply when a government requires that its citizens render their highest loyalty to government or another god rather than to the Lord Jesus Christ.

13:5 And a mouth speaking great and blasphemous things was given to him, and authority to make war for forty-two months was given to him.

This verse and the next contain two more examples of “the Divine Passive” which was discussed in a footnote under Revelation 6:2. God shall give him *authority to make war for forty-two months*. God, who is blasphemed, whose Son is opposed, allows the Anti-Christ to work, but only for a predetermined time.

The *forty-two months* is that same three and a half year time period. See also 11:2-3 and 12:6. According to Walvoord,⁵⁰ Anti-Christ is in power during the whole seven year Tribulation, but for the second half of those seven years he will be a powerful leader over the whole earth who with great pride and blasphemy will violently persecute believers.

13:6 And it opened its mouth for blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name and His dwelling – those who dwell in heaven.⁵¹

This pride reminds us of Daniel 7:8, 11, 25; and 11:36-45. The Anti-Christ’s *blasphemy* is not a detail in his career. It is foundational to his nature.

⁵⁰ Pp. 200-201.

⁵¹ Though the grammatical relationship between *His dwelling* and *those who dwell in heaven* is not completely clear, it seems that *His dwelling* is explained as *those who dwell in heaven*. In any case it is very clear that the beast blasphemes or slanders *God, heaven, and those dwelling in heaven*. The word βλασφημεῖον/*blasphēmeō* can refer to blasphemy (which in English is only towards God) or “slander” (which in English is used towards people).

13:7 And it was given to him to make war against the saints and to be victorious over them. And authority was given to him over every tribe, and people, and language, and nation,⁵²

It is strange that the beast is *victorious*⁵³ over the *saints*. This apparent contradiction is in fact a great irony, because although the devil is *victorious* over the *saints* in a physical victory, they are able to be *victorious* over him in a spiritual and eternal victory.⁵⁴

13:8 and all those who dwell upon the earth⁵⁵ will worship him, those whose names⁵⁶ are not written in the Book of Life⁵⁷ of the Lamb who was slain since the foundation of the world.⁵⁸

The beast is successful, and everyone that is not saved *will worship him*. Note 13:4, where we read that “they worshiped the dragon who had given authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast.”

Sometimes we hear the idea that God is not just or righteous because He condemns people that never got a chance to hear the Gospel. It is said that perhaps they are seeking God, and would believe if they could hear the Gospel. This passage shows how wrong that idea is. People *will worship* the Anti-Christ without special help from God, but they do not worship Christ without the effective calling work of His Spirit. Unregenerate men are evil. The Apostle Paul takes the same view in Romans 1:18-32. All men *will worship* the beast, except those whose hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit to bring them to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Divine election is also strongly stressed in this passage. God, who is sovereign, has already chosen the ones who will believe in Him, and their

52 See the discussion concerning these four terms under Rev. 5:9.

53 Note the discussion of this significant term in the comments under 5:5.

54 The contrast between physical and spiritual victory is similar to the contrast between physical and spiritual wealth in 2:9 and 3:17.

55 See the comments on the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* in the discussion of 3:10.

56 The word *names* here is actually singular in Greek.

57 See the discussion under 3:5 about the *Book of Life*.

58 The word order indicates that *since the foundation of the world* modifies *slain*, as in this translation. For some interpreters (note the NASB and the NET) the similar statement in 17:8 means that this verse should be understood to say that it is the writing of *the names* that happened before *the foundation of the world*. Although we cannot understand how it is that *the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world*, because of the word order it seems best to take that as the meaning. Word order is more significant than what is said in 17:8. Note also 1 Pet. 1:20.

names have been written in the *Book of Life*. The names of those who worship the beast are not written there.

God's sovereignty was a great comfort for those who were suffering under the Roman Empire at the time of John, and will be for those under the power of the Anti-Christ in the last days, as well as for each person in every age who suffers persecution because of the name of Christ.

13:9 If someone has an ear, let him hear.

This is similar to the first words of the repeated call in each of the seven letters of chapters two and three, "The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." These exhortations are very similar to the phrases used in Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16;⁵⁹ Luke 8:8; and 14:35.⁶⁰

13:10 If someone holds captives, he will go away as a captive.⁶¹ If someone will kill with the sword, he must be killed by the sword. Here is the need for⁶² the endurance and the faithfulness⁶³ of the saints.⁶⁴

The first two sentences of this verse promise that justice will be done upon violent people that take *captives* and kill. The third sentence is a call for *endurance and faithfulness* for those that are suffering from such people. It would have been very meaningful for the congregation in Smyrna. In Revelation 22:12 there is a similar promise that the Lord will "pay out to each according to his deeds." Even today these promises are a great comfort for the persecuted church. Even though the promise of justice would be encouraging, it does not bring immediate relief from pain, and so it follows that there is a *need for the endurance and the faithfulness of the*

59 Mk. 7:16 is in the Majority Text, but is omitted from some versions of the Critical Text. It is missing from two very ancient manuscripts.

60 The word *ear* is singular in all the Revelation passages, and plural in all the similar passages in Matthew and Mark.

61 The words *as a captive* are not in the original, but were added as a clarification.

62 This could be translated "Here is the endurance and the faithfulness," but the words ὡδε εστιν/bōde estin suggest the addition of *the need for*, or a translation like "this calls for the endurance and the faithfulness..." or "here is an opportunity for endurance and faithfulness." Note the use of ὡδε/bōde in Heb. 7:8; Rev. 13:18; 14:12; and 17:9, as well as BDAG's comments on ὡδε/bōde.

63 This word, πιστις/pistis, usually means "faith," but here it more likely means *faithfulness*, especially with the word *endurance* in the near context. Note the discussion of this word in the footnote under 2:13.

64 This verse has some textual problems in the ancient manuscripts. The reading given here is that of the majority of manuscripts.

saints. The persecuted church is asked to patiently endure; it is asked to “be faithful until death,” and it is assured that justice will be done. There is no mention of an easy way out, no mention of prosperity, no immediate fire from heaven upon our enemies, no guidance to avoid pain. The Lord is calling for endurance and faithfulness. Note Revelation 13:18; 14:12; and 17:9 for similar expressions.

The words *if someone will kill with the sword, he must be killed by the sword* are similar to the words of the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:52, “...for all that take the sword by the sword will die.”

Seventh Insertion: Second Beast (13:11-18)

With the introduction of the second beast there are three prominent evil beings central to this section. They might be called “The False Trinity,” because they imitate the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ received power from the Father (Matthew 11:27), Anti-Christ receives power from Satan (Revelation 13:4); the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), and the second beast glorifies Anti-Christ (Revelation 13:12); Christ works so that mankind will worship God (Revelation 1:6), Anti-Christ works so that mankind will worship Satan (Revelation 13:4).⁶⁵ In 16:13 the three evil ones are mentioned in parallel in the same sentence, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are sometimes mentioned in parallel in the same sentence, as in Revelation 1:4-5 and Matthew 28:19.

13:11 And I saw another beast coming up from the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb, and he was speaking like a dragon.

He *had two horns*, as opposed to the first beast with its ten horns. He appears like *a lamb* but truly he is more like *a dragon*, especially in his *speaking*.⁶⁶ He is *like a dragon* – he lies and deceives like Satan.

13:12 And he carries out all the authority of the first beast before him, and he made the earth and⁶⁷ those dwelling in it worship the first beast, whose lethal wound had been healed.

The work of the second *beast* will be to make *the earth and those dwelling in it worship the first beast*. As they read this verse, many of the original readers would surely remember the worship of Caesar demanded of them,

⁶⁵ Mounce, p. 258; Beasley-Murray, p. 207; and Bauckham, p. 284.

⁶⁶ Beasley-Murray, p. 216.

⁶⁷ Indeed it is unclear how *the earth* could *worship the beast*. Since the word here translated *and* (*καὶ/kai*) is sometimes translated “that is,” perhaps it would be better to translate this “he made the earth, that is, those dwelling in it, worship the beast.”

but that was only a historical hint of the coming world-wide work of the second *beast*, and the world-wide worship of *the first beast*.

This second *beast* is called “the false prophet” in Revelation 16:13; 19:20; and 20:10.⁶⁸

Because the second *beast* makes *the earth and those dwelling in it worship the first beast*, there are commentators who say that the second *beast* is the priesthood of the religion of Anti-Christ, but it is better to take the *first beast* and the second *beast* as two evil human beings that will come to power at the end of the age.

13:13-14 And he performs great signs, even fire so that it comes down from heaven⁶⁹ before the people, and, by the signs which were given to him to perform before the beast, he deceives those (they are Mine) who dwell upon the earth, telling those who dwell upon the earth to make an image of the beast who had the wound from the sword, but lived.

This second *beast* can even use miracles in his service for the glory of the first *beast*. This should be a warning to us to not be influenced by miracles that are not in line with the Word of God. The second *beast* will be able to imitate Elijah who called down *fire* from *heaven* in 1 Kings 18:38. Like a false Elijah, he brings people to worship a false Christ.⁷⁰

The *image of the beast* which the second *beast* has the people set up and worship reminds the reader of the *image* Nebuchadnezzar had set up in Daniel 3.

In John’s time, representatives of Caesar made images of him that the people had to worship. If someone refused to worship the *image* of Caesar, then he could be punished with death. It seems that this practice will again be used in the end times.

Suddenly in the middle of these words, we see the parenthetical expression *they are Mine*, spoken by the Lord or by God the Father, who is apparently asserting His ownership of *those who dwell upon the earth*, perhaps as a reminder that He has the right to judge them.⁷¹

⁶⁸ This word, Φευδοπροφητης/pseudoprophētēs, is only used three times in the Book of Revelation and eleven times in the whole NT. Compare Mt. 7:15; 24:11; and 24:24.

⁶⁹ This word, ουρανος/ouranos, can also refer to the sky.

⁷⁰ Mounce, p. 259.

⁷¹ The majority of the manuscripts have the expression *they are Mine*, but the oldest along with a number of other manuscripts do not have that expression.

13:15 And it was given to him to give breath⁷² to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could even speak, and could cause all those who did not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

According to Mounce,⁷³ the literature of that era mentions statues which were “brought to life.” We are reminded by Deuteronomy 13:1-3 and 2 Thessalonians 2:9 that not everything supernatural is from God!

This verse describes how a miraculous sign combines false worship with deadly persecution, in striking contrast to the way the Lord’s miracles in the Gospels gave healing and life, and encouraged true worship.

Six times in the Book of Revelation (in 13:15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; and 20:4) we read about the worship of *the image of the beast*. Since the number six is one less than seven, which suggests completion or perfection in the Book of Revelation, this may be a subtle reminder that the worship of *the image of the beast* is false worship.

13:16 And he makes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free and the slave, so that they⁷⁴ give to them a mark⁷⁵ upon their right hand or upon their forehead,

This is the opposite of the seal that the righteous have received in Revelation 7:3.

These three pairs of words, *small and great, rich and poor, free and slave* emphasize that no one will be free from the demand to have this *mark*.

In that era disobedient slaves, defeated soldiers, and fanatic religious adherents could be given a *mark*.⁷⁶

13:17 even so that no one is able to buy or sell, unless he has the mark: the name of the beast or the number of his name.

It seems that this persecution will be carried out in a number of ways. The *beast* kills some who refuse to worship the image, and he also forbids buying and selling among those who do not receive his *mark*. There will be violent persecution and also economic persecution. Although it may be more systematic at the end of the age, in many lands and in many eras

⁷² This word, πνεύμα/pneuma, can mean “spirit,” “wind,” or *breath*.

⁷³ P. 261. According to Beasley-Murray, p. 217, in those days rumors circulated that there was a statue in Parium that could speak and a statue in Troas that could speak and heal the sick.

⁷⁴ The identity of the people actually giving the *mark* is not clarified.

⁷⁵ This word, χαράγμα/charagma, is used seven times in the Book of Revelation, always about the *mark* of the beast.

⁷⁶ Mounce, p. 262.

believers that would *buy or sell* have been shunned by those that hate them and their faith in Christ. If indeed believers in Thyatira were ejected from their labor guilds because they would not worship Apollo, they would see that their sufferings were hints of the sufferings that faithful believers will have to go through under the authority of the *beast*.

13:18 Here there is wisdom.⁷⁷ Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number, and his number is 666.

Everyone will be required to receive the mark of the *beast* on his forehead or right hand, a mark that will be required for any kind of buying or selling. The mark is the name, or the *number* of the name, of the beast, 666.

In that era, Jews, Greeks, Romans, and others would use codes in which A=1, B=2, C=3, etc., so names could be expressed as numbers.⁷⁸ The sentence "I love her whose name is 545" was scribbled on a wall in Pompeii before the city was completely covered with ash from the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius.⁷⁹ This probably means that the sum of the numbers of the letters of her name is 545. The reader of those words on the wall in Pompeii would not be able to know the name of the girl, but some girls that read that sentence would calculate the *number* of their names to see if they might be the one written about on the wall! In other words, it is easy to go from name to *number*, but hard to go from *number* to name.

There are many interpretations about the purpose and meaning of the *number* 666. One hundred years after the Book of Revelation was written, Irenaeus, most likely a disciple of Polycarp, who may have been a disciple of John, could only suggest three possibilities.⁸⁰ As explained above, although many have tried to do this, it is impossible to take the *number* 666 and determine the name of the *beast*. But at the end of the age, when the *beast* appears, suffering believers will take comfort from the simple fact that the Word of God predicted his arrival, even down to the *number* of his name!

⁷⁷ See the footnote under 13:10 concerning similar expressions in Revelation.

⁷⁸ The rabbis called this *gematria*.

⁷⁹ Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p. 276. Another sentence there in Pompeii read "Amerimus thought upon his lady Harmonia for good. The number of her honorable name is 45 (or 1035)."

⁸⁰ The three possibilities Irenaeus mentions in *Against Heresies* were Euanthas, Lateinos, and Teitan. He does not mention Nero (Mounce, pp. 264-265).

Beasley-Murray⁸¹ notes that the Latin name and title “Nero Caesar” can yield the *number* 666.⁸² It should be noted, however, that this requires several steps:

- The title Caesar must be added to the name Nero.
- Those Latin words must be translated into Greek.
- Those Greek letters must then be transliterated into the one and only option of the Hebrew (!) spelling that will yield 666.
- Those Hebrew letters have to be coded into numbers.
- Those numbers have to be added up.

If Nero were the *beast* of the Book of Revelation, then a few of the interpretational difficulties of the Preterist interpretation, mentioned in the Introduction of this commentary, would be resolved, but it takes a very complicated process to get from 666 to Nero. It is better to understand the *beast* as someone yet to arise.

Whether or not this numbering and lettering process is appropriate here, it is clear that the *number* 666 falls short of 777, which seems to be an obvious way of saying that the Anti-Christ will fall short of Christ.

We do not need to know the name of the Anti-Christ. What is important is that when he appears, he will have a name that is clearly related to the *number* 666, whether he likes it or not. And that will prove that the Sovereign Lord of the Universe knew all about the Anti-Christ thousands of years before he was born. In that day the righteous, who are being persecuted by him, will be encouraged and will worship God all the more. And that is far more important than whether or not we can figure out the identity of the Anti-Christ today!

Eighth Insertion: 144,000 People (14:1-5)

Chapter 13 was full of evil figures, but now our attention moves to Christ and those that worship Him. We, as readers, are comforted and strengthened because our King will surely be victorious, and He will be with His faithful people in all their struggles.

⁸¹ Pp. 219-220.

⁸² Beasley-Murray, p. 220, explains that if it is taken from Latin letters directly into Hebrew letters it makes 616. Indeed Codex Ephraemi, a fifth century manuscript containing the Book of Revelation, reads 616 rather than 666!

14:1 And I looked – and see! – the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a total of⁸³ one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads.

After being sealed on earth in Revelation 7:4-8, now here in chapter 14 apparently this same *one hundred and forty-four thousand* Jews are safe in heaven, all accounted for, and none lost. If so, these are Jews who have repented, believed in Jesus Christ, and then were killed during the days of the Tribulation. The seal they received protected them from the Trumpet Judgments, but not from the persecutions of the beast.

In contrast to the mark of the beast, these wear the *name of the Lamb*, and *His Father's name, on their foreheads*, which indicates that they are victors. Despite all the economic and violent persecutions of the beast, these have not worshiped the beast or the devil and they are no longer threatened by Anti-Christ because they are with *the Lamb*.

In the Old Testament, *Mount Zion* referred to Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:31) and the tribe of Judah (Psalm 78:68); it will lie desolate (Lamentations 5:18); and it is the place where the Lord God will reign (Isaiah 24:23 and Micah 4:7). But in Hebrews 12:22 we see the idea that *Mount Zion* can refer to the heavenly Jerusalem. The expression “redeemed from the earth” in Revelation 14:3 confirms that this is a heavenly *Mount Zion* and that these people are no longer living on the earth.

14:2 And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the sound which I heard was like that made by zither-players playing their zithers,⁸⁴

Sometimes in Revelation there is a *sound* or a voice which is not identified.⁸⁵

The *sound* John heard left such an impression that John described it with three explanations. First, the *sound* was like *many waters*. A similar expression was used to describe the *sound* of the creatures' wings in the vision in Ezekiel 1:24 and the *sound* of the voice of God in His glory in Ezekiel 43:2. The same expression is used again in Revelation 19:6.

⁸³ The majority of manuscripts have $\alpha\rhoιθμος$ /arithmos, a total of, but several manuscripts, including the oldest, lack that term.

⁸⁴ Note the explanation of this term, $\kappaιθαρα$ /kithara, in the footnote under the discussion of 5:8.

⁸⁵ In Rev. 6:6; 8:5; 9:13; 10:4; 11:12, 15, 19; 12:10; 14:2, 13; 16:1, 17, 18; 18:4; 19:5; and 21:3 there is a voice or sound whose origin is not identified, but sometimes can be understood.

Second, the *sound* was like that of *loud thunder*. In 6:1 and 19:6 a similar expression is used.

Third, the *sound* was *like that made by zither-players playing their zithers*. Evidently the sound John heard was not only amazing, but also beautiful.

14:3 and they are singing a new song before the throne and before the four creatures and the elders, and no one was able to learn the song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth.

In the whole Bible this idea of *a new song* is mentioned nine times. In Psalm 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; and 144:9 *a new song* is sung in the context of a victory or physical deliverance.

God is not specifically mentioned in this verse, but in the Book of Revelation He is often mentioned indirectly using the word *throne*, for example in 1:4; 4:2-10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:9-11; 16:17; 20:11; 21:3 and 5. (Chapter 7:9-11 is most important in this context, because the 144,000 sealed people are also mentioned there.)

Their praise before God is exclusively their own, because *no one was able to learn the song* except the 144,000.

14:4 These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were purchased by Jesus⁸⁶ from men, firstfruits⁸⁷ to God and to the Lamb,

This description of the 144,000 *virgins* standing on the heavenly Mount Zion contains some confusing elements. It seems to suggest that a man that has sexual intercourse with his own wife defiles himself, but we know from passages like Hebrews 13:4 that that is certainly not true. Because the word here translated *defiled*⁸⁸ is also used to speak of promiscuous sexual intercourse,⁸⁹ and because the word here translated *virgins*⁹⁰ is also used

86 The expression *by Jesus* is found in the majority of Greek manuscripts, but not in others, including the oldest.

87 In the NT this term (*απαρχη/aparchē*) normally means *firstfruits*, that is, the fruit which is the first to be harvested and must be given to *God* (Exod. 23:19). It becomes a figure of speech used of the Holy Spirit in Rom. 8:23, the risen Christ in 1 Cor. 15:20, and Epenetus in Rom. 16:5 (because he was the first to come to faith in Christ in the province of Asia).

88 μολυνω/molunō

89 In *The Letter of Aristeas* (15.2), according to *EBC-R*.

90 παρθενος/partenos

to speak of widows,⁹¹ it is better to understand that these 144,000 were morally pure during their lives on earth. This passage is only difficult in English because of our own precise definitions of the words “defile” and “virgin,” and the lack of more appropriate English words that might be used here. However, the actual Greek words have slightly different meanings from their English translations, and the original sentence would not have confused the original readers.

The use of the word *Lamb* in this verse is noteworthy. The expressions “Son of Man” or “Alpha and Omega” or “Lion of Judah” are not mentioned, but the term *Lamb* is used, referring to the One who was sacrificed on the Cross. This may even subtly suggest that these 144,000 followed the *Lamb* even unto death. They are called *firstfruits to God and to the Lamb*, perhaps because they precede other victors, but that is not stated clearly. This passage explains that at the end of the age, God will gather on a heavenly Mount Zion 144,000 honorable Jews, victors who will praise Him there.

They *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*. This expression could be interpreted two different ways. It could be saying that when they lived their lives on earth they followed *the Lamb wherever He went*, meaning that they loved and obeyed the Lord Jesus during their lifetimes, following Him even to death as martyrs. That understanding is supported by the expressions that *they have not defiled themselves with women*, and that “on their lips no lie was found, for they are blameless.”

On the other hand, perhaps in the end times, after they will be killed by the beast, there in the Kingdom, they will *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*. In other words, this expression speaks of the rewarded status they will enjoy. There in the Kingdom “they will walk with Me, clothed in white, because they are worthy” (3:4). That understanding is supported by the fact that they will have “His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads,” just as in 3:12, “I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem... and I will write on him My new name.” Both of these interpretations are supported by the near context and by the emphasis of the whole book. Perhaps the expression is meant to be ambiguous: in this present age in bold obedience they *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*, and so, when He returns to establish His Kingdom, as a rich reward for their faithfulness they will *follow the Lamb wherever He goes*. If so, there is a clear application for us: *follow the Lamb wherever He goes now*, so that when He returns you will be granted to *follow the Lamb wherever He goes in the Kingdom!*

⁹¹ In Ignatius’ letter to Smyrna, 13, according to EBC-R.

14:5 and on their lips no lie was found, for⁹² they are blameless. In the era of the Anti-Christ, an era full of lies, they will not lie. They are honest, just like the remnant of Israel in Zephaniah 3:13 who “will not speak lies, and in their mouths a tongue of deceit will not be found.”⁹³ This prophecy is closely related to our text in Revelation, as is clear from Zephaniah 3:15, “The LORD, the King of Israel, is in your midst, you will not fear evil again.”

Ninth Insertion: Three Angels (14:6-13)

In this insertion, three angels bring up three themes: repentance, the judgment on Babylon, and personal judgment. This insertion ends with an encouragement to faithfulness.

14:6 And I saw an angel⁹⁴ flying high in the sky, having an eternal Gospel⁹⁵ to proclaim to those dwelling on the earth, even to every nation, and tribe, and language, and people,

This is the only use of the term *Gospel* in the Book of Revelation, but what the *angel* said does not fit with the normal meaning of *Gospel*. There are two possibilities. Perhaps the *angel* told some good news, that the Kingdom of God was coming soon. This is truly good news for God’s oppressed people in the Great Tribulation. However, the news the *angel* brought was *eternal* and is proclaimed not to God’s people but to *those dwelling on the earth* who have refused the Lord Jesus as their Savior. A more likely understanding is that the *angel* told the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, but what is quoted in this verse is not complete, because it does not contain the foundation of salvation, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The news the *angel* proclaims becomes the final appeal that *those dwelling on the earth* repent, believe in the Lord Jesus, and thus be saved from judgment.

92 A few early and late manuscripts omit the word *for*, but the two earliest manuscripts and the majority of manuscripts include the word.

93 Newell, p. 218.

94 The word “another” (as in the *NIV* translation of this verse, “I saw another angel”) is in some of the oldest manuscripts, but it is not in the very oldest or the majority of manuscripts.

95 This term ευαγγελιον/euanggelion, does not use the article in the original language, so the translation “some good news” may be appropriate. In the whole NT, this term is used with the article 74 times. Only twice, here and in Rom. 1:1, is this term used without the article.

14:7 declaring in a loud voice, “Fear the Lord⁹⁶ and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come, and worship the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water!”

The angel did not say, “Repent!” Instead he said *Fear the Lord and give Him glory*. Words similar to this are used in 11:13. In the discussion of that verse we understand that the expression “give God glory” points to repentance. As is emphasized in the Book of Revelation, the One who must be worshiped is not a beast but *the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water*. What is the value of the signs made by the beast, compared with God’s creation as a sign of His power?

There are two elements about that flying angel which remind us of how universal the Gospel is. One is that he speaks to “every nation, tribe, language, and people,” and the other is that the One that should be worshiped is *the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water*. Revelation often has fourfold expressions of the realm of creation.

14:8 And another, a second angel, followed, declaring, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She gave all the nations to drink from the wine of the passion⁹⁷ of her immorality.”

The *second angel* announces the destruction of *Babylon*, which actually is realized in chapters 17-18. This is just like the way the Kingdom of God is said to have arrived in 11:15 and 12:10, but its coming is not realized until chapter 19.

In the Old Testament (as for instance in Jeremiah 50:2) *Babylon* is the enemy of the people of God.⁹⁸ This *angel* alludes to Isaiah 21:9 and Jeremiah 51:7.

14:9 And another, a third angel, followed them, declaring in a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives the mark on his forehead, or upon his hand,

After reading chapter 13, the reader understands the terms *beast*, *his image* and *mark*. Although worship is certainly a matter of the heart, the worship that is condemned in this passage is accompanied by a *mark* on the *forehead* or the *hand*.

96 According to Hodges’ Majority Text, many, but not the majority, of Greek manuscripts read “God” instead of *the Lord* here.

97 This term, θυμος/*thumos* normally means “wrath,” as in 14:10, but in this verse and in 18:3 the translation *passion* is more fitting. Note the discussion in *BDAG*, and note that the exact same expression, *from the wine of the passion of her immorality*, is found in both 14:8 and 18:3.

98 Mounce, p. 274.

14:10 then⁹⁹ he himself will also drink of the wine of God's wrath¹⁰⁰ that has been poured¹⁰¹ undiluted in the cup of His anger, and he will be tortured with fire and sulfur before the holy angels and before the Lamb.

The punishment for those who "worship the beast and his image" is severe. The news from the angel with the "loud voice" becomes a reminder and an opportunity to repent.

This punishment is likened to drinking *wine*... *poured undiluted*. When decent people drank *wine* in biblical times, they drank it diluted. Normally *undiluted wine* would be mixed, three parts water with one part *wine*.¹⁰² Dilution like that would give an alcohol percentage similar to that of beer. People certainly knew that it was much easier to become drunk drinking *undiluted wine*, so being given *undiluted wine* is a metaphor for the punishment prepared for worshipers of the beast and his image. The image is vivid. Looking at a person that is drunk from drinking *undiluted wine*, people saw someone that had become shamefully incapacitated. Likewise, those that will suffer *His wrath* will be shamefully incapacitated. Lest anyone suggest that the drunkard does not mind, at the time, being drunk, it is further clarified that *he will be tortured with fire and sulfur*.

Psalm 75:8 uses the same metaphor: "For in the hand of the LORD is a cup with foaming wine, full mix, and He pours from it. All the wicked of the earth drain it, they drink even the dregs." This punishment is given with *fire* and *sulfur*, as in Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19.

The torture described by the angel is not a minor theme in Revelation. The necessity of punishment originates from the holiness of the Lord God Himself, so that this torture will take place *before the holy angels and before the Lamb*, so that His holiness is publicly vindicated.

99 The word *καὶ/kai* here has the less common meaning of *then*.

100 Note the discussion of this word, *θυμός/thumos*, in the footnote under 14:8. In the OT the *wrath* of *God* is compared to *wine* in, for instance, Job 21:20; Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17; and Jer. 25:15-38.

101 Normally this word, *κεραννύμι/kerannumi*, means "to mix," as when water and full strength *wine* are *poured* together into a *cup* to be drunk. However, the translation "mixed" does not work well in this verse, because the *wine* is *undiluted* or unmixed! *BDAG* suggests the meaning of *poured* in this passage. In that era, people mixed their *wine* with water and spices in mixing bowls before drinking it.

102 Morris, p. 179, gives the 1:3 ratio based the Soncino Talmud, *Pesahim*, p. 561, n. 7, but doubtless some drank *wine* that was less, or more, diluted.

14:11 And the smoke of their torture goes up forever and ever, and those worshiping the beast and his image have no rest day and night, nor does anyone¹⁰³ who receives the mark of his name."

The third angel warns of the consequences of siding with the Anti-Christ. There will be *no rest* for them from their tortures. There will, however, be *rest* for "the dead who die in the Lord," according to verse 13.

Also, just as in 4:8 the four creatures praising the Lord *have no rest day and night*, so the judged, *day and night*, *have no rest* from their suffering. In fact, the exact same Greek words for that phrase are intentionally used five times in the book. *Day and night* is used of God's servants coming out of the Great Tribulation (7:15), the activity of Satan accusing the saints (12:10), the torture of those worshiping the beast (14:11), and the torture of Satan, the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire (20:10).

In this verse, *the smoke of their torture goes up forever and ever*, and in 19:3 *the smoke of the torture of Babylon* also "rises from her forever and ever." So we see that the worshipers of the beast and the city of Babylon receive the same punishment. The expression *day and night* is also used in 20:10, so the fate of the worshipers of the beast is the same as the fate of Satan and the beast. Eternal punishment is not a new theme in the Word; in Isaiah 34:10 *night and day and smoke* that *shall go up forever and ever* are mentioned, and the Lord Jesus said that in hell "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

In 8:4 we read that *smoke* and incense mixed with the prayers of the saints go up; those prayers are answered in this verse.

14:12 Here there is the endurance of the saints¹⁰⁴ – those who keep the commandments of God¹⁰⁵ and faith in Jesus.¹⁰⁶

Here *the endurance of the saints* needs to be emphasized. Then there is clarification about which *saints* are being spoken of: *those who hold to the commandments of God and the faithfulness of Jesus*.

¹⁰³ Literally, "and if anyone receives the mark of his name."

¹⁰⁴ See the footnote under 13:10 concerning similar expressions in the Book of Revelation.

¹⁰⁵ The expression *those who keep the commandments of God*, is also used in 12:17.

¹⁰⁶ This expression, την πιστιν Ιησου/tēn pistin Iēsou, could be translated "the faithfulness of Jesus," but *faith in Jesus* seems slightly more likely. The people described here *keep the commandments of God*, meaning they are obedient to the Word of *God*, and they also hold onto their *faith in Jesus*. The idea that they trust that He is trustworthy ("the faithfulness of Jesus") seems somewhat artificial. Note the footnote on the term πιστις/pistis under 2:13.

The *saints*,¹⁰⁷ all who have been made holy by accepting the Lord Jesus as their Savior, are urged to join with *those who hold to the commandments of God and the faithfulness of Jesus*. This verse is a reminder, a call to be victors who patiently endure. This is a major theme in this book. The congregation in Smyrna probably welcomed this encouragement.

14:13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: Blessed¹⁰⁸ are the dead that die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their toil,¹⁰⁹ and¹¹⁰ their deeds follow them.”

This is one of the seven blessings of the book, which are for obedient believers.¹¹¹ Here they are called *the dead that die in the Lord from now on*. Since the setting being described is the Great Tribulation, during which the beast will be persecuting and murdering so many that are faithful to Christ and to God, most people that die faithful to *the Lord* will be martyrs. Here despite the pain of their martyrdom, they are said to be *blessed*. We will see them later in 20:4, on thrones, reigning with Christ for a thousand years. Here they are called *blessed*, they get *rest from their toil* (perhaps the *toil* of Gospel preaching during the difficult years of the Tribulation) *and their deeds follow them*. Do *their deeds follow them* so that they can be saved and enter the Kingdom based upon those *deeds*? Certainly not! *Their deeds follow them* so that they can enjoy rewards, inheritance, thrones, and crowns in that Kingdom. In 22:12 Jesus says, “My wages are with Me to pay out to each according to his deeds.”

The rabbis of Israel said, “In the hour of a man’s decease neither silver, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor pearls accompany him, but his knowledge of the Torah and good works.”¹¹² Certainly the teaching of the rabbis pointed to salvation by good works, but *the Spirit* clearly teaches that it is not our good *deeds* but the blood of the Lamb of God that redeems and saves us. That said, God does not forget our good works. *Their good deeds follow the saints and bring blessing.* Thus the *voice from heaven* and the Holy Spirit Himself comfort the church in Smyrna, along with each

¹⁰⁷ Paul uses this term in for instance Rom. 1:7; 12:13; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, and 15.

¹⁰⁸ This is the second use of the word *blessed*. Note the discussion under 1:3.

¹⁰⁹ The word here translated *toil*, *χοπος/kopos*, can refer to “bother” or “hardship” that does not include work, as in Lk. 11:7; 18:5; and Gal. 6:17. However, it more often refers to *toil*, “hard work,” or “labor,” as in Jn. 4:38; 2 Cor. 10:5; and 2 Th. 3:8. Often it is difficult to see which of these two closely related ideas is intended, and perhaps, indeed, both are often intended.

¹¹⁰ The majority of Greek manuscripts read *and*, but the oldest read “for.”

¹¹¹ See the footnote under the discussion of 22:14.

¹¹² Beasley-Murray, p. 228.

believer who is persecuted and remains faithful to Christ. That *voice* becomes a challenge to other churches to obey the commands that the Lord Jesus has given them.

The idea that our *deeds follow us* reminds us of 1 Timothy 5:24-25, "The sins of some people are obvious, going on into judgment ahead of them, but then for others they follow along. Also in the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are otherwise cannot be hidden." This idea seems at first glance to contradict the clear teaching of the New Testament that we are forgiven our sinful *deeds*, so that they are taken away, and in effect do not *follow us*. And yet here it is stated very clearly that the good *deeds* of those martyrs in fact do *follow them*. This *apparent* contradiction, which is widespread in the New Testament, is resolved when we understand that for the purpose of determining our entrance into the Kingdom of God, our sin is indeed perfectly forgiven and forgotten. This means that our past, present, and future sins have nothing to do with our entrance into that Kingdom. All of those sins were perfectly atoned for by the costly and wonderful blood of Christ. In short, salvation, our entrance into the Kingdom of God, is purely by grace. However, for the purpose of determining our status in that Kingdom, our *deeds will follow us*. In the context of the Book of Revelation, we understand that we believers must be victors, as defined in chapters two and three, in order to, for instance, sit with Christ on His throne. This is discussed more completely in Appendix B: New Testament Teachings on Rewards, at the end of this volume.

Tenth Insertion: Harvest of the Earth (14:14-16)

Having just heard the news from the three angels, the account of the grape harvest on the earth is given. This is related to Joel 3:13, in which a ripe grape harvest and a grape pressing are used to picture the judgments of the Day of the Lord: "Send in the sickle for the harvest is ripe; come and trample for the winepress is full; the wine vats are overflowing because of their great evil." Joel 3:13 and Revelation 14:14-20 are two visions which give the powerful impression that He is coming, and will carry out His judgments.¹¹³ See also Isaiah 63:3 where judgment on evil is compared to the pressing of grapes in the winepress. These two visions are fulfilled in chapters 19-20.

¹¹³ According to Beasley-Murray, p. 228, there are commentators who say that Rev. 14:14-16 tells about the gathering of the righteous, while Rev. 14:17-20 tells about the judgment of the wicked. That distinction should be rejected because these two visions are both related to Joel 3:13, all of which is surely about the judgment of the wicked.

14:14 And I looked – and see! – a white cloud, and seated upon the cloud One like a Son of Man, having a golden crown¹¹⁴ on His head and a sharp sickle¹¹⁵ in His hand.

The expression *like a Son of Man* is difficult.¹¹⁶ Remember that at the time the Old and New Testaments were written, Greek and Hebrew had no capital letters to indicate titles or names.¹¹⁷

Some say the *One like a Son of Man* is an angel, while others say the *One like a Son of Man* is the Lord Jesus. Each view of the identity of the *One like a Son of Man* has strong arguments. Here some of those arguments are summarized.

Support for the idea that *son of man* refers to an angel:

- It is more likely that one angel is commanding another angel in 14:15, so *son of man* must be an angel.
- The angel of 14:15 is called “another angel.”
- The term *son of man* was used of angels in apocalyptic literature outside of the Bible.
- There is no Greek article in front of the expression *son of man* in 14:14.
- The one called the *son of man* reaps the harvest in 14:16, and an angel also reaps in 14:19. It would seem strange and inappropriate if the Lord Jesus and an angel did work that was almost the same.

Support for the understanding of *Son of Man* as the Lord Jesus Himself:

- The expression *One like a Son of Man* is taken from Daniel 7:13-14, which prophesies about the Messiah Himself.
- The expression *One like a Son of Man* is only used twice in all of Revelation, here and in 1:13, which is a picture of the Lord Jesus. Outside those two verses, the expression *Son of Man* is not used in

¹¹⁴ This is the word στεφανος/*stephanos*. See the footnote under 2:10 concerning this term.

¹¹⁵ According to BDAG this word, δρεπανον/*drepanon*, refers to “an agricultural implement consisting of a curved blade and a handle, used for a variety of purposes.” A δρεπανον/*drepanon* is used for cutting the branches of a tree. In Mk. 4:29 it is used to harvest grain. Like a *sickle*, it is a general purpose tool used in agriculture. In this passage the δρεπανον/*drepanon* or *sickle* is used in a metaphorical grape harvest.

¹¹⁶ See discussion on this expression in 1:13.

¹¹⁷ Greek writers later developed upper and lower case letters, but even to this day Hebrew letters do not have an upper case and a lower case.

Revelation. The use of this term in Revelation has more weight than its use in extra-biblical apocalyptic literature.

- In Revelation 1:13 (which is about the Lord Jesus) there is also no article.
- The Lord Jesus Christ is humble so He would not have an objection to being given a command by an angel, who was given orders from the Father Himself.
- According to 14:16, the One spoken of here is mighty enough to “put out His sickle upon the earth” and reap the earth.
- The use of the expression “another angel” is not significant, because that same expression is used in 14:6, even though angels have not been mentioned recently.

After weighing all the reasons above, this author believes that the *Son of Man* spoken of in this verse is the Lord Jesus, but, as noted above, this is a difficult choice. Readers are, of course, invited to meditate on and weigh these arguments themselves.

14:15 And another angel came out of the temple, crying out in a loud voice to the One seated on the cloud, “Send in Your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe!”¹¹⁸

If the above identification of the Son of Man is correct, then here the Lord Jesus is commanded by an *angel*! From man’s point of view this is difficult to accept, but the Lord Jesus is not like men who like to defend their position, their honor, or their prestige. For the Lord Jesus, submitting to the authority of the Father is not a problem. If His Father gave Him a command through a messenger, He would have no objection.

The *angel* giving this command *came out of the temple*. (Compare this with 7:15, which says “they are before the throne of God, and they are serving Him day and night in His temple.”) Because the *angel* comes from *the temple* it is clear that the command he gives is from the Father.

The judgment of the evil of mankind can no longer be postponed, *because the harvest of the earth is ripe*. Whether or not we can sense it, the history of mankind is unfolding and moving forward to the point of time spoken of in this verse. At this point in the Book of Revelation, the time has

¹¹⁸ The Greek here is literally “...because the harvest of the earth has dried.” When the grain dries on the stalk it is *ripe* and ready for *harvest*, and the same term expressing ripeness can be used of a grape *harvest*, even though the grapes do not dry out.

arrived and cannot be put off any longer, just as a farmer cannot postpone the *harvest* if the crop is already *ripe*.

There are a number of parables about a *harvest* in the Word of God, sometimes referring to the righteous (Matthew 9:37-38; Mark 4:29; and John 4:35-38), and sometimes referring to the godless (Jeremiah 51:33 and Hosea 6:11). In Matthew 13:30 and 13:40-42 the righteous and the godless are “harvested.”

14:16 And the One seated on the cloud put out¹¹⁹ His sickle upon the earth, and the earth was reaped.

The figure of speech here is brief, clear, and impressive. It is as if the Lord Jesus will judge the whole earth as easily as a harvester puts his *sickle upon a crop*.

The picture of a “ripe” harvest is richly meaningful for people who live in an agricultural setting. The opportunity to reap is very limited and cannot be postponed. If postponed, the crops rot, and the farmer loses the income for which he has labored.

Eleventh Insertion: Harvest of Grapes on the Earth (14:17-20)

14:17 And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, he too having a sharp sickle.

Just like the angel mentioned in 14:15, here is *another angel* who *comes out of the temple in heaven*. In the same manner as the Son of Man in 14:14, the other *angel* also carries a *sharp sickle*.

14:18 And another angel, having authority over the fire, came out from the altar and called in a loud shout to the one having the sharp sickle, saying “Send in your sharp sickle and harvest¹²⁰ the bunches of grapes¹²¹ of the earth’s grapevine, because its grape clusters¹²² have ripened.”

The *angel* that tells the other *angel* to go bring in the *grape* harvest comes *from the altar*. He has *authority over the fire*. The meaning of *authority over*

¹¹⁹ This word, βαλλω/ballō, often means “to throw,” or “to place.” Here and in verse 19 it clearly means he is using *His sickle*.

¹²⁰ The word here translated *harvest* is τρυγω/trugāō. This word is related to the Greek word for “grain crop,” and refers to the gathering of a harvest. The same word is used in the next verse.

¹²¹ The word βοτρυς/botrus, used only once in the NT, means “bunch or cluster of grapes.”

¹²² The word σταφυλη/staphulē, used three times in the NT, also means “bunch or cluster of grapes.”

the fire is not explained in this verse. Apparently this means that the *angel* was given certain *authority* in the process of judgment. In Revelation 6:9-11 and 8:3-5, that *altar* is connected to the prayers of the people of God, who ask “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?” (6:10). Could it be here, too, that there is a connection between prayer and judgment? The God that hears His people’s prayers commands that the harvest of judgment be reaped. If so, that would be of great interest to the oppressed people of Smyrna, who could feel that in their poverty they had no input into the affairs of the world!

- 14:19 And the angel put out his sickle upon the earth and harvested the earth’s grapevine and threw it¹²³ into the winepress of the great wrath of God.¹²⁴

This verse employs an impressive figure of speech. Just like grapes which are thrown into a *winepress* and pressed until their juice comes out, so men who do not repent, who finally choose to worship the beast, and not to believe in the Lamb of God, experience *the wrath of God*. This metaphor was taken from Isaiah 63:2-6 and Joel 3:13.¹²⁵

- 14:20 And the winepress was stomped outside the city, and blood went out of the winepress up to the bridles of horses for a distance of two hundred miles.¹²⁶

Men who are unwilling to benefit from the judgment of the cross that took place *outside* the walls of Jerusalem (Hebrews 13:12 and John 19:20)

123 The word *it* is added in the translation to make a better English sentence.

124 Even though the *NIV*, the *NET*, and the *HCSB* all suggest meanings like “the great winepress of the wrath of God,” that translation is unlikely. Because *winepress* is feminine it cannot be modified by the masculine adjective *great*. That adjective must modify either *wrath* or *God*, the two masculine nouns of the phrase.

125 In those passages, as here, the grapes being crushed in the *winepress* are the rebellious nations. The same metaphor is used in Lam. 1:15, but there it is Judah that is to be judged.

126 Literally, 1600 σταδιον/stadion. According to *BDAG* a σταδιον/stadion is about 192 meters, or one-eighth of a mile, so 1600 σταδιον/stadion equals about 200 miles or 300 kilometers. That distance corresponds to the length of the coastline of Israel, from Tyre to El-Arish on the border of Egypt (Beasley-Murray, p. 230, refers to Antonius in his book *Itinerary*). There are some possibilities for the significance of the number 1600 in this context. 1600 is four squared, times ten squared. The number four is the number of the earth (7:1 and 20:8), and the number ten may be the number that says that something is “complete” (5:11). Alternatively, the number 1600 is also 40 squared, with 40 being a number that suggests judgment (Num. 14:33 and Deut. 25:3). However, it is not possible

will receive their own judgment *outside the city*, so there is a hint of irony in that expression. Perhaps this prophecy means that there will be a battle *outside the city* of Jerusalem, and the *blood* spilt in that battle will be compared to the juice flowing out of an overflowing *winepress*. The Lord is not overwhelmed by evil, any more than a farmer would be overwhelmed by an abundant grape harvest.

This powerful image clearly speaks of dreadful warfare in this judgment, with *blood* flowing about a meter and a half (about 60 inches) deep for about *two hundred miles* (or about 300 kilometers). Each reader will have to decide for himself or herself whether to understand this expression as a literal prophecy or some particular figure of speech. In either case, the judgment is dreadful.

Bauckham¹²⁷ writes of other apocalyptic literature that uses similar expressions about the terror of war. 1 Enoch 100:3 speaks of *horses* walking in the *blood* of evil people, up to their chests, and chariots being “drowned” in it. In other texts the *blood* flows up to the belly of the *horses*, or to the nose. Others speak of the *blood* flowing 12 stadia, or 400 stadia, to the sea.

What we see in this verse is developed in greater detail in 19:15-21.

3. Seven Bowls (15:1-16:21)

The insertions into the chain of events in the Book of Revelation have ended with the harvest of grapes, and our attention is returned to the chain of judgments, here culminating in the bowl judgments.

As these judgments are readied we are told in 15:1 that these are the last of the plagues, “because in them God’s wrath is complete.” These seven plagues, clarified in verse 6 to be the plagues brought by the seven angels with their seven bowls, are “the last seven plagues.” That was not and could not be said of the seven seal judgments or the seven trumpet judgments, but it confirms the idea that the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls are a successive series of judgments rather than a three-fold viewing of the same seven judgments. As was clarified earlier in the discussion about the “Telescopic View” and the “Reiteration View,” the seven seals contain the seven trumpets, and in the same way the seven trumpets contain the seven bowls (see the diagram given in chapter six).

to know whether these symbolic suggestions have any validity. Whatever the reason behind the use of the numbers in this verse, it is clear that it prophesies a very heavy judgment, and there is no reason to take these numbers as purely metaphorical.

¹²⁷ Pp. 40-43.

a. Introduction of the Seven Bowls (15:1–16:1)

15:1 And I saw another great and amazing sign in heaven: seven angels having the last seven plagues (they are last¹²⁸ because in them the wrath of God is completed).

Here the *last series of seven plagues* is announced, but it is not immediately carried out. John describes the appearance of *seven angels having the last seven plagues* as a *great and amazing sign* perhaps because with the appearance of these angels the activities of the end times have almost reached their climax. When the *seven angels* finish carrying out their *seven plagues*, *the wrath of God is completed*. At the end of chapter 16 these *plagues* are *completed*, and chapters 17 and 18 give specific details about the end of those *plagues*.

15:2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who were victorious over the beast and over his image and over the number of his name, standing upon¹²⁹ the sea of glass, holding zithers¹³⁰ from God.¹³¹

In 7:9–17 John sees a large group of people who have come out of the Great Tribulation, that have been *victorious* over all temptation, worshiping the Lord God. Only after worship were the seven trumpets described. So also in 15:2–4, before the explanation of the seven bowls is given, John sees *those who were victorious over the beast and over his image and over the number of his name*.

People who die as martyrs without denying Christ are *victorious* over the Anti-Christ, because his goal is not to kill people, but to pressure them so that they will deny Christ and worship the *beast or his image*.¹³² Morris

128 The words *they are last* are only implied in the Greek text, but are supplied in the English translation. Even so, the Greek text does speak of *the last seven plagues*, which supports the idea of a telescoping structure rather than a reiteration structure, as described in the discussion prior to 6:1.

129 The preposition *επι/epi* followed by the genitive case is normally translated *upon*, but *BDAG*, with support only from Mt. 9:9 and Mk. 2:14, suggests a less common meaning, “beside.” Thus these words might be translated “standing beside the sea of glass.”

130 Note the explanation of this term, *κιθαρα/kithara*, in the footnote under the discussion of 5:8.

131 Literally the Greek (*κιθαρας του θεου/kitharas tou theou*) would be translated “zithers of God.” Since the genitive case can indicate source, *zithers from God* seems to be the meaning here.

132 Ladd, p. 204.

notes that “in the early church the day of a man’s martyrdom was often called the day of his victory.”¹³³ The Apostle Paul was probably thinking of that same victory when he wrote 2 Timothy 4:18 which says, “And He will deliver me from every evil work, and He will save me into His heavenly Kingdom....” Paul’s concern was not whether or not he would be killed in ministry; it was whether or not he would be faithful unto death, and thus ushered into God’s heavenly Kingdom as a victor. William Barclay agrees, saying, “The real victory is not to live in safety, to evade trouble, cautiously and prudently to preserve life; the real victory is to face the worst that evil can do, and if need be to be faithful unto death.”¹³⁴

In 14:1-5, the *victorious* 144,000 believing Jews stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb. Here in Revelation 15:2 *those who were victorious over the beast* stand *upon the sea of glass*. Because in 4:6 the “sea of glass like crystal” is before the throne of God, we know that in 15:2 they also stand before the throne of God.

15:3 And they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and¹³⁵ the song of the Lamb, saying: “Great and marvelous are Your deeds, Lord God, the Almighty! Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations!”¹³⁶

Those for whom we feel sorry because they have been killed do not regret their death. Regret is far from their hearts. Their hearts are full of praises to the *Lamb* and to *God*. In the Old Testament there are two songs of *Moses*, one in Exodus 15, when *Moses* celebrated the victory over Pharaoh and another in Deuteronomy 32, when *Moses* praised God before he died. What had been the *song of Moses* in Exodus 15 became the foundation for the *song of Moses* here in 15:3-4. The *song of Moses* in Exodus 15 is very fitting in the context of the Book of Revelation, because in that *song*, *Moses* celebrates victory. In Revelation 15, victory is also celebrated, a victory

133 P. 188.

134 Morris, p. 188, quotes Barclay.

135 Since the word *καὶ/kai* here can be translated *and* or “that is,” it is unclear whether there are two songs being sung (*the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb*) or one song (*the song of Moses*, that is, *the song of the Lamb*) being sung in this passage.

136 Note the perfectly parallel structure:

Great and marvelous are Your deeds,

Lord God, the Almighty!

Righteous and true are Your ways,

King of the nations!

This parallel structure is the norm for Hebrew poetry, and is easy to observe in the Psalms.

much more glorious than that of *Moses*. The victory of *Moses* becomes a type of the victory of Christ. Once more in the Book of Revelation the day of judgment becomes a “new Exodus.”

The song here is called *the song of the Lamb* because *the Lamb* earned the greatest and best victory, as He said in 3:21, “To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

Because they were “victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name,” they are able to sing this *song*. They do not seek glory for themselves. Instead, their attention is focused on the One they worship.

Beasley-Murray says, “Yet while every word of the song stems from the *OT*, the dimensions of what it celebrates are a consummation and not a mere repetition of *OT* psalm and prophecy.”¹³⁷

15:4 Who will not fear You, Lord, and glorify Your name, because You¹³⁸ alone are holy? For all the nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous acts have been revealed.”

As a prelude to these last judgments, the victorious martyrs are given zithers, and they sing in praise of the *Lord God*, the Almighty. They emphatically proclaim that the day will come when *all the nations will come and worship before the Lord*. Everyone that refused to believe in Christ will be destroyed, but all the surviving of *the nations will come and worship before Him*.

We are presently living in an era in which too few of *the nations come and worship the Lord*, and in which His *righteous acts* are often not *revealed*, but hidden. We need to consider this verse in light of the conditions of the seven churches in chapters two and three. The reactions of those who are rich physically but poor spiritually, those who are persecuted, and those who are lukewarm, will all be very different. Hopefully the rich will see their poverty, the persecuted will be comforted, the lukewarm returned to devotion, and the faithful strengthened in their faithfulness.

¹³⁷ P. 236.

¹³⁸ The word *You* is only implied in the Greek, but it is added for clarity in the English.

15:5 And after these things I looked, and the temple – the tent of the testimony – was opened in heaven,

With the completion of the worship of 15:2-4, this verse directs our attention to the seven bowls whose contents must be poured out on those who dwell upon the earth.

15:6 and the seven angels having the seven plagues came out of the temple, dressed in clean bright linen, wearing golden sashes around their chests.

This verse stresses the fact that *the seven angels* and the judgments they bring originate from God the Father Himself. Their clothing shows that they are holy and glorious, in accordance with their divinely appointed task.

15:7 And one of the four creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls¹³⁹ filled with the wrath of God who lives forever and ever,

In 8:2 there were *seven angels* who were given *seven trumpets*. In this verse *one of the four creatures* gives *seven bowls* to *seven angels*. Almost every time the *four creatures* are mentioned, it is clear they have special rights: they are close to God, and close to His throne (for example, see 4:6; 5:6; 7:11; 14:3; and 19:4). The involvement of *one of the four creatures* also shows that the judgment of the *seven bowls* comes from God himself.

In passages like Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:17-23; Jeremiah 25:15-29; 49:12; Ezekiel 23:32-34; and Habakkuk 2:15-16 there is a strong connection between drinking from cups full of wine and *the wrath of God*.¹⁴⁰ This idea fits with Revelation 16:19 which says, “And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give to her the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath.” Furthermore, in Revelation 5:8 there is a bowl “full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” Thus there may be a relationship between the prayers of God’s people and God’s judgment in these verses.¹⁴¹

15:8 and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

The judgment that will fall on the earth originates from the *temple*, from the Lord God Himself. In the Old Testament, *smoke* was often closely

¹³⁹ The word here translated *bowl* is φιάλη/*phialē*. In the LXX this word is most often used of *bowl*s in the tabernacle or temple worship, but it can also refer to *bowl*s used for mixing and drinking wine, as in Pr. 23:31.

¹⁴⁰ Beasley-Murray, p. 232.

¹⁴¹ Morris, p. 191.

associated with the throne of God, as in Exodus 19:18 and Isaiah 6:4. Here we see that *no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues were completed.* God is distant as He judges.

Chapter 16 tells about the seven bowl judgments. They are described one after the other, without interruption, without any relief, which gives the impression they are all the more severe.

Bauckham¹⁴² notes that the previous section, chapters 12-15, begins without any transition, and has a strong connection to chapter 16, that is, to the *seven bowls*. For example, 15:1-16:1 appears to be an introduction to the judgment of the *seven bowls*. In that introduction we are told about those who have already defeated the beast, a theme which is also developed in chapter 14.

In contrast to the seal and trumpet judgments, as the bowl judgments continue there is no insertion, because it is already clear that people do not want to repent, as can be seen in 16:9 and 11. Therefore the emphasis is on God coming suddenly to carry out the final judgment. In 10:6-7 we read that the moment to repent has already passed.

¹⁴² Pp. 15-16.

Bowl Judgments and the Plagues of Exodus

<i>Rev. 16</i>	<i>Bowl Judgment</i>	<i>Exodus</i>	<i>Plague</i>
vs. 2	sores	9:8-11	boils
vs. 3	sea into blood	7:14-21	Nile to blood
vs. 4	rivers into blood	7:19	all water into blood
vs. 8	sun scorches		
vs. 10	darkness and pain	10:21-23	darkness
vv. 12-13	Euphrates dries up, three frogs	8:1-6	frogs
vv. 18-21	lightening, roaring, thunder, earthquake, hail	9:13-26	hail, thunder, lightening

The *plagues* of the *seven bowls* are very similar to the ten *plagues* in Exodus, but the order is different.¹⁴³ This entire prophetic section of Revelation tells of a “greater exodus” which is global in scope. Not only are the *seven bowl judgments* similar to the ten *plagues*, but the attitude of those who dwell upon the earth in Revelation 16:9, 11 and 21, is similar to Pharaoh’s attitude in Exodus. And in striking contrast, the attitude of their hard hearts is very different from the attitude pictured in 11:13 when the people “glorify God” as a result of the judgments and testimony of the “two witnesses.”

16:1 And I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God upon the earth.”

Chapter 15, which opens mentioning the “seven angels having the last seven plagues,” is a prelude to the pouring out of the contents of the *seven bowls*. They are clearly from God. In 15:6 “the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple.” They are directed to *pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God upon the earth by a loud voice from the temple*.

¹⁴³ Bauckham, p. 204; and Beasley-Murray, p. 232.

b. Seven Bowls Poured Out (16:2-21)

16:2 And the first went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores broke out on the people that had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

The ones who received *the mark of the beast* receive a new “sign,” *harmful and painful sores*.¹⁴⁴ These *sores* are like the boils of the sixth plague in Exodus 9.

During the judgment of the seven bowls at the end of the Tribulation, Anti-Christ is already in power and being worshiped. Apparently the judgment of the seven bowls is the reaction of God Himself to the *beast* and each person who *worshiped his image*.

16:3 And the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood, like that of a corpse, and every living being in the sea died.

The *sea* turns to *blood*, similar to the first plague in Exodus 7 and the second trumpet, but this judgment is more dreadful. It is more dreadful, not just because its reach is unlimited, but also because of the expression *like that of a corpse*, which is not found in Exodus 7 or Revelation 8.

16:4 Then the third poured out his bowl into the rivers and into the springs of water, and they became blood.

The *rivers and springs* turn to *blood*, destroying the drinking water of mankind and animals. This is also similar to the first plague in Exodus. The third trumpet made river and spring *water* bitter, but did not change it into *blood*. The judgment of this *bowl* is more terrible and fearful than the corresponding judgment in Exodus.

16:5 And I heard the angel of the waters saying: “You are righteous – the One who is and who was, the Holy One – because You have made these judgments,

Just as in 7:1 four angels “hold back the four winds of the earth” and in 14:18 an angel has “authority over the fire,” here there is an *angel* in charge of the *waters*. In other apocalyptic literature there are angels with power over water and other elements of creation.¹⁴⁵

In this verse *the angel* who has power over *the waters* praises God because He is *righteous*.

¹⁴⁴ Mounce, p. 293. The relationship between sin and judgment seen in this verse and Rev. 16:6 can also be seen in Rom. 1:21-32.

¹⁴⁵ Beasley-Murray, p. 242, brings up Enoch 60:11 as an example. Mounce, p. 294, mentions Enoch 66:2.

16:6 because they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, so You have given them blood to drink. They deserve it!”¹⁴⁶

As in 16:2, there is a close relationship between the nature of a sin and the nature of the corresponding judgment. Beasley-Murray¹⁴⁷ and Mounce¹⁴⁸ explain that this relationship was not a foreign concept for the Jews. In Isaiah 49:26 it says that the ones who oppress Israel will eat their own flesh and drink their own *blood*. Likewise *The Wisdom of Solomon*¹⁴⁹ 11:16 says “...that they might learn that one is punished by the very things by which he sins.” Note also Romans 1 and Revelation 22:18-19.

The angel in charge of the waters makes clear a connection which we (but not those in Smyrna!) might have missed: those that oppress God’s people will be avenged!

16:7 And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments!”

This is a figure of speech. It is not *the altar* that speaks, but as in Revelation 6:9-10, “the souls of those under the altar.” After they see the judgment of this bowl, the souls under *the altar* are satisfied. This must have been a great comfort for the congregation in Smyrna.

16:8 Then the fourth poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was given to it to scorch people with fire.

This plague of *fire* from *the sun* has no parallel in Exodus, although in Exodus 10:21 Egypt was covered with darkness. In Revelation 8:12, a third of the sun, the moon, and the stars are struck in the fourth trumpet’s judgment “so that a third of them were darkened.”

¹⁴⁶ The word translated here *They deserve it* is exactly the same as 3:4 which is translated “because they are worthy.” Just as certain people in Sardis are “deserving” of white clothes, the ones judged in 16:6 deserve to be given *blood to drink*.

¹⁴⁷ P. 242.

¹⁴⁸ P. 295.

¹⁴⁹ *The Wisdom of Solomon* is a part of the Apocrypha, and not accepted in the Protestant Canon of Scriptures. It can be found in the Catholic Bible. Even though it is not a part of the Word of God, and cannot be trusted as such, it is nevertheless truly ancient literature, and sometimes gives insight into the nature of the literature of that era.

16:9 And people were scorched by the great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God, who has authority over these plagues, and¹⁵⁰ they did not repent and give Him glory.¹⁵¹

Once again readers are reminded that the judgments of the bowls originate from God, *who has authority over these plagues*.

In chapter 16 it is increasingly clear that even though they are judged, those who dwell on the earth will *not repent* (16:9, 11 and 21). Their hardness of heart is like Pharaoh's. This passage, with verse 11, answers the question often posed by unbelievers, "How is it just of your God to condemn those that have never heard your Gospel?"

16:10 Then the fifth poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was darkened, and they were gnawing their tongues because of the pain.

The judgment of the *fifth bowl* is the first judgment especially focused on the *beast*. This plague of darkness is like the ninth plague, in Exodus 10:21. In the Wisdom of Solomon 17 there is also a plague of darkness in the end times.¹⁵²

16:11 And they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pain and because of their sores, and they did not repent from their deeds.

Again their hardness of heart is stressed. Unlike the results of the ministry of the two witnesses (11:3-13), these judgments do not bring repentance.

16:12 Then the sixth poured out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up so that the way for the kings from the east would be prepared.

The plague of the *sixth bowl* appears to be the preparation for the Battle of Armageddon, a battle described in 19:11-21. The first preparation is the drying up of the *Euphrates*, so there is no physical barrier for the soldiers and *kings* who will come *from the east*. In Exodus there is no plague parallel to this one.

In Genesis 15:18, we can see that the *Euphrates* is one of the boundaries of the ideal promised land. The explanation about the *Euphrates River* in 9:14

¹⁵⁰ The Greek word *καὶ/kai*, used three times in this verse, has the basic meaning of *and*. In this commentary's translation that meaning is used as consistently as possible, even though it frequently might also be translated "then" or as here, "but."

¹⁵¹ Literally, "and they did not repent to give Him glory." Note the use of the expression "give glory to the God of heaven" in 11:13.

¹⁵² Mounce, p. 297.

shows a tie between the sixth trumpet judgment and the *Euphrates* River. In Revelation 9:14, we read “Release the four angels binding the great River Euphrates.” The second preparation, the gathering of the soldiers and *kings* of the whole world, will be explained in the following verses.

16:13 And I saw 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.

A part of the sixth bowl judgment comes *out of the mouth of the dragon* (Satan), *out of the mouth of the beast* who is from the sea (the Anti-Christ, 13:1) and *out of the mouth* of the beast who comes from the earth (the *false prophet*, 13:11). The judgment of God comes out of the mouths of His enemies!

The *three* frog-like evil *spirits* remind us of the plague of *frogs* of Exodus 8:1-5, but this is a very vivid way to describe the evil lies of Satan. We must be careful to reject those lies!

16:14 For they are spirits of demons¹⁵³ making signs, who go out upon the kings of the whole world to gather them to the battle of that great day of God the Almighty.

Chapter 13:13 tells about the work of the false prophet and his *signs*. This verse appears to be the climax of his work.

In 16:12 we read that *the kings* coming from the east will not be stopped by the Euphrates River, but besides them there are also *kings of the whole world* who will come to join in this battle.

In 1 Kings 22:19-23 a spirit volunteers to go become a deceiving spirit in the mouths of the prophets, to deceive King Ahab to go to war, to a battle in which he will die. That same thing happens here, but on a global scale.

The expression *that great day of God the Almighty* is quite similar to the *day* mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:8; 3:13; Philippians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; and 2 Peter 3:12.

The idea of nations gathering together in order to oppose *God* also is prophesied in Zephaniah 3:8, where we see that *God* gathers them to pour out His wrath.

They *gather* together, and they do not understand that in fact they are being gathered together to be defeated on *the day of God the Almighty*.

¹⁵³ This does not mean that *demons* have *spirits*. The *demons* mentioned in this verse are *evil spirits*.

16:15 – “Look, I am coming like a thief!¹⁵⁴ Blessed¹⁵⁵ is he who stays alert and guards¹⁵⁶ his clothing, lest he have to walk about naked and people see his shameful state.”¹⁵⁷ –

This surprising break in the flow of the narrative, in which the Lord Jesus Himself speaks, reminds us that the chain of Seal, Trumpet and Bowl Judgments are closely connected to the seven letters to the seven churches. The whole book is tightly interrelated. *Look! I am coming like a thief!* is very much like what He said to Sardis in 3:3 “So if you do not wake up, I will come upon you like a thief....” This reminds us that we must not simply read the Book of Revelation for information. The *whole* book is written to encourage us to be victors!

This blessing, about having *clothing* and not being caught *naked* and ashamed (like someone from Laodicea in 3:17-18), is in harmony with the other six blessings of Revelation, as mentioned in the discussion of 1:3. What is said here is not new, but in the context it reminds us of the importance of faithfulness. This reminder is similar to the one given to the people of God in 18:4.

16:16 And¹⁵⁸ he¹⁵⁹ gathered them to the place called Armageddon¹⁶⁰ in Hebrew.

Armageddon is now the Tell of Megiddo, south-east of Mount Carmel, not far from the north coast of Israel. It is located just beside the large, flat,

¹⁵⁴ That the Lord will come suddenly is also emphasized in Mt. 24:42-44 and 1 Thess. 5:2. Note the footnote under 2:5 that discusses the seven times the Lord says *I am coming*.

¹⁵⁵ This is the third use of the word *blessed*. Note the discussion under 1:3.

¹⁵⁶ Note under 1:3 the footnote concerning the verb $\tau\eta\rho\epsilon\omega/tērēō$, here translated *guards*.

¹⁵⁷ *The Mishnah* (teachings of the rabbis of Israel) tells how the head guard of the temple routinely tested the alertness of the guards at the temple during the night. If a guard happened to be found asleep, his clothing would be stripped off him and burned and he would have to go home *naked* and ashamed (Mounce, p. 301). Compare also Ezek. 23:24-49 and 2 Cor. 5:3.

¹⁵⁸ In 16:16-21 there are eleven sentences or phrases beginning with the term $\kappa\alpha\iota/kai$, which is usually translated *and* but in this context could be translated “then.” The repeated use of this term gives the impression that the events described in 16:16-21 come in rapid succession one after the other.

¹⁵⁹ Despite the NIV translation, the Greek verb *gathered* is singular, as the KJV and the translation above have it. The *he* here is probably Satan, the dragon of verse 13.

¹⁶⁰ The place that is pronounced *Armageddon* in English is Αρμαγεδών/*Armagedōn* in Greek, from *bar megiddo* in Hebrew, meaning “the mountain of

fertile valley named Megiddo or Jezreel. Megiddo is mentioned in Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 9:27; 23:29; and 2 Chronicles 35:22. Many battles have already been fought in that valley.

Note that the description of this great battle is interrupted, and only picks up again at 19:19.

16:17 And the seventh poured out his bowl into the air and a loud voice came out from the temple of heaven¹⁶¹ from the throne, saying: “It is done!”¹⁶²

That *seventh bowl* brings its own judgment, unlike the *seventh seal* and the *seventh trumpet*. This supports the telescoping view of this section rather than the reiteration view (as described in the discussion of the structure of this section, prior to the discussion of 6:1). The judgment of the *seventh bowl* includes the destruction of Babylon and the cities of the nations. According to 16:19 the cities of the nations are destroyed along with Babylon, even though little or nothing is said about them in chapters 17-18, which give great detail about the destruction of Babylon.

This final judgment from the *seventh bowl* is accompanied by the *voice* of God, coming *out from the temple of heaven from the throne* saying: “*It is done!*”¹⁶³ Indeed the final plague, a terrifying storm, is not yet mentioned when He speaks but it has begun, and all that remains is to await its appearance. It seems that the prayers of God’s people in Psalm 79:12, “Return into the chests of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have reproached You with, O Lord,” have been perfectly answered in this verse.

16:18 And there were lightning, roaring, and thunder, and there was a great earthquake – such as had never happened since man has been on the earth, so great was that earthquake.¹⁶⁴

The terrifying storm and *earthquake* spoken of in this verse are the result of the pouring out the *seventh bowl*.

Megiddo.” It is only used this one time in the NT.

161 The words *of heaven* are in the majority of Greek manuscripts, but the very oldest manuscripts do not have that expression.

162 This verb uses the Perfect Tense, which gives the impression that the result of this judgment is final and will remain.

163 The statement in verse 17, “*It is done!*” is not the same Greek verb that the Lord Jesus used when He said on the Cross, “*It is finished!*” Here the word is γεγονεν/genonen from γινομαι/ginomai, but the word the Lord spoke on the cross in Jn. 19:30 was τετελεσται/tetelestai from τελεω/teleō.

164 Although a literal translation like “that great was the earthquake so severe” is awkward, it is clear that the Greek emphasizes the severity of the *earthquake*.

See under 4:5 and 11:19 about the repeated terms *lightning, roaring, thunder, earthquake* and in 16:21, “severe hail.” These repeating terms indicate that this is the great climax of all the terrible judgments that God will, at the end of the ages, bring upon those that dwell upon the earth, those who oppose Him, and will not repent of their rebellion and disbelief.

The terrifying *earthquake* is emphasized in this verse. Remember that among the original readers there were many who had experienced earthquakes that were frightening and destructive. They had experienced firsthand the frightening destructive power of normal earthquakes, but this will be *a great earthquake – such as had never happened since man has been on the earth*. The words are similar to Exodus 9:18; 10:6, 14; 11:6; and Daniel 12:1.¹⁶⁵

16:19 And the great city became three parts and the cities of the nations¹⁶⁶ fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give to her the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath.

The great city is *Babylon* in 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19 and 21. (Curiously, in 11:8 the same expression refers to Jerusalem!) As was mentioned above, this verse tells briefly what is then told in more detail in chapters 17-18.

The note that *Babylon the great was remembered before God* must have been a deep comfort for all those readers that were being persecuted by the wealthy and powerful. During the days of their suffering they may have wondered if *God* had forgotten, but the day will come in which *Babylon the great* will be *remembered before God*.

The city of *Babylon* is not just ruined, it fully experiences *the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath*. The arrangement of the words here gives the impression that the judgment falling upon *Babylon* is very great. Morris¹⁶⁷ says “Nowhere in this book is there an expression as emphatic as that rendered *the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath*.” Because *Babylon* “gave all the nations drink of the wine of her immoral passion” (14:8), so in the end God gave her *the cup* she must drink. See the comments under 14:10, and compare this verse with 18:6.

¹⁶⁵ Beasley-Murray pp. 246-247.

¹⁶⁶ The term εθνος/ethnos means “ethnic group.” Jewish writers used this word for non-Jewish ethnic groups. See for example Mt. 10:5 and 20:19; Acts 13:46, 47, 48; 14:2, 5; Rom. 2:14, 24; 3:29; 9:24, 30; 11:11, 12, 13, and 25. In English this term usually refers to modern nation-states, like China and France, but that is not the meaning here. The concept of nation-state had not yet developed.

¹⁶⁷ P. 201.

16:20 And every island fled and no mountains were found.

This may have been because in the terrible earthquake described in 16:18, the *islands* and *mountains* are destroyed.

16:21 And great hailstones, weighing about a talent each,¹⁶⁸ come down from heaven on people, and the people blasphemed God because of the plague of hail, since the plague was very severe.

These *great hailstones* complete the elements of 16:18-21, which completes the climax that has been growing from 4:5 to 8:5 to 11:19 to here.¹⁶⁹ They remind us of the seventh *plague* of Exodus 9. See also Joshua 10:11; Psalm 78:47-48; Ezekiel 38:18-22; Isaiah 28:2, 17; and 30:30 where *hail* is connected to judgment.

4. Babylon as a Prostitute (17:1-18)

17:1 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is sitting on many waters,

The appearance of *one of the seven angels having the seven bowls* ties this section about Babylon to the judgment of the seventh bowl. Furthermore, exactly the same words, *And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls* are used in 21:9, so that “the wife, the bride of the Lamb” in that passage is presented in stark contrast to *the great prostitute* here.

The city of Babylon is first introduced to us in the metaphor of an attractive woman who is a *prostitute*. This same condemnation is given of Jerusalem in Isaiah 1:21 and Ezekiel 16:15-58, Tyre in Isaiah 23:15-16, Israel in Jeremiah 2:20, Jerusalem and Samaria in Ezekiel 23, and Nineveh in Nahum 3:4.

For Walvoord¹⁷⁰ and many other evangelical interpreters, *the great prostitute* spoken of in chapter 17 represents the “Christian” religion that has rejected the teachings of Christ. This interpretation is based on the concept of prostitution, which is symbolized by Israel who was unfaithful to God in the book of Hosea and in Ezekiel chapters 16 and 23. This

¹⁶⁸ According to BDAG, the weight of a *talent* varied between 26 to 36 kilograms (57-80 pounds). In Diodorus Siculus xix, 45 *hailstones* as heavy as one *mina* were said to be the largest *hailstones* that had ever fallen. Since one *talent* is 60 *mina*, these *hailstones* are far larger than those mentioned by Diodorus. (This author has seen the damage grapefruit-sized *hailstones* caused to a car windshield in Odessa, Texas, USA.) Because they are formed with layer upon layer of ice, *hailstones* can become quite large (Mounce, p. 304).

¹⁶⁹ Note the comments on this pattern in the discussion of 11:19.

¹⁷⁰ Pp. 243-244.

interpretation is also supported by the use of the term “abominations” in 17:4 and 5 (which is often related to idolatry¹⁷¹) and the expression “blasphemous names” in verse 3. But overall, their interpretation is unsupported by the context, and rather forced.

False religion and idol worship are mentioned, but what really stands out in chapters 17 and 18 are sexual sin and materialism. Indeed, sexual sin and materialism are rampant in today’s modern cities. Further, idolatry and materialism are connected, as is pointed out in Colossians 3:5, “Therefore put to death whatever of you is earthly: sexual immorality, filth, passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.”

The great prostitute here is sitting on many waters. In 17:15 John learns from an angel that the *many waters* refers to “peoples and multitudes, and nations and languages.”

17:2 with whom the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality and those who dwell upon the earth got drunk from the wine of her immorality.”

The former Babylon and the coming Babylon have influenced and will influence *kings* and *those who dwell upon the earth* toward *sexual sin*. Jeremiah 51:7 says, “Babel is a gold cup in the hand of the Lord. All the earth is drunk. From her wine the nations have drunk, therefore the nations have gone insane.”

17:3 And he carried me off in the Spirit¹⁷² into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names and having seven heads and ten horns.

Far from the busy city, in *a wilderness*, John can see the “prostitute,” and understand her true character.¹⁷³

In 17:1 we read that the prostitute sits “on many waters” and here she sits *on a scarlet beast*. There are two truths for the reader from these word pictures: first, she has power over many people; second, in this verse she is supported by the *beast* who has *seven heads and ten horns* (13:1), the Anti-Christ. Those who are familiar with apocalyptic literature would not feel that her *sitting* on many waters and also on the *beast* would be a

¹⁷¹ According to Beasley-Murray, p. 252, in Jewish tradition the term “abominations” ($\beta\delta\epsilon\lambda\nu\gamma\mu\alpha/bdelugma$) was used for idolatry. It is found in Mt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14 (about the deeds of Anti-Christ); Lk. 16:15; Rev. 17:4, 5 (about Babylon); and 21:27 (about the deeds of those that will not be able to enter the New Jerusalem).

¹⁷² Note the footnote under 1:10 concerning the expression *in the Spirit*.

¹⁷³ Morris, p. 205.

contradiction, because in reading apocalyptic literature the reader is not invited to imagine a picture in his mind. Instead, the reader is meant to understand the spiritual condition being described in such vivid ways.¹⁷⁴ The *beast* is *scarlet*. Beautiful colors are sometimes associated with sin, as in Isaiah 1:18.

In 13:1-6 we read that the *beast* blasphemes God. The same theme is emphasized in this verse where it is written that the *beast* is *full of blasphemous names*.

Chapter 17:1-3 is an introduction to a vision of Babylon. Bauckham¹⁷⁵ observes that this introduction, 17:1-3, and the introduction of the vision of the New Jerusalem, 21:9-10, are very similar, using many of the same words:

¹⁷⁴ This idea is also quite clear in the description of our Savior as “a Lamb standing, but looking as if it had been slain” in Rev. 5:6. We are not to visually picture a lamb; instead we are reminded that the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, and then raised from the dead.

¹⁷⁵ Pp. 3-5.

17:1 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls... came and spoke with me, saying "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is sitting on many waters

17:3 And he carried me off in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names and having seven heads and ten horns.

21:9 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the wife, the bride of the Lamb!"

21:10 And he carried me off in the Spirit to a massive and high mountain and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God.

Likewise the *conclusions* of the two sections are similar:

19:9 And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

19:10 And I fell before his feet to worship him, and he said to me, "Do not do that! I am a fellow slave of yours and of your brothers that are holding to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

22:6 And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true....

22:8 I, John, am the one that heard and saw these things, and when I heard and saw them, I fell to worship before the feet of the angel showing them to me.

22:9 And he said to me, "Do not do that! I am a fellow slave of yours, and of your brothers the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

Surely these similarities are not coincidental. In composition and content, the two visions are parallel. Both tell the story of a large city pictured as

a *woman*, in one case a prostitute and in the other a bride! Though the two visions are parallel, it is very clear that the spiritual conditions of the cities are radically different.

In the two charts above words that are identical are in *italics*. The *openings* of the two sections are similar. This contrasting double parallelism emphasizes that both Babylon and the New Jerusalem, who are opposed to each other, claim our exclusive loyalty. But we cannot serve two masters.

We can also compare the fates of the two cities. In 18:23 it is written “the light of a lamp will never shine in you again, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again,” while 19:7 says “Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory, because the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has prepared herself.”

17:4 And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, covered with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominations and unclean things of her sexual immorality.

The city of Babylon is first introduced to us in the figure of an attractive woman. But a closer looks shows how evil that city is, with its “blasphemous names” and her *cup filled with abominations and unclean things of her sexual immorality*.

The clothing mentioned in this verse shows she is wealthy; she is *covered with gold¹⁷⁶ and precious stones and pearls*, and her clothing is *purple and scarlet*. Since the dye for *purple* was very expensive, it was usually reserved for royalty. The clothing of the *woman* is far different from the clothing of the bride of Christ which is “radiant and clean fine linen” (19:8).

She is holding a *golden cup* which should be filled with a high quality wine. But evidently this cup’s appearance is deceptive, because it is *filled with abominations and unclean things of her sexual immorality*.

¹⁷⁶ The word χρυσοω/chrusoō is here translated *covered*, but it means “to make golden, gild, adorn with gold” (BDAG). In that way the phrase is redundant or emphatic, and might be woodenly translated “covered with gold with gold.” The same expression is used in 18:16.

17:5 And on her forehead a secret¹⁷⁷ name was written, “Babylon the Great, the Mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.”

Roman *prostitutes* normally displayed their names on their headbands,¹⁷⁸ but as the use of the word *mystery* shows, this “prostitute,” who was immoral with the kings of the earth, has a *secret name* that was hidden, but is revealed here: “*Babylon the Great, the Mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.*”

This hidden *name* gives the idea that the “woman” was the source of all *prostitutes*, the source of all *abominations*.¹⁷⁹

Hopefully reading this the believers in Pergamum and Thyatira that were committing sexual immorality realized how evil sexual immorality is, and repented from that sin. Likewise today, hopefully any believers committing sexual immorality will realize that in doing so instead of following Christ they are following after *the Mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth*, and will repent.

17:6 And I saw that the woman was drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. And seeing her, I was astonished in great astonishment.

Like a drunk unable to control himself when wine is available, so also the great prostitute cannot control herself in persecution, in the pouring out of *the blood of the saints*. Like a drunk who is not satisfied with the wine that has been drunk, so also the great prostitute is not satisfied with the amount of *blood* already poured out. Isaiah 49:26 speaks of being *drunk from blood*, as with wine. This figure of speech was also used in Roman literature.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Because this word, μυστηριον/*mustērion*, has the same form in the nominative and accusative, there are two possibilities for translation. The translation above takes the word as accusative. If it is actually nominative, the translation would be “a name was written, ‘Mystery Babylon, the Mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.’” EBC-R notes that scholars disagree, but that the above translation is preferred.

¹⁷⁸ EBC-R and Mounce, p. 310.

¹⁷⁹ If we think our era is the most wicked in all history, we should understand the moral condition of the Roman Empire. Tacitus, a Roman historian, said that in Rome “all the horrible and shameful things of the world congregate and find a home.” Juvenal, another historian, said that among all her other sins, Messalina, the wife of Emperor Claudius, worked incognito as a prostitute in the public brothels of Rome (Mounce, p. 310).

¹⁸⁰ Mounce, p. 310, mentions four authors who use expressions like this.

17:7 And the angel said to me, “Why are you astonished? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that bears her, which has the seven heads and ten horns.

Here, just as in Daniel 8:15-26, there is also an explanation from an *angel*. This is a normal pattern in apocalyptic literature.

17:8 The beast which you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go away to destruction. And those who dwell upon the earth¹⁸¹ – whose names¹⁸² have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world – will be astonished seeing that the beast was, and is not, and is to come.

Earlier, in Revelation 1:4,¹⁸³ God was called the one “who is, and who was, and who is coming.” Here something similar but not identical is said of *the beast*. John has already seen *the beast* in chapter 13. There he was said to come “out of the sea” rather than *from the abyss*. Maybe the use of *was, and is not* refers to the fatal wound *the beast* experienced in 13:3. In 11:7 the same *beast* “came up out of” *the abyss*.

Here the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* is defined for us. They are those *whose names have not been written in the book of life*.

17:9-10 This calls for a mind that has wisdom.¹⁸⁴ The seven heads are seven mountains upon which the woman is seated. And they are seven kings: five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he might come, he must remain a little while.

It is quite likely *the mind that has wisdom* is not yet possible for us in this age. Perhaps *wisdom* here is hidden for now, until the time of the fulfillment of these verses. As it says in Deuteronomy 29:29, the concealed things belong to the Lord our God.

The *seven hills* in the city of Rome have been well-known since the years of Rome’s great glory. Each year there was a celebration called *Septimontium*,

¹⁸¹ As noted in the discussion of 3:10, the expression *those who dwell upon the earth* is used nine times in the Book of Revelation, always concerning unrepentant people living on *the earth*. This is its last appearance in the book. This makes sense, because unless they repent and leave that group, they are in the lake of fire at the end of chapter 20.

¹⁸² οὐοῦα/ονομα

¹⁸³ Note also Rev. 1:8 and 4:8.

¹⁸⁴ Literally, “here the mind having wisdom.” See the footnote under 13:10 concerning similar expressions in the Book of Revelation.

meaning “seven mountains” in Latin.¹⁸⁵ This suggests, but does not prove, that this passage is speaking of the city of Rome.

In accordance with the flexible style of apocalyptic literature, *seven heads* also means *seven kings*. According to Walvoord,¹⁸⁶ the *seven mountains*¹⁸⁷ and *seven kings* refer to *seven great kingdoms*: Greece, Persia, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Rome and one kingdom that will appear at the end of the age.

According Beasley-Murray,¹⁸⁸ the *seven kings* spoken of here are the caesars of Rome and one king that will come at the end of the age. The problem with that interpretation is that the actual list of caesars is difficult to fit into this verse. Beasley-Murray says that is not a problem because apocalyptic literature does not need figures to be accurate. He says that what is important is that the figure *seven* points to the completeness of the list of kings/caesars. But it seems better to understand that this *seven* is *both* a symbolic figure of completeness and an accurate prophecy about the number of *kings* being foretold.

Morris¹⁸⁹ suggests that perhaps the *seven kings* are the caesars of Rome, or the great kingdoms throughout time. Surely when the time comes, when God’s people will need to know the true interpretation, they will receive the *mind that has wisdom!*

17:11 And the beast that was, and is not, is himself an eighth and is of the seven, and goes away to destruction.

The symbolism used here is difficult to understand in this age. Originally *the beast* has seven heads, but in this verse *the beast* is said to be *of the seven*. The images that are described in apocalyptic literature are not meant to be visualized in our minds – rather they are meant to evoke understanding and emotional insight into what is being prophesied. This seems to mean that the Anti-Christ is an *eighth* king that is of the same kind as the *seven kings*.

The readers should not think John thought he was writing something that everyone would understand. John here is simply recording what the angel told him.

¹⁸⁵ Beasley-Murray, p. 256.

¹⁸⁶ Pp. 250-254.

¹⁸⁷ In Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; and Dan. 2:35 *mountains* and kingdoms are closely connected, so it is reasonable to take the term “mountain” as a symbol for “kingdom.” Ladd, p. 227, also holds this interpretation.

¹⁸⁸ P. 257.

¹⁸⁹ P. 210.

Though we cannot at this time identify *the beast*, the text emphasizes that he *goes away to destruction*.

17:12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour.

Apparently the seven or eight *kings* mentioned in 17:11 reign one by one, though the *ten kings* in this verse will reign all at once, in the end times. Beasley-Murray¹⁹⁰ says that maybe the *ten kings* are the *kings* that are prophesied in 16:12 which says, “Then the sixth poured out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up so the way for the kings from the east would be prepared.”

17:13 These have one intent, and they give their power and authority to the beast.

This group of kings gives *their power and authority* to the Anti-Christ. Although it seems here that they do this of their own volition, we learn in 17:17 that this *one intent* is actually from God.

17:14 They will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, because He is Lord¹⁹¹ of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.”

It is as though the angel telling this cannot close the explanation about the great prostitute without noting that those ten evil kings will be defeated by *the Lamb*, though the victory mentioned here will be described in more detail in the next section (19:14).

The idea that the *Lord* is *Lord of lords and King of kings* is not found only in the Book of Revelation. Very similar names are used in Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 136:2-3; Daniel 2:47; 1 Timothy 6:15; and Revelation 19:16. This name emphasizes the glory and sovereignty of Christ. The expression *those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful* suggests that the victors, *faithful* believers, will be *with Him* when He returns, in accord with Revelation 19:14.

¹⁹⁰ P. 258.

¹⁹¹ In the original language, this term, κυριος/kurios can mean *Lord* or “lord,” according to the context. In other words, this term can refer to the *Lord* Jesus Christ, but it can also refer to human beings of very high socio-economic status in their societies. Whenever this term is used, the reader must study the context to see whether the meaning *Lord* or “lord” is intended. In the LXX this term was very often used as the translation for the name of God, much as we today find LORD in our translations of the OT.

17:15 And he says to me, “The waters which you saw, upon which the prostitute sits, are peoples and multitudes, and nations and languages.

In Jeremiah 51:13, Babylon is said to dwell beside many *waters*. Because Revelation 17:1 is so similar to Jeremiah 51:13, some commentators say that the Babylon prophesied in this section is the Babylon mentioned in the Old Testament. Note the discussion on Babylon under 17:18 below. Here the expression “many waters,” which is also used in the Old Testament,¹⁹² is explained. This verse uses one element from the Babylon of the Old Testament to say that this Babylon has powerful and evil influence over many people.

The picture here is impressive. It seems to mean that the prostitute brings all her “abominations and the unclean things of her sexual immorality” to all the *peoples and multitudes and nations and languages* of the earth.¹⁹³

17:16 And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the prostitute, and they will make her¹⁹⁴ desolate, and they will make her naked, and they will eat her flesh, and they will burn her up with fire.

In the Book of Revelation evil appears in two forms: *the beast* along with the kings who conspire with him, and the city of Babylon along with the kings who “commit sexual immorality” with her. Anti-Christ uses violence and false signs so that people will worship him; Babylon uses the seduction of sexual sins and materialism to capture people. God’s people must be very careful about both of these strategies of Satan. Anti-Christ’s approach can be resisted with faith that Christ already experienced and defeated death. Babylon’s approach can be resisted by the realization that Babylon, who competes with Christ for our hearts, is vile and repugnant.

This verse describes very strong hatred. Note that the basic statement, that they *will hate the prostitute*, is expanded with four parallel expressions: *will make her desolate, will make her naked, will eat her flesh, and will burn her up with fire*.

The Book of Revelation seems to describe a shift in the relationship between Babylon and the political power of the Anti-Christ. In 17:3 Babylon is “sitting on a scarlet beast,” suggesting that she is supported by

¹⁹² Morris, p. 204, mentions Isa. 8:7-8; 23:10; Jer. 46:7-8; 47:2; and Ezek. 29:10. Note also 2 Sam. 22:17-19, in which “many waters” is an expression referring to the many enemies from which the Lord rescued David.

¹⁹³ Beasley-Murray, p. 259.

¹⁹⁴ The majority of Greek manuscripts repeat the words *they will make her*, but the few oldest manuscripts do not repeat those words.

the Anti-Christ, but in this verse *the ten horns who are ten kings and the beast will hate the prostitute*, so that they *burn her up with fire*. In this verse one evil destroys another evil. There is no lasting unity in evil, even more so at the end of the age, as is suggested in Ezekiel 38:21 and Zechariah 14:13. In Revelation chapter 17 the character of Babylon is stressed, not her destruction. In chapter 18 her destruction and character are both stressed.

17:17 For God has given into their hearts to carry out His intent, and to have one intent,¹⁹⁵ and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are completed.

Beasley-Murray¹⁹⁶ says “The beast and his allies remain in the hand of the God they defy, and by the impulse of the Devil they unitedly fulfill the words of God.” In other words, even though Anti-Christ and the ten kings continue to oppose the Lord *God*, He uses them to do His will, which in this case is to utterly destroy Babylon.

17:18 And the woman which you saw, she is the great city that has royal rule¹⁹⁷ over the kings of the earth.”

The angel explains that there really is no *woman* named Babylon. The *woman* is a figure of speech to help us realize what *the great city that has royal rule over the kings of the earth* is really like.

At the time of the Apostle John, Rome was *the great city that has royal rule over the kings of the earth*, so when Christians at that time interpreted this verse, they would think Babylon represented Rome. Since then, other similarly powerful cities have come and gone.

In any case the great prostitute explained in chapter 17 is *the great city* written about in chapter 18. The first is a metaphor to tell about the second. The *woman* is a figure of speech to tell about the *city*. Thus this verse becomes the transition to chapter 18.

Here are some of the points of similarity between the *woman* of chapter 17 and the *city* of chapter 18:

- with both *the kings of the earth* have committed adultery 17:2; 18:3
- with both there is the expression *great city* 17:18; 18:16
- with both there is wealth 17:4; 18:12-13
- with both there is the blood of the saints 17:6; 18:24

¹⁹⁵ The *one intent* here is the same as the *one intent* of 17:13.

¹⁹⁶ P. 260.

¹⁹⁷ The word βασιλεία/basileia often means “kingdom,” and it may have that meaning here, but perhaps the abstract meaning *royal rule* is more appropriate.

- with both there is a cup 17:4; 18:6
- both are destroyed by fire 17:16; 18:8
- both are destroyed by the will of God 17:17; 18:5

Further evidence that the *woman* is a metaphorical expression that refers to the *city* is that the words that describe the *woman* in 17:4, “clothed in purple and scarlet, covered with gold and precious stones and pearls,” are repeated, in exactly the same grammatical form, in 18:16 about the *city*.¹⁹⁸

Again, the first is a metaphor about the second. The *woman* is a metaphor about the *city*.

Although there should be no debate about the relationship between these two chapters, confirming the actual identity of the *city* called Babylon pictured in chapters 17 and 18 is difficult. Here are three possibilities:

- It could be ancient Babylon rebuilt.
- It could be a secret name for a particular *city*, like Rome with its seven hills, or Hollywood.
- It could refer to all the big cities of the world and their “globalization.”

The first option, ancient Babylon rebuilt, has the advantage of being literal. However, it has several disadvantages.

1. Revelation 17:18 says this Babylon is a “great city that has royal rule over the kinds of the earth.” It is possible though unlikely that ancient Babylon could be rebuilt and attain to that level of power.
2. Revelation 18:3 says of this Babylon that “the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her.” It is possible though unlikely that ancient Babylon could be rebuilt and attain to that level of evil influence.
3. In Revelation 18:4 God says, “Come out of her, My people, lest you participate in her sins....” Would this refer only to God’s people living in that one city? That too seems unlikely.
4. Revelation 18:17-19 gives the impression this is a port city, but the site of ancient Babylon is now quite far from the Persian Gulf.
5. Revelation 18:24 says “And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all those slain upon the earth,” but can that Babylon be guilty of blood shed during the thousands of years that it was left in ruins?

¹⁹⁸ In 18:16 the expression “fine linen” appears, but that expression is not used in 17:4.

6. Jeremiah 50:39 says, "...and no one will live there again forever, and no one will dwell there from generation to generation," so it seems that ancient Babylon will not be rebuilt at all.

The second option, that the word "Babylon" is a secret name for a particular *city*, is possible. If so, the name of the real city is hidden from us. The third objection listed above would also apply here.

Although it cannot be said with certainty, the third possibility listed above seems preferable. This collection of cities worldwide is characterized by sexual immorality, materialism, persecution of the saints, and false worship.

Besides a *woman* and a *city*, there is also a *party* related to this *city*, in 19:17-18. Besides Babylon, a *city* which will be destroyed in the space of an hour, a *city* represented by a wealthy prostitute, there is another woman, another *city*, and another *party*.

In fact, there are numerous opposing pairs in the Book of Revelation:

- As opposed to the death and resurrection of the Lamb of God there is the apparent death and resurrection of the beast (5:6 and 13:3).
- As opposed to the prostitute there is a bride (19:7; 21:2, 7; and 22:17).
- As opposed to the city of Babylon there is the New Jerusalem (21:2-4).
- As opposed to the feast of scavenger birds there is the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:5-9).
- As opposed to the mark of the beast on the right hand or forehead (13:16-17) there is the name of God written on God's servants' foreheads (3:12; 14:1; and 22:4).
- As opposed to the victory of Satan, there is the victory of the Lamb and His obedient followers (note the discussion of the two victories under 5:5).
- As opposed to drinking freely from the spring of the water of life, there is forced drinking from the cup of the wine of the anger of God's wrath (16:19 and 21:6).

As Ressegueie¹⁹⁹ points out, "The imagery of the wedding on the one hand, and the illicit affair with the whore on the other, accentuate the two choices of the Apocalypse: to follow the Lamb and to participate in the Lamb's wedding feast, or to follow the beast and Babylon." Again, we see that the Book of Revelation does tell the story of what will happen in

¹⁹⁹ See James L. Ressegueie's discussion of chapter 19 in his book, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*.

the future, but it tells that story in a way that encourages the reader to be a victor. These opposing pairs, for instance, clearly encourage the reader to make the right choice.

5. City of Babylon Destroyed (18:1-24)

In chapter 17 we see, in apocalyptic style, the divine evaluation of hedonism and materialism. Chapter 18 pictures the character and fate of that hedonistic and materialistic society, centered in the city of “Babylon.” In chapter 17 we see the spiritual perspective on the city, but in chapter 18 the physical perspective is stressed. Babylon is seen from heaven in chapter 17, while in chapter 18, the same city is seen from the deck of a cargo ship!

A number of voices tell us about the fall of Babylon. First, an angel sees the fall of Babylon as having already happened. Next there is other news from heaven, and the fall of Babylon has not yet happened. Next are three laments, from the kings, from the merchants, and from the captains and sailors. Each of these tells about the fall of Babylon from his own viewpoint.

a. The Fall of Babylon Announced (18:1-8)

18:1 After these things I saw another angel coming down out of heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated from his glory.

Ezekiel 43:2 says, “And look, the glory of the God of Israel comes from the way of the east, and His voice is like the sound of many waters, and the earth shined from His glory,” but in this verse it is an *angel* that comes, rather than the *glory* of the God of Israel. The expression *great authority* and the explanation that *the earth was illuminated from his glory* tell us this is not an ordinary *angel*. In Exodus 34:29-35, when Moses had just spoken with God, his face shined, so perhaps this *angel* also has just come from the throne of God.

18:2 And he cried out in a mighty voice, saying “Fallen,²⁰⁰ Babylon the Great, and she has become the dwelling place of demons, and a haunt²⁰¹ for every unclean spirit, and a haunt for every unclean and hated bird.

There are many passages that prophesied the fall of the first *Babylon*, but these words spoken by this angel are reminiscent of Isaiah 14:23; Jeremiah 50:39; and 51:37. The judgment is so heavy that the only ones who gather there are *unclean spirits* and *unclean and hated birds*.

18:3 For from the wine of the passion of her immorality all the nations have fallen,²⁰² and the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have gotten rich from the power of her sensuality.”

There are three reasons for Babylon’s heavy judgment described in this verse. The first and second reasons were already mentioned in 17:2, when Babylon was pictured as a prostitute. The interpreter’s decision about what it means to commit *sexual immorality with her* will depend upon that interpreter’s understanding of who or what Babylon is. If, as discussed in the comments on 17:18 and 18:11, Babylon in Revelation represents the globalized cities of the world, then the *sexual immorality* mentioned in this verse is probably a figure of speech referring to the *sexual immorality* that thrives in the globalized cities of the world.

The third reason for Babylon’s judgment, concerning the *merchants of the earth*, is not mentioned in chapter 17. According to this verse, the city of Babylon is judged for involving other people (*the nations, the kings of the earth, and the merchants of the earth*) in her sin.

Whenever we are tempted by worldly wealth, whenever the lifestyle of Laodicea and Babylon might draw us away from the Word of God and the testimony of the Lamb, we should look again at that third reason for Babylon’s judgment, that *the merchants of the earth have gotten rich from the power of her sensuality*. Note that, yes, *her sensuality* has its own *power*! Today, perhaps as never before, *the merchants of the earth* brazenly utilize that *power* in order to get *rich*. They understand that *the power of Babylon’s*

²⁰⁰ Some of the oldest manuscripts and many later manuscripts repeat the word *fallen*, but it is not repeated in the majority of the manuscripts, or in *Sinaiticus* of the 4th century.

²⁰¹ The word here translated *haunt*, φυλακη/phulakē, usually refers to guarding, guards, the place where guarding is done (as in a prison), or the time when guarding is done (a “watch” of the night). It is a place where no one would want to go.

²⁰² The majority, and all the oldest manuscripts, read *have fallen*. A few late manuscripts read “have drunk.”

sensuality can sell their products. They brazenly and successfully use *the power of the sensuality* of Babylon in their advertisements in order to get rich! But judgment will come.

18:4 And I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out, out of her, My people, so that you do not participate in her sins and lest you receive of her plagues,

In describing the coming judgment upon ancient Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 51:45, “Go out from her midst, O My people, and may every man rescue his soul from the fury of the wrath of the Lord!”²⁰³ Ancient Babylon had oppressed God’s people, and they are warned to flee to safety before the Lord’s judgment falls upon them. How appropriate then that this prophecy is restated here in a prophecy of even greater intensity and scope.

Since the *voice from heaven* speaking in this verse refers to them as *My people*, either this person is somehow speaking in the name of God,²⁰⁴ or it is God Himself speaking, without being clearly identified (and it seems that He continues to speak through verse 20). This is consistent with His role so far in the Book of Revelation. Except for 7:17, He is only spoken of very indirectly until the close of the book. At any rate, this command calls for God’s *people* to flee from the city of Babylon – but throughout history God’s *people* have been commanded not to compromise and commit the *sins* of Babylon.

This is not the first time God has commanded His *people* to not participate in the *sins* of the people around them. In Revelation 2-3 He exhorts the seven churches not to *participate in the sins* that some have fallen into. Also, He threatens them with negative consequences if they do not repent, just as here He threatens *lest you receive of her plagues*. These negative consequences here do not suggest that the people being addressed will go to hell. They are *My people*. Even so, there are negative consequences. If the believers that He is calling to *come out of her* refuse, and continue in their Babylon-like lifestyle and pride, they will experience the warnings of chapters two and three, and miss out on the promises of those seven messages.

Perhaps at the end of the age, this call for God’s *people* to *come out of* Babylon will be fulfilled literally, but this call has an indirect application

²⁰³ The people of God were commanded to *come out* of the original Babylon in Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6, and 45. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Cor. 6:17, uses that OT concept just as it is used here in Revelation.

²⁰⁴ Mounce, p. 324.

to the members of the congregation in Laodicea, and perhaps to us as well. How are we to *come out of her*? Are we to *come out of her* physically, to leave the city and go out into the countryside like so many cults, to await the Second Coming? How easy that would be! But that is not what He is calling us to do. No reader of the New Testament should have to be reminded that the Lord is much more interested in our hearts – our physical addresses are much less significant to Him. And how much of Babylon is in our hearts? How much have we compromised and adapted to the ways of Babylon? Our response today should be to get Babylon out of our hearts, rather than physically leaving a city named Babylon.²⁰⁵ We must not *participate in her sins*. Even if the precise identity of the Babylon spoken of here is not clear, the temptation to desire the lifestyle of Babylon is clear, and needs to be clearly rejected. Babylon whispers to us, “a little more comfort, a few more nice things, and how good life will be.” But our God says, *Come out, out of her, My people.*

18:5 because her sins have piled up to heaven and God has remembered her crimes.

This picture is unusual. People think *sins* already committed do not exist anymore and can be forgotten, but here the *sins* of the city of Babylon *have piled up to heaven* and are *remembered*. Perhaps this picture comes from Jeremiah 51:9 which says that the judgment of the *sins* of Babylon “touches the skies, and it is lifted up to the clouds.” These figurative expressions are used to mean that *God* can no longer ignore Babylon’s evil deeds.

Then in the next two verses the voice from *heaven* seems to shift from speaking to those in the city that need to “come out of her” to the angels that are instructed to bring judgment upon the great city.

18:6 Pay²⁰⁶ her as she paid others,²⁰⁷ and double it²⁰⁸ for her, double in accord with her deeds. In the cup she mixed, mix for her double.

The voice from heaven commands that Babylon be repaid. The rule “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is not enough for Babylon, who has led astray the nations. *Double* judgment must fall upon her. She enjoyed getting the kings and the nations drunk, therefore she will be given a drink twice as strong from the same cup. See the comments and footnote under 14:10 concerning the preparation of wine in mixing bowls.

²⁰⁵ Ressegue agrees, citing Smalley, Boxall, and Boring as well.

²⁰⁶ The four imperative verbs in this and the next verse are all plural.

²⁰⁷ The word *others* is implied but not expressed in Greek.

²⁰⁸ As above, the word *it* is implied but not expressed in Greek.

In Jeremiah 16:18 God says the ancient city of Babylon will be repaid *double* for her wickedness. In Isaiah 40:2 God says Jerusalem “received from the hand of the Lord double for all her sins” during her exile in Babylon.

18:7 As much as she glorified herself and lived in sensual luxury, to that extent give her torment and grief, because in her heart she says, ‘I sit as queen and a widow I am not; I will never ever²⁰⁹ see grief!’

The law of sowing and reaping will fall upon fearless and proud Babylon. As Galatians 6:7 says “...for what a man might sow, that also will he reap.”

In Isaiah 47:7-8 the ancient city of Babylon is said to have the very same attitude. Babylon is pictured as a woman that says “Forever I will be queen.... I shall not sit as a widow, and I shall not know the loss of children!” And in Isaiah 47:9 the Lord responds, “These two will come upon you in a moment, in one day: loss of children and widowhood.” The Lord is drawing some very clear lines of comparison between the ancient city of Babylon and the Babylon of these chapters.

EBC-R summarizes this judgment, saying “In terms drawn from the fall of harlot cities in the past, John describes the end of the great reality of evil, Babylon the Great. While allusions to Rome seem to appear, it is only because Rome—like Tyre, Babylon, or Jerusalem—is herself a prostitute city; the characteristics of all of these cities are found in the queen mother of prostitutes.”

As we think about the power and wealth of the megacities of the world, it is easy to believe that their great power and wealth will continue forever. Who looks at the cities of the world and envisions them in complete ruin, like archaeological sites? The congregation in Laodicea surely did not. They were wrong. Do we have a similar attitude? Do we think of our great cities as indestructible, worthy of the investment of our lives? All these great cities will come to ruin.

²⁰⁹ The use of the double negative, οὐ μη/οὐ μῆ, indicates the speaker feels great certainty. Babylon feels great certainty about her secure future, but she is certainly wrong! In 18:14, 21, 22 (three times), and 23 (twice) the same double negative is used seven times to speak of her judgment. (In each case, the English translation is *never*, except once, where it is translated “no... ever.”) See the footnote under 2:11 for more on the Greek double negative.

18:8 Therefore in one day her plagues will come: death and grief and famine, and she will be burned up by fire, because mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

In verse 7, Babylon says “I will never see grief,” but in fact *in one day her plagues will come* upon her.

In Isaiah 47:9 ancient Babylon is told that judgment will come upon her *in one day*. This Babylon will be *burned up by fire*. In Jeremiah 51 ancient Babylon is told it will become “a burnt-out volcano” (verse 25), with “her homes set on fire” (verse 30), and “her high gates in flames” (verse 58).

It is difficult to envision, but this passage tells us that *in one day* the proud city will fall. Should we be wanting to buy real estate there? And should we live for the luxury and sensuality by which the city would entice us? The pride of Babylon will disappear by the might of the *Lord God*.

b. Reaction of the World (18:9-19)

The kings of the earth, the merchants, the captains, and sailors (those who became wealthy from the glory of Babylon) weep and mourn.

18:9 And the kings²¹⁰ of the earth who committed sexual immorality with her and lived in sensual luxury will weep and mourn over her when they see the smoke of her burning.

The ones who *mourn* in this verse, those called the *kings of the earth*, are not the ten horns, or the ten *kings* who join with Anti-Christ to destroy Babylon (17:12-17). The ones mentioned in this verse are Babylon’s partners, not the ten *kings* who hate her.

This section is similar to what is written in Ezekiel 26-28 about the city of Tyre. The lament of the princes of the sea foretold in Ezekiel 26:16-18 is similar to the lament in this passage.

18:10 Standing far away for fear of her torment, they will say, ‘Woe, woe,²¹¹ the great city, Babylon, the mighty city, for in one hour your judgment has come.’

Even with so many kings, none are brave enough to come and save *Babylon*. They can only stand *far away* and weep. As kings, they are amazed that a city as strong as *Babylon* can be destroyed so easily.

²¹⁰ These three groups of people who *mourn* in Revelation (*kings*, merchants, and sailors) are also mentioned in Ezek. 27:29-36.

²¹¹ The sound of their cry, *ouai*, *ouai/ouai*, *ouai*, is very sad.

18:11 And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn for her,
because no one buys their cargo any more,

They *mourn*, not because their friends are killed, but because their businesses fail, and therefore their income will cease. With the fall of Babylon, the market for *their cargo* of luxury goods collapses. No one digging their way out of the rubble of a terrible earthquake heads to the shopping mall to buy jewelry!

If on the one hand the Babylon referred to in this chapter is a single huge, wealthy, seductive, and influential megacity, then its destruction will trigger the collapse of the world-wide market for luxury goods. If on the other hand Babylon here speaks symbolically of all the megacities of the globalized world,²¹² then its destruction is at the very same time the destruction of the entire market for luxury goods. Indeed, in the midst of such a global economic and social catastrophe, who will be buying such luxury goods?

18:12 cargo of gold, and silver, and precious stone, and pearl, and fine linen, and purple cloth, and silk, and scarlet cloth, and all fragrant wood, and every object made of ivory, and every object made of rare wood, and bronze, and iron, and marble,

In this extensive list, the word *and* is repeated between each item, drawing out the itemization and thusly heightening the emotional effect. Indirectly this text criticizes the wealth and extravagance of Rome,²¹³ and Laodicea as well. But it is more than a criticism. This passage is also a warning to believers of every era, that despite the power of its sensuality, materialism and the love of these sorts of things will come to a painful end.

²¹² EBC-R basically takes this view, saying “it is not John’s intent to describe any one city but the great harlot city, the archetype of the earth’s evil cities.”

²¹³ According to Mounce, pp. 329-330, at one of Emperor Nero’s receptions the Egyptian roses alone cost nearly US\$100,000. Emperor Vitellius enjoyed eating peacock brains and nightingales’ tongues. Wealthy women demanded bathtubs made of silver. Generals on battlefields used dinner plates made of *silver*. Julius Caesar spent the equivalent of US\$ 18,000 to buy a single pearl to give to his mistress Servilia. Though *silk* had to be imported from China, one triumphant army was clothed in *silk* to appear before Caesar Vespasian.

18:13 and cinnamon,²¹⁴ and incense, and myrrh, and frankincense, and wine, and olive oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and sheep, and cattle, and horses, and carriages,²¹⁵ and bodies²¹⁶ and souls of people.²¹⁷

Beasley-Murray²¹⁸ in his discussion about 18:17-19, says “The sin of Babylon was its use of these things to seduce mankind to adopt the kind of gross materialism and mammon-worship illustrated in the songs of the merchants and the seamen.”

Ezekiel 27 gives a list of luxurious goods along with the country of origin of these goods.²¹⁹ This list of Babylon’s goods reads like an ancient version of the modern city dweller’s wish-list. In fact, with just a few exceptions (livestock, slaves, *citron wood, purple and scarlet cloth*) that are out of fashion, illegal, or are replaced by the products of modern industry, many of these items would be found in the homes of “successful” people in any modern city.

The total number of types of goods they were selling was 28, or 4 times 7. According to Bauckham,²²⁰ the number 4 represents the earth, and the number 7 represents completeness. This suggests that this list represents all the luxury goods offered by the world, that is, all of the world’s treasure.²²¹

²¹⁴ The oldest manuscripts add an Indian spice here called *αμωμον/amōmon*.

²¹⁵ This term, *φεδη/rhedē*, is only used once in the NT. This was a carriage with four wheels that was used by the citizens of Rome, not a war chariot (Mounce, p. 330).

²¹⁶ The Greek word here, *σωμα/sōma*, usually means “body,” but it might refer to slaves here, because outside the NT this word can mean “slave,” and its Hebrew equivalent in Gen. 36:6 and Ezek. 27:13 seems to mean “slave” in those two passages.

²¹⁷ The expression *ψυχας ανθρωπων/psuchas anthrōpōn* could just mean “people,” but being preceded by *bodies*, this list seems to reach a climax in saying that the worse thing they did was treat human beings as merchandise. Their cargo certainly included slaves.

²¹⁸ P. 268.

²¹⁹ The original readers may have known that *gold, ivory, and fragrant wood* came from northern Africa, *cinnamon* from southern China, *myrrh* from Arabia, *wheat* from Egypt, *horses* from Armenia, *carriages* from Gaul (France), and *slaves* from many lands (Beasley-Murray, p. 267).

²²⁰ P. 31.

²²¹ About half of the goods listed here in Rev. 18:12-13 are also mentioned in Ezek. 27:12-22 (Mounce, p. 328).

Among the many slaves in the Roman Empire, some were forced into prostitution. Others were forced to become gladiators and fight other slaves to the death as entertainment for the people. Their masters were often very rich. But the merchants of the world did not weep and mourn for the plight of the slaves. They wept and mourned because “no one buys their cargo any more.” The slave market emptied, and they wept.

18:14 And the fruit of the desire of your soul is gone from you, and all luxury and radiance is lost from you, and you will never ever find these things.²²²

The expression *the fruit of the desire of your soul* speaks elaborately of deep longing. Their souls longed for material wealth. The reader of the Book of Revelation must not think that because cinnamon or pearls are mentioned among the cargos of the merchants of the earth who mourn Babylon’s fall, they must never taste cinnamon or own a pearl. The New Testament never makes a list of items and says, “These items are luxurious and therefore inappropriate for followers of the Lord Jesus.” Rather, the New Testament teaches us what a wonderful Savior we have, and what wonderful things He has done for us, and that He would draw us into such a deep love for Him, so that there would be no place in our souls for a *desire* for physical wealth. Other religions offer various lists of Do’s and Don’ts. Instead, the New Testament offers us a wonderful Savior, and we should love Him. He should be *the desire of your soul*. The congregation in Smyrna knew that full well, but how well did the Laodiceans hear these words? How do we hear these words?

Romans 8:20 tells us that “creation was subjected to futility.” We all at times feel this purposelessness, futility, and emptiness. Some people feel it oppressively. And we respond in different ways. What medicine, what salve, do you put on this “disease” that has afflicted us all? When you feel empty and useless, when you need a “lift,” what do you do? Some like to go out shopping, and of course, to work harder so as to not go into debt. That is one “medicine” for the futility and emptiness to which all creation is now subject, and it “sells well” in Babylon. Do you go out looking for physical pleasure? That is another medicine for this futility. Another medicine is to pour out our hearts to the Lord in worship.

The End of the Age is not some obscure fanciful dream; instead, it is anchored in our present circumstances. The opportunities to join Babylon and its gross immorality and its false worship are all around us... today. So are the opportunities to live in a way that fits the eternal character of

²²² The NIV adds the words “They will say” to the beginning of this verse, but those words are not in the original.

Christ, loving Him and – energized by that love – striving to follow Him in His character and heart, enjoying His present promises.

18:15 The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand far away for fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, Just like the kings in 18:10, the *merchants* who profited greatly because of the luxury of Babylon, only *stand far away*, and are not brave enough to help Babylon.

18:16 and saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and covered with gold and precious stones and pearls,

Some of these words of the merchants' lament over Babylon are identical to the words used to condemn the prostitute in 17:4, and some of these words of the merchants' lament are identical to the words of the kings' lament in 18:10. Even though some of the kings' and merchants' words are identical to the angel's words, the intent behind the words is the opposite. The angel who is speaking in 17:4 is showing John the judgment of the great prostitute, but the kings and merchants, using the same words, are lamenting their loss. The kings and merchants are lamenting the loss of the very things that bring condemnation on Babylon. This suggests that those kings and merchants are heading for the same judgment.

18:17 because in one hour such great wealth is made desolate.’ And every captain,²²³ and everyone having a place on a ship, and sailors, and as many as work on the sea stood far away.

They are amazed that a city so successful in making *wealth*, a city that became the center of their existence, can be destroyed like that. They do not realize how foolish it is to place such value on *wealth*, but perhaps hearing this, the merchants of Laodicea realized their foolishness.

In 18:17-19 there is a third group expressing sorrow over the loss of Babylon: those involved in the business of delivering luxury goods. Like the kings and the merchants, they can only stand *far away*. They cannot help Babylon. There is no one that can help Babylon.

18:18 and, seeing the smoke of her burning, they were crying out, saying ‘Who is like the great city?’

Ezekiel 27:32 likewise says “who is like Tyre, as one silenced in the midst of the sea?”

²²³ This word, κυβερνητης/kubernētēs, might be translated *captain*, “shipmaster,” or “helmsman.” It is used twice in the NT, here and in Acts 27:11.

18:19 And they threw dust on their heads, and they were crying out, weeping and mourning and saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, by which all those owning ships on the sea became rich from her abundance, because in one hour she is made desolate.’

The verbs *weeping* and *mourning* are used three times in this section, in 18:11, 15, and 19. The expression *woe, woe* is used three times in this section, in 18:10, 16, and 19. The phrase *in one hour* is also repeated three times in this section, in 18:10, 17, and 19. These themes are emphatic here!

Ezekiel 27:29-30 says, “And all those that handle the oar, sailors, and all pilots of the sea, shall go down from their ships to the earth, and they shall stand. And they shall cause their voices to be heard against you, and they shall cry out bitterly, and they shall throw dust upon their heads, and roll in ashes.”

Just like the merchants, the sailors mourn not because they have lost friends, but because they have lost the source of their wealth. That is the reaction of those that dwell upon the earth. Heaven’s reaction follows.

c. Babylon Never Restored (18:20-24)

18:20 Rejoice over her, heaven, and saints, and apostles, and prophets, because God has judged her with the judgment you got from her.”²²⁴

In other words, “Come, you who have been persecuted by the great prostitute, you whose blood she drank, this is your victory!” The use of the word *because* emphasizes that those who cried out and prayed in 6:10 and 8:3-4 are finally comforted. In 6:11 we read that those who are persecuted are told to “rest yet a while, until the number is completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers and those that are about to be killed, as also they were killed.” Now here in 18:20 that number is finally completed, and there will be no more martyrs.

Of ancient Babylon, the LORD says in Jeremiah 51:48 “And heaven and earth and all that is in them will sing for joy over Babylon, for from the north the destroyers are coming to her.” That prophecy is echoed here in the Book of Revelation concerning an end times Babylon. But at the end of the age the Lord will not send another force to destroy this Babylon, He will come Himself!

²²⁴ BDAG offers two options for the translation of this difficult phrase: “God has pronounced judgment for you against her,” or, better, “God has pronounced on her the judgment she wished to impose on you.”

18:21 And one mighty angel took up a stone like a large millstone,²²⁵ and threw it into the sea, saying “In this way Babylon, the great city, will be thrown down²²⁶ in a violent rush,²²⁷ and will never again be found.

In Isaiah 20, Jeremiah 13 and Ezekiel 4 the prophets of God use visual aids to emphasize their message. So also in this verse *one mighty angel* uses *a stone like a large millstone* as a visual aid. A *large stone* thrown to the *sea* is lost and *will never again be found*. This is the fate of the city of *Babylon*.

This text reminds the reader of Jeremiah 51:63-64 when the prophet Jeremiah took a scroll and wrote out on it all the judgment that would befall Babylon, and then instructed an official, “And when you have finished reading this scroll, tie upon it a stone, and throw it to the middle of the Euphrates. And you shall say, ‘Thus Babylon will sink and shall not rise up because of the disaster which I will bring upon her.’”

In Ezekiel 26:21, the prophet prophesies about the city of Tyre, “I will put you in terror and you will be no more. And you will be sought but you will not be found, ever again, forever.” So also the city of Babylon *will never again be found*.

18:22 And the sound of zither players²²⁸ and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will never ever be heard in you again, and no craftsman of any craft will ever be found in you again, and the sound of a millstone will never ever²²⁹ be heard in you again,

In Revelation 18:9-19 kings, merchants, and mariners see Babylon destroyed from afar, but in this verse the judgment of Babylon is viewed from close at hand.²³⁰ The words here about music resemble the prophecy against Tyre in Ezekiel 26:13, in which the Lord says, “I will cause the noise of your songs to cease, and the sound of your lyres will not be heard

²²⁵ EBC-R explains that *a large millstone* would be four or five feet (1.2-1.5 meters) in diameter, about one foot thick, and weigh thousands of pounds.

²²⁶ The term *down* is not in the Greek, but is added in this translation so the meaning of *thrown* (from the word βαλλω/ballō) is more clear.

²²⁷ A closely related word is translated “rushed down” in Mk. 5:13 and “rushed” in Acts 19:29.

²²⁸ This is the word κιθαρωδος/kitbarōdos, meaning “zither player.” Note the explanation of the term, κιθαρα/kithara, “zither,” in the footnote under the discussion of 5:8.

²²⁹ In this translation the word *ever* is used three times to indicate that the double negative, οὐ μη/ou mē, is used three times. It is very emphatic.

²³⁰ Mounce, p. 333.

again." Note also the prophecy against Judah in Jeremiah 25:10, and the prophecy against the whole earth in Isaiah 24:8.

18:23 and the light of a lamp will never shine in you again, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again, because your merchants were the elite of the earth, because by your sorcery all the nations have been deceived.

In Jeremiah 7:34 *the voice of bridegroom* and of *bride* are likewise brought to an end in Jerusalem and Judea.

There are three reasons that the heavy judgment is given. First, her *merchants* were *the elite of the earth*. By spreading materialism over the earth, they became rich and powerful. Second, *by your sorcery all the nations have been deceived*. With *sorcery* Babylon will deceive *the nations* and then receive her reward, just as was proclaimed about Nineveh in Nahum 3:4.

18:24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all those slain upon the earth."

The third reason for the heavy judgment is that the city of Babylon was responsible for killing the *prophets*, the *saints* and *all those slain upon the earth*.²³¹ If this prophecy is about a single great city that is called Babylon, then there is a figure of speech here, because that *blood* has been shed in many places throughout the earth. It seems to make more sense to say that the city of Babylon represents or signifies all the rich and powerful cities of the world, all of which have been guilty of martyring God's people through the ages. Even when a prophet or saint is martyred outside of the rich and powerful cities of the world, the guilt for that shed *blood* is in those cities. Their leaders and governments, who dwell in those cities, bear that guilt.

Again we see that the *blood* of the persecuted, which does not seem to be valued by God in chapters two and three, is actually of high value to Him. As Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of His godly ones."

This chapter emphasizes that wealth and luxury goods are temporary. All will be burned. The congregation of Laodicea that said of itself "I am rich and I have acquired wealth and I have need of nothing," but was in fact "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" should be motivated to reevaluate themselves and their wealth, because their wealth is fleeting.

²³¹ Mounce, p. 335.

On the other hand, the persecuted and physically poor congregation in Smyrna doubtless found great comfort in these words.

But these two applications are not at all limited to the members of those two first century churches. Every believer with spiritual characteristics similar to the Laodicean congregation, all believers that are physically wealthy, but also self-assured and proud, should find motivation to repent in these verses. Likewise every oppressed and physically poor believer, those with spiritual characteristics similar to the Smyrna congregation, should find encouragement here. But both repentance for the proud, and comfort for the oppressed, require faith. For this book to be effective in the lives of believers that read it, they must be assured that “these are the true words of God” (19:9), “these are the faithful and true words of God” (21:5), and “these words are faithful and true (22:6). The believer that approaches the Book of Revelation without such faith might find it an interesting composition, but how will it help him or her spiritually?

Christ has His promises to whomever is faithful unto death, to whomever does His work until the End. The modern global city also has its promises of sexual and economic pleasure. Which will you choose to strive for? Whose words are more reliable? The Book of Revelation has made the answer to that question abundantly clear!

6. Rejoicing in Heaven (19:1-10)

Chapter 19:1-10 is a continuation of the account of the judgment of Babylon. In chapter 19 joy at Babylon’s judgment transitions to joy at the wedding feast of the Lamb. There is great contrast between the Prostitute and the Bride, and also between Babylon and the New Jerusalem. As Babylon is destroyed, heaven’s joy contrasts with earth’s mourning.

As we apply this section, we need to remember these two opposing reactions anytime we are tempted to think “If I own this, my life will be great...” or “This thing will make me happy” or “The rich have a great life because they can buy this and that.” Such thoughts are worldly illusions that are opposed to heavenly truths.

19:1 After these things I heard something like the loud sound of a numerous throng in heaven, saying, “Hallelujah!²³² Victory²³³ and power and glory²³⁴ belong to our God,

John hears *something like the loud sound of a numerous throng*, but the identity of the ones worshiping God is not revealed. They are thankful for the coming of the *victory and power and glory* of God to the earth.

19:2 because true and righteous are His judgments. For He has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her sexual immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His slaves²³⁵ from her hands!”

Indeed, there are many reasons to praise God, but in this case, it is *because true and righteous are His judgments*. This is further explained by the words *He has judged the great prostitute... and He has avenged the blood of His slaves from her hands!* The Kingdom of God on earth in our day is still in secret form according to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13. The Kingdom of God certainly has not come with its glory fully revealed as long as Babylon still has “all the nations drink of the wine of her immoral passion” (14:8). However, once God *has judged the great prostitute* and once *He has avenged the blood of His slaves from her hands*, the way is open for the coming of His Kingdom in all its fullness.

19:3 And a second time they said, “Hallelujah!” And the smoke rises from her²³⁶ forever and ever.

According to what has been said in 17:16; 18:8, 9 and 18, Babylon will be burned with fire. In Isaiah 34:8-10, the country of Edom is judged by the Lord God and *the smoke rises forever and ever*.

²³² The term *hallelujah* (αλληγλούια/*hallelouia*), which means “Praise the Lord” in Hebrew (*balelu Yab*), is only used four times in the entire NT, all here in Rev. 19:1-6.

²³³ See the footnote under the discussion of 12:10 concerning this term, *victory* (*σωτηρία*/*sōtēria*).

²³⁴ The oldest manuscripts read “glory and power,” but the majority of manuscripts read *power and glory*.

²³⁵ Although often translated “servant,” this word, δουλος/*doulos*, really does refer to *slaves*. And it is a great thing to be a slave of our God.

²³⁶ Literally, “and her smoke rises into the ages of ages.”

19:4 And the twenty-four elders and the four creatures fell to the ground²³⁷ and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne, saying: “Amen! Hallelujah!”

In 4:10; 5:8, 14; 7:11; 11:16; and 19:4, *the twenty-four elders fell to the ground*. In 5:8; 7:11; and here in 19:4, *the four creatures also fell to the ground*. Neither *the twenty-four elders* nor *the four creatures* are mentioned again in the Book of Revelation.

19:5 And a voice went out from the throne, saying “Praise our God, all His slaves,²³⁸ and all who fear Him, the small and the great!”

The source of the *voice* is not given in this verse. If indeed the *voice* is that of the Lord Jesus, then this text is the only one in the whole New Testament where the Lord Jesus uses the expression *our God*. Compare John 20:17, when the Lord Jesus says “My Father and your Father, even my God and your God.”

All those who could be called *His slaves*, who *fear Him*, are invited to praise *God*. Remember in the context of the Book of Revelation, the entire congregation in Smyrna and the entire congregation in Philadelphia are counted among those who *fear Him*, but those words are not fitting for the church of Laodicea, unless they have repented. The condition of those that are not victors in chapters two and three, people that cannot be said to *fear Him*, is not a major theme in these chapters. We are told very little about what will happen to them. That is not a theme that is developed in the Book of Revelation. To the reader that is thinking, “I am a believer, but not a victor, and I sure wish this book said more about my future,” this book says, “Never mind about that. Repent and be a victor!”

19:6 And I heard something like the sound of a numerous throng, and like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of mighty thunder, saying “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has begun to reign!²³⁹

Here our attention returns to *the sound of a numerous throng*, apparently the same *numerous throng* described in 19:1, no longer celebrating the fall of Babylon, but now celebrating the coming of the Kingdom of *God*.

²³⁷ The words *to the ground* are implied in the Greek, and supplied in this translation.

²³⁸ See the note on this word, δουλος/*doulos*, under 19:2.

²³⁹ Normally the Aorist Tense is translated as a past tense. However, this use of the Aorist Tense of the verb βασιλευω/basileuō is part of a category of the Aorist Tense called the “Inceptive Aorist,” so that the verb is here translated *has begun to reign*. Note the comments on the verb here, βασιλευω/basileuō, in the footnote under 5:10.

The coming of the glory of *God* and the powerful voice are also mentioned in Ezekiel 43:2.

19:7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory, because the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His wife²⁴⁰ has prepared herself.

In chapters 17 and 18 we read about a “woman” who was destroyed, the great prostitute, who is metaphorically spoken of as a city (17:18); and we also read about a “woman” who will enter into great joy, in becoming *His bride*. It is clear from 21:2 that the city called the New Jerusalem is figuratively referred to as a *bride*. In chapter 18 the merchants of the world were sorrowful, but in this verse we are invited to *rejoice and be glad and give Him glory*.

This verse announces the coming of *the wedding celebration of the Lamb*, but the event itself is not described at all. However, Isaiah 25:6-9; Matthew 8:11; 22:2-14; 26:29; and Luke 14:15-24 all tell us more about the messianic banquet, called here *the wedding of the Lamb*.

This verse tell us that *His bride has prepared herself* for *the wedding of the Lamb*. She has an active role in her preparation. That active role has already been explained in chapters two and three. As believers obey the commands of chapters two and three, the *bride* is preparing herself for *the wedding of the Lamb*. What a joy and a blessing that will be!

19:8 And it was given to her that she might be clothed in radiant and clean fine linen, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds²⁴¹ of the saints.”

The impression that this is the clothing of the victors of chapters two and three, especially 3:4, 5, and 18, is strengthened by the explanation given:

²⁴⁰ The use of the term γυνη/gunē (here translated *wife*), and not the term νυμφη/numphē (often translated “bride”), does not need to be a problem. This term, γυνη/gunē, is used in the NT 215 times, and although it is usually translated “woman” (as in Mt. 5:28 and 9:20), its meaning is broader than the word “woman.” For example in Mt. 5:31-32; 14:3; and 18:25 this word means *wife*, and not just “woman.” The term νυμφη/numphē, which is only used 8 times in the whole NT, means “bride” in Jn. 3:29; Rev. 18:23; 21:2, 9; and 22:17. In Mt. 10:35 and Lk. 12:53 the word νυμφη/numphē means “daughter-in-law”! Although she is here called a γυνη/gunē, in 21:2 she is a νυμφη/numphē, and in 21:9 she is called both γυνη/gunē and νυμφη/numphē.

²⁴¹ This word δικαιωματα/dikaiōmata is the plural of δικαιωμα/dikaiōma and might refer to a “sentence of righteousness” given by a judge (Morris, p. 227, takes that interpretation), but it seems better to translate it *righteous deeds* as in Rom. 5:18 (Ladd, p. 249, takes this interpretation). If the translation “sentence of righteousness” were correct, then this verse would emphasize the fact that God

the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. This suggests that the bride somehow consists of the victors, with their *righteous deeds*. Indeed, did we not read in the previous verse that “His bride has prepared herself”? She prepared herself by doing *the righteous deeds of the saints*, as she was exhorted to do in chapters two and three.

Thus the identity of “His wife,” or “the Bride,” becomes more clear. Those two expressions are figures of speech that refer to the victors. The reader might think, “Is not the Church of Christ His Bride?” But if the New Testament is examined, there is no evidence of that figure of speech.

The clothes (and the *deeds*) of the Lamb’s bride are far different from the clothes (and the *deeds*) of the other woman which are “purple and scarlet, covered with gold and precious stones and pearls” (17:4).

Chapter 19:1-8 is a heavenly chorus of praise that God has judged and avenged His martyrs, and prepared a feast.

19:9 And he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed²⁴² are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

Verses 9-10 are a transition, to prepare the readers for the next section when the Lord Jesus Himself comes to make war.

In order to determine who it is that will be *invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb*, it is essential to understand the use of the term *blessed* in the Book of Revelation. The seven passages that use this term in the Book of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and 22:14) are explained under the discussion of 1:3. That discussion shows that all seven of these blessing passages, including *blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb*, refer in a special way to the “victors,” those who have believed in Christ and are faithful until death. The Lord wants all believers to be there, but only the victors will be *invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb*. As was noted in the discussion of 19:5, the Book of Revelation does not go into detail about the condition of those outside *the wedding of the Lamb* but still in the Kingdom of God. They are *almost* completely ignored!

has declared us *righteous* based on the sacrifice of Christ. If *righteous deeds* is the correct translation, then this verse emphasizes rewards which will be given to believers who are faithful to Christ. This writer prefers the translation *righteous deeds* (or “righteous acts”), as do many English translations, including the *NIV*, *NET*, *HCSB*, *ESV*, and *ASV*.

²⁴² This is the fourth use of the word *blessed*. Note the discussion under 1:3.

Surely many cultures throughout the world have *wedding feasts*, and in many of those communities participation in a *wedding feast* would be by invitation only. Thus the joy of participation and the disappointment of not being invited to such a *banquet* would be familiar to many readers.

In Matthew 25:1-13 the Lord tells a parable based on the idea of inclusion and exclusion at a *wedding banquet*. The five wise virgins are included, and the five foolish virgins are excluded. The same lesson is taught here: in the community of believers there are those that are wise, often called “victors.” They will be *blessed* with an invitation to *the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb*. Although it is not mentioned here, the foolish in the community of believers, for instance those in the congregation of Ephesus that do not return to their first love, or those in the congregation of Thyatira that do not repent of their immorality, will not be *invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb*. They will still be in the Kingdom. They are saved, but excluded from *the banquet*.

Although some interpreters might say that ongoing immorality as in Thyatira would cause loss of salvation, and others would say that such immorality is proof those people never actually had what they call “saving faith” (as if there were several kinds of faith in the Lord Jesus), those interpreters would logically have to say that ongoing loss of first love would have the same horrifying result! It is perhaps easy for those interpreters to say that habitual adulterers that have supposedly believed in Christ will go to hell, but if consistent, those interpreters would be forced to the more difficult conclusion that anyone like the congregation in Ephesus that do not return to their first love are also going to hell.²⁴³

The command, *write*, stresses the importance of the next sentence *Blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!* This declaration of blessing is important, because as readers who are being persecuted hear and believe that they shall be *blessed*, they are strengthened to remain faithful. On the other hand, readers who are enjoying a comfortable life, like those in Laodicea, ought to come to understand that what they enjoy is not a genuine blessing.

²⁴³ Those interpreters that would tell us that the believers in the church in Ephesus show by their sin that they never had saving faith have an especially difficult problem here, because the Lord commands them to “remember from whence you have fallen, and repent and do those first deeds.” Could it be that in the past they were showing that they had “saving faith,” but when the Lord rebuked them they somehow never had “saving faith”? That seems very odd! If those interpreters would claim that they never had “saving faith,” why does the Lord command them to “remember from whence you have fallen”?

Based on the parallelism of 22:6-9; 19:9b-10; and 1:1-3 Bauckham says that the expression *the words* points especially to 19:9a, the fifth use of the expression *blessed*.²⁴⁴

Chapter 19:9-10 is the close of the story of the great prostitute. Note the chart in the discussion of 17:3 which compares this passage with the close of the story of the Bride of Christ.

19:10 And I fell before his feet to worship him, and he said to me, “Do not do that! I am a fellow slave of yours and of your brothers that are holding to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

Marking the close of this entire vision that has mostly concerned the Prostitute, the apostle John, who dearly loved Jesus, *fell before his feet to worship* the angel. But John is immediately rebuked; the angel says, *Do not do that!* Only God Himself is worthy of *worship*. The angel confessed himself to be only a *slave*, even a *fellow slave* of John’s and of his *brothers*, who also hold to the *testimony of Jesus*. That expression seems to refer to all the *testimony* given by Jesus Himself.

We ought to *worship God*, and not the angels that merely deliver God’s Word like prophets, because the essence of *prophecy* is always the *testimony* about Jesus. *Prophecy* is essentially always about Jesus.

7. Christ Returns (19:11-14)

Between the account of the great prostitute/Babylon (17:1-19:10) and the account of the Bride/the New Jerusalem (21:9-22:10), there is the transition of kingdoms,²⁴⁵ the account of the coming of Christ. His victory over all who oppose Him is strongly emphasized here. A few interpreters claim that the Bible does not clearly say that He will come again to this earth in a physical body, or literally. However, these verses speak of the fulfillment of the words of the angel in Acts 1:11, “This Jesus that was taken up from you into heaven, in this way He shall come, the way you saw Him going into heaven.” If Jesus Christ was raised and ascended into heaven with a new resurrection body then He can certainly return with that same resurrection body!

See how many of the things said about the Lord in these verses are drawn from chapters one, two, and three! Even if there was doubt about the identity of the rider of the white horse in 6:2, there is no doubt about who is riding this white horse!

²⁴⁴ P. 5.

²⁴⁵ Bauckham, pp. 5-6.

19:11 And I saw heaven opened and look!²⁴⁶ – a white horse! And the One seated upon it was called “Faithful” and “True,” and with righteousness He judges and makes war.

The name *Faithful and True* reminds us of 3:14, where the Lord calls Himself “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” The Lord Jesus does not judge randomly, He judges with *righteousness*.

19:12 Now His eyes are²⁴⁷ a fiery flame and there are many crowns²⁴⁸ on His head. He has names written, and a name written²⁴⁹ which no one knows except He Himself.

A number of elements here connect this section to the vision in chapter one, and to the first verse in each of the seven messages to the churches in chapters two and three. He is “Faithful and True,” and *His eyes are a fiery flame*. We need to remember that He who rebukes and comforts us in chapters two and three is He who will come as Victor and Judge at the end of the age.

Many people would like to know what the *name* is that is *written which no one knows except Himself*, but we are simply not told. There are of course many things about the future, and even about the end of the age, which are not told in the Book of Revelation, nor anywhere else in the Word of God. The reader should take comfort in assurance that the Lord, who knows us and loves us, is giving us all the understanding we need in order to live lives pleasing to Him.

²⁴⁶ The use of the word *ἰδού/idou*, translated *look!*, brings a feeling of suddenness or surprise. See the footnote under 1:7 in the first volume of this commentary.

²⁴⁷ The oldest available manuscript and a majority of the manuscripts do not use the word *ὡς/bos*, meaning “like” or “as” here, but another old manuscript, and some later manuscripts do have that word. In either case, there is a figure of speech here which also appears in 1:14 and 2:18.

²⁴⁸ See the footnote under 12:3 concerning this word *διαδημα/diadēma*, here translated *crowns*.

²⁴⁹ One very old manuscript, and some others, have “He has a name written which no one knows except He Himself,” but the majority of the manuscripts have *He has names written, and a name written which no one knows except Himself*. The oldest known complete NT manuscript, Sinaiticus, has the unlikely words, “He has a name knows except He Himself”!

19:13 And He is dressed in clothing dipped in blood, and His name is the Word of God.²⁵⁰

Morris²⁵¹ says that since the battle has not yet begun, this is not the *blood* of battle. He says the *blood* mentioned in this verse is the *blood* of Jesus Himself, so that this verse reminds us that He who comes to judge men is He who already came to save them. However, a close look at Isaiah 63:1-6 suggests instead that it is the background for this verse, and so His *clothing* is already *dipped in the blood* of the nations, just as the Coming One is described in Isaiah 63:3.²⁵² We read there that He treading the winepress alone. He treading on the nations in His anger and trampled them in His wrath. Their *blood* spattered on His garments. So the same metaphor that is at work in Isaiah 63:1-6 is at work in this verse. The treading of grapes in the winepress is a metaphor for the destruction of the rebellious nations.

Other than a *name* “which no one knows except Himself,” He also has the *name Word of God*, the Son of God who has come in human form.²⁵³

19:14 And the armies²⁵⁴ that are in heaven, wearing white, clean, fine linen, were following Him on white horses.

Are those *following Him* angels or are they people who have been “victorious” who will “sit with” Christ? This verse seems to be the fulfillment of Revelation 17:14, “...the Lamb will conquer them... and those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.” It describes the future experience of those who have obeyed the commands of chapters two and three, the victors.

Here described as *the armies that are in heaven*, they are not involved in the warfare, but simply follow Him. Just like the Lord Jesus, they ride *white horses*. They join in the holiness and victory of their Savior and King. And according to the promises written in 3:5, they wear *white, clean, fine linen*. These are not angels, they are victors. Throughout the Book of Revelation it is not angels that wear *white* clothing, but the victors. Note the consistent promise to them of *white* clothing in 3:4, 5, 18; 6:11; and 7:9.

²⁵⁰ Literally, “and His name is called the Word of God.”

²⁵¹ P. 230. EBC-R agrees, and claims early support in that view from Hippolytus, Origen, and Andreas.

²⁵² Beasley-Murray, p. 280; and Mounce, p. 345.

²⁵³ This word, λογος/logos, is used 331 times in the NT, but rarely is it used as here, of the Lord Jesus. Note also Jn. 1:1 and 14.

²⁵⁴ The word here translated *armies*, στρατευμα/strateuma, is explained in the footnote under 9:16, and is also used twice in verse 19.

8. Christ Defeats the Beast and his Army (19:15-21)

Chapter 19:7-9 mentions the banquet of the wedding celebration of the Lamb. Here in this section, in 19:17-21, we read of another banquet with a very different atmosphere. A wedding banquet should have a joyful and hopeful atmosphere, but the banquet spoken of in this section tells about hopeless suffering and death. In this banquet, the ones invited are birds of prey, and what they eat is the flesh of kings, commanders and soldiers, horses and riders, and the flesh of all the people who take the side of the Anti-Christ and oppose the Lord God.

In the Book of Revelation there are two victories, two resurrections, two drinks, two marks, two women, two cities, and two banquets! This text is similar to Ezekiel 39:17-20, a prophecy about a “sacrifice” at the end of the ages.

19:15 And from His mouth a sharp two-edged²⁵⁵ sword goes out, so that with it He can strike the nations. And He will shepherd them with an iron staff,²⁵⁶ and He Himself stomps the winepress of the wine of the anger of the wrath of God, the Almighty.

These three figures of speech are all taken from the Old Testament: the *sharp sword* coming from *His mouth*, the *iron staff*, and the *winepress*. Indeed, the Lord Jesus will fulfill the Old Testament’s end times promises to Israel. Note Isaiah 49:2; Psalm 2:9; and Isaiah 63:1-6.

The world was created at His word. His enemies are also destroyed at His word. Isaiah 11:4 says, “...And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will kill the wicked.” Likewise 2 Thessalonians 2:8 tells us that the Lord will destroy the lawless one “with the breath of His mouth.”

The statement *He stomps the winepress of the wine of the anger of the wrath of God* explains even further how *He will shepherd them with an iron staff*. Just as grapes are crushed underfoot in a *winepress*, so the rebellious nations will be crushed by the *anger of the wrath of God, the Almighty*.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ The majority of manuscripts have the term *two-edged*, but the two oldest manuscripts, *Sinaiticus* and *Alexandrinus*, omit that term.

²⁵⁶ The expression, *He will shepherd them with an iron staff*, taken from Ps. 2:9, is also used in 2:27 and 12:5. Note the use of this verb, ποιμανω/poimainō, in the footnote under 2:27.

²⁵⁷ Note the comments on Rev. 14:19-20, where this metaphor of judgment is also used.

19:16 And He has a name written on His clothing and²⁵⁸ on His thigh,
“King of kings and Lord of lords.”

Aside from the *name* used in 19:13, “Word of God,” He also has the name *King of kings and Lord of lords*. This *name* is *written on His clothing and on His thigh*, so that it can be seen while He is fighting.²⁵⁹ See the discussion on 17:14, where almost the same *name* is used.

19:17 And I saw an angel standing on²⁶⁰ the sun, and he cried out in a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying high in the sky: “Come, gather around for the great dinner of God,

Apparently this *angel* is *standing on the sun* so that he can be seen by *all the birds flying high in the sky*. Likewise *he cried out in a loud voice* so they would hear.

19:18 so that you can eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of commanders, the flesh of mighty people, the flesh of horses and those who ride upon them, and the flesh of all,²⁶¹ free and slave, small and great!”

Ezekiel 39:17-20 tells of the same feast:

And you, son of man, thus says the Lord GOD, “Say to all the birds and to all the animals of the field, ‘Assemble and come be gathered from all around to the sacrifice I am sacrificing for you, a great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and you shall drink blood. The flesh of mighty men you shall eat, and the blood of the princes of the earth you shall drink – rams, lambs, and goats, bulls, fatlings of Bashan all of them. And you shall eat fat to satiety, and you shall drink blood to drunkenness, at the sacrifice which I am sacrificing for you. And you will fill yourselves at My table,

²⁵⁸ The word *and* (*καὶ/kai*) can be translated, “that is.” If that less frequent translation is used, this verse would be translated “And on His clothing, that is, on His thigh, is written....”

²⁵⁹ Mounce, p. 347, notes that the *thigh* is “a most prominent place for one mounted on a horse.”

²⁶⁰ Usually the word *εν/en* is translated “in,” but the use of this word in Jn. 4:20; Heb. 8:5; Mt. 5:25; 20:3; and 2 Cor. 3:3 shows that it can also mean *on*.

²⁶¹ The term *all* here, *πάσι/pas*, means “all kinds of people,” without exception (Mounce, p. 349, and Beasley-Murray, p. 283). People of *all* races and *all* economic levels who oppose the Lord God face this punishment.

horse and rider, mighty man, and all men of war, declares the Lord God.”

This banquet is different from the usual banquet that people arrange. It is not people who are invited, but birds; and it is not birds that are eaten, but people.

This prophecy must have been a great comfort to those in the church of Smyrna who were persecuted by *commanders* and *mighty people*. At the same time, it was probably disturbing for the church in Laodicea, because even if there were no *commanders* and *mighty people* in the congregation, with their great wealth they must have befriended and socialized with *commanders* and *mighty people*. Those friends of theirs are just like the ones that will be eaten!

19:19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered to make war against the One seated upon the horse and against His army.

The preparations for this *war* are told in 16:12-16, but after that passage other events interrupted the story of this great battle. Here that story resumes. Even though they *gathered to make war against the One seated upon the horse and against His army*, only *the One seated upon the horse* opposes them. The role of *His army* is to witness His victory.

19:20 And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet that performed the signs before him, signs by which he deceived those that received the mark of the beast and those that worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur.

Evidently in order to emphasize his evil, the expression *false prophet* is accompanied by the comments that he *performed signs* and *deceived those that received the mark of the beast* and had already *worshiped his image*.

It looks like “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies” can gather, but they have no opportunity to demonstrate any battle strength. We read that *the beast and the false prophet* are *seized* and *thrown alive into the lake of fire*.

The expression *the lake of fire*²⁶² is only used in the Book of Revelation. The term “Gehenna” refers to the same place and is used 12 times in the New Testament.²⁶³

The beast and the false prophet are the first to enter *the lake of fire*. After that Satan (20:10), “Death and Hades” (20:14), and then later, all evil people (21:8) are also thrown into it.

Daniel 7:11 tells of a *beast* being slain and having his body thrown into a burning *fire*.

19:21 And the rest were killed by the sword which comes out of the mouth of the One seated upon the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves with their flesh.

It is unclear why the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire immediately, but *the rest* are simply *killed*. We might guess that this is because they deserve a more immediate punishment, but that would just be a guess.

This metaphor of a *sword* was used in 19:15. Once again, evidently *the sword which comes out of the mouth of the One seated upon the horse* is a metaphor for the Word of Christ, with which He created all things, and with which He will kill those that “gathered to make war with the One seated upon the horse” (verse 19).

One of the terrors of warfare is the shame of dying on a battlefield, body unburied and eaten by *the birds* that gather. Note the comments on 11:8 concerning this.

262 The expression, *the lake of fire* (ἡ λίμνη τοῦ πυρος/*hē limnē tou puros*) is only used in Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14 (twice), and 15. In 21:8 a slightly different expression is used, which might be translated “the lake burning in fire and sulfur.”

263 The term γεεννα/geenna is used eleven times in the Gospels and once in Jms. 3:6. The NIV translates it as “hell.” Its name comes from the Valley (*gay’*) of the Son of Hinnom, which was a ravine south of Jerusalem. At one time disobedient Jews worshiped Molech and sacrificed children there (Jer. 7:31 and 32:35). Later King Josiah put an end to that (2 Kings 23:10). It became a rubbish pit with smoldering fires (EBC-R, under Mt. 5:22). The term ᾅδης/*hadēs* is used about ten times in the NT, including Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, and 14. This term is translated “Hades,” “the depths,” “the grave,” and “hell” in the NT, and refers to the temporary place of judgment, where unforgiven sinners wait for their punishment. 2 Pet. 2:4 also mentions Tartarus, which the Greeks thought of as “a subterranean place lower than Hades where divine punishment was meted out” (BDAG).

9. Satan Defeated (20:1-3)

In 19:11-21 the Rider on the white horse defeated those who opposed Him, and in this section, His angel captures Satan.

20:1 And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having in his hand the key to the abyss and a huge chain.

The beginning of this sentence, *And I saw*,²⁶⁴ is used to open 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; and 21:1. Therefore, although there is no record of time in this verse, there is an impression that the visions seen in chapters 19-21 happen one after another. Mounce says, “the interpretation that discovers recapitulation for the segment 20:1-6 must at least bear the burden of proof.”²⁶⁵ In other words, the plain sense of this passage is that it is a single narrative of a series of events. The interpreter that says otherwise has to have strong arguments against a simple one-after-the-other reading of the passage.

Whether the *chain* is symbolic or some kind of an angelic *chain* is beyond our understanding. According to Morris,²⁶⁶ the *huge chain* is a metaphor, because a spirit cannot be held by a *chain*, but because we do not know about the chains of angels, it might be better not to give an opinion beyond noting that if it is literal then the *chain* that will be used will be unlike any *chain* that we have ever seen.

In 9:1-2 an *angel* was given a *key* to open the pit of the *abyss*, and in this text the *abyss* becomes a prison for Satan for a thousand years.

20:2 And he seized the dragon – the ancient snake, who is the devil and Satan – who deceived the whole earth,²⁶⁷ and bound him for a thousand years.

The binding of *Satan* is not described in detail. He is not captured by God, nor by the Son of God, but by an unnamed angel.²⁶⁸ Evidently there is not a prolonged battle. We only read that the angel *seized the dragon*. In the end it will not be a highly dramatic event. For some reason, there was a greater struggle to cast *Satan* out of heaven, as described in 12:7.

The term *dragon* reminds the reader of chapters 12-13, but the expression *the ancient snake* reminds the reader of Genesis 3:1-15. The beast and the false prophet are thrown directly into the lake of fire, but *the devil* is only

²⁶⁴ Καὶ εἰδού/Kai eidon

²⁶⁵ P. 352.

²⁶⁶ P. 235.

²⁶⁷ The expression *who deceived the whole earth* is missing in the two oldest manuscripts and many newer ones, but is found in the majority of manuscripts.

²⁶⁸ Morris, p. 235.

put in "prison." He has another role to perform *a thousand years* later. After that he, too, will be thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).

This is the first mention of the *thousand years*. This expression occurs six times in verses 2-7. Commentators have discussed the *thousand years* and the binding of *Satan* a great deal, most being influenced by their theological views. Our theology needs to be rooted in and grow out from our interpretations of Scripture, rather than the other way around. If the expression *a thousand years* is read here by someone without preconceived ideas, he would think this passage is telling us that after the Lord Jesus comes there will be a time period of *a thousand years*, during which *the devil* will be out of action and those faithful to Christ will reign as kings with Christ. The comments prior to 20:4 describe the various views of the millennium.

There are commentators (Ladd,²⁶⁹ for example) who say that this verse merely speaks of a long period of time, but not necessarily an actual *thousand years*. But we should remember that the God who gave the visions and words of the Book of Revelation is the One who sets the duration of the Kingdom of the Messiah. If Revelation is read as literature, the number *a thousand* speaks of perfection. If it is read as a prophecy telling the length of the Kingdom of the Messiah, the number is literal. Since Revelation is indeed prophetic literature, let us understand that the expression *a thousand years* speaks about a literal *thousand year* period of time whose actual duration reminds us of its perfection!²⁷⁰

Isaiah 24:21 tells us of an era in which the Lord will punish "the forces of the height in the height" and also "the kings of the land on the land." The next verse tells us "they will be gathered, prisoners in a pit, and they will be shut up in a dungeon and after many days they will be punished."²⁷¹

The interpretation of the verbs *seized*, *bound*, and in the next verse "threw," "locked," and "sealed" is also closely related to the problem of

269 P. 262.

270 If a friend is celebrating his one hundredth birthday, and we give him one hundred flowers, it is true that the number one hundred *symbolically* represents his one hundred years, but it is also true that there are *literally* one hundred flowers.

271 Besides OT prophetic hints of this, there are also pagan myths with similar themes. Beasley-Murray, p. 286, mentions Bundehesh, the sacred writings of the religion of Zend in Persia, in which there was an evil *snake* named Azi-Dahaka who was overcome by Thraetaeona and tied up with a chain in a mountain for nine *thousand years*. After that time he was freed by an evil spirit named Ahriman, and he reigned for *a thousand years*. After the *thousand years*, he was killed and a new world was created.

the interpretation of *a thousand years*. If the expression *a thousand years* refers to this present age and there is no Millennial Kingdom, then one must explain the matter of *Satan* being *bound* and thrown into the abyss, which is then sealed so he “cannot deceive the nations again.”²⁷² Can we say that in this age *Satan* is bound with a chain, and sealed in the abyss, so that he cannot deceive the nations? If we could say “Yes,” then perhaps there would be an opportunity for a non-literal interpretation for the *thousand years*, but as we look around we observe that right now *Satan* is deceiving people. It is very clear that in this verse we do not just have a partial limiting of *Satan*. *Satan* absolutely cannot deceive during the *thousand years*.

Mounce²⁷³ explains that the following texts are used by those who say that in some sense *Satan* is *bound* in this age: Matthew 12:29; John 12:31; and Colossians 2:15. It is good to examine those three verses and ask the following question: Are these texts saying the same thing as the declaration that *Satan* will be bound and thrown into the abyss which is then sealed so he cannot deceive the nations? This author says “No.” Those three verses do teach us that since the crucifixion, *Satan*’s power has been limited. It is true that he no longer has the power to do what he could do before the Cross. But one thing he still can do is deceive the nations!

Mounce²⁷⁴ gives a few texts showing *Satan* to be very active in this age: Acts 5:3; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4; 11:14; Ephesians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:18; 2 Timothy 2:26; and 1 Peter 5:8. This author would add 1 John 5:19. All these verses should be examined, and this question should be asked: After *Satan* is *bound* with a chain and thrown into the abyss which is then sealed, will he be able to do the activities mentioned in these verses? This author says “No.” If *Satan* is actively deceiving now, then the *thousand years* that *Satan* will be in the abyss is not a metaphor for this present age. The *thousand years* will begin when Jesus Christ returns to this world.

²⁷² Actually, those holding that metaphorical understanding would also need to explain what 20:7 means when it says that “when the thousand years are brought to an end, *Satan* will be loosed from his prison.”

²⁷³ P. 352.

²⁷⁴ Pp. 352-353.

20:3 And he threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it over him so that he cannot deceive the nations again, until the one thousand years are brought to an end. And after these things he must be loosed for a brief time.

Satan is seized by the unnamed angel. He is thrown into the *abyss*, and will be there for a *thousand years*. This description of Satan's capture emphasizes that he absolutely will not be able to *deceive the nations* during the Millennial Kingdom.

C. The Millennium and Judgment (20:4-15)

Only in these twelve verses do we see that the coming Messianic Kingdom will last one thousand years. Three verses tell what will happen during the time of that Kingdom, four verses tell about the final rebellion, and five verses tell about the Final Judgment. Little is revealed here about the Millennial Kingdom itself. Chapter 20:4-6 tells about those reigning in the Millennial Kingdom.

This very brief description of the Millennial Kingdom²⁷⁵ is fitting because the purpose of the Book of Revelation is not to simply inform us about how the world will end, but to motivate us so that we will be victors that live to please the Lord, victors who may have to suffer now, but who will, when the time comes, be richly rewarded. Indeed so much has been already told about those who will reign with Christ during those thousand years. They are mentioned in:

1:3 “Blessed ... are those who... keep those things written in it”

2:1-3:22 “the victors”

4:4 “the twenty four elders”

6:9 “the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they were holding on to”

7:14 “the ones coming out of the Great Tribulation... have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”

11:18 “the time to give wages to Your servants, the prophets, and to the saints and to those who fear Your name, small and great”

12:11 “And they were victorious over him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives unto death”

²⁷⁵ The Thousand Year Kingdom is often called the Millennium or the Millennial Kingdom, from the Latin word meaning “thousand” and from the Latin word meaning “year.”

- 14:4-5 "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes... and on their lips no lie was found, for they are blameless"
- 15:2 "Those who were victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing by the sea of glass, holding zithers from God."
- 17:6 "And I saw that the woman was drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus"

This is not a minor theme. Throughout the Book of Revelation we learn about those that will be reigning with the Lord Jesus during His Thousand Year Kingdom. Therefore, what else would He need to explain about the activities of His people in the Kingdom? Rather than being disappointed about the lack of detail in the coming Kingdom, we should focus our thoughts and energy on making sure that we are not only citizens in that Kingdom, but victors! Did He not say "Look! I am coming suddenly, and My wages are with Me to pay out to each according to his deeds" (22:12)?

Ezekiel 36-48 is related to Revelation 20:1-22:5. In Ezekiel 36-37 the Messiah's Kingdom is described, with parables about the raising of Israel, meaning that Israelites will be gathered together in the land of Canaan as believers. Chapters 38-39 happen "after many days" (38:8). These two chapters tell of the war between Gog and Magog, which is also described in Revelation 20:7-9. Apparently, the Millennial Kingdom ends with this war. Ezekiel 40-48 contain a description of the New Heaven and the New Earth.²⁷⁶

In the discussion about the Millennial Kingdom, the problem of the future of the people of Israel on the earth has to be weighed. In Genesis 12:1-3, the LORD God made a promise to Abram: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you." In Genesis 35:11-12 the promise was passed on to Jacob: "...A nation and an assembly of nations shall be from you, and kings shall come out from your loins, and the land which I gave to Abraham and to Isaac to you I shall give, and to your seed I shall give the land."²⁷⁷

To this point it is clear enough. In the Old Testament the LORD God made promises to Abraham and his descendants of a bright and beautiful future.²⁷⁸ The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have not yet experienced the fulfillment of that promise. They now have some

²⁷⁶ Beasley-Murray, p. 289.

²⁷⁷ The same promise is developed in Gen. 46:3; Exod. 1:7; 2 Sam. 7:8-16; and Mic. 7:20.

²⁷⁸ Some of those promises are listed in the discussion of the various interpretations of the millennium, after the discussion of 20:8.

land, but they certainly do not have the peace and prosperity that is included in that promise. According to what is sometimes referred to as “Replacement Theology,” the place and rights of the people of Israel have been permanently given to the church of Christ, so that God’s promises to Abraham are completely fulfilled in the church of Christ. They say there is no special future for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They say the church has permanently replaced Israel in the plan of God. Those who hold this view should read Romans 9-11 carefully, because in those three chapters the Apostle Paul emphasizes that while Israel is being temporarily rejected the gentiles are coming to faith, but later when Israel is finally brought to faith, it will be like a complete resurrection for the earth. In Romans 11:15 Paul wrote, “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead?” He was writing about a future time when all the living physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will come to faith in Christ, and God will fulfill His promises to Abraham.

The metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11:17-24 says the same thing. In 11:24 Paul writes to non-Jewish believers, “For if you (gentiles) are cut off from the olive tree that is wild by nature (if you were taken out of unbelieving gentile humanity), and contrary to nature grafted into the cultivated olive tree (if you were placed into the family of God even though you come from a contrary humanity), how much more these, the natural branches, will be grafted to their own olive tree (how much more readily will the Jews, who are actually of the chosen people, be joined back into the family of God of which they had been a part)?

In Romans 11:25-26 Paul writes clearly, without metaphors: “...there is a hardening in part for Israel, until the fullness of the gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, the Deliverer shall come from Zion, and He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.”

When will the promise of “their acceptance” be fulfilled? When will the promise, “all Israel will be saved” be fulfilled? Unless these promises are fulfilled during this age, which seems very unlikely, they will have to be fulfilled during the Millennium.

The time period “one thousand years” is mentioned six times in 20:2-7, so even though this is a commentary, not a book on theology, it is appropriate to briefly describe the three primary ways those thousand years are interpreted by Christian theologians. Unlike one’s approach to the Tribulation, the approach a person takes on this issue is crucial to understanding the Book of Revelation.

Premillennialism

This approach says that the Lord will return to earth *before* the Millennium. The expression “a thousand years,” which is used in 20:2-7, is understood to be a literal thousand years. Premillennialism teaches that the thousand year Kingdom of God is the time during which God will literally fulfill His promises to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. Most of the as yet unfulfilled promises that God has made concerning Israel will be fulfilled during those thousand years.

Amillennialism

This approach says there *will never be a literal* millennium, but the time period we now live in is the period the Bible symbolically refers to as the thousand years. Amillennialism teaches that the above mentioned promises are figuratively fulfilled in the church, and are never to be literally fulfilled in the national experience of a future generation of physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In their teachings, the church has permanently replaced Israel. Presbyterian or Reformed churches often hold this view.

Before the era of Augustine, who died in the year 430 AD, the church fathers took these verses literally. They believed that the Kingdom of the Messiah would last for a thousand years.²⁷⁹ But around the time of Augustine some Christian teachers were saying that those thousand years would be filled with material benefits and sensuous pleasures. Of course, there were good teachers that rejected those excessive teachings, but Augustine went further than that. He rejected them, along with the entire idea of a millennial kingdom! He did that by giving an allegorical meaning to Revelation 20. Augustine said that Christ bound Satan during His earthly ministry, the first resurrection was the spiritual birth of believers, and the thousand years was the time between Christ’s first and second comings.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Mounce, p. 358, notes that in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* 80 he said that well-taught believers “were assured of a resurrection of the dead to be followed by a thousand years in Jerusalem.”

²⁸⁰ Mounce, p. 358. Compare Augustine’s interpretation about “The Good Samaritan” (Lk. 10:25-37) in *Questions about the Gospels* (2.19). According to Augustine, the Samaritan represented Christ; the person who was robbed and beaten represented Adam; the bandits were Satan and demons; the priest and Levite represented the ministry of the OT; the inn was the church; and the owner of the inn was the Apostle Paul!

Postmillennialism

This approach says the Lord will return *after* the millennium. In this view, the human condition will get better and better, and finally the Lord will return.

This author takes the Premillennial viewpoint. Revelation 20:3 says that the devil is bound for the thousand years “so that he cannot deceive the nations again, until the one thousand years are brought to an end.” Certainly we may wonder if he will be bound with a figurative chain, a real chain, or a spiritual chain, but in what possible figurative sense could it be said, with the Amillennial view, that the devil is now bound to keep him from deceiving the nations? Remember 1 Peter 5:8, which says “Be self-controlled, be alert. Your enemy, the devil, as a roaring lion, *is walking around*, seeking someone he might devour.” If Revelation 20:3 and 1 Peter 5:8 are both about this era, then right now the devil is both “locked and sealed” in the abyss “so that he cannot deceive the nations,” but also prowling “around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” It is better to understand Revelation 20:3 will happen just before a yet to come literal thousand year period.

In fact, in the Bible the term “year” with a number modifying it is always literal. Even in the case of 2 Peter 3:8, which says “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,” the expression “a thousand years” does not mean “a very long period of time.” A real one thousand years is like a real 24 hour day for the Lord. In other words, there is a figure of speech in 2 Peter 3:8, but it is a simile as indicated by the expression “is like.” The presence of that simile does not justify interpreting the words “a thousand years” to mean “a very long period of time.” A helpful parallel is found in Psalm 139:12 which reads, “Even darkness does not darken before You, and night – like day – shines; as darkness, so light.” Just as real darkness poses no problem for the Lord God, so a real thousand years poses no problem for Him.

Here are some of the promises for the descendants of Israel in the Word that will be fulfilled during the literal thousand year kingdom:

a continuing and populous nation whose enemies will be cursed
(Genesis 12:1-3; 13:15-16; 15:5; 26:4; and 28:14).

possession of the land (Genesis 12:1; 13:15, 17; 17:8; and Deuteronomy 30:1-10).

an enduring Kingdom of David, ruled by a Son of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34 is probably the most well-known statement of the New Covenant, but see also Hosea 2:18-20;

Isaiah 42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jeremiah 32:36-44; and 33:14-22.

The Amillennial view must have some other explanation for the mention of the territory of Benjamin, the specific villages around Jerusalem, the towns of Judah and the towns of the hill country, the western foothills, and the Negev in Jeremiah 32:44, but to this author those sound like literal place names, places where God promises to restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah.)

If the Old Testament promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (men who understood the promises to be literal, men who knew absolutely nothing of a “New Israel” made up mostly of gentiles) are not to be fulfilled to a generation of their descendants, then it would appear as if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would have grounds for a complaint against God! Is it in keeping with the character of God to make promises to people and their descendants, and then create “spiritual descendants” that replace the people’s literal descendants? This would not be tolerated in human society. If I promise to give your children \$10 each, and then later I tell you that my own sons, Philip, Daniel, and Peter, are your “spiritual descendants,” and I have given them the \$10 each, I would have simply broken my promise. A faithful God would not change the terms of promises He makes!

Note in the precise context of the New Covenant promises to Israel, in Jeremiah 32:42, the Lord says, “For *just as* I have brought upon *this people* all this great evil, *so* I will bring upon *them* all the good which I have spoken upon *them*” (emphasis added). Those that would deny that all these promises will one day be fulfilled in a generation of physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must somehow be saying that the word “them” above does not refer to the expression “this people,” which surely refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!

Thus the Thousand Year Kingdom is to be a literal kingdom that lasts one thousand years. It is to take place on this earth, and it is a time when the literal physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob receive the fulfillment of the promises God made concerning them so long ago. Of course, they will have repented and believed in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. (See also Romans 11:11-32.)

Besides being a time and place for the fulfillment of God’s many promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob concerning their descendants, during this Kingdom martyrs and other faithful people will reign with Christ, according to 20:4-6. This is the fulfillment of the promises to victors in

chapters two and three, and other promises in the New Testament of special rewards for faithfulness.

In Hebrew literature outside the canon of Scripture, literature not inspired by God, the concept of the Messiah's Kingdom is also developed.²⁸¹

The Millennium needs to be studied in light of the entire Bible. The student that begins with the New Testament might not understand some of the New Testament passages on the Millennium which are undergirded by Old Testament passages, but if a student gains solid understanding of the Old Testament background of those New Testament passages, her or she will have an easier time understanding what the New Testament says about the Millennium. Here are some passages from the Old and New Testaments that should be carefully considered, in studying the issue of the Millennium: 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:6-9; Isaiah 29:18; 30:19-33; 33:20; 35:1-10; 42:4; 56:7; 65:8-16; 66:6-21; Jeremiah 23:3-6; 31:12; 31:31-34; 33:18; Ezekiel 20:33-39; 34:25-27; 37:1-28; 40:1-48:35; Daniel 2:35-45; 7:13-14; 12:1-3; Amos 9:11-14; Zechariah 14:1-11; 16-21; Matthew 19:28; 25:14-46; Acts 15:16-18; Romans 11:25-27; Revelation 1:7; 2:25-28; 19:11-21; and 20.

I. Those who Reign with Christ for a Thousand Years (20:4-6)

20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and authority to judge²⁸² was given to them. And I saw²⁸³ the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God.²⁸⁴ And I saw as many as had not

²⁸¹ Beasley-Murray, pp. 288-289, mentions thirteen opinions about the length of Messiah's Kingdom that were held by the rabbis of Israel. The teachings of those rabbis vary greatly. Rabbi Akiba says that the Kingdom of the Messiah will last 40 years, based on the time Israel was in the wilderness. Based on Isa. 63:4 and Ps. 90:4, there were rabbis who said that the Messiah's Kingdom would last 365,000 years! According to Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose from Galilee it would last *a thousand years*.

²⁸² Here translated *authority to judge was given to them*, a more word for word translation would be “judgment was given to them.”

²⁸³ The words *I saw* here and in the next sentence are added to make the English sentence easier to understand.

²⁸⁴ See the discussion under 1:2 concerning this pair of words, *testimony* and *word*.

worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark upon their forehead or upon their hand. And they came to life and they reigned²⁸⁵ with Christ the thousand years.

This verse shows that God's promises of *thrones* for the victors of the seven churches (and thus to victors in our generation), and to those who had *not worshiped the beast*, and to the martyrs in the Tribulation, are fulfilled during *the thousand years*. All victors will reign *with Christ the thousand years*. He promised, "Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near" (1:3). Polycarp understood this blessing. Perhaps that was why he was able to receive his martyrdom with such peace and gratitude.²⁸⁶

In the Old Testament the term *judge* has a close connection with ruling. Compare the whole Book of Judges and how those who were called "judges" ruled over the nation of Israel. Also in Psalm 9:5, God "judged" from His throne. So, in saying that those victors were given *authority to judge*, it means they were given *authority* to rule. But this is made very clear at the end of the verse, where it says they *reigned with Christ*.

Note how similar the words *And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God* are to Revelation 6:9, "...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they were holding on to." That is certainly not a coincidence!

Remember that in 2:26 the Lord said, "To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations." Here, near the end of the Book of Revelation, at the beginning of the Thousand Year Kingdom, that promise is fulfilled. This is the emphasis in Revelation 20.

In Genesis 1:26-28 mankind was created and given dominion over the earth. Mankind has continually failed in that role. But during the Millennial Kingdom, and also on the New Earth in eternity, those who have been redeemed by Christ and do His will to the end (2:26) will carry out that role well. They will bring the earth under their dominion as they reign *with Christ*. One of the purposes of the Millennial Kingdom is to proclaim the glory of God on this earth. If there were no Millennial Kingdom, if this earth were destroyed without a righteous age, then it

²⁸⁵ Note the comments on the verb here, βασιλευω/basileuō, in the footnote under 5:10.

²⁸⁶ See the description of the death of Polycarp in the discussion of Rev. 2:8.

could be said that Satan was successful in ruining this earth, and God failed in restoring it.

The theologians mentioned above who say that the expression *the thousand years* refers to this present age, and that there is no literal Thousand Year Kingdom, would say the words *they came to life and they reigned with Christ the thousand years* mean that we “come to life in Christ” like what is written in John 5:25, which says “...the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those that hear shall come to life.” According to them, this refers to the “spiritual resurrection” we experienced when we first believed in Christ. But in 20:5, the very next verse, the word translated *came to life* is also used (there it is translated “come to life”).²⁸⁷ In verse 5, this word refers to a physical resurrection. It is very unlikely that one term would mean two such different things, in such a close context, without a clarification in the text.²⁸⁸

This also relates to Daniel 7:27 which says, “And the kingdom, the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under all the heavens are *given to the holy people* of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship Him and obey” (emphasis added). So about 600 years before John saw this vision, Daniel had already seen a vision in which the Kingdom of God was “given to the holy people of the Most High.” In the Book of Revelation we are learning about who “the holy people of the Most High” are. They are the victors! Further, we learn that *they reigned with Christ the thousand years*. The question of whom they will reign over is discussed under 22:5 below.

20:5 (And the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.) This is the first resurrection.

The expression *the first resurrection* needs some clarification. Apparently it refers to the entire *resurrection* of the righteous, which comes in several stages, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 (“For just as in Adam all die, thus also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in its own proper order: Christ, the firstfruits, then those of Christ in His appearing. Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power”).²⁸⁹ If this is the case, then what is described in 20:4 is a part of *the first resurrection*. It

²⁸⁷ The word translated *came to life* in verse 4, and translated “come to life” in verse 5 is εζησαν/εζέσαν from the root ζω/ζαō. This term refers to the resurrection of the physical body in Jn. 11:25; Rom. 14:9; Rev. 1:18; 2:8; and perhaps also in 13:14.

²⁸⁸ Mounce, p. 356. Henry Alford, in *The Greek Testament*, 4:732, also brings this up and also is sure that the two uses of εζησαν/εζέσαν have the same meaning.

²⁸⁹ Note also Lk. 14:14 and Acts 24:15.

is a significant part of that *resurrection*, because in it the victors of all ages and the martyrs of the Tribulation are raised from *the dead*. Remember that at the beginning of the Tribulation, all saved people, living or *dead*, were taken up, raptured, to be with the Lord, as taught in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, and, especially, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, which says “we all will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” It hardly seems reasonable to say that Paul intends to say “we all will be changed in several phases....”

But who are *the rest of the dead*? According to this verse, they are not going to participate in the Millennial Kingdom. They could be:

1. Tribulation-era victors that were not beheaded
2. Church-era believers that are not victors
3. Old Testament-era believers that are not victors
4. Tribulation-era believers that are not victors
5. Unbelievers of all ages

The first possibility is unlikely, because the language of 20:4 seems to include all the various sorts of believers that are victors. It does not seem to be exclusively about beheaded victors.

The second possibility is unlikely. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Paul says “For the Lord Himself at a shout of the archangel, and at the trumpet of God, shall come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ shall be raised first; then we the living, the remaining, together with them shall be snatched away in clouds into meeting the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.” Even more precisely, note 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, which says “we all will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.” It hardly seems reasonable to think that Paul intends to say “we all will be changed, but in several phases, depending on whether or not the person is a victor.” So, at the beginning of the Tribulation, all saved people, living or *dead*, faithful believers and sinful believers, will all be taken up, raptured, to be with the Lord. In other words the congregations in Philadelphia and in Laodicea are treated the same way at this point, so it is inappropriate to separate out sinful believers in understanding Revelation 20:5.

The third possibility is also unlikely, because 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 would apply to them too.

The fourth possibility cannot be eliminated. The resurrection and rapture of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 will have already happened before they come to faith, so it is not relevant. If any that come to faith in Christ end up compromising, and worshipping the beast, even

though they have believed in Christ, this verse seems to indicate that they will not participate in the Thousand Year Kingdom. However, it is important to understand that this sort of Tribulation believer is not mentioned in Revelation 6-18, so it seems unlikely that they would be referred to here.

The fifth possibility seems to be the strongest option. Unbelievers will not be resurrected in order to enjoy the Millennial Kingdom. They will be resurrected later so that they can be judged at the great white throne judgment described in Revelation 20:11. Furthermore, the term *dead* in this verse is very appropriate for those that have not believed in the Lord Jesus.

The reader that is a believer who is not interested in becoming a victor may ask, “Where will I be in all this?” That might be a reasonable question, but the fact is that the wording of 20:4 excludes him (see this discussion of 20:4), and the wording of 20:5 ignores him! His place “in all this” is of no interest to the Lord, and it is not described. Instead, to such a believer, the Lord has said over and over again in chapters two and three, “Repent!” Perhaps their status will be much more pleasant than it is now, perhaps not, but the Lord does not speak of it.

In this text, we are told there are a *thousand years* between the two resurrections. Indeed, in Daniel 12:2 (“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, and some to reproach and everlasting contempt”) we can understand that there is a difference between the *resurrection* to eternal life and the *resurrection* to eternal judgment, but the element of a *thousand years* between the two resurrections is only clearly described in Revelation 20.²⁹⁰

20:6 Blessed²⁹¹ and holy is he that has a part in the first resurrection. Upon them the second death has no authority, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and they shall reign²⁹² with Him a thousand years.

In accord with the tone set in 1:3, it is best to consistently understand the seven blessings in the Book of Revelation to be for those that obey what is written in the book. If so, then this one, too, is for obedient believers, even if that distinction is not made explicit in this passage. That raises the question as to whether carnal believers, saved but not at all obedient, will have *a part in the first resurrection*. Very little of their story is told in

²⁹⁰ Beasley-Murray, p. 296.

²⁹¹ This is the fifth use of the word *blessed*. Note the discussion under 1:3.

²⁹² βασιλευω/basileuō

the Book of Revelation. The Lord is not interested in encouraging an “as long as I’m saved” attitude.

Just as there is a *first* and a second *resurrection*, so there is a *first* and a *second death*. The first *death* is the *death* that can be seen, physical *death*, while the *second death* is everlasting judgment.

2. Final Rebellion (20:7-10)

At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released. He will lead a rebellion against Christ. The people of this rebellion will be devoured with fire from the sky.

20:7 And when the thousand years are brought to an end, Satan will be loosed from his prison

The discussion of *the thousand years* is very brief, but as noted in the discussion before the comments on 20:4, John has already told the readers what will happen during that time.

At the end of *the thousand years*, *Satan* is released and once more will deceive the nations. Satan does not free himself, but he is *loosed from his prison*, because the Lord God has a predetermined purpose.

20:8 and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog! – to gather them to war. Their number is as the sand of the sea.

In accordance with his character, the final work of Satan is to *deceive the nations*.

After the Lord Jesus Himself reigns on the earth for a thousand years, a golden era for mankind with a perfect environment filled with the wisdom and justice of the Lord Jesus, there comes a moment when many will join Satan and oppose Christ. This event proves that unredeemed human beings are inherently evil. The unredeemed human heart is always evil, even in a perfect environment. The problem is man himself, not his environment, his background, or influences from outside. In 20:3 we read that Satan will be “loosed for a brief time,” so it appears that those people will be easily deceived!

Who are those deceived by Satan in the Millennial Kingdom? It is strange that there are people who are willing to oppose Christ in the Millennial Kingdom. Those alive after the Tribulation, who believed in the Lord Jesus during the Tribulation, will enter the Millennium with their physical bodies, and they will be able to have children and grandchildren (Isaiah 65:20-25). A portion of their descendants will believe and stand with

Christ at the end of the thousand years, but a portion will not believe, and at the end they will be deceived by Satan.

The expression *Gog and Magog*, suddenly appearing in the passage, does not mean that those gathered for war are all from two particular places called *Gog and Magog*. The expression clearly points the reader back to the prophecy of Ezekiel 38:1–39:16, which is a prophecy in which *Gog and Magog*, with a vast army of many nations, attack Israel, and are themselves completely destroyed. Note that the Revelation text indicates that those gathered are of the *nations in the four corners of the earth*, and in Ezekiel 38:1–39:16 there is a repeated emphasis on the many *nations* that accompany *Gog and Magog* into battle (note Ezekiel 38:8, 9, 15, 22, 23; and 39:4). It is as if this passage in Revelation 20:8 is exclaiming “Ezekiel’s prophecy about Gog and Magog is being fulfilled!” In Ezekiel 36–37 there is a prophecy about the renewal of the people of Israel in the land of Canaan at the beginning of the Kingdom of the Messiah, and after it, in chapters 38–39, there is a prophecy about the war of *Gog and Magog*. According to Ezekiel 38:2 *Gog* is “the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal.”²⁹³ The name *Gog* appears only in 1 Chronicles 5:4; Ezekiel 38–39; and 20:8. In Genesis 10:2 and 1 Chronicles 1:5 we read that *Magog* was Noah’s grandson. In Ezekiel 38:2 and 39:6 we read that *Magog* is an ethnic group to the north of Israel that is an enemy of the people of God. In a clay letter found at Tel el Amarna, the term *Gog* refers to tribes near northern Israel.²⁹⁴ In any case, the reader should review Ezekiel 38–39 to see a more detailed prophecy concerning this last battle.

20:9 And they advanced over the breadth of the earth and encircled the camp²⁹⁵ of the saints, that is,²⁹⁶ the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven from God²⁹⁷ and devoured them.

This is an amazing rebellion. It is massive, yet it is described in just one sentence. It is not difficult for the Lord to dispose of evil, because He is

²⁹³ According to Mounce, p. 362, “Meshech and Tubal are not the original forms of the names Moscow and Tobolsk.” Meshech and Tubal were two ancient ethnic groups in Asia Minor which were also called Moschi and Tibareni.

²⁹⁴ Beasley-Murray, p. 297. These letters were written around 1350 BC.

²⁹⁵ The word translated *camp*, παρεμβολη/parembolē, was generally used for an army *camp* or barracks, but was also used of the *camp* of the people of Israel in the wilderness.

²⁹⁶ The word καὶ/kai is normally translated “and,” but it can mean *that is*. It seems to have that meaning here, so that in this verse the *camp of the saints* is the *beloved city*.

²⁹⁷ The oldest manuscript and the majority of manuscripts include the words *from God*, but one old manuscript and a few later ones omit *from God*.

the Almighty. In our times it is rare for evil to be destroyed like this, but when the final rebellion arrives, He will deal with it easily.

The expression *the beloved city* refers to Jerusalem, which is the opposite of Babylon.

In 2 Kings 1; Ezekiel 38:22; and 39:6 we see that *fire came down* from above. In apocalyptic literature outside of the Word of God, for example 2 Esdras 13:1-12, almost the same thing is recorded. Those who gather to oppose the Messiah will be *devoured by fire*.

20:10 And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Finally, the last deception of *the devil* ends with him being *thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur*.

In 19:20 the *beast* and *the false prophet* were the first to be *thrown into the lake of fire*. In this text *the devil... was thrown into the same lake of fire and sulfur*. Finally, according to 20:14-15, “death and Hades” and “anyone... not found written in the book of life” are thrown into *the lake of fire and sulfur*. In Matthew 25:41 we read that “the eternal fire” is prepared for “the devil and all his angels.” Those who join *the devil* in his rebellion will join in his punishment.²⁹⁸

Thus the Thousand Year Kingdom is described. *The devil* will be freed, and will deceive all the unbelievers among those born to the people in the Thousand Year Kingdom (those deceived have regular bodies and can still sin). They gather to somehow do battle against the King. Note that the King of kings does not hunt down His enemies to kill them. Instead they are gathered together to kill Him!

3. White Throne Judgment (20:11-15)

After the final rebellion comes the final judgment. A “great white throne” appears, and heaven and earth disappear. The time of the Millennial Kingdom is completed. The judgment described here is for those who have never believed in the Lord Jesus. Based on their works, they will be thrown into the lake of fire. They are judged and sentenced according to their deeds.

²⁹⁸ Ladd, p. 270.

20:11 And I saw a great white throne, and the One seated upon it, from before whose presence²⁹⁹ the earth and the heaven fled,³⁰⁰ and no place was found for them.

The *throne* of God drew most of John's attention in 4:2. This is even more so in 20:11 at the time the *earth and the heaven fled*, as was prophesied in Isaiah 51:6 and 2 Peter 3:11-13.³⁰¹

The identity of *the One* who sits on the *great white throne* is not stated in this text. In Revelation 4-5 God the Father sits on His *throne*, but in 3:21 we read that the Lord Jesus will also sit on the *throne* of His Father! In John 5:22, 30; and 8:16 it seems that the Lord Jesus will be the judge.

It is difficult to be certain that the *great white throne* is precisely the same *throne* that the Lord Jesus promised to the victors in 3:21. If it is the same, it means that the victors will join in the judgment of the unbelievers. In 1 Corinthians 6:3, the Apostle Paul says "Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more the things concerning this life!"

20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And books³⁰² were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book³⁰³ of life. And the dead were judged from what was written in the books, according to their deeds.

In 20:5 we read "And the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished." In this verse they have been raised in order to be *judged*. Here they are called *the dead, the great and the small*. They were not raised or "raptured" before the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). They are not those martyred because they would not worship the Anti-Christ. The martyrs' resurrection was described in 20:4. The ones called *the dead* in this verse are those who never believed in Christ.

Those raised in the first resurrection (20:4) enter into eternal glory, but those who are raised in the second resurrection (20:12) are still called *the dead*, and they enter into eternal judgment.

²⁹⁹ The word translated *presence* here is literally "face."

³⁰⁰ This term, φευγω/pheugō, means *fled*, as in Mt. 3:7 and 24:16.

³⁰¹ See also Mt. 5:18; Mk. 13:31; 1 Cor. 7:31; and 1 Jn. 2:17.

³⁰² In John's era, most long documents were recorded on scrolls. *Books*, bound in the basic format we still use today, were still fairly uncommon at the time Revelation was written. The term βιβλιον/biblion here was used of documents as brief as a certificate of divorce (as in the LXX of Deut. 24:1) and as long as the Book of Isaiah (as in Lk. 4:17).

³⁰³ The words *the book of* here in this sentence were implied, but not expressed, in the Greek.

If this is true, will believers not experience judgment? In John 5:24 the Lord Jesus answers “The one who hears My word, and believes the One who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has been transferred from death into life.” There is a judgment for believers, but it is not to decide who can enter the Kingdom of God. Its purpose is to assess each believer’s works to determine his or her rewards. That judgment is called the Bema Seat Judgment, named after the Greek word³⁰⁴ for the kind of seat Christ will sit upon when He assesses our works. Note Romans 14:10, “For we will all stand before the ‘bema’ of Christ” and 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the ‘bema’ of Christ, so that each may be paid back for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Note Appendix B for further discussion on the New Testament theme of rewards.

This same word, “bema” is also used in a secular physical sense in Matthew 27:19; John 19:13; Acts 7:5 (where it means “step”); 12:21; 18:12, 16, 17; 25:6, 10, and 17.

Those who are called *the dead* are judged *according to their deeds from what is written in the books*. Besides these *books* containing the records of *their deeds*, there is another *book*, *the book of life*, mentioned in 3:5.³⁰⁵ That *book* contains the names of all those that have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those who do not receive forgiveness through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God will be judged *according to their deeds*. The Word of God is very clear on this. See Psalm 62:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 2:6; and 1 Peter 1:17.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ βῆμα/bēma

³⁰⁵ See the explanation about *the book of life* in the discussion of 3:5.

³⁰⁶ The teaching of the Word of God is very different from the teaching of the rabbis of Israel. In *The Testament of Abraham* chapter 13 there is an angel who writes down the good *deeds* done by the people being judged, there is an angel who writes down the *deeds* of the wicked, and there is an angel who tests the *deeds* with fire. If the good *deeds* outweigh those that are evil, then that person escapes judgment (Ladd, p. 273). In the Word of God, good *deeds* are not weighed. Sin must be punished, either on the cross of Christ, or in eternal damnation. 1 Cor. 3:12-15 is not an exception, because it discusses rewards, not salvation.

20:13 And the sea gave up the dead in it,³⁰⁷ and Death and Hades³⁰⁸ gave up the dead in them, and they were judged each according to their deeds.

In order for the judgment mentioned above to happen, *the sea and Death and Hades* must give up *the dead*. No matter how he or she died, or what happened to his or her body after death, no unbeliever escapes! John repeats and emphasizes that they were *judged each according to their deeds*.

20:14 And Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Death and Hades seem to be the last enemies to be defeated by the Lord Jesus.³⁰⁹ After this, no one else will ever die. What is logically explained in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 and 15:54-55 is told in apocalyptic style in Revelation 20:13-14.

The second death is mentioned in Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; and 21:8.

20:15 And if anyone was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This verse appears to be a summary of the great white throne judgment. Here we learn that the only condition for being free from *the lake of fire* is that we be *written in the book of life*.³¹⁰ Those who do not have citizenship in the Kingdom of God will be *thrown into the lake of fire*. There is no other place for unbelievers.

The great white throne judgment stands between the Thousand Year Kingdom and the New Heaven and the New Earth. In preparation for that judgment, earth and sky (or heaven)³¹¹ flee. The New Heaven and the New Earth are not yet created. The New Heaven and the New Earth are never to be touched by sin.

³⁰⁷ There are interpreters who say that there is a contradiction between verse 11 when the earth has fled and verse 13 when *the sea gave up the dead in it*. In apocalyptic literature the author does not have to guard the order of stories with precision. Apocalyptic style allows certain freedoms like those described above (Morris, p. 241; and Mounce, p. 366).

³⁰⁸ The term ἀδησ/hades, which is translated *Hades*, is explained in the footnotes under the discussion of 19:20.

³⁰⁹ Beasley-Murray, p. 303; Mounce, p. 367; and Morris, p. 242.

³¹⁰ Note the expression *book of life* in the discussion of Rev. 3:5.

³¹¹ As noted earlier, the word οὐρανος/ouranos can refer to heaven or sky.

D. The New Jerusalem (21:1–22:5)

This final vision is given after the Millennium and after the great white throne judgment. The old heaven and earth are no more. Some³¹² might suggest that chapters 21 and 22 are not in chronological order, but the fact that there is no longer any night in 21:25 strongly suggests that chapters 21 and 22 are indeed chronological, so that 21:1–22:5 are about the Eternal State, which is after the Millennium and after the great white throne judgment.³¹³ This transition between the Millennium and the eternal kingdom (the “New Heaven and the New Earth”) is also clearly recorded for us in 1 Corinthians 15:24, which says “Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” In this vision the New Jerusalem is revealed as the capital (or center) of the new creation. Nothing at all is said specifically about the New Heaven, and very little is said specifically about the New Earth. People living outside the New Jerusalem but on the New Earth are almost completely ignored. In this revelation God tells us much more about the New Jerusalem. It is like a bride. The pace of the narrative here picks up dramatically. Verses 2–8 spill out one after another rapidly. God’s actual presence among the victors in the New Jerusalem is celebrated; and His comfort is celebrated. Verses 5–8 are spoken by the One on the throne, God the Father.

Here in this final vision, the theme of rewards for faithful believers is carried forward. This writer takes the view that only faithful believers, called victors in chapters two and three, will be allowed into the New Jerusalem. As the new capital of the New Earth, it is the seat of its government, and it is where those that are given authority to rule will dwell. This understanding, which is consistent with all that has been said through the book to encourage us to do His will to the end, is most clear in 21:24 and 26, where we learn that there are nations outside the New Jerusalem that bring their tribute to it. Because they are saved, they are not in the lake of fire; but they are not rewarded. They are in the

³¹² In the last chapter of his book, *Things to Come*, Dwight Pentecost discusses several of these opinions at length.

³¹³ Indeed, the burden of proof would be upon the interpreter that asserts that chronological order is broken in this section. The most difficult element here for a chronological order is the presence of the nations and kings outside the city, who bring their tribute to the city. However, right after they are mentioned in 21:24, we read in 21:25 that there is no more night there. It is most unlikely that the time frame has shifted back to the Millennium, because there is no indication that before or during the Millennium the sun and its daily cycle of light and darkness are no more.

Kingdom, but they are not reigning with Christ in the Kingdom. They are citizens, not rulers. It is also quite clear in 22:14, the last of the seven blessings of the Book of Revelation, which reads, “Blessed are they that do His commands, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.” Obedient believers will have the right to “enter through the gates into the city.” This would make sense to the original readers. They knew that Rome was the capital of the Roman Empire. They knew that those that ruled over the nations lived in Rome, and that those nations paid their taxes to Rome.³¹⁴

Readers of the *NIV* might object to this view based upon these verses:

- 21:24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.
- 21:26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.
- 21:27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.
- 22:14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.
- 22:15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

However, as explained below in the comments and footnotes on these verses, the word “into” in 21:24 and 21:26 can sometimes mean “to” rather than “into,” so it is very possible that the kings of the earth will only bring that tribute to the New Jerusalem, not into it. It is also possible that those kings are victors that somehow reside in the New Jerusalem, but are also out among the nations as necessary for the work of ruling.

As explained in the discussion on 21:27, the word “names” is not used in the original, but it is supplied by the *NIV* translators.³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Note also that it is the victors in 3:12 that receive the special promise, “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 out of heaven from My God.” That alone does not prove that only victors reside in the New Jerusalem, but it supports that idea.

³¹⁵ The word “names” is incorrectly included in the *NIV* and the *NET*, but correctly excluded by the *KJV*, the *ASV*, the *HCSB*, and the *ESV*.

Concerning 22:14, two things show that this verse is not telling us that all saved people will be allowed into the New Jerusalem. Firstly, there is a textual problem in this verse, and the better reading is “Blessed are they that do His commands...” See the footnote concerning that verse for more on that textual problem. Secondly, this is the seventh of the seven blessings of the book, all of which spring from and elaborate on the first blessing, 1:3, which reads “Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near.” These blessings are for the victors. They will reside in the capital city of the New Jerusalem, and there they will reign with Christ.

The final possible objection to the idea that only victors will live in the New Jerusalem is 22:15, which tells us “Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone that loves and practices falsehood.” That sounds much like the description of the unbelievers in the lake of fire in 21:8. But this list does not include “unbelievers,” and they are “outside,” not in the lake of fire. They are outside the capital city, and they are described with words that fit their activity on earth today. They are now like dogs, they now practice witchcraft, they are now sexually immoral, and they love to lie. These are harsh words, but we have already heard hard words: “So, because you are lukewarm, and not hot or cold – I will spit you out of My mouth” (3:16) and “...you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (3:17b). These harsh words in 22:15 reflect the activity of those that have believed in the Lord Jesus, but for various reasons they are not His disciples. They will not receive ten cities, or even five (Luke 19:11-27); and their works of wood, hay, and stubble will be burned up, so they “shall experience loss,” but they themselves “will be saved, but as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

1. Introduction: New Jerusalem (21:1-8)

As asserted above, excluding the visions of chapter 12, the text from 6:1-22:5 is presented in chronological order. Events are described in the text according to the order that they will actually occur. Because of that, it is natural and best to hold that the New Jerusalem will not be not a part of the Millennial Kingdom. The New Jerusalem will come out of the New Heaven, and it will come down to the New Earth.

21:1 And I saw a New Heaven³¹⁶ and a New Earth, for the first heaven and the first earth are gone,³¹⁷ and the sea exists no longer.

Verses 1-2 here are summary statements that will be repeated in more detail in the verses to come.

In Isaiah 65:17 the prophet says, “Look, I am creating a New Heaven and a New Earth, and the first things shall not be remembered, and they shall not go up upon the heart.”

John sees that *the sea existed no longer*. Interpreters have a number of reasons to explain this. One possibility is that in that era they were afraid of *the sea*, but Mounce³¹⁸ feels that a better reason is that in the Word of God the sea symbolizes wickedness, as in Isaiah 57:20 and Revelation 13:1.

21:2 I also saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

The *New Jerusalem* is just introduced here. Several spoken comments follow in verses 3-8, and the description of the *New Jerusalem* continues in 21:9-22:5.³¹⁹ Though John sees the New Heaven and the New Earth, what the Lord emphasizes to him is the *New Jerusalem*. This is the second city and the second “woman.” The use of the words *Holy* and *New* reminds us that the city of Babylon, in contrast, was wicked and old. The *New*

³¹⁶ This term, οὐρανός/ouranos, can be translated “sky” as in Mt. 16:1-3, but normally this word is translated *heaven*, as in Mt. 16:17. Perhaps in the Book of Revelation the difference between *heaven* and sky is less significant. For example, in Rev. 10:6 “...the One who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, and the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it.” In that verse the word οὐρανός/ouranos could mean *heaven* or sky, both were created by God. So also in Rev. 9:1, which says “I saw a star, fallen from the sky to the earth, and the key to the pit of the abyss was given to him,” the “star” which falls from the sky is an angel who lives in *heaven*.

³¹⁷ Although it may sound too simplistic, the verb here, ἀπέρχομαι/aperchomai, does simply mean “go away,” or literally “go from.” The same verb is used to make a similar statement in 21:4.

³¹⁸ P. 370.

³¹⁹ As the last chapter of Pentecost’s *Things to Come* explains in detail, some Bible teachers have greatly elaborated on this, suggesting that the *New Jerusalem* comes twice, and that *coming down out of heaven* somehow means that it does not make it all the way to the New Earth, but remains, at least for a time, suspended somewhere above the New Earth. However, these complicated schemes are foreign to the text for two reasons. Firstly, verse 2 introduces the New Jerusalem, and verse 10 begins the detailed vision about it. Secondly, the word translated *coming down* here and in verse 10, καταβαίνω/katabainō, includes the idea of landing on the ground. Note this verb’s use in Mt. 7:25 and 27. Certainly the rain came down and made it to the earth!

Jerusalem, which comes *down out of heaven from God*, seems to be a part of the New Heaven and the New Earth, which were just mentioned in the previous verse.

Some might say that it is impossible for a city to *come down out of heaven from God*. But doing that is certainly less difficult than creating a “New Heaven and a New Earth”!

This city comes *down out of heaven from God*. It seems to be a piece of *heaven* that comes down to earth as a place in which victors will fellowship with *God*, and from which victors will rule the New Earth.

Beasley-Murray³²⁰ writes, “...the importance of the new creation is precisely its setting for the city of God, even as the significance of the city is its provision of a context for the holy fellowship of God with his creatures.” In other words, the main purpose of the new creation is that in it God and His creatures can fellowship together in holiness. This author would add to Beasley-Murray’s comment that it is His victors, not simply His creatures, that will enjoy holy fellowship with *God* in the *New Jerusalem*. The situation of believers that are not victors is discussed under 21:24.

This city, *prepared like a bride adorned for her husband*, reminds us of what is written in Isaiah 54:5, “For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of Hosts is His name.”

The term *like* reminds us that the *bride* is a figure of speech, just as 17:18 explains that the great prostitute was a metaphor for the city of Babylon.

21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven³²¹ saying, “Look! God’s home is with mankind, and He will live³²² with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them.³²³

This is the central point. This sentence, spoken from heaven, summarizes the purpose of the Book of Revelation, and the purpose of the history of

320 P. 308.

321 The two oldest manuscripts read “from the throne,” but the majority of manuscripts read *from heaven*. Note that in verse 5 the One seated on the throne does speak.

322 The word translated *home* here is σκηνή/*skēnē*, which usually refers to a tent, and the word here translated *live* is σκηνοῦ/*skēnoō*, which usually means “live in a tent,” so this passage seems to draw from the OT tabernacle or “Tent of Meeting,” when God did *live* among His people.

323 The majority of manuscripts and the earliest manuscript exclude the expression “and be their God,” but some manuscripts including an early one include that expression.

mankind, which is the reward that each person who loves the Lord God longs for: *He will live with them.* Note that this verse is about God, who has been so hidden up to this point in the Book of Revelation.

This declaration fulfills some promises to victors, but it also fulfills some Old Testament promises to Israel. Leviticus 26:11-12 says, “I will set My dwelling place in your midst, and My soul will not abhor you. I will walk about in your midst, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people.” Note also Ezekiel 37:27-28; 48:35; and Zechariah 8:8.

21:4 And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more, or mourning, or crying, nor will pain exist any more, because the first³²⁴ things are gone.”

The previous verse told about the great blessing that the victors will enjoy because of God’s near presence, and this verse expands upon that idea. Revelation 7:17 tells us, with almost exactly the same wording, that God *will wipe away every tear from their eyes.* In these two passages faithful believers are encouraged that although in their present faithfulness there are tears and pain, the day will come when God Himself will personally comfort them.

What is said in 20:14 is further developed in this verse, so that all difficulties, like tears, *death, mourning, crying*, and *pain* will be wiped away. Compare Isaiah 35:10 and 51:11.

Isaiah 25:8 says, “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and He will turn away the reproach of His people from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.”

21:5 And the One seated on the throne said: “Look! I am making all things new!” And He said, “Write that³²⁵ these are the faithful and true³²⁶ words of God.”³²⁷

God the Father rarely speaks in the Book of Revelation. He is probably speaking in 11:3 and 18:4, and He does speak in 1:8 and finally here in 21:5-8. This is a clear observation. The reason for this pattern is not as clear.

³²⁴ This term, πρῶτος/prōtos, really means *first*, so that this verse says that all things from the *first* earth and the *first* heaven *are gone.*

³²⁵ The word here translated *that* (ὅτι/hotí) can also be translated “because.”

³²⁶ Many manuscripts read *faithful and true*, but some others read “true and faithful.”

³²⁷ The words *of God* (τοῦ θεοῦ/tou theou) are present in many manuscripts, but absent in others. Hodges considers them original in his Majority Text, but Robinson does not, in his Byzantine Text. Those two words are not in the Critical Text.

Perhaps for some reason God the Father chooses to stay in the background of these events, until the Son “turns over the Kingdom to God, even the Father, when He has destroyed all dominion and all authority and power,” as 1 Corinthians 15:24 describes. See the comments on this in the section entitled “The Theology of the Book of Revelation.”

The One on the throne affirms that He will be *making all things new*, and that this is all *true*. The words *Write that these are the faithful and true words of God* jar us back to our present situation and force us to respond: do we believe all this is *faithful and true* or not? He writes about the future to help us now. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, “if someone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away. Look, all things have become new.” That verse describes what has already happened to us as believers. The same thing will happen to the whole universe, as affirmed by Romans 8:21, “even creation itself shall be set free from the bondage of decay into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

We must be convinced of this truth, receiving these words as *faithful and true*. Only in that way will we be willing to struggle to win the rewards described in the Book of Revelation.

21:6 And He said to me,³²⁸ “I am here,³²⁹ the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To him that is thirsty I³³⁰ will freely give from the spring of the water of life.

The Gospel is stated here with great clarity: *To him that is thirsty I will freely give from the spring of the water of life*. Note that God gives people to drink from one of two drinks in the Book of Revelation: this *water of life*, or “the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath” in 16:19. In fact, the offer to *freely* drink *the water of life* is given twice (here and in 14:10), and the threat of “the wine of the wrath of God” is also given twice, in 14:10 and in 16:19. This perfect balance did not happen by itself!

Note too that this gift *from the spring of the water of life* is free. The man, woman, or child that is *thirsty*, that senses his or her need, is given this gift *freely*. The gift is eternal life. It can be given *freely* because the Lamb

³²⁸ The majority of manuscripts do not include the words “it is done,” but one very old manuscript does include those words.

³²⁹ In two ancient manuscripts this verse has different wording. They read “they have become.” The original reading is *I am here, the Alpha and Omega....* The verb γινομαι/ginomai can be translated *I am here* according to BDAG, a translation that makes much better sense than “I have become the Alpha and Omega.”

³³⁰ The use of the first person singular pronoun, εγω/egō, emphasizes that it is God Himself who *freely* gives this *water*.

of God has already been sacrificed, bearing our sin. He paid, so God can justly give this gift *freely*.

This verse reminds us of various Old Testament passages, including the beautiful invitation in Isaiah 55:1, “Ah, all you that are thirsty, come to the waters. And whoever has no money, come buy and eat! And come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” In Jeremiah 2:13 the Lord refers to Himself as the “source of living water.” See also John 4:10 and 4:14. The theme of thirsting for God is in Psalm 42:2-3; 36:8; and 63:1.

21:7 The one who conquers³³¹ will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

Right after the free Gospel is stated, the special blessings of diligent faithfulness are stated. The victors described in chapters two and three (and, by extension, all obedient believers) *will inherit these things*, meaning they will *inherit* the earth (as is clearly promised in Matthew 5:5). This is an explicit connection between being a victor and being an heir. Note the comments on this verse in the discussion on the Scroll and the Lamb, 5:1-7.

The word for *son* here does not always refer to one born physically into the family.³³² It can refer instead to one who is chosen by the father and adopted as heir. Overcomers, victors, those who conquer (as the word is used in this book) *will inherit* the Kingdom of *God*, and will have this special relationship with the loving *God*. Note Genesis 17:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14.

In 2 Corinthians 6:18, after telling the congregation about how they need to be holy, the Lord says, with the same word for *son* as is used here, “you shall be my sons and daughters.”

³³¹ The word used here is νικαω/nikaō, the same word used of the victors in chapters two and three.

³³² There is another Greek word, τεκνον/teknon, often translated “child,” which can be used to refer to all born-again children of God. However, the Greek word here translated *son* (ύιος/buios) sometimes refers to the child that a father will select as his heir, making it especially appropriate for faithful believers, those who are often called “victors” in the Book of Revelation. Here we see that they *will inherit these things*. John has never, until now, used this word, ύιος/buios, for believers except in a physical sense, as in Jn. 1:42; 19:26 or Rev. 2:14. Here and only here he uses it for believers in this sense: he is referring to believers that are obedient, believers that are victors. It describes something of that rich relationship they will enjoy with Him. It does not speak of all born again children of God. For that concept, John uses the word τεκνον/teknon. Jn. 8:35 and 12:36 are possible exceptions, but both of those could refer to believers that are, in Revelation’s terms, victors.

21:8 But for the cowards,³³³ unbelievers, sinners,³³⁴ loathsome people, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

These are all *unbelievers*. They never received the Lord Jesus as their Savior. They behave in accord with their lack of faith. And their judgment is sure: *their part will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur*.

Here in 21:6-8, the three options for all mankind are touched upon with particular clarity. There are those whom the Lord God freely gives from the spring of the water of life. Further, some of those, the victors, are given "these things" and the special status of "adopted sons" of God. But in sharp contrast, *unbelievers* are thrown into *the lake burning with fire and sulfur*. Be sure you have enjoyed drinking from that spring freely. Be sure, further, that you are a victor. And rejoice that having drunk freely from that spring, you will never experience that *lake burning with fire and sulfur*.

2. Walls and Gates of the New Jerusalem (21:9-21)

This passage is a more detailed view of what is said briefly in 21:2. Just as the angel gave him a close view of "the Harlot," Babylon, now with very similar terminology he gets a close view of "the Bride," the New Jerusalem.

21:9 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the wife,³³⁵ the bride of the Lamb!"³³⁶

As is clear in the chart in the discussion of 17:3, 21:9-10 is parallel to 17:1-3. Both are introductions to more detailed description of a city. In 17:1 we

³³³ The inclusion of *cowards* here brings up the question of what sort of fear those *cowards* have that resulted in them being in *the lake burning with fire*. EBC-R says they are "those who fear persecution arising from faith in Christ." But how much fear of persecution causes someone to be thrown into the *lake of fire*? EBC-R does not answer that difficult question. It is better to understand that these *cowards* were always too frightened to believe in the Lord Jesus as their Savior, and thus will be in the *lake of fire*.

³³⁴ The majority of manuscripts include the word *sinners* here, but the two oldest manuscripts do not.

³³⁵ The word used is γυνή/gunē, which is normally translated "woman" or *wife*. See the footnote on the discussion of Rev. 19:7 where this word also refers to *the bride of the Lamb*.

³³⁶ The two oldest manuscripts and many others read "the bride, the wife of the Lamb," but the majority of manuscripts read *the wife, the bride of the Lamb*.

read that “one of the seven angels having the seven bowls” said to John, “Come, I will show you...” Then in 17:3 we read, “And he carried me off in the Spirit into a wilderness,” where he saw Babylon. In 21:9-10 *one of the seven angels* that had *the seven bowls* brought John “in the Spirit to a massive and high mountain” to witness the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven to earth. The repetition here of a few phrases from the text about Babylon functions to emphasize that there are two different cities, each one inviting men and women to join them.

21:10 And he carried me off in the Spirit³³⁷ to a massive and high mountain and he showed me the holy³³⁸ city, Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God,

At the resurrection we will be with the Lord. But that does not mean we will spend eternity in *heaven*. The idea that when believers die they go to *heaven* and spend eternity there is actually not supported by the Word of *God*. After the Lord returns to earth He is going to establish His Thousand Year Kingdom on this earth, and believers will be on the earth, not in *heaven* throughout those thousand years, and even throughout eternity, on the New Earth. This *city*, the New *Jerusalem*, comes to the New Earth. We were created to live on and subdue the earth as God’s representatives, and finally the victors will do that well.

The Apostle John was taken to *a massive and high mountain* where he saw *Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God*. In Ezekiel 40:2 the prophet Ezekiel tells about how he was “brought to rest upon a very high mountain.” There he saw the temple of *God* being measured by a man whose appearance was like the appearance of bronze. Compare also Isaiah 2:1-3, which also mentions a *mountain* and the house of *God*.

In this city, the victorious Lamb will be able to fulfill all of His promises to the victors. Chapter 21:18 says, “and the city is pure gold.” The church in Laodicea was told to “buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so that you may be rich” (3:18). Perhaps this “pure gold” is the same as that “gold refined in the fire.” Revelation 22:2 mentions “the tree of life making twelve fruits according to the month.” Note also how the Book of Revelation begins and ends with the same “tree of life.” It is promised for victors in chapter 2 and it is described in the New *Jerusalem* in detail in chapter 22.

³³⁷ Note the footnote under 1:10 concerning the expression *in the Spirit*.

³³⁸ Some manuscripts add the words *the great*, so that this verse has “the great, the holy city,” but according to Hodges and the Critical Text those words were not in the original text.

21:11 having the glory of God. Its radiance is like the most precious jewel, like a jasper stone as clear³³⁹ as crystal.

In summary he says that the New Jerusalem has *the glory of God*. The precise meaning of the word translated *jasper*³⁴⁰ here is not clear, nor are the other precious stones in this section. What is clear is that these valuable stones speak of *the glory of God*.

21:12 It has a massive and high wall with twelve gates, and upon the gates there were twelve angels, and names were written upon them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel.

The fact that *the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel are written upon the twelve gates* of the city strongly suggests that *Israel* has a highly significant role in the city.

Chapter 21:12-13, about the *gates* of the New Jerusalem, agrees with Ezekiel 48:31-34, but the prophet Ezekiel did not mention *twelve angels*. The honor given the *twelve tribes of the sons of Israel* reminds readers of the special care given to them in Revelation 7:4-8.

21:13 From the east, there are three gates; from the north, there are three gates; from the south, there are three gates; and from the west, there are three gates,

The existence of *three gates* on each side of the city suggests that the city will be quite large. In Enoch 33-36 heaven also has twelve *gates*, *three gates* in each direction. That extra-biblical book tells how stars, wind, and snow burst through those *gates*.

339 The original here does not necessarily speak of the idea of “clearness.” The noun *κρυσταλλος/krustallos* is made into a verb, *κρυσταλλιζω/krustallizō*. Perhaps this text likens the *radiance* of the city to the clearness of a *jasper stone*, but it is also possible that some other aspect of “being crystal” is intended, like “shining like a crystal.” The verb *κρυσταλλιζω/krustallizō* only appears here in this verse, but the noun *κρυσταλλος/krustallos*, is used in 4:6 and 22:1.

340 This Greek word, *ιασπις/iaspis*, is translated *jasper* here. Mounce, p. 382, says it is a translucent green stone. Morris, p. 87, says it refers to a stone we now call *jasper* or possibly jade or even a green crystal. BDAG says, “In antiquity the name was not limited to the variety of quartz now called *jasper*, but could designate any opaque precious stone.” Clearly, modern names for precious stones may not exactly match the precious stones spoken of in Rev. 21 and 22.

21:14 and the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

With mention of the *twelve foundations* and the *twelve names of the twelve apostles*, we see that the *apostles*, and surely obedient members of the church, also will have their place in the New Jerusalem.

The mention of the *twelve gates* and the *twelve foundations*, all with their corresponding *names* written upon them are clearly parallel, and strongly suggests that both believing and obedient Israel and believing and obedient members of the church have significant roles in the New Jerusalem. Further, this parallelism supports the distinction between Israel and the Church that was discussed under 7:4.

21:15 And the one speaking with me had a gold measuring rod so that he might measure the city and its gates and its wall.

In Ezekiel 40-42 there was an angel who measured the temple of God with a *measuring rod*. In Zechariah 2:1-2 a *measuring* line was used to measure Jerusalem.

According to Mounce,³⁴¹ the *measuring* rods normally used at that time were about ten meters (33 feet) in length.

21:16 Now the city is laid out as a square, and its length is the same as the width. And he measured the city with the measuring rod at twelve thousand stadia;³⁴² twelve³⁴³ for the length, and for the width, and for its height, they are equal.

1 Kings 6:20 tells us that the inner sanctuary of the temple of God, the Holy of Holies, where the tablets of the law of God were placed, is cube-shaped, which seems to be the same as the New Jerusalem. During Old Testament times, God Himself dwelt in that cube-shaped inner sanctuary. In eternity, God Himself will dwell in the New Jerusalem (21:3), and there will not be a temple in it (21:22). According to the regulations of the Levitical priesthood only the High Priest could enter the inner sanctuary, only once a year, carrying a blood sacrifice. But in eternity each inhabitant of the New Jerusalem will dwell there with the living God.³⁴⁴

³⁴¹ P. 380.

³⁴² According to BDAG a σταδίον/stadion is about 192 meters, or one-eighth of a mile.

³⁴³ The majority of the Greek manuscripts repeat the word *twelve*, apparently for emphasis. Some manuscripts, including the two oldest, do not repeat the word *twelve*.

³⁴⁴ Beasley-Murray, p. 322.

The measurement taken by the angel and observed by John is *twelve thousand stadia*, about 2300 kilometers (1400 miles), and it is cubic or pyramidal in shape. Remember that in our era the distance between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea is about 110 kilometers (68 miles). So some interpreters consider the size of this city to be impossible. Actually, if we are thinking about “impossibilities” what is “more impossible”: a city which comes down from heaven or a city shaped like a cube measuring 2300 kilometers on each side? Also, the distance between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea on this earth is not at all relevant when discussing the size of the New Jerusalem on the New Earth!

This author holds that the Book of Revelation was inspired and written most likely during the reign of Domitian in Rome.³⁴⁵ When the first readers were reading this, the temple of God in Jerusalem had already been destroyed by General Titus, and the Jews had begun to ask when Jerusalem would be restored. There were Jews who believed that the Jerusalem built by God would reach as far as Damascus to the north and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and its height would reach the throne of God.³⁴⁶ The Book of Revelation answers questions like that.

But what is the reason that the Lord God picked the measurement of *twelve thousand stadia* for the New Jerusalem? Bauckham³⁴⁷ observes that *twelve* is the number of the people of God, for example in 7:4-8; 12:1; 14:1; (144,000 = 12 x 12 x 1,000); 21:12 and 14. Also he observes that in 7:4-8 and 14:1 the number *twelve* (or 12 times 12) is multiplied by a *thousand* to add the element of vastness.³⁴⁸ Thus the measurement of *twelve thousand stadia* shows the New Jerusalem is a very great city prepared for the people of God.

21:17 And he measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits,³⁴⁹ the measure of mankind, which is also the angel's.

According to 21:12 there was “a massive and high wall.” Remembering that the New Jerusalem is huge, it may be that *one hundred forty-four*

345 See the discussion of the date of writing in the Introduction.

346 Beasley-Murray, p. 322.

347 *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 36-37.

348 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 36-37, also observes that in this section, 21:9-22:5, the term “God” is used seven times (21:10, 11, 22, 23; 22:1, 3 and 5), the term “Lamb” is used also seven times (21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1 and 3). Note also the repetition of the term *twelve* or “twelfth” as discussed in the section entitled “The Interpretation of Numbers and Repetitions” and in the appendix on repetition.

349 One cubit ($\pi\gamma\chi\nu\varsigma/pēchus$) was about half a meter (1.6 feet) long. This word is only used four times in the NT, in Mt. 6:27; Lk. 12:25; Jn. 21:8; and Rev. 21:17.

cubits (about 61 meters or 200 feet) refers to the width and not the height of the wall. Maybe what is important in this verse is not the ratio between the wall and the city but the number *one hundred forty-four*, which is of course twelve times twelve.

21:18 And the building material of its wall was jasper³⁵⁰ and the city is pure gold, like pure glass.³⁵¹

The precious stones used for the walls are also mentioned in 4:3. But in that verse the precious stones describe the appearance of God's throne. The New Jerusalem is full of the glory of God, so that even *the building material of its wall* declares His glory.

According to 1 Kings 6:20, Solomon's temple was layered with *gold*. Also, the part of the temple repaired by Herod the Great was covered in *gold*. Because the temple faced east, when the sun rose the reflection of the sun's rays on the section in front of the temple was blinding, so that people could not stare at it anymore than they could stare at the sun.³⁵² But the entire New Jerusalem is made from *pure gold*. In 21:21 the *gold* is "like transparent glass."

21:19-20 The foundations of the wall of the city are arranged³⁵³ with every precious stone. The first foundation is jasper, the second

³⁵⁰ See the footnote on the word *jasper* under 21:11.

³⁵¹ As noted in the footnote under 4:6, this word (*βαλός/bualos*) can refer to *glass* or "crystal."

³⁵² This is according to Flavius Josephus, in *The Jewish War*, V. 6.

³⁵³ The verb here, *κοσμεω/kosmeō*, can either mean "to put in order, to make tidy," as in Mt. 12:44 and 25:7, or it can mean "to decorate," as in Mt. 23:29 and 1 Tim. 2:9. Although these two meanings are related, they give a different impression in this context. If the first meaning, "to put in order," is intended, then we get the impression that the twelve foundation stones each consist of one of these jewel stones, just as we will see that the each of the twelve gates consist of a pearl. If the meaning "to decorate" is intended, then we get the impression that the foundation stones are made of some other unmentioned material, and merely decorated with the jewels that are listed. This author prefers the first interpretation, and so translates as *the foundations of the wall of the city are arranged with every precious stone*.

sapphire,³⁵⁴ the third chalcedony,³⁵⁵ the fourth emerald,³⁵⁶ the fifth sardonyx,³⁵⁷ the sixth carnelian,³⁵⁸ the seventh chrysolite,³⁵⁹ the eighth beryl,³⁶⁰ the ninth topaz,³⁶¹ the tenth chrysoprase,³⁶² the eleventh jacinth,³⁶³ and the twelfth amethyst.³⁶⁴

The twelve parts of the zodiac each had a particular stone associated with it, and each of the twelve tribes of Israel was represented by one of those stones.³⁶⁵ This list uses those same stones, but in reverse order.³⁶⁶ This may symbolically illustrate the Lord's disapproval of the zodiac, but it is difficult to be certain about symbolic interpretations like this.

Although it is hard to be certain of the details, there is an overall impression that the beauty and the glory of the New Jerusalem is indescribable.

The idea that the city would be made up of various precious stones was prophesied much earlier in Isaiah 54:12.

³⁵⁴ According to Mounce, p. 382; and Morris, p. 253, *sapphire* (*σαπφειρος*/*sappheiros*) is a precious stone that is a deep blue with gold specks. In modern times this stone is called lapis lazuli. See the footnote under the discussion of Rev. 21:11 concerning this term, *ιασπις/iaspis*.

³⁵⁵ According to Mounce, *chalcedony* (*χαλκηδων*/*chalkēdōn*) is a green stone found near Chalcedon in Turkey.

³⁵⁶ *Emerald* (*σμαραγδος*/*smaragdos*) is a brilliant, green stone.

³⁵⁷ According to Mounce, *sardonyx* (*σαρδονυξ*/*sardonux*) is a stone with layers of red (*σαρδ*/*sard*) and white (*ονυξ*/*onux*).

³⁵⁸ According to Mounce, *carnelian* (*σαρδιον*/*sardion*) is a red stone which is often carved.

³⁵⁹ As is obvious from the meaning of the Greek name of this stone, Mounce notes that *chrysolite* (*χρυσολιθος*/*chrusolithos*) is a gold (*χρυσιον*/*chrusion*) or yellow stone (*λιθος*/*lithos*).

³⁶⁰ *Beryl* (*βηρυλλος*/*bērulloς*) is a green stone.

³⁶¹ *Topaz* (*τοπαζιον*/*topazion*) is a golden or yellow-green stone.

³⁶² According to BDAG, *chrysophrase* (*χρυσοπρασος*/*chrusoprasos*) is highly translucent.

³⁶³ According to Mounce, *jacinth* (*ύακινθος*/*huakinthos*) is a stone which is a purplish blue like what we now call a *sapphire*, but Morris says there is a chance that this stone is red.

³⁶⁴ *Amethyst* (*αμεθυσος*/*amethusos*) is a quartz which is purple. At that time people thought that amethysts were an antidote to drunkenness. The Greek name makes sense when you realize that *μεθυσος*/*methuos* means "intoxicated."

³⁶⁵ The modern names of most of these stones are difficult to determine because the colors and their descriptions vary greatly.

³⁶⁶ EBC-R. However, Osborne says that there is no real evidence for a list of the stones of the zodiac in the first century, so the connection of this list to the zodiac is uncertain.

21:21 And the twelve gates are twelve pearls – each one of the gates is made from one pearl. The main street of the city is pure gold, like transparent glass.³⁶⁷

The rabbis of Israel at that time also said the *gates* of Jerusalem would be made from *pearls*.³⁶⁸ A *pearl* like what is described here is hard to imagine, as is *gold* shining like *transparent glass*. Indeed, no one on this earth has *gold* that is truly 100% *pure, like transparent glass*.

According to 1 Kings 6:30 the floor of the temple of God was covered with *gold*. But according to this verse the *main street of the city* will be made of *pure gold*!

3. Glory of the New Jerusalem (21:22-27)

21:22 And I did not see a temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its temple.

The holy *temple*, with all its symbolism, is no longer appropriate because the reality described in the symbols has already come in the person of Jesus Christ who in the Book of Revelation is frequently referred to as *the Lamb*.

21:23 And the city has no need of the sun nor of the moon that they might shine on it, for the glory of God illuminates it, and the Lamb is its lamp.

As was emphasized in 21:11 *the glory of God* is shining in the New Jerusalem. This is also prophesied in Isaiah 60:19, which says, “The sun will no longer be your light by day, and the brightness of the moon will not shine on you; and the LORD will be your eternal light, and your God will be your glory.” Note that this is repeated in 22:5.

Verses 22 and 23 are parallel in structure. They both begin with something that is not in *the city*, and they both conclude with something about *God* and something about *the Lamb*.

³⁶⁷ See the footnote on this word under 4:6, which is here again translated *glass*. The idea of *transparent glass* would be more striking for the first readers, because most *glass* at that time was dark and impure. Only the wealthy could afford pure, *transparent glass*.

³⁶⁸ Collins, p. 1282.

21:24 And the nations will walk by its light³⁶⁹ and the kings of the earth carry the glory and honor³⁷⁰ of the nations to³⁷¹ it.

In this verse we see again the parallelism of the New Jerusalem and Babylon. In chapters 17 and 18 *the nations* and *the kings* are deceived and become drunk from Babylon (see for example 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9, and 23). But in the eternal age, *the kings of the earth*, who shall certainly be believers, will offer the riches of *the nations* to the New Jerusalem. In the end some of *the kings of the earth* are loyal to the New Jerusalem, not Babylon,³⁷² and the others, not mentioned here, are in the lake of fire.

Even the mention of *the nations* here is a surprise for the reader. This word³⁷³ is used 24 times in the Book of Revelation, and eleven of those times they are either rebelling against God or being judged by God. Only in 7:9 and 15:4 are they clearly for God.

There are people that will not have the privilege of living in the city. Called *the nations* here, *kings* will *carry* their tribute *to it*. Who are *the nations*? They cannot be the unbelievers – we know where they are. They cannot be the victors – they are sitting on thrones in the city. They must

³⁶⁹ The use of the feminine pronouns *αυτης/autēs* and *αυτην/autēn* makes it clear that *its light* refers to the *light* of the city, and *carry the glory and honor of the nations to it* refers to carrying these things *to* the New Jerusalem. Those *nations* will not live in the city, but their tribute will be brought there. Residence in the capital city is reserved for victors.

³⁷⁰ The two oldest manuscripts, and some other manuscripts, do not include the words *and honor*, but the majority of the manuscripts include those words.

³⁷¹ This word, *εις/eis*, usually means “into,” but as *BDAG* clearly demonstrates, it can also mean *to*. Note the use of *εις/eis* in for instance Mt. 17:27 “...go *to* the lake” (Peter did not go *into* the lake!); Jn. 4:5 “He came *to* a Samaritan town called Sychar,” (even though in Jn. 4:28 and 30 we see that He did not actually go *into* the town); and Jn. 11:31 “...she was going *to* the tomb” (she did not go *into* Lazarus’ tomb, which still had the stone over the entrance). The meaning *to* is also preferred here in Rev. 21:24, because we read in 22:14 that only those that receive the blessing that is such a major theme in Revelation have the right to “enter through the gates into the city,” and apparently those outside, whose tribute is brought *to* the city, do not have that right. If, however, as suggested in the discussion on 21:24, the kings mentioned here are victors that reside in the New Jerusalem but go out to rule the nations as that task requires, then the normal translation of *εις/eis*, “into,” would be appropriate.

According to Walvoord, J. B. Smith, in his commentary *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, agrees that the use of *εις/eis* here does not indicate that they entered into the city.

³⁷² Bauckham, p. 314.

³⁷³ εθνος/ethnos

be the citizens of the Kingdom, those that believed in Christ but did not become victors. They believed,³⁷⁴ but they did not live as followers of Christ. They are not heirs and owners of the Kingdom. We learn here that they *will walk by the light* of the New Jerusalem, and that their *kings* will *carry their glory and honor* to the New Jerusalem, but other than that, we are not told about their situation. It is not a theme upon which the Lord wants to dwell. They are saved, and thus not thrown into the lake of fire, but they did not get crowns and thrones. They are citizens of the eternal kingdom, but without rewards. They are outside the city, they enjoy the *light* from it and their *glory and honor* is carried to it, but they may not live in it. Here again this book discourages believers from being satisfied with mere citizenship, offering instead rulership!

The related expression, *the kings of the earth*, is used eight times in the book. In its first usage, in 1:5, we read that Jesus Christ is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” But that assertion *seems* in doubt as we read in 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9; and 19:19 that *the kings of the earth* are committing sexual immorality with Babylon, and finally joining the beast to gather and make war against the One seated upon the horse. In all those passages they are enemies of God and His people. But finally, here in 21:24, what was claimed in 1:5 is shown to be true for eternity. *The kings of the earth* are clearly demonstrating that the Lord Jesus is their ruler.

Who then are *the kings of the earth*? Because they do not live in the New Jerusalem, they seem to be merely appointed *kings*, much like local *kings* and governors whom the Roman emperor would appoint and remove throughout his empire. They seem to be vassal *kings* that owe allegiance and tribute to the King of kings and His victors in the New Jerusalem. (It would also be possible that they are victors, and they live in the New Jerusalem, only going out to *the nations* over whom they rule as needed. However, that seems unlikely, because as residents in the New Jerusalem the victors would be the *recipients of the glory and honor of the nations*, not the *bearers* of those gifts!)

If so, if indeed *the kings of the earth* are not victors, and must live outside the New Jerusalem, then they, the most honored among *the nations* there outside, function as mere tax collectors, who were the most despised of the nation of Israel! Thus the reader should not say, “Oh, I will be happy

³⁷⁴ Although the AV translates this “the nations of them which are saved,” there do not seem to be any Greek manuscripts with words like “of them which are saved.” These additional AV words, “of them which are saved,” should be considered accurate commentary, rather than translation of text.

to be one of the kings of the earth. I don't have to work hard today and become a victor, and I will still have a high status in the Kingdom."

The point of the text is not that there are *kings* out there, it is that even *the kings of the earth* will honor those in the New Jerusalem. That emphasis is a major theme of Isaiah 60 and 61.

- Isaiah 60:3 And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your sunrise.
- 60:5 Then you will look and shine, your heart will tremble and swell; for the wealth of the sea will be brought to you, the riches of the nations will come to you.
- 60:11 And your gates will always be open; day and night they will not be shut, to bring you the riches of the nations – and their kings being led forward.
- 60:16 And you will suck the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. And you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Note also Zechariah 14:14, which says "...and the wealth of all the surrounding nations will be gathered – gold and silver and clothing in great abundance."

Note the contrast between verse 23 and verse 24 concerning *light*. In verse 23 we read that "the glory of God shines on it, and the Lamb is its lamp," but here in verse 24 we read that *the nations will walk by the light* of the New Jerusalem. The victors, living in the city, have "no need of lamp and light, because the Lord God will shine on them" (22:5), but *the nations will walk by the light* of the New Jerusalem. Clearly the residents of the city have a far more wonderful experience of that *light*.

21:25 And its gates will never ever³⁷⁵ be closed by day (there will be no night there),

The first readers in Smyrna did not enjoy a feeling of safety. Their possessions and lives were threatened. In the New Jerusalem it is so safe and secure that *its gates will never ever need to be closed*. There are no more enemies threatening them. Even the nations that walk by the light of the New Jerusalem and bring their tribute to the city, as described in the previous verse and the next verse, are not allowed into the New Jerusalem. *Closed gates* do not keep them out. They do not go in simply because they are forbidden to go in. They lost that privilege when they rejected the exhortations to become victors during the previous era, our era right now!

³⁷⁵ The Greek double negative, οὐ μη/οὐ μῆ, is here translated *never ever*.

Note Isaiah 60:11 quoted above. Writing about that same age, Zechariah 14:7 says, "...not day and not night... at evening time, there will be light."

There are interpreters who say this verse contradicts 7:15 where it is said that they "are serving Him day and night in His temple." But there is no contradiction because 7:15 tells of the situation in the Millennial Kingdom, but 21:25 is about the eternal state. Indeed, here and in 22:5 we learn that by the time the New Earth and the New Heaven are created, there is *no night*.

21:26 and they will carry the glory and the honor of the nations to³⁷⁶ it,³⁷⁷

This idea, that the kings of the earth *will carry the glory and the honor of the nations to* the victors, living in the New Jerusalem, is so important to the purpose of the Book of Revelation that it is repeated here. We should reflect on this. The identity and the situation of *the nations* cannot be ignored. If the understanding presented above is correct, we are all again motivated to become victors, and never be satisfied with an "as long as I am saved" attitude.

21:27 and nothing defiled will ever³⁷⁸ enter into it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those written in the Lamb's book of life.

The reader has just read that those kings will bring their wealth to the New Jerusalem. This brings up the question, "Will they be able to enter into it?" And this verse answers that very question.

This tells of the holiness of the New Jerusalem. Although the NIV and the NET say something about those whose "names are written" in this verse, the word for "names" is not in the original Greek. Thus the KJV and the HCSB exclude the word "names." So this verse is not saying that just being saved is all a person needs to *enter into* the New Jerusalem. It

³⁷⁶ This is again the preposition εἰς/eis. Note the footnote on this word, here also translated *to* instead of "into," under the discussion of 21:24.

³⁷⁷ The issue of who will be allowed to enter into the New Jerusalem must have been an important issue for Christians of an earlier age, because there are at least four later Greek manuscripts (from the 11th c., the 14th c., and two from the 15th c.) that have the added words "so that they might go in" at the end of verse 26! Even so, it is mere wishful thinking to say that if they bring their *glory* and *honor* to the city, they will be allowed in. In other words, tribute brought to the New Jerusalem will not gain them access to the city. What will gain them access is holiness and obedience today! Be a victor!

³⁷⁸ The words *nothing... ever* translate the Greek double negative. See the footnote under 2:11 for more on the Greek double negative.

seems to be saying that the *Lamb's book of life* includes information about who is a victor and who is not. In other words, *only those so written of in the Lamb's book of life* may enter into the New Jerusalem.

This interpretation is supported by 20:12, which says “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged from what was written in the books, according to their deeds.” That verse seems to suggest that more is written about us in the *Lamb's book of life* than simply our names. Note also Psalm 56:8 and Malachi 3:16.

When and where are these *defiled* or *detestable* things being done? Certainly not in the time and place being described here. By that time, sin shall have been defeated and destroyed. It would be strange if this was referring to *defiled* or *detestable* things being done in the lake of fire. That is a place of judgment, not on-going sin. The only logical time and place for these *defiled* or *detestable* things is this era and this world. This is the sexual immorality of the congregation of Thyatira. This is the pride of the congregation of Laodicea. This is the sin of worldly believers that we know today!

Believers that live *defiled*³⁷⁹ or *detestable*³⁸⁰ lives in this age, believers that are not victors, who are called “dogs” in 22:15, will be disqualified from going into the New Jerusalem. They will never *enter into it*. Because they have believed in the Lamb of God, they will live on the New Earth, but because they did not live as victors in this age they will not live in the New Jerusalem.³⁸¹ Without distinguishing between the Jerusalem of the Millennium and the New Jerusalem, Isaiah 52:1 says “...the uncircumcised and unclean will never again enter into you.”

4. River of Life and Slaves of the Lamb in

³⁷⁹ This word, from *κοινός/koinos*, has two meanings. It can mean “together” as in Acts 2:44; 4:32; Tit. 1:4; and Jude 1:3, but the meaning *defiled*, as in Mk. 7:2, 5; Acts 10:14, 28; 11:8; Rom. 14:14; Heb. 10:29; and Rev. 21:27, is clearly this word’s meaning in this passage.

³⁸⁰ See the comments about this term, *βδελυγμα/bdelugma*, under the discussion of 17:1.

³⁸¹ It is true that in Gal. 4:26 Paul mentions a “Jerusalem that is above” which is free, but that allegorical discussion is far from the context of the New Jerusalem. All believers partake in that “Jerusalem that is above,” but only victorious believers will live in the New Jerusalem.

New Jerusalem (22:1-5)

22:1 And he³⁸² showed me the river³⁸³ of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming out from the throne of God and of the Lamb,

We have heard of this *water* before, for instance when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, but here there is a whole *river* of it! Of course we know its source. With a similar expression,³⁸⁴ John 7:38 mentions “rivers of living water.”³⁸⁵ The background for this expression is in Ezekiel 47:1-12. There Ezekiel tells about *water* flowing out from under the threshold of the temple, *water* which flows deeper and deeper, becoming a *river* entering the Dead Sea, whose *water* becomes fresh and full of fish. Ezekiel’s vision refers to the Millennial Kingdom, and Revelation 22:1 refers to eternity, but it is not strange that there is a similarity between the two time periods.

In passages like Exodus 40:12, 30; Leviticus 14:8-9; Isaiah 44:3; John 4:14, 7:38-39; and Hebrews 10:22, *water* is related to the Spirit of God, holiness and eternal *life*.

But that which, in the future Kingdom, will flow from *the throne* is now available from *the Lamb* through faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior! Chapter 22:17 says “And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wants receive the water of life freely.” This is what is sometimes called “the presence of the future.” That which can only be “tasted” through faith in Christ today shall be deeply experienced by those that believe and obey His will, and thus become victors, as expressed in chapters two and three.

³⁸² Although the *NIV* translates this “the angel,” the Greek does not identify that person. It must be the same angel that has been speaking to John since 21:9, there identified as “one of the seven angels having the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues.” Again in 22:6 that angel is not identified, despite the *NIV* translation. Then in 22:8 we see that John attempts to worship the angel that has been speaking to him.

³⁸³ Some manuscripts add the adjective “pure” to the description of *the river*, but Hodges does not consider that to be in the Majority Text, and it is not in the Critical Text.

³⁸⁴ Jn. 4:10, 11; and 7:38 use the expression “living water,” ($\text{Ὥδωρ} \ \zeta\omegaν/budōr zōn$) with a participle to express the idea of “living,” but in Rev. 7:17; 21:6; 22:1, and 17 the expression used is *water of life* ($\text{Ὥδωρ} \ \zeta\ωης/budōr zōēs$).

³⁸⁵ This is a literal translation.

22:2 in the middle of its main street, and on this side of the river and that side is the tree³⁸⁶ of life making twelve fruits according to the month, each month yielding its fruit. And the leaves of the tree are for the service of the nations.

As the differences in various translations suggest, it is not clear from the text whether the *twelve fruits* are *twelve different kinds of fruit*,³⁸⁷ or whether there are *twelve crops*.³⁸⁸

In either case the *main street* of that city will be beautiful! The various boasts of those seven cities of Asia Minor have long since faded away from human memory, but perhaps the original readers, residents of those seven cities, each with their particular boasts, were ashamed to have participated in the local pride of their place, once they began to realize how wonderful the New Jerusalem will be.

We saw the *tree of life* in both Genesis 2:9 and 3:22. Its *fruit* was promised to victors in Revelation 2:7, to the ones who return to their first love. The presence of the *tree of life* here, and the fact that there is no more curse (22:3), strongly suggest that the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden has been reversed.

Ezekiel 47:12 says, “And beside the river all trees of food shall go up on both its banks. Their leaves will not wither, and its fruit will not be used up. According to its month it will bear, for the waters from the sanctuary flow to it. And their fruit will be for food and its leaf for healing.” Although the Hebrew word³⁸⁹ that Ezekiel used certainly means “healing,” the Greek word³⁹⁰ in Revelation 22:2 is ambiguous. Most often in Greek literature the word means *service* or “attendance,” whether it is the gods, or parents, or young children, or animals, or plants, or temple buildings that receive *service*.³⁹¹ Among all that, it can also refer to medical *service* or healing, but that meaning, even though it fits well with Ezekiel 47:12, seems very unlikely here, because the *nations* will not need any healing by that point in time!

³⁸⁶ In the original language this word is singular.

³⁸⁷ The KJV, the HCSB, and the NET take it that way.

³⁸⁸ The NIV takes it that way.

³⁸⁹ *tērūpâ*

³⁹⁰ θεραπεῖα/therapeia. Note that even though many centuries later the English language picked up this word and gave it a medical meaning, that development is completely irrelevant to the meaning of the Greek word in our passage.

³⁹¹ Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, ninth edition, 1940.

As discussed under 21:24 above, *the nations* are composed of believers that did not become victors. They do not live in the New Jerusalem, but they walk in the light of that great city.

Certainly this expression is strange. It raises, but does not answer, the questions of what sort of service *the nations* will receive, and why they will need any service. However, do not be distracted into too much speculation here, and let these words have their intended effect: be a victor, with no need of any leaves! Be a victor, and live in a city with the privilege of eating the abundant fruits of the tree of life!

22:3 And there shall no longer be any curse,³⁹² and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His slaves serve³⁹³ Him, Even though this speaks of *any curse*, surely it especially refers to the primary *curse* of God given in Genesis 3:14-19. The existence of the “tree of life” also mentioned in Genesis 3 strengthens the connection between this passage and the *curse* in Genesis 3. Now that the *curse* is removed, the fruit of the tree of life can be eaten, as in 22:2 and 14. *His slaves* there in the New Jerusalem are the victors.

22:4 and they shall see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.

In 1:16 it says, “His face was like the sun shining in its power,” but here we read that “His slaves,” living there in the city, *shall see His face*, something not possible for even Moses (Exodus 33:20 and 23). As Psalm 42:2 and Matthew 5:8 remind us, seeing *His face* has been the longing of godly people throughout the ages.

We also read the promise to the victors that the *name* of God will be written on them (3:12). Also, 14:1 tells of “one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads.”

There is actually something wonderful in this verse. Notice that it speaks of both *the face* of God and the *face* of the victors that will live in the New Jerusalem. Nowhere else in all the Scriptures do we have a sentence

³⁹² This word, *καταναθέμα/katanathema*, is only used here in the NT. The normal word for *curse*, *κατάρα/katara*, is only in Gal. 3:10, 13 (twice); Heb. 6:8; Jms. 3:10; and 2 Pet. 2:14.

³⁹³ The word here translated *serve*, *λατρεύω/latreuō*, can refer to priestly ministry or service in God’s temple, as in Heb. 8:5. The use of the expression *His slaves* suggests that is the meaning here. Very often it means “worship,” and that meaning is certainly possible here. There is a textual problem concerning the tense of this verb. Hodges says the majority of manuscripts use the Present Tense.

in which God's *face* and the faces, or *foreheads*, of human beings are mentioned together. In fact, putting those two so close together would be inappropriate anywhere else, but here, finally, God has made it so that *His face* and the faces of some human beings can be put into the same sentence. We cannot imagine something like that with the faces of Moses and God,³⁹⁴ or Paul and God, or John and God! Thus the marvelous *face to face* fellowship with God which is promised to the victors of chapters two and three is described in a little bit more detail for us.

In 13:16 the followers of the beast had his *name on their foreheads*. Here in 22:4 those dwelling in the New Jerusalem have *His name on their foreheads*. The word "forehead" is used eight times in the Book of Revelation, four times concerning the *foreheads* of those that love the Lord and have *His name* or seal *on their foreheads* (7:3; 9:4; 4:1; and 22:4), and four times concerning *foreheads* with the mark of the beast or the *name* of Babylon (13:16; 14:9; 17:5; and 20:4). Let us all be sure to take our stand, and be in strong contrast with the followers of the beast!

22:5 And there will be no night,³⁹⁵ and no need of lamp and light,³⁹⁶ because the Lord God will illuminate them, and they will reign³⁹⁷ forever and ever.

It was already said in 21:23 that "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God illuminates it, and the Lamb is its lamp," but this is further emphasized here to highlight the close fellowship that those in the city will enjoy with the *Lord God*. Remember the contrast with the nations, who merely walk in the *light* of the city (21:24). How much more wonderful that the *Lord God* illuminates the victors.

394 It is true that in Exod. 33:11 we read, "And the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man to his friend...", but note also Exod. 33:20, "you are not able to see My face, because no man will see My face and live." Something much more wonderful is happening in Rev. 22:4.

395 The two oldest manuscripts and some others add the word ετι/eti here, which would be translated "any more." The majority of manuscripts do not have that word here.

396 The majority of manuscripts read *and no need of lamp and light*, but other manuscripts read "and they do not have need of lamp and light of the sun," others (including the two oldest manuscripts) read "and they do not have need of light of lamp and light of sun."

397 Note the comments on the verb here, βασιλευω/basileuō, in the footnote under 5:10.

In 20:4 we learned that the victors are to *reign* with Christ for the whole thousand years of the Messianic Kingdom. Here the very last words of the very last vision expand that prophecy about the rewards of those that do His will until the end, those that are faithful until death. Here we learn that they do not only *reign* for the duration of those thousand years. The last words of the last vision are *they will reign forever and ever*. Thus the promise to the victors becomes more expansive and beautiful. It is, in fact, everlasting.

Will you be a victor? How much will it cost you to obey the commands of chapters two and three? It might cost you a great deal. It might be very difficult for you. However, the promise is that if you pay that price you will *reign* not only for the thousand years, you will be with *the Lord God*, reigning *forever and ever*.

If the victors *reign* there, over whom do they *reign*? What is clear is that they do not *reign* over those who did not believe in the Lamb, because those people are in the lake of fire. If so, there remains those who believe in Christ, who are redeemed, but were not “faithful until death,” and did not “do His will to the end.” People like that are rarely described in the Book of Revelation after chapter 3, not because they do not exist, but instead because the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to encourage us to be victorious, not to just “get by.” What is their situation? Surely what they were warned about in chapters two and three happened in their lives, but they “are saved... as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). If they are saved, then they enter into the Kingdom of God and the New Earth, but very little is said about them.

Saved people who are not victors will live on the New Earth, but they are outside the New Jerusalem. We are told what is outside the New Jerusalem in 21:24 and 26. In these texts, we read that “nations will walk by its light” (the city’s light) and “the kings of the earth carry the glory and honor of the nations to” the city. Those ruled by the New Jerusalem have to bring tribute to those that rule in the New Jerusalem. We know from 22:15 that their lives now, during this present age, are not described in pleasant terms.

Another reason the New Jerusalem must be reserved for the victors, with believers that were not victorious over sin living outside the city, comes from an unexpected place in the Book of Revelation. At the end of the book, in 22:19, there is a curse upon anyone that “takes away from the words of this book.” The curse is “may God take away his part in the tree of life and in the holy city.” If all saved people have a “part in the tree of

life and in the holy city,” then the text is calling down a curse that means anyone that “takes away from the words of this book” should lose his or her salvation. It would mean that they should be damned. Not only would that be a rather harsh thing to curse people with, it would also be against the clear teaching of the Word of God that once we are saved, we are always saved. Scripture teaches that we cannot lose our salvation, but we can lose our rewards (note Revelation 3:11). John’s curse, “may God take away his part in the tree of life and in the holy city,” is a curse that they should lose their reward, not their eternally secure salvation!

Hebrews 11 describes the heroes of the faith. In Hebrews 11:10 we see that Abraham was waiting for a city having foundations, whose architect and maker is God. And in verse 16 we see that God has prepared a city for those heroes of the faith. That city is called the New Jerusalem, and Abraham, with all the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, will live there!

Very little is said about those who are saved but are not victorious, and very little is said about the place where they live, the New Earth. But in order to strengthen us so that we are victorious, much is said about the future of those who are victorious (and their city, the New Jerusalem).

E. The Conclusion of the Vision (22:6-17)

Both the Prologue and this Epilogue say that:

- The book is prophecy (1:3; 22:10, and 18-19).
- The one who obeys the book will be blessed (1:3 and 22:7).
- It is revealed by a “chain” of steps (1:1 and 22:6).
- Its purpose is “to show to His slaves what must happen suddenly” (1:1 and 22:6).³⁹⁸

These pairs of ideas serve to emphasize those ideas, but they also serve to show that the book has a very distinct beginning and end. They are like “bookends”³⁹⁹ at the beginning and end of a row of books, marking the beginning and end for us.

After the vision of the New Jerusalem, the close of the book has some statements that strengthen the vision and testimony. The first words come from the angel that appeared in 21:9 (who accompanied the Apostle John to see the vision of the New Jerusalem). The second words are from the Lord Jesus Himself and the third from the Apostle John.

³⁹⁸ This list is adapted from Mounce, p. 390.

³⁹⁹ The technical term for “bookends” like this is “inclusio.”

Three themes are emphasized in this section:

- This Word is true.
- The Lord Jesus will return suddenly.
- There will be rewards for each person who obeys what is written in this book.

22:6 And he⁴⁰⁰ said to me, “These words are faithful and true.⁴⁰¹ And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly.”⁴⁰²

This verse, with its “chain of revelation” (the Lord, *His angel*, and *His slaves*), reminds us of 1:1. The similarity between 1:1 and 22:6 makes sense, in that we are drawing near the close of the book. Both the beginning and the end of the Book of Revelation are marked, like bookends, with various elements, as noted above. This section is directed to the readers, and concerns the entire text of the Book of Revelation.

The expression *to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly* is repeated here with exactly the same words as were used in 1:1, and a very similar expression is used in 4:1. Mounce⁴⁰³ and Ladd⁴⁰⁴ say that throughout this age, Christians must wholeheartedly await the coming of the Lord Jesus, just as we are taught in Matthew 24:42-44. The date of the coming of Christ has not been revealed, so each generation must be watching with alert hearts and minds.

Again we here and now are reminded that these words are *true*, and that we can base our lives and lifestyles on them. In that great Day absolutely no one will say, “Ha, I took the exhortations and warnings of the Book of Revelation seriously, and made major changes in my life, and it was all a waste. I’m sorry I ever did that.” There will be regret among some born-again men and women at the end of the age, but not that kind of regret. They will regret that they did not “keep those things written in it, for the time is near” (1:3 and 22:7). They will certainly regret that they did not consider *these words* to be *faithful and true*. But no one that believes and acts upon *these words* will regret it when that Day comes.

⁴⁰⁰ Concerning the identity of this speaker, see the footnote under 22:1.

⁴⁰¹ The words *faithful and true* are used four times in the Book of Revelation. See the footnote in the discussion of 3:14.

⁴⁰² See the footnote under 1:1 concerning the word *suddenly*.

⁴⁰³ P. 391.

⁴⁰⁴ P. 290.

22:7 “And look, I am coming⁴⁰⁵ suddenly!⁴⁰⁶ Blessed⁴⁰⁷ is the one keeping⁴⁰⁸ the words of the prophecy⁴⁰⁹ of this book.”

The Lord Jesus Himself assures us. With this expression He sharpens what was said in the previous verses, and He repeats the words of the original blessing in 1:3 “Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near.” Revelation 1:3 and 22:7 are also like “bookends” for this book. If you believe the Lord Jesus, you should believe the visions and promises that are made in *this book*, and be encouraged to continue in faithfulness, or perhaps leave behind what needs to be left behind. This blessing is written out at two very prominent and crucial places, the beginning and the ending of the book. Is not the idea that He will come, conquer, and distribute rewards to those who obey *the words of the prophecy of this book*, especially in chapters two and three, the principal theme of the book? The Book of Revelation should not become material for speculation on things that do not have practical application to our lives. The Book of Revelation is meant to be applied so that its readers will reign in the New Jerusalem forever and ever.

Bauckham⁴¹⁰ observes that just as 1:1 is echoed in 22:6, so also 1:3 is echoed in 22:7, to show that 22:6-9 is the closing of the vision of the New Jerusalem and also the beginning of the conclusion of the book.

22:8 And I, John, am the one that heard and saw these things, and when I heard and saw them, I fell to worship before the feet of the angel showing them to me.

This functions as a validating signature to the book. *John* “signs” it. In the preceding verses he has emphasized that the words of this prophecy originate from God, but in this verse *John* would convince us that he himself has witnessed the visions of the Book of Revelation.

⁴⁰⁵ See the footnote under the discussion of 2:5.

⁴⁰⁶ See the footnote under 1:1.

⁴⁰⁷ This is the sixth use of the word *blessed*. Note the discussion under 1:3.

⁴⁰⁸ Note under 1:3 the footnote about the verb *τηρεω/tēreō*, here translated *keeping*.

⁴⁰⁹ Bauckham, p. 35, observes that the word *prophecy* (*προφητεια/prophēteia*) is used seven times in the Book of Revelation (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18 and 19). Could the use of the word seven times point to the perfection of the *prophecy* of the Book of Revelation? Note that this verse also contains the words *I am coming* and *blessed*, which are also used exactly seven times in the book!

⁴¹⁰ P. 256.

In 19:10 there is a very similar event. The repetition of this event functions to close the vision of the New Jerusalem, just as the vision of Babylon was closed in 19:10.⁴¹¹

According to Bauckham,⁴¹² *the angel showing them to me* is the angel appearing in 1:1, therefore *these things* that are shown to John refer to all the contents of the Book of Revelation. This event is recorded in the conclusion of the Book of Revelation to emphasize that the whole of the book is a revelation originating not from man, nor from angels, but from God Himself.

In trying to worship *the angel*, and in recording the angelic rebuke, John is showing us his weakness, directing us not to himself, but to the God who sits on the throne.

22:9 And he says to me, “Do not do that! I am a fellow slave of yours, and of your brothers the prophets, and of those who keep⁴¹³ the words of this book. Worship God!”

Chapter 22:8-9 tells of John’s mistake. This admission of that mistake strengthens the prophecy, because in reading this text we believe that John was not ashamed to confess when he was wrong. Surely John was not perfect, but he wrote a careful account of his encounter with the Lord, and of the visions that the Lord showed him. And we know that even the words he chose to use in this account were given to him by the Holy Spirit. We know that the entire Bible is the Word of God. Some passages are given to God’s prophets by dictation, for example Revelation chapters two and three. Further, all passages in the Bible were written under the supervision of the Holy Spirit, so that they too are perfect. In any case, the entire Bible is the perfect Word of God. Men may fail, as we note here about John, but the Word of the Lord abides forever!

John wanted to *worship* the angel as the source of the amazing revelation, but the angel refused that *worship*. He ordered John to *worship God!* So the angel emphasized that the Lord God is the source of the revelation John saw.

With this short rebuke the definition of the word *slave* is clarified: *your brothers the prophets and... those who keep the words of this book* are worthy to be called slaves of God. Once again obedience is emphasized. The angel expresses his own unity with those who *keep the words of this book*, the victors.

⁴¹¹ Bauckham, pp. 255-256. Note the chart in the discussion of 17:3.

⁴¹² P. 256.

⁴¹³ τηρεω/tēreō

22:10 And he says to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

This command is unlike Daniel 12:4, where Daniel is told to *seal up the words* of the scroll until *the time* of the end.⁴¹⁴ In 10:4 John is told to “seal up what the seven thunders spoke.” But the contents of the Book of Revelation are not like that. Because *the time is near*,⁴¹⁵ and the contents of *this book* need to be understood and obeyed, *this book* should not be sealed, but made public. According to the “heavenly clock,” two thousand years is not very long. We need to be watching, because *the time is near*.

22:11 Let the wrongdoer still do wrong, and let the filthy still make himself filthy. And let the righteous still do righteous deeds, and let the holy still make himself holy.”⁴¹⁶

In Jeremiah 23:25 the Lord says, “I have heard what they say, the prophets prophesying lies in My name saying ‘I had a dream, I had a dream.’” The Lord’s disgust and rebuke are clear. In the midst of that condemnation, we read in 23:28, “The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and the one who has My word, let him speak My word truthfully. What is straw next to grain, declares the Lord.” In the context it is clear that the dreamers’ dreams are not from the Lord. It is as if His patience had come to an end, and He mockingly encourages them in their false prophecy. Note also that in Jeremiah 44:25 the Lord tells the women of Judah to go ahead and keep their vows to sacrifice to the “Queen of Heaven.”

In the same context we read calls to repentance and offers of forgiveness. Note Jeremiah 17:24-25, “But if hearing you hear Me... this city will be inhabited forever.” So in Jeremiah we see rebuke and promised judgment, calls to repentance, as well as the rather strange invitation to false prophets to continue declaring their false dreams.⁴¹⁷

The same thing seems to be happening in Matthew 23:32. After condemning the sins of the Jews’ ancestors, the Lord says, “so fill up the measure of your fathers!” Although the wording is “compressed,” the Lord seems to be telling the Jews to go ahead and sin just like their ancestors sinned. Likewise in Revelation we read of rebuke and promised judgment,

⁴¹⁴ See also Isa. 8:16; Dan. 8:26; and 12:9.

⁴¹⁵ See the discussion of the word *near* ($\epsilon\gamma\gamma\upsilon\varsigma/enggus$) in the comments on 1:3. This word is used in 1:3 and here in 22:10.

⁴¹⁶ This translation takes the verbs translated *make himself filthy* and *make himself holy* as Middle Voice.

⁴¹⁷ Note also Ezek. 3:27. Although it could be translated in other ways, it is probably best translated “The one listening, he will listen; and the one who refuses, he will refuse, for they are a rebellious house.”

calls to repentance, and this rather strange invitation for *the wrongdoer* to *still do wrong*. There are many parallels between Jeremiah and Revelation, so however we understand the words of Jeremiah 23:38, “The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and the one who has My word, let him speak My word truthfully. What is grain to straw, declares the Lord,” so also we should take the words *Let the wrongdoer still do wrong... and let the righteous still do righteous deeds.*

Here in Revelation 22:11, in Jeremiah 23:28 and 44:25, and in Matthew 23:32 the God who has demonstrated His love for humanity by sending His Son to the cross also demonstrates His righteousness and readiness to judge sinners. If we dislike these four passages, perhaps it is because we have let the perfect love of God overwhelm the perfect righteousness of God. He is both perfectly loving and perfectly righteous. The Savior is the Judge! Here His role as the Judge of all the earth is foremost.⁴¹⁸

If reading the entire Book of Revelation has not convinced you to stop being a *wrongdoer*, then you might as well *still do wrong!* What more can the Lord say to any believers like that?

These wrongdoers and *filthy* people contrast sharply with those of verse 17 who are thirsty. Whether the wrongdoers and *filthy* people here are unbelievers or disobedient believers is not mentioned. If they are unbelievers, they will of course end up in the lake of fire. If they are disobedient believers, they will end up on the New Earth, walking in the light of the New Jerusalem.

⁴¹⁸ According to Beasley-Murray, pp. 337-338, this verse challenges people to correct themselves. The *wrongdoers* may *still do wrong*. Their judgment is already prepared. Those who are *holy* may *still make* themselves *holy*. Their reward has already been prepared. Man’s evil does not frustrate the plans of the Lord God! In other words, “Do they want to continue in their sin? Let them. The Judge of the whole earth will not be undone by their sin.” Indeed just as this book prophesies that “those that dwell upon the earth” will not repent despite the years of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments, here they are actually invited to *still do wrong*. Perhaps this assurance of the greatness of the Judge of the whole earth will end up being motivation to help some repent. But God does not need people to repent, and He does not beg people to please repent. Through the Book of Revelation, and the entire NT, He has made His will known. How will you and I respond? As the following verse makes clear, He is ready in any case. Mounce, p. 392, offers a slightly different perspective. He says it is as if John is in the end times, just before Christ will come, so he is firm, as if the opportunity to repent has passed as in Lk. 13:25. This seems reasonable, as long as we admit that this statement, as in Jeremiah, is mixed in among real calls to repentance (as in Rev. 22:17b) and real expressions of judgment.

Note the similarity with Daniel 12:10, “Many will purge themselves and make themselves white and be refined, and the wicked will act wickedly, and all the wicked will not understand. But the wise will understand.”

22:12 “Look! I am coming⁴¹⁹ suddenly,⁴²⁰ and My wages are with Me to pay out to each according to what his deeds will be!⁴²¹

This is another very powerful restatement of the principal theme of the book. The Lord Jesus will come, destroy His enemies, hand out rewards to faithful believers, and judge those who do not believe. All will be done *according to their deeds*. This is not to say that by *deeds* a person can erase the doom of damnation. That is done by receiving the work of the Lamb who was slain. But the unbeliever will be damned *according to his deeds*, the believer who was nevertheless lazy like many of those in Sardis will not be rewarded, because of *his deeds*, and the believer who was careful to do the Lord’s will to the end will be rewarded *according to his deeds*.

The reader that would doubt that the Bible repeatedly says that God will judge and reward *according* to a person’s *deeds* should also note Isaiah 40:10; Jeremiah 17:10; Psalm 62:12; Romans 2:2; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:23; and 20:13.⁴²²

22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end!”

Does anyone challenge the Lord’s right “to pay out to each according to his *deeds*”? That person should remember that He is *the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end*.⁴²³

In Revelation 1:8 and 21:6 it is the Lord God, who is seated on His throne, that calls Himself *the Alpha and the Omega*, but here it is the Lord Jesus, who is “coming soon,” that calls Himself *the Alpha and the Omega*. Note in the section entitled “The Theology of the Book of Revelation” the discussion on these expressions as support for the doctrine of the trinity and proof of the full divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴¹⁹ See the comments and the footnote under the discussion of 2:5b concerning the expression, *I am coming*.

⁴²⁰ See the footnotes under 1:1 and 2:16 concerning this word, ταχὺ/ *tachu*.

⁴²¹ Most manuscripts include the future tense verb εσταὶ/ *estai*, but two old manuscripts and one other uses the present tense rather than the future tense.

⁴²² Each of these four NT verses use the Greek word κατά/ *kata*, here translated *according to*.

⁴²³ Ladd, pp. 292-293.

22:14 Blessed are they that do His commands,⁴²⁴ so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.

Two rights are promised to those who *do His commands*. The first is *the right to the tree of life*, which is of course located in *the city*. The fruit of this *tree* has already been promised to those in Ephesus, if they repent and return to their first love (2:7). The second is *the right to enter through the gates into the city*. These support the interpretation of this author above that the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place of the Father, the Lord Jesus, and those who are victorious; and that believers who are not victorious must live outside the New Jerusalem, but on the New Earth. Believers who are not victorious just bring their wealth to the city (21:24 and 26).

This verse is the last of seven expressions of blessing in the Book of Revelation.⁴²⁵ Whoever is victorious and does the work of God, whoever is faithful until death, will enjoy the blessings described in those seven expressions.

Victors will enjoy this blessing, and will have the right to *enter into the city*. The situation of these victors is in stark contrast with the situation of those in the following verse, who are “outside” the city.

22:15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone that loves and practices⁴²⁶ falsehood.

In 21:8 we read “But for the cowards, unbelievers, sinners, loathsome people, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” But here people described with what seem to be similar words are said to be *outside* the city, the New Jerusalem. We know from

⁴²⁴ The two oldest manuscripts (Sinaiticus of the fourth century and Alexandrinus from the fifth century) and one eleventh century manuscript read “Blessed are they that wash their robes,” but all the other Greek manuscripts containing this passage read, *Blessed are they that do His commands*, which is in accord with the other blessings in the book. (In Greek the spelling of “wash their robes” is very similar to *do His commands*.) Actually, the reading “Blessed are they that wash their robes” also fits with the obedience/reward theme of the book because in 7:14 we read about Tribulation martyrs that “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Those obedient believers will receive a special *right to the tree of life and the city*.

⁴²⁵ Note the discussion under 1:3 concerning use of the word *blessed*.

⁴²⁶ This might also be translated “every lover and doer of falsehood.” It speaks of their character and attitude in this present age.

21:24 that “the nations will walk by” the light of the New Jerusalem. Those nations are *outside*, and they are here described in very harsh terms. But they are not in the lake of fire. People in the lake of fire do not walk by the light of the New Jerusalem!

Those in 21:8 never believed in the Lamb of God (nor did those in 9:20-21, which has a similar list of sins). They are called “unbelievers.” Those here in 22:15 are not called unbelievers because they did believe (that is why, of course, they are not in the lake of fire), but they never became victors. Note that unlike in 21:8 they are not called “unbelievers.” But they did not defeat sin in their lives. They did not love God. They are not allowed in the city, but they are in the Kingdom. They are citizens in the Kingdom by the grace of their Savior, but they are not rulers in the city.

To the great shame of those *outside*, they look very much like the unbelievers of 21:8. Note how similar the descriptions are in 21:8 and here in 22:15. This similarity is intentional. Let us not look like them!

But is it possible that someone who by faith has received the Lord Jesus as his Savior could practice sorcery, or sexual immorality, or murder someone, or lie? That question was answered back in chapters two and three, where we learned that some of the people in those congregations were sinning terribly, and were rebuked and warned by the Lord Himself. He warned them that rather than sitting with Him on His throne they would receive His discipline. Rather than receiving authority over the nations they would suffer His chastisement. They were warned. And now, at the very end of the age, we see them experiencing exactly what they were promised. The Lord does not compromise or negotiate! Here at the end of the ages we can see quite clearly why He spoke so strongly to them in chapters two and three while there was still opportunity for them to repent. Let us be certain we are not among their number. Let us be victors, as the Lord so carefully described to us in those seven messages to those seven churches. Both directly and indirectly, this exhortation is repeated throughout the Book of Revelation.

In the Word of God the term *dogs* refers to the wicked (see Psalm 22:16, 20; and Philippians 3:2).

Note that in 21:6-8 the three options for mankind are touched upon, as observed in the discussion on 21:8. This passage is similar, but now that we are near the end of the book, the lost in the lake of fire are not even mentioned. It is as if they are forgotten. What is emphasized is that some are blessed, they “do His commands,” and have the right “to the tree of life” and to “enter through the gates into the city.” Others are unrewarded

outside the city, and their sins are listed. Here only two of humanity's options are given: saved, obedient, and rewarded, or saved, disobedient, and *outside* the city. The placement of this summary contrast between the condition of obedient and disobedient believers highlights the place of this distinction in the overall purpose of the book.

22:16 “I, Jesus, I have sent My angel to testify to you⁴²⁷ about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star!”

The identity of the One speaking in this verse is clear. He says that He *sent* the *angel* who testifies to you *about these things*, the *angel* who accompanied the Apostle John through the visions of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation does not have human origins. This verse emphatically reminds us of what is said in 1:1-2, that is, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly. He made it known by sending it through His angel to His slave John, who testified to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw.”

The Lord Jesus calls Himself *the root and the descendant of David*, the fulfillment of Isaiah 11:1 which says “A shoot will go out from the stem of Jesse, and a stem from his roots will bear fruit.” He is also *the bright morning star*, the fulfillment of Numbers 24:17 which says “a star will come out from Jacob, a scepter will arise from Israel.” The expression *morning star* symbolizes hope in the coming of Messiah that will end the age of darkness,⁴²⁸ and is one of the promises to victors, in Revelation 2:28.

22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one hearing say, “Come!” And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wants receive the water of life freely.

In this verse the joyful expectation of the Lord’s return and promises for the victors overflow, so that *the Spirit and the bride say “Come.”* *The Spirit* and also the future inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, *the bride*, invite the Lord Jesus to *come!*

There seem to be four invitations in this verse.⁴²⁹ It seems best to see them as two pairs of invitations. The first pair contains two calls for the

⁴²⁷ The word *you* here is plural. In this verse the Lord Jesus is not only speaking to John, but also to the seven churches, and to us! This plural *to you* is parallel to the *to you* of 1:4.

⁴²⁸ Mounce, p. 395, mentions the text of two Qumran documents; *Test. Levi* 18:3; and *Test. Judah* 24:1.

⁴²⁹ It is possible that all four invitations are directed to unbelievers whose hearts have been touched by reading the Book of Revelation, so that they thirst for the

Lord Jesus to return, much like the call, "Maranatha." The second pair is given to unbelievers. Any unbeliever who wishes may *come to the water of life* and freely receive salvation.

Obviously *the one hearing* is each person who hears the words of this prophecy. They are told to join in saying "*Come!*" This is similar to the prayer of believers, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done; as in heaven, so also upon the earth" (Matthew 6:10). This is the longing of each person who loves the Lord Jesus.

Thus *the one who thirsts* and *the one who wants* is whoever has not yet believed in the Lord Jesus, but who is open to Him. They are invited to *come* and *receive the water of life freely*. They are invited to believe in the Lamb and receive the forgiveness that He has made available by His death on the cross. Salvation is offered *freely* in this verse. Thrones and crowns are not offered *freely*, but salvation in Christ is always by grace. Other clear declarations of this free salvation are found in Isaiah 55:1; John 4:14; 7:37; and Ephesians 2:8-10.

In chapter five everyone longed for someone to come and open the scroll. Likewise now *the Spirit and the bride* long for Him to return. And the perfectly free gift of salvation is again emphasized. If the idea of being thirsty is not clear enough, it is explained with the idea that anyone that *wants* it can *freely receive the water of life*.

This book does *not* teach that we need to work to gain eternal *life*, but it does teach that believers that serve faithfully all their days will be richly rewarded during the Thousand Year Kingdom and after that in the New Jerusalem.

This is the last of the comments that close the final vision. What remains serves as a conclusion to the entire book, just as 1:1-8 served as an introduction to the entire book.

F. The Conclusion of the Book of Revelation

salvation the Lamb of God has prepared for any and all who will believe in Him. Ladd, p. 294, and Mounce, p. 395, take that view. There are two weaknesses to their view. Firstly, why is not the Lord included with *the Spirit and the bride* in the first invitation, if it is directed at unbelievers? Second, if there is no invitation to the Lord here, then to what is He replying "Yes, I am coming suddenly" in verse 20? However, a weakness of the view of this author is that it is odd that the Holy Spirit would invite the Lord Jesus to *come* to earth.

(22:18-21)

This section is the conclusion of the Book of Revelation. In it John⁴³⁰ curses anyone who would change these writings, he affirms the validity of these writings, and he closes wishing the Lord's grace on God's people.

22:18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, may God⁴³¹ add to him the plagues written in this book.

Until the invention of the printing press, books had to be copied by hand, so they were subject to intentional and unintentional changes by scribes. Threats or curses like these two verses were not uncommon. Any kind of manuscript might have a similar threat. When the Septuagint translation was completed, it was ordered that they "pronounce a curse in accordance with their custom upon anyone who should make any alteration either by adding or changing in any way whatever any of the words which had been written or making any omission."⁴³² Deuteronomy 4:2 is also a command not to alter the commands that Moses gave to the people of Israel.

Here in Revelation 22:18 it might seem strange that *hearers* are warned not to change the *written* text. Perhaps this is simply so that this warning goes out to as many as possible, hearers as well as readers and copyists.

Sometimes 22:18-19 is used as proof that the Book of Revelation is the final book in the canon of the New Testament. It is true that the Book of Revelation is the final book of the canon of the New Testament, but that truth is not taught in these two verses. By reading 22:6-10 and 16, we see that the expression *the words* refers to the whole Book of Revelation, but not the whole Bible or the whole New Testament. This verse concerns changes to the text of the Book of Revelation.

The repetition of the word *add* suggests parallelism between the sin and the judgment. This is also true in the verse that follows. Compare Revelation 16:6, where those that have poured out the saints' blood are punished by being given blood to drink.

⁴³⁰ It is possible that the *I* of verse 18 was the Lord, but it seems much more likely that it was John.

⁴³¹ There is a difficult textual problem in verses 18 and 19. In both verses the majority of ancient manuscripts actually say *may God* rather than "God will" (as many other manuscripts read).

⁴³² *The Letter of Aristeas* 310-311. According to *BDAG*, p. xxvii, the author Artemidorus asks that the scribe "neither take away nor add to" the content of his work.

22:19 And if anyone takes away from the words of this book of prophecy, may God take away his part in the tree of life and in the holy city that are written in this book.

In the discussion of 2:7, it was explained that the right to eat from *the tree of life* is a reward for the believers who obey and do the will of Christ to the end. This right to eat from the fruit of *the tree of life* is not a sign of salvation, but of obedience. In 22:14, we see that *the holy city*, the New Jerusalem, is inhabited by the victors. Those who believe in Christ but are not victorious are outside the New Jerusalem (22:15). This interpretation is strengthened in 22:18-19. Access to the fruit of *the tree of life* and *the holy city* are rewards given to all victorious believers. Note *the tree of life* and *the city* in the blessing in 22:14. If someone *takes away from the words of* this Book of Revelation, his reward is taken from him, but not his salvation. This interpretation is in accord with the understanding that salvation received by grace cannot be lost because it is based on the work of the Lord Jesus Himself on the cross. But rewards, which are received for obedience, can be lost.

John does not write a curse for eternal damnation for anyone who *takes away from the words of* the Book of Revelation. He does not pray that anybody who deletes *words* from *this book* be thrown into the lake of fire!⁴³³ But he does pray that they forfeit any status they might have as victors. In other words, it would be strange if this text were interpreted as a prophetic pronouncement that whoever would add or take away from the writing of John would be punished with eternal death in the lake of fire, but fitting if it is seen as a curse so that people who ruin the Book of Revelation would lose their reward.

These two verses are very similar to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:19, “So whoever does away with one of these commands, and

⁴³³ Osborne, who consistently interprets the Book of Revelation to make it say that all true believers must be victors, has a problem here. Adding or taking away *from the words of this book of prophecy* would hardly be grounds for damnation, but without admitting it he subtly shifts the meaning of these two verses. He says they refer to “twisting the meaning of these visions” to teach “views that counter the cardinal doctrines and destroys the nucleus of the Christian faith.” And for that “they will suffer the ‘second death’... namely the loss of eternal life and eternity in the lake of fire.” However, this text is not about “twisting the meaning of these visions”! It is about adding or taking away from the text of the Book of Revelation! Osborne’s subtle but significant shift in the text might make his interpretation more acceptable to some readers, but it is obviously not exegesis. How much better to understand these two verses to mean that the scribe that intentionally alters the text of the Book of Revelation will lose his eternal rewards!

teaches thusly to people, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven.” The Lord Jesus did not curse those people with eternal judgment in hell. They were still in the Kingdom of Heaven. Their rewards were taken away, so that they were called “least in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Note that these two rewards are linked: *his part in the tree of life and in the holy city*. This is further support for the fact that the same people that enjoy eating the fruit of *the tree of life* also have the privilege of living *in the holy city*. Victors will be eating the fruit of *the tree of life* and living *in the holy city*, the New Jerusalem. Believers that do not “keep the words of the prophecy of this book,” that do not “do His commands,” will not “enter through the gates into the city.” Instead they will be outside, along with anyone who *takes away from the words of this book of prophecy*. They will have no part *in the tree of life* or *in the holy city*.

Note that the rewards offered to obedient believers in 22:14 and what is taken away from anyone who *takes away from the words of this book of prophecy* are the same: access to *the tree of life* and *the holy city*. In other words, 22:19 would undo 22:14!

22:20 The one who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming⁴³⁴ suddenly!”⁴³⁵ Amen!⁴³⁶ Yes,⁴³⁷ come Lord Jesus!

The Lord Jesus Himself attaches His testimony of affirmation to the words of the book which He has revealed to John. These words are certain. The implications these words carry for the life of the victor – and for the life of the disobedient Christian – are clear and compelling. He wants His return to this earth always to be on our minds and hearts so that we always remember the importance of obedience for our future.

In 1:17 the Apostle John fell prostrate at His feet, and in 22:20 he longs wholeheartedly for the Lord’s return, so that he says *Amen! Yes, come Lord Jesus!* Awaiting his death, the Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 4:8 that a crown of righteousness awaits Paul and all those who love the Lord’s

⁴³⁴ See the footnote under the discussion of 2:5.

⁴³⁵ See the footnote under the discussion of 2:16.

⁴³⁶ In Aramaic and Hebrew the word *Amen* is a strong affirmation of the truth of what has been said. Since ancient Greek manuscripts did not include quotation marks or other punctuation, it is actually not clear whether this should be “Yes, I am coming suddenly!” *Amen! Yes, come Lord Jesus!* or “Yes, I am coming suddenly! *Amen!* Yes, come Lord Jesus!” In other words, the *Amen* may have been the end of the words of the Lord, or the beginning of the words of John.

⁴³⁷ The majority of manuscripts include the word *yes*, but the two oldest manuscripts and some other manuscripts exclude it.

appearing. Here in Revelation 22:20 we see that John also longs for His coming.

22:21 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ⁴³⁸ be with all the saints.⁴³⁹
Amen.⁴⁴⁰

Normally apocalyptic literature does not end with an expression of blessing like a letter would end, but the Book of Revelation begins and ends like a letter, with its appropriate closing blessing.⁴⁴¹

With reverence, the Book of Revelation is closed with the word *Amen*.

⁴³⁸ The majority of manuscripts have the word *Christ*; the two oldest manuscripts do not.

⁴³⁹ The majority of manuscripts read *with all the saints*, but the oldest reads “with the saints,” and another very old manuscript reads “with all.”

⁴⁴⁰ The majority of manuscripts, including the oldest manuscript, include the word *Amen*, but others, including one very old manuscript, exclude it.

⁴⁴¹ Mounce, pp. 396-397.

Summary

Man was created as God's images to fill and subdue or rule the earth. Falling into sin, man failed to do that. But a Second Adam was sent, Jesus Christ the Perfect Son of Man, truly man, to do what the First Adam failed to do. He will succeed, and by the redemption which He has provided, we may be forgiven our sins, *and* we may join Him in His rule. To be forgiven our sin we only need believe, but in order to rule our faith needs to be mixed with good deeds that continue until death or until the Lord returns. Those that will rule are often called "victors" in the Book of Revelation.

The repetition of words and phrases is one example of the intricate nature of the Book of Revelation. It is not difficult to note repeated words and phrases, but it is difficult to study through such an intricate book and determine its primary theme and purpose. However, the ideas that are introduced at the beginning of the book and restated at the end of the book surely are a major help in any effort to establish the overriding purpose of the book. We have seen that the theme of rewards is quite strong in chapters one, two and three, and a powerful statement of reward for faithful believers closes the visions of the New Heaven and the New Earth. The vision the Lord gave John which he passed on to us, ends with the words "and they will reign forever and ever." Little is said of the end of those that never believed. We know enough about that. They are in the lake of fire. Little is said of the status of those that believed but were not "faithful unto death," that did not "do My will until the end." We know that they will bring their wealth and honor, as tribute, to the capital city where thrones are set up for the One Seated upon the throne, for the Lamb, and for the victors.

In the Book of Revelation there is a striking connection between the promises, for instance to the church in Thyatira in 2:26-27, "To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations" or to the church in Laodicea in 3:21, "To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne," and the vision of the Thousand Year Kingdom, where the victors, including those that were beheaded because of their testimony and because of the word of God, will be seated upon thrones and reign with Christ for a thousand years, and then, in the New Jerusalem, forever and ever.

This connection is very important in the purpose of the Book of Revelation. The demands and promises of chapters two and three do

not stand alone without a connection to the present age, the coming Millennial Kingdom, and even the age of the New Heaven and the New Earth. So also, the prophecy about the New Jerusalem and the presence of Jesus, our Savior, is not simply a fact to be read and understood by believers. It is written out for us to become our hope and challenge. The key to life in this present age is in the connection between chapters two and three and 19:1–22:5. The beauty of the New Jerusalem is described so that this city becomes our hope. Thus we are strengthened to do what is commanded in chapters two and three, so we can experience the blessing introduced in 1:3 and elaborated upon all throughout the book.

We need to remember that these amazing visions were not given merely to satisfy curiosity. They were given to John to help the leaders and members of the seven congregations, and us, to follow the Lord. Some of them, and perhaps some of us, need to repent. Others of them, and others of us, need encouragement on the difficult path of obedience. The section that begins with “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” was there to meet all those needs.

The following is a survey of how the seven congregations might have responded to the Book of Revelation:

As the congregation in *Ephesus* read the central truth of the end times promises, that “God’s home will be with mankind, and He will live with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them” (21:3) they were spurred on to devote themselves to knowing and loving Him, and not just knowing His doctrines.

As the congregation in *Smyrna* read of the kings of the earth, the nobles, the commanders, the rich, and the powerful in 6:15–17, they saw that those that were presently persecuting them would one day crawl into caves and beg the rocks to fall upon them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. The congregation was inspired to be steadfast despite persecution, as they read of the thrones in 20:4 and of the “souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God,” seated upon those thrones.

As the immoral members of the congregation in *Pergamum* read of the sexual immorality of the great prostitute, and of the “abominations and unclean things of her sexual immorality,” the end results of their

immoral activities were vividly portrayed to them. We hope that they repented and abandoned their immoral activities.

As those in the congregation in *Thyatira* that had been led astray read that those that “had not worshiped the beast or his image” were given to sit upon those thrones in 20:4, they would be helped to burn the idols that had ensnared them, give up their immorality, and worship the Lord alone.

As the congregation in *Sardis* read of the unsurpassed glory of the Lord as an ever widening circle of beings worship Him in 5:8-13, so that “every creature which is in heaven and upon the earth and under the earth, and upon the sea, and those in them” are all worshiping the Lord their Savior, they were helped to cast off their laziness, and pursue heartfelt obedience to the Lord.

As the congregation in *Philadelphia* read of the certainty of the victory of the Coming King, they were all the more careful that no one would take their crown, so that they could participate with Him in His victory.

As the congregation in *Laodicea* read of Babylon’s attitude, revealed in statements like “I sit as queen and a widow I am not; I will never ever see grief,” perhaps they came to realize that their own attitude, revealed in statements like “I have acquired wealth” and “I have need of nothing,” was similar to Babylon’s arrogance. We hope that they did realize that, and that they soon humbled themselves before the Lord.

May every lesson and meditation from this book encourage the people of God to love Him with an increasingly faithful obedience.

May He whose eyes are like flames of fire see and speak forth our secret sins; may He whose feet are like bronze set fear in our hearts so that we flee all our sin; may He who walks among the seven golden lampstands refresh our hearts with His presence. May we all perceive our God as He really is; may we be counted worthy to receive white clothes, crowns and thrones. May we receive grace, wisdom, and faith to serve well now and thus to live in the holy city, the New Jerusalem, forever and ever. We lift this prayer in the name of the Lamb of God who was slain and raised to life again.

Appendix A:

The Pre-Tribulational Rapture

The Rapture is a complex issue, and is not brought up in the text of the Book of Revelation (except possibly in 3:10), so it is not discussed in detail in this commentary.

The reader should carefully consider both 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:9 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–58. Note especially 1 Thessalonians 5:2–3. The Rapture will happen without warning. But how could it happen without warning, if it happens right after the Seven Year Tribulation? Would not the unfolding events of the Tribulation become a warning that the Lord will return and take up His church at the end of the seven years?

If we are all raptured at the *end* of the Tribulation, then all believers that enter the Millennial Kingdom will have resurrection bodies, and cannot have children. Therefore they cannot have any unbelieving children, which would mean there cannot be any unbelievers in the Millennial Kingdom. So how does Satan inspire his revolt at the end of it in 20:7–9? Are those believers in resurrected bodies? This does not make sense. Some inhabitants of the Millennial Kingdom must have normal bodies, and they must have children, some of whom will not believe in the Lord.

According to the Pre-Tribulational understanding, all believers are raptured away (and receive resurrection bodies) at the beginning of the Tribulation. Then as unbelievers repent during the Tribulation, they become “Tribulation Saints.” If they are not killed, they can just “walk in” to the Millennial Kingdom with regular bodies. Since they shall not have experienced a Rapture or a resurrection, they can marry and have children. Some of their descendants will not be believers when the final rebellion of Revelation 20:7–9 happens.

When the Amillennialist or Post-Tribulationalist prays “Maranatha,” or “Come quickly, Lord Jesus,” he is saying he would rather see the Lord come right away, and he considers that more important than the salvation of billions of people that presently do not know the Lord. But in the Pre-Tribulational view we pray “Come quickly Lord Jesus,” knowing that if He comes today and raptures His church up to be with Him, there are still seven years for people to come to faith in Christ and thus gain eternal salvation!

Appendix B:

New Testament Teachings on Rewards

The concept that born-again believers who serve the Lord faithfully in this age will be rewarded in the age to come is clearly presented in the Book of Revelation, most notably in what is said to the victors or “overcomers” of Revelation 2-3 and the careful record of the fulfillment of most of those promises in chapters 20-22. However, the concept of rewards is not at all limited to the Book of Revelation.

Speaking to both Jews and gentiles, in the context of the end times, Romans 2:6 tells us that God “will give to each according to his works.” The same idea is discussed in such passages as 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7-9; Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24-25; and 1 Peter 1:17, all of which are written to, and are about, believers. The difficulty with these passages is, of course, how they can be reconciled with the Gospel of grace, which as clearly states that believers will not be judged for their sins.

In other words, how can He say to the churches that He “will give to each of you according to your deeds” (Revelation 2:23), and also that “to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:5)?

Some have tried to reconcile these two ideas by saying that only true believers will be forgiven, and all true believers will persevere in good works, and because of those good works they will receive the rewards mentioned above. Believers that do not persevere in good works only thought they were believers, but they did not have “saving faith.” This view is called the Perseverance of the Saints. One of the problems with this is that Scripture tells us that many real believers will not persevere in good works.¹ In other words, some truly regenerate believers will be fleshly Christians. Note the discussion of this at the end of the discussion of chapters 2 and 3. Another problem with this view is that it leaves the Ephesian congregation of Revelation 2 in a very odd state. The Lord clearly is dissatisfied with them, they need to repent. Did they therefore never have “saving faith”? If they never had “saving faith,” how could the

¹ See Rev. 2-3 for several examples of believers that were not obedient. The Laodiceans would be the most obvious example. And yet they are a true congregation of Jesus Christ, who walks among the seven golden lampstands, one of which is in Laodicea! Note also 1 Cor. 3:1-15. The believer whose works are figuratively called “wood, hay, or straw” will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire!

Lord command them to “remember from whence you have fallen, and repent and do those first deeds”? Surely the place they fell from was the life of obedient and loving believers! Surely those “first deeds” were done as believers that were pleasing to the Lord!

Others try to reconcile those two ideas about salvation and rewards by saying that if a believer does enough evil, that believer will lose his or her salvation. So all that die as believers must have lived holy lives, and they will receive those rewards. The problem with this view is that Scripture never speaks of someone that is born again becoming “un-born-again”! We are sealed with the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), and the death of Christ is certainly more than sufficient to cover all our sins (Hebrews 10:14). We cannot be separated from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35, 38, and 39).

Instead of those two approaches, the best way to reconcile the fact that all believers have escaped from eternal judgment, and yet every believer that “does My will until the end,” that is “faithful until death,” will be rewarded is to see that in the coming Kingdom of God there will be citizens, and there will be rulers. All believers certainly will, by the grace of God through the death of Christ, be citizens of the coming Kingdom. But only those that fulfill the requirements described in Revelation 2-3 will sit upon thrones in that Kingdom. There will be a judgment seat of Christ at the end of this age (Romans 14:10; and 2 Corinthians 5:10). During that judgment the Lord Jesus will determine rewards for believers. Then later, at the end of the Millennium, there will be the great white throne judgment, in which unbelievers will be judged (Revelation 20:11).

In Matthew 5:3-12 the Lord clearly speaks of more than entrance into His Kingdom for those that live in ways that please Him. He speaks of them *owning* His Kingdom! Likewise in James 2:5 we learn that loving Him is a condition for becoming a *heir* of His Kingdom. (Loving Him is also a condition for receiving the glories promised in 1 Corinthians 2:9.)

In Matthew 6:2-4 the Lord tells us that when people give to the poor without fanfare, the Father, “seeing what is done in the dark,” will reward them.

In Mark 9:41 we learn that even giving a cup of cold water can earn us a reward.

In the Parable of the Minas in Luke 19:11-27 the Lord describes the end times situation of those that serve Him effectively (they are given ten or five cities to rule over), those that serve Him badly (they receive no reward at all, but instead are sternly rebuked), and those that hate Him and did not want Him to be king over them (they are “killed” in front of Him).

In 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 Paul describes how each believer's works will bring reward or loss to him, depending on the quality of that work. The reader should carefully note that the fire in this passage is not at all the fire of hell. Paul makes it quite clear that people that serve the Lord poorly will suffer loss, but also that they will be saved, "as through fire."

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (and 2 Timothy 2:5) Paul compares our life to a race, in which one can win an imperishable crown, as opposed to the quickly wilting wreaths given to the winners of Greek athletic contests. Then Paul continues the same theme, shifting from a race metaphor to a boxing metaphor. He describes a boxer that beats the air, and says that unlike that boxer he is like a boxer that beats his own body, meaning he disciplines his own body, lest he be disqualified from winning the prize. Paul was not at all worried about losing his eternal salvation. He was concerned about losing the reward for which he had served long and well.

The reader should note that Ephesians 5:5 does not say that the immoral, impure, or greedy believer will not enter the Kingdom of Christ. What it says is that such believers will not have any inheritance in that Kingdom. This is a significant difference. Surely this difference is even greater than the difference between renting a house and owning that house! Note also 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Galatians 5:21.

In Philippians 4:1 and 1 Thessalonians 2:19 Paul tells those believers that they are his crown. Because he had successfully served the Lord, as evidenced by those obedient congregations, he knew he would be receiving a crown from the Lord. In fact, 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; and 1 Peter 5:2-4 all speak of crowns to be given to all that love and serve the Lord.

In 1 John 2:28 and 2 John 8 the apostle encourages and warns his readers to continue, and to watch out, so that indeed they can be fully rewarded when the Lord returns, and not be ashamed.

Note also 1 Timothy 6:17-19; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Hebrews 11:35; and 2 Peter 1:11, as well as the discussion titled "A Major Interpretational Issue" after the discussion of Revelation 2:7 in this study

In short, the best way to reconcile the biblical statements that we will be judged with the biblical statements that we have been delivered from judgment is to understand that we will not be judged at the great white throne judgment, because our sins are forgiven, but our works will be evaluated to determine what sort of rewards, if any, we will receive.

So, the New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is by grace, which God can justly offer, because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. He paid it all. Our obedience is not a condition for keeping our salvation, and it is not a condition for being truly saved. However, only the obedient believer will receive the rewards promised in the Book of Revelation, and throughout the entire New Testament.

Appendix C:

Manuscript Variation

Several times in this commentary the observant reader will notice that its translation is different from most modern translations in more than choice of words and style. In those cases the reason may be that the actual Greek text behind the translation is not quite the same. One significant example of this is found in Revelation 22:14, where the two oldest manuscripts, Sinaiticus² from the fourth century and Alexandrinus from the fifth century, as well as one eleventh century manuscript read “Blessed are they that wash their robes, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.” However, the majority of manuscripts, all from the eleventh century and later, read “Blessed are they that do His commands, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.” Many modern scholars,³ following the lead of two men named Westcott and Hort,⁴ put a great deal of trust in the very oldest manuscripts they could find, and viewed the later manuscripts with a great deal of suspicion. When some of those oldest manuscripts agree together on a different “reading,” those scholars consider that reading to be the same as the very most ancient reading, which is of course the

² One simple proof of the low quality of the fourth century manuscript Sinaiticus can be found in its version of Mt. 19:21. There in one verse, the scribe that wrote out this portion of Sinaiticus (scholars suggest there were at least three scribes involved in the initial production of Sinaiaticus) failed to copy the letter ε/ε: the word θελεις/theleis became θελις/thelis, τελειος/teleios became τελιος/telios, and ακολουθει/akolouthei became ακολουθι/akolouthi. This same error is actually found six times in Mt. 19:17-21, and in none of those cases did any of the seven correctors find and correct those errors. In three of those cases, no other known Greek manuscript makes the same mistakes. For each the other three, there is only one known Greek manuscript with the same errant reading. (These mistakes in Sinaiticus are not noted in the textual apparatus of the UBS or Nestle-Aland Greek New Testaments, but can be seen clearly in photographs of Sinaiticus.) Despite its early age, Sinaiticus is a low quality manuscript.

³ The scholars that compiled the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament’s 27th edition in 1993 and those that compiled the United Bible Society’s 4th edition in 1993 would be included in this group. Most modern Bible translations use those Greek editions of the NT, and thus trust Westcott and Hort’s view of how to choose between different readings in the Greek manuscripts. The *New King James Version* would be an exception. It follows the text that the King James Bible used. See the footnote below on the King James Bible.

⁴ Westcott and Hort first published their Greek NT text in 1881.

original document. They do that because those two manuscripts, from the fourth and fifth centuries, are somewhat closer in time to the original manuscript written several hundred years earlier, in the late first century.

Two simple questions need to be asked in response to that logic. The first is “Why do so many manuscripts agree that Revelation 22:14 should read ‘do His commands?’” The majority of the manuscripts presents a remarkably unified picture of the entire New Testament text, so much so that Westcott and Hort and their followers have had to propose a massive and coordinated revision of the text, called a “recension,” which was then approved on a broad geographic basis, so that almost all the “true” manuscripts were destroyed, and a lesser quality (according to Westcott and Hort) text became the majority text. Westcott and Hort explained that the striking uniformity of the majority of manuscripts happened only because some major church leaders agreed upon a poor quality standard manuscript, and then systematically destroyed the best manuscripts throughout Christendom, or at least prevented them from being copied. Westcott and Hort suppose that those leaders had immense power, even to persuade people to give up their precious manuscripts. However, this hypothesized event that supposedly unified the manuscripts of the New Testament, an event that would have had to take place with broad high level ecclesiastical authority, has never been supported by any historical evidence. It is a very weak theory for the uniformity of the majority of manuscripts.

The second question is, “Why did those few very ancient manuscripts survive, when all the other manuscripts from those 300 years have been lost?” Were they – with great foresight – preserved so that future generations would have access to their better record of the ancient text? Or were they set aside because Christians knew that they were poor manuscripts in comparison with all the now lost manuscripts those Christians read? Remember, almost every single manuscript written in those first 300 years is lost to us, mostly because Christians valued them and read them over and over again, until they just wore out.⁵

In Christian households today, favorite Bibles are well worn, and ironically it is the translations we do not value that are well preserved on

⁵ The reader may want to read the introductions to the *New King James Bible* and Zane Hodges’ *The Greek New Testament* for more details about the Majority Text position. Harry Sturz, in *The Byzantine Text-Type & New Testament Textual Criticism*, shows in great detail the weaknesses of the Westcott/Hort position, and clearly shows that the Majority Text deserves much more weight than it is usually given.

our bookshelves. A visitor to our homes might open one of those unworn and clean Bibles and assume that we value it more than the worn out Bibles. That visitor would be mistaken. Precisely because I value it so much, my favorite Bible is worn, stained, marked, and pages are falling out. Even so, I do not turn to the other translations I own; they remain well preserved on my shelf. In the same way, the accurate manuscripts of the first 300 years of the church, including the originals, are all worn out and gone. With very few exceptions, all that remains from those first 300 years are a handful of manuscripts which never got worn out. The best explanation for that preservation is that people did not really think those particular manuscripts were worth wearing out! The followers of the textual methods of Westcott and Hort are mistaken because they have no way to deal with the existence of manuscripts that are both low quality and very ancient. They wrongly assume that no poor quality manuscripts were produced in the first several centuries of the church.

In the few cases where there is any difference, this commentary uses the “reading” of the majority of manuscripts, even though they are not quite as ancient as those few very ancient manuscripts.⁶ Many of those textual problems are noted in the footnotes.

6 Because it was translated so many years before Westcott and Hort lived, the King James Bible was not unduly influenced by those few very ancient, but less accurate, manuscripts. This does not mean that that wonderful translation, the King James Bible, is perfect. In the centuries since it was produced scholars have improved their understanding of some words which appear once or rarely in the Bible but are fairly common in other ancient texts, and the text that it translates is not quite the same as the Majority Text.

Appendix D: Repetition in Revelation

This appendix presents more examples of the repetition of words, as discussed in the Introduction. Again, all of these word counts are based on the Greek text.

The number four is used in connection with God's creation and with angels that are given authority over nature: 7:1, 2; 9:14, 15; and 20:8. Clearly, nature stands out in the use of the number four, all the more if we remember that the four creatures have the form of animals or man as part of nature, that is, a lion, a calf, a man, and a flying eagle.⁵⁸⁴

The number seven is also used of evil. In 12:3 the dragon has seven heads and seven crowns, and in 13:1 the Anti-Christ has seven heads (also in 17:3, 7, and 9). In 17:10 and 11 the seven heads stand for seven kings, the allies of the Anti-Christ. It is hard to be certain of the significance of this use of the number seven. Perhaps it means that the Anti-Christ is completely evil, or that he imitates Christ's perfection.

These words are used seven times: Abyss,⁵⁸⁵ worthy,⁵⁸⁶ to reign,⁵⁸⁷ to be full,⁵⁸⁸ endurance,⁵⁸⁹ sickle,⁵⁹⁰ adultery,⁵⁹¹ and the expression "the Lord God Almighty,"⁵⁹² assuming the expression "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty,' found in 1:8, is included in the count.

The word "star"⁵⁹³ is used 14 times.

The numbers ten or tenth are used ten times in Revelation. The number one tenth is used once. In 2:10 there is tribulation for ten days. In 21:20 the tenth stone is chrysoprase. Except for those two passages, the numbers

⁵⁸⁴ Other than that, Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 31) notes that the creation of God is divided into four in 8:7-12; 14:7; and 16:2-9.

⁵⁸⁵ αβυσσος/abussos

⁵⁸⁶ αξιος/axios

⁵⁸⁷ βασιλευω/basileuō

⁵⁸⁸ γεμω/gemō

⁵⁸⁹ ύπομονη/hypomonē

⁵⁹⁰ δρεπανον/drepanon

⁵⁹¹ πορνεια/porneia

⁵⁹² Note the use of this expression, ὁ κυριος ὁ θεος ὁ παντοκρατωρ/ho Kurios ho Theos ho Pantokrator, in 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; and 21:22, with very slight variation.

⁵⁹³ αστηρ/astēr

ten and tenth are used to tell about the horns, crowns, and kings that oppose the Lord God and His people.

The words “true,”⁵⁹⁴ “thunder,”⁵⁹⁵ and “image”⁵⁹⁶ are used ten times.

The numbers twelve and twelfth are used 24 times in Revelation. Twelve is only used in connection with the people of Israel (7:5-8, 12 times; and 12:1) and the New Jerusalem (21:12-22:2).

Eleven times the expression “One seated upon the throne” is used. Then the use of that expression climaxes with Revelation 20:11, which says “And I saw a great white throne, and the One seated upon it – from before whose presence the earth and the heaven fled, and no place was found for them.” Thus God is referred to twelve times as being seated upon a throne.

In the final vision of the book, that is 21:9-22:5, the word “twelve”⁵⁹⁷ appears twelve times. This is not clear in the English translation, but this is correct in the Greek Majority Text.⁵⁹⁸ Within that same vision, the term “Lamb” and the term “God” are both used seven times! This simply did not happen by accident.

The expression “the Lord God” appears ten times in Revelation (4:11 is not counted, because there the expression is not “the Lord God,” but “the Lord and the God”). The term “Christ” appears ten times. As mentioned above, the word “Spirit”⁵⁹⁹ is used 14 times for the Spirit of God.

⁵⁹⁴ αληθινος/*alēthinos*

⁵⁹⁵ βροντη/*brontē*

⁵⁹⁶ εικων/*eikōn*

⁵⁹⁷ δωδεκα/*dōdeka* or δεκαδυο/*dekaduo*

⁵⁹⁸ In the Critical Text, the word “twelve” occurs only 11 times. The problem is in 21:16. Those that hold to that text might also note that the word “three” is used four times, so that in that final vision (if “three” appearing four times is considered a twelve) the concept of twelve occurs 12 times in the Critical Text. To complicate matters, the word “twelfth” occurs once in that vision, in 21:20, so it is also true that in the Critical Text, the words “twelve” or “twelfth” occur twelve times!

⁵⁹⁹ πνευμα/*pneuma*

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