

# Revelation

The English word *revelation* comes from the Greek word *apokalyptō*, which means “to uncover,” “to reveal,” or “to disclose” what is hidden (Rev. 1:1). The word *apocalyptic* does not refer to a judgment day or the end of the world. This is seen clearly in Matt. 11:25-29, where every use of the English word *reveal* is the Greek word *apokalyptō*. The book of Revelation is a revealing (*apokalyptō*) of Yahweh’s plan for creation from Jesus Christ to John (Rev. 1:1).

It is widely accepted among scholars that John, the disciple of Jesus, is the author of this book. Though external evidence for authorship is lacking, the internal evidence for John as the author is strong. There are numerous similarities in style, words, and phrases found in the gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation. A couple of examples are the use of *logos* (“word”) in John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1; and Rev. 19:13, which is used nowhere else in the Second Testament. Also the prophecy of Zech. 12:10, quoted in John 19:37 and Rev. 1:7 and using the Greek word *ekkentēo* (“pierced”), is not found in the Greek Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew First Testament) or in any other part of the Second Testament.<sup>1</sup> These and many other similarities are difficult to explain if John was not the author.

According to the writings of several early church fathers,<sup>2</sup> the Romans sent John as a prisoner from Ephesus to the island Patmos, where he became the pastor of the church there. Patmos is in the Aegean Sea, just southwest of Ephesus. It is ten miles long and six miles wide, and it served as a penal colony for political prisoners of Rome. John remained there until after the emperor Domitian died in 96 AD. Domitian’s successor, Nerva, allowed John to return to Ephesus.

The majority of scholars date the book to either during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81–96 AD) or toward the end or after the reign of Nero (54–68 AD). Because it is not clear when the letter was written, one must be careful not to develop too detailed an argument of the book that is tied to a specific date and the historical events of that date.

John wrote to the literal seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2–3) following the same sequence in which a messenger traveling the Roman roads would have delivered the book, meaning he was writing to a specific people of a specific culture of his day, who would have understood the symbology, metaphors, and meanings of his writings. Thus, he was not writing to some distant, future generation that would one day understand his message as it unfolded in their future time. He was addressing the issues of their day, which will be unpacked in the following sections.

## Purpose

Some scholars argue that John’s purpose in Revelation is to exhort his reader audience to be steadfast in their faith in the midst of persecution and to fortify their courage by revealing the ultimate destruction of the powers of evil and the establishment of the kingdom of Yahweh on earth.<sup>3</sup> This makes several assumptions. First, it presupposes that the external persecution was the sole reason for the writing of the letter. Second, it assumes a late date—under the intense persecution of Domitian—when it is possible to argue for an earlier date. Third is the assumption

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<sup>1</sup> See Craig S. Keener. *Revelation*, pp. 35-39; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 15-21.

<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and Victorinus. See also Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, pp. 434-35.

<sup>3</sup> See Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 206; Martin Kiddle. *The Revelation of St. John*, pp. xxxvi-xliii.

that the identity of “Rome” or “Babylon” is restricted to a specific kingdom. The context of the book—and also the fact that Babylon no longer existed—makes it clear that these are symbolic of any nation’s government.<sup>4</sup> Though there was Roman and Jewish external persecution against the church of John’s day, there was also internal conflict.

There were three groups within the Christian church at this time. First were the Jewish Christians, who came from a staunch monotheistic way of thinking, and though they had professed faith in Jesus as the Messiah, they still struggled with the divine nature of Jesus as the God-man. They also still felt loyal to Judaism and were under pressure from their non-Christian Jewish family and friends to maintain the Jewish customs and regulations of the Law. Second were the Hellenistic Christians, who came from a pagan background and continued to be influenced by pre-Gnostic dualistic ideas of salvation, in which “salvation” was liberation from the “bad” material realm into the “good” spiritual realm, where one would become a divine spiritual being. Thus, they still struggled with the humanity of Jesus as the God-man. Third were those Christians whose views embraced fully both natures of Jesus as the God-man. These three groups found it increasingly difficult to coexist in a community of love and unity, as they were challenged by a high Christology of Jesus that was foreign to the cultures they had come out of. In fact, some were already departing from the faith (1 John 2:18-19; 2 John 7; 3 John 9–10). Likewise, false teachers had a strong presence and influence in the church and were promoting false ideas of the nature of Christ. There was a strong pressure for Christians in the church to go into spiritual idolatry of compromising the truth and to behave wrongly. The temptation was to forsake Jesus and return to the familiarity of what they had come from. This reality can be seen in the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3).

The first major purpose of Revelation is to exhort the believers toward moral separation from the world and to remain faithful to Jesus Christ as the God-man even to death.<sup>5</sup> Second is to exhort the believers to bear faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus in the midst of a compromising church and idolatrous world.<sup>6</sup> The gospel is that Jesus Christ (God-man), the long awaited King, came into the world to redeem humanity through His death and resurrection (Rev. 5; 7; 14) and is returning as creation’s King to judge the world and establish the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth (Rev. 19–22). The unity of these two ideas is the driving focus of the book of Revelation.

This is the focus of the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 1–3) and continues on throughout the heavenly unveiling of the rest of the letter. The focus of the book, all the way through, is on Jesus as the God-man and Lion-Lamb who is coming to establish the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth. The book is establishing His authority and sovereignty over all creation and in the face of all other alternatives.

This is how the believers endure persecution: by staying focused on and faithful to Jesus Christ and living in obedience to Him. He is the only one who can sustain the believer in the chaos of the world, and He will one day judge the evil world and subdue the chaos. The believers are able to persevere because He first suffered and conquered sin and death in order to redeem them (Rev. 5). So, no matter what the world does to believers, He will resurrect them into the kingdom

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> See John Philip McMurdo Sweet. *Revelation*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 33.

of heaven on earth—the renewed Garden of Eden—to dwell with Yahweh and Jesus for all eternity (Rev. 12–22). You might die, but you overcome by the blood of the lamb.

“The seer’s [John] chief concern is to present a drama about God’s salvation through his judgement to a community which was *itself* infected with falsehood. The members of John’s circle were inclined to inadequate belief, notably about the person of Jesus, and therefore to wrong conduct. The temptation to compromise with the truth, and use power unjustly, would be increased by the fact that these adherents were surrounded by a pagan society which encouraged people to eat food which had been sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2.6, 14-15, 20) and dominated by an imperial rule which absolutized its own power and prosperity. The prophet-seer therefore warns his readers about the dangers of idolatry in any form: social, political, ecclesiastical or economic. In a passage of striking imagery (the destruction of Babylon, Rev. 17–18), for example, he demonstrates the inevitable downfall of human arrogance. By contrast, and by means of a testimony which is relevant to any Christian group in any age, John urges his congregations to worship God, rather than the beast, and to reject the wiles of Satan by following the exalted Lamb (Rev. 14.1). See further on Rev. 9.20; 19.20; 20.10; 21.8; 22.15, 18-19.”<sup>7</sup>

## Themes

Four major theological themes are developed in the book of Revelation: the supremacy of Jesus as king and conqueror, the tale of two cities, judgment and redemption, and the coming together of Heaven and earth.

### ***The Supremacy of Jesus as King and Conqueror***

The letter begins with a high Christology of Jesus, who appears to John as a divine being who is exalted above all others. John’s response is to fall down before Him in worship. This sets the stage for the letter, in which John exhorts the seven churches to either re-enthroned Christ in their church or to remain faithful to Him despite the trials they face in their church. These letters to the churches make it clear that Christ is above all others and the only one worthy of their devotion and obedience.

Once John is taken up into heaven in a vision, he immediately sees the most incredible and powerful throne, on which Yahweh is enthroned above all of creation (Rev. 4). Then Jesus appears as the Lion and Lamb before the throne of Yahweh and is given all authority over creation because He obediently sacrificed His life for humanity and conquered death (Rev. 5). The book of Revelation recognizes that evil powers conquer by killing and oppressing people (Rev. 13:7). Christ, on the contrary, conquers by overcoming evil through his own self-sacrifice (Rev. 5:5-6). Thus, the followers of Jesus are called to conquer the world by remaining faithful to Him and to resist the forces of evil through their own suffering and maybe even death (Rev. 2:7, 11). The rest of the book shows how Christ will conquer all evil and establish His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

At the end, Jesus appears as a warrior king riding a white horse (Rev. 19:11-21), eliminating all evil, and then ruling over all of creation with life and peace. Yahweh then brings the kingdom of Yahweh down to earth, enthroning Himself and Jesus on the earth in order to dwell with

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 6.

humanity where there is no more sin, evil, suffering, or death (Rev. 21). It is the theological reality of the kingship, self-sacrifice, and future hope of Jesus Christ that enables the believers to persevere in their faith despite the temptation to submit to the world's idols and give up in the midst of suffering.

### **A Tale of Two Cities**

As a book, Revelation has an element of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature uses polar opposites (there is *only* right and wrong), with no allowances for grey area or anything between. One is either completely wicked *or* completely righteous; they are not a mixture of both. Wisdom literature is not interested in the grey area of who you are but in the reality of who Yahweh is and what it truly means to be with Him. The narrative stories of Abraham, David, and others deal with the grey areas of being human and having a relationship with Yahweh. Wisdom literature reminds you to not take sin and obedience lightly in your life even though you are saved by grace. The narrative reminds you that even though you are so wicked and evil, there is the grace of Yahweh. Since John is combating the watering down of the gospel, sin, and the need for obedience, he employs wisdom literature to make his points.

The Bible develops this polarity all the way through Revelation with a tale of two cities. Found in Isa. 1–4 is a contrast between the old Jerusalem of idolatry, rebellion, sin, misuse of power, and injustice and the new Jerusalem of devotion, obedience, righteousness, love, and justice. This city is sometimes called Babylon and carries into Revelation (Gen. 11:8-9; Ps. 137:8; Isa. 13-14; 21:1-12; 47; Zech. 2:7; Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:1-6; 18; 19:1-10). Yahweh declared that the old city would be burned to the ground in judgment. But this fire would be a purifying fire, burning away all that is worthless and creating a righteous city where people are holy. This city is where the people of Yahweh will be righteous and dwell with Yahweh (Ps. 38:1-3; 46:4-5; Isa. 52:1; Heb. 11:10; Rev. 21).

These cities are also portrayed as mountains. In the ancient world, the gods were portrayed as living on mountains, above and separated from the people—a location known as the cosmic mountain. The people would then build cities on hills or mountains, not only for defense but to mimic or to gain access to the gods. In ancient and Jewish literature, mountains are a symbol of strength and kingdoms (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 5:3; Dan. 2:35; 1 Enoch 52:1-7; Rev. 8:8; 14:1). This is seen in the Tower of Babylon (Gen. 11). Likewise, Yahweh portrayed Himself metaphorically as living on a mountain. He first appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19) and then in the temple in Jerusalem, which was built on Mount Moriah. In the Psalms and prophets, this was called Mount Zion, the spiritual name of the true city of Yahweh (Ps. 2:6; 9:11; 48:11; 102:21; 110:2; Isa. 2:3; 4:3-5; 8:18; Jer. 31:12; Joel 2:32; 3:16-17; Rev. 14:1). In contrast to the pagan gods, however, Yahweh actually speaks from the mountain with His people and then comes down to dwell with them in the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh. It is onto this mountain that Yahweh says He will one day gather the true believers from all the nations to dwell with Him on Mount Zion, His cosmic mountain (Isa. 2:1-5; Micah 4:1-5; Rev. 14:1).

These cities are also portrayed metaphorically as women. The contrast is between the prostitute and the virgin daughter of Yahweh. Literal sexual prostitution is not what is in mind here. The “prostitute” is symbolic for that which allures, tempts, seduces, and draws people away from Yahweh (Isa. 23:17; Hos. 4:11-12; Rev. 18:3, 9; 19:2).<sup>8</sup> It was used in the First Testament to

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<sup>8</sup> See William Hendriksen. *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, p. 167.

communicate the apostasy of Israel, the people of Yahweh (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:20-28; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15-41; Hos. 2:5). But it is also likened to the “great city” or “Babylon,” which is the secular pagan kingdom (Isa. 23:16-17; 47; Nahum 3:4; Rev. 17:18). It is specifically used of anyone who rejects their creator and goes after idols. It is the prostitution of all that is right for the gain of power, which becomes misused power. In contrast, the new Jerusalem is portrayed as a righteous and virgin daughter (Ps. 9:14; Isa. 62:11; Mic. 4:13; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10; 9:9) or a faithful bride of Yahweh (Isa. 49:18; 61:10; 62:5; Jer. 2:2; John 3:29; Rev. 19:7; 21; 22:17).

### ***Judgment and Redemption***

The driving theme throughout Revelation is the underlying perception that Yahweh’s salvation comes to His creation through judgment. The judgment and love of Yahweh belong together in the redemption of humanity and creation and are making all things new.

The churches are told that they need to repent of their idolatrous beliefs and behavior, or they will experience judgment (Rev. 2:14-16, 20-24; 3:3, 19). Yahweh’s judgments are ultimately an expression of His love. They are meant to call people to repentance to spare them from judgment. But if they do not repent, then the judgment is meant to reveal the failure of their idols to save them so that they will turn back to Yahweh in repentance and be redeemed. Those who are found in Christ will reign with Christ forever (Rev. 11:18; 16:5-7; 20:4). Divine judgment through the Lamb is thus transferred from a future terror into a present encouragement.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of Yahweh’s judgments is not just to eliminate evil but to bring people to salvation. This is seen in the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, which always end with the announcement of the coming salvation for the people of the world.<sup>10</sup> As Babylon is destroyed (Rev. 17–18) and the dragon and the beast are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:7-10), Yahweh’s people are finally free from all that is wicked and can go on to full and complete salvation, dwelling with Yahweh (Rev. 21). The removal of evil is an expression of His love for His people, for only when they are free from wickedness can they live with Yahweh in life, peace, and joy.

### ***Heaven and Earth Coming Together***

The book opens with the divine Jesus enthroned in heaven and revealing Himself to John in order to exhort and encourage the seven churches on earth. These letters reveal that Jesus has assigned angelic beings to watch over each of the churches (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The stars and lampstands, images that represent the churches on earth, also stand before the throne in heaven, and Jesus is said to stand among them (Rev. 1:12; 4:5). Jesus is one with Yahweh and humanity (John 1:14). The very nature of the metaphysical Jesus as the God-man allows Him to invade the physical dimensions, allowing matter (Himself) to be a carrier of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the spiritual realm re-merges with the material realm in the future coming of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:11-16).

The unfolding of the seals, trumpets, and bowls reveals that what happens in heaven directly affects what happens on earth, for the judgments are announced and unleashed from heaven but are poured out on the earth. The martyred believers stand under the altar of Yahweh in heaven

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<sup>9</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 46-56.

(Rev. 6:9-11) asking for justice to be carried out on earth. We see the 144,000 believers who are sealed on earth, but they are simultaneously the great multitude who stand before the throne of Yahweh in heaven (Rev. 7) showing the reality of the believer existing in the two realms of heaven and earth.

Eventually Yahweh brings an end to the great divide by bringing the kingdom of Yahweh (heaven) down to earth (Rev. 21), merging the two as one, as it was in the Garden of Eden (Rev. 22:1-5). It is only when the two are merged can Yahweh and Jesus completely and eternally dwell in creation with humanity in a good relationship.

## Structure

There is no scholarly consensus on the structural analysis of Revelation. Scholars have argued that the book is structured based on chronological events, literary themes, and theological ideas. But none of these structures work completely to make sense of the structure John used for writing Revelation.

The problem with seeing the events of Revelation as chronological is that there is nothing to suggest that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are chronological. The fact that they are numbered means nothing, for to-do lists and grocery lists can be numbered as well. There are very few mentions of specific timeframes using numbers (Rev. 11:2, 3, 9, 11; 12:2, 6; 13:5; 20:2-3), and these are very late in the book with no attempt to root them in time and space or in relation to any chronology of events. And in the midst of these judgments (Rev. 6; 8-9; 11:15-19; 15-16) are asides (Rev. 7; 10, 11:1-14; 12; 13; 14; 17) that interrupt the judgments and are portrayed as happening at the same time as the judgments (recapitulation). This lack of chronology is further seen in the fact that many things destroyed in the seals still remain in the trumpets. This continues throughout all three sets of judgments. And after the entire world has been judged in the seals, trumpets, and bowls, Babylon (the power of Satan and fallen humanity) still remains. There is no sense of structure when it comes to time and chronology despite how much people have tried to create rigid timelines for the events, as will be discussed below. There is very little information to plug this book into a specific view or time period. The numbers of periods of times are either completely missing or so sparse and random they cannot be definitive.

These visions cannot be seen as being in chronological order. Yahweh's purposes are ultimately perceived from a viewpoint that is outside of time and, therefore, outside a chronological framework. Zechariah's visions are an example of this. Trying to figure out the sequence of events, therefore, is pointless; one must establish the timeless truths of Yahweh's salvific purposes for His creation as they are being communicated in Revelation.<sup>11</sup> This is an epic drama of Yahweh's final redemption of creation and humanity, not a chronology of events in history.

The events in the book of Revelation progress toward the second coming and final victory of Jesus Christ rather than communicate an understanding of the chronological sequence of events of how one gets there through cause and effect. The whole action points toward the end of history, the conquest of wrongdoing, and the consummation of Yahweh's eternal will for the faithful. A literary structure with theological elements provides a better understanding than a chronological structure.

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<sup>11</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 19. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 163.

## Outline

- I. The Exalted Christ's Message to His Seven Churches (1:1–3:22)
  - A. John's Vision of Christ (1:1-20)
  - B. The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)
- II. The Seven Seals (4:1–8:5)
  - A. Yahweh and Jesus Enthroned in Heaven (4:1–5:14)
  - B. The Opening of the Seals (6:1-17)
  - C. The 144,000 Sealed (7:1–8:5)
- III. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:29)
  - A. The Blowing of the Trumpets (8:6–9:21)
  - B. The Angel, the Witnesses, and the Seventh Trumpet (10:1–11:19)
- IV. The Great Signs (12:1–14:21)
  - A. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1-18)
  - B. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)
  - C. The Song of the 144,000 and the Angelic Judgment (14:1-20)
- V. The Seven Bowls (15:1–18:24)
  - A. The Pouring out of the Bowls (15:1–16:21)
  - B. The Fall of Babylon (17:1–18:24)
- VI. The Restoration of Creation (19:1–22:21)
  - A. The Return of Christ (19:21-24)
  - B. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ (20:1-15)
  - C. The Marriage of Heaven and Earth (21:1–22:21)

## Understanding Apocalyptic Literature

The book of Revelation is a type of genre called apocalyptic literature, which is defined as a spiritual unveiling of hidden things that exist in the spiritual realm or are soon to take place. Apocalyptic literature flourished in early Judaism between 200 BC and 100 AD, and its symbols and metaphors were common and understood by the Jewish culture of this time. When Jesus told parables, His disciples were confused (Mark 4:10-13), but when He used apocalyptic language, they seemed to understand what He was saying and to think He had answered their question (Matt. 24; Mark 13). Examples of apocalyptic literature are found in parts of Ezekiel, Daniel 7–12, Zechariah 1–6, 1 Enoch, The Book of Jubilees, and The Apocalypse of Abraham.

Apocalyptic literature is characterized by vivid metaphorical language, symbols, eschatological events, dualistic ideas of good/evil and God/Satan, strange and dangerous animals or angels of the spiritual realm, numerical symbology, pessimism over hostile and wicked society and governments, and the sovereign Yahweh breaking into the material realm to judge the

wickedness of the world and redeem it. Apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic and metaphoric in its language.

Apocalyptic literature is similar to parables in that its details are simply a part of the overall scenery. Every little detail does not and should not be interpreted as carrying meaning. How all the details develop the big picture image and feeling is the best picture. It is highly symbolic to the point of fantasy and hyperbolic expression. It is like a dream where the imagery is not meant to be interpreted literally but is a conglomeration of images in order to communicate an idea. For example, in Dan. 7:1-8 Daniel sees four strange beasts coming up out of the sea. This is not meant to be interpreted literally at all. The sea is symbolic of chaos and humanity. The beasts are symbolic of human rulers over four consecutive kingdoms. The point Yahweh is making is that when human rulers and kingdoms turn away from Him and seek power, they become chaotic and beastly as they devour others for power. Also the use of the name Babylon does not refer to the literal Babylon—it no longer existed—but to Rome; by writing of Babylon, however, the people could be critical of Rome without incurring persecution. The authors of such literature used this enigmatic language and predictions in order to provoke thought. It was not meant to be interpreted literally, and the original readers would not have done so.

Everyone agrees that Jesus with fiery eyes and a sword coming out of his mouth (Rev. 1:12-16); Jesus as a seven-eyed, seven-horned slain lamb (Rev. 5:6); a literal 144,000 believers sealed (Rev. 7:1-8); mutated locusts (Rev. 9:8-12); the eating of a scroll (Rev. 10:9-11); a winged woman with the sun, moon, and stars surrounding her (Rev. 12:1-2, 14); Satan as a seven-headed dragon spewing water (Rev. 12:3-4, 15); the antichrist as a seven-headed, hybrid beast coming out of the sea (Rev. 13:1-4); the harvesting of the earth (Rev. 14:14-20); and the prostitute riding the beast (Rev. 17) are all metaphorical. Yet some would say that mixed in with all of those are literal events: the cosmos falling apart three different times (Rev. 6:12-14; 8:6-13; 16), the two witnesses who bring plagues and breathe fire (Rev. 11), the antichrist ruling the whole world (Rev. 13), the antichrist being wounded and coming back (Rev. 13:3), and the beast giving everyone a mark (Rev. 13:16-17). There is no reason given for why some are interpreted literally and some metaphorically—that is not how apocalyptic literature works. Nor can you just decide with any genre of literature to apply your own rules to the text based on a system that you have established. There are rules of literature that must be followed when interpreting, and the rules shape your interpretation and theology—not the other way around.

Numbers are always symbolic and do not communicate a literal number of items. For example, Jesus is not literally a seven-eyed, seven-horned lamb with its neck slit (Rev. 5:6). The eyes are symbolic of knowledge, horns are symbolic of authority, and seven is symbolic of completion. So it is communicating that His knowledge, authority, and dominion are complete and worldwide, that he was sacrificed for the sins of the world. Likewise, Satan is not literally a seven-headed, ten-horned red dragon (Rev. 12:3). Some people want to interpret the 1,260 days (Rev. 11:3; 12:6), forty-two months (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), and three and a half days (Rev. 11:9, 11) as literal since they are connected to time, but this is an assumption that violates the genre. Even though these numbers are attached to references of time, these references of time are not connected to any historical events or chronological time structure to even identify when these days, months, and years even begin or end in relation to other events. The meaning of the numbers will be discussed in the commentary that follows.

Apocalyptic literature is known for recapitulation, where it recycles or recaps its visions. When a new vision begins, the vision temporarily goes back in time and then moves forward to the end

again, paralleling the previous vision. Or the vision starts partway through the previous vision and then moves forward. Oftentimes, this new vision goes into greater detail than the previous one or views it from a different perspective. For example, in Dan. 2 Nebuchadnezzar has a vision of a statue made up of different metals, the individual metals representing the Babylonian, Median, Persian, and Greek empires. This is from humanity's perspective, wherein the empires are valuable and beautiful. Then Dan. 7 recapitulates from Yahweh's perspective, wherein these empires are portrayed as ugly, mutated, animalistic beasts that come out of the sea of chaos. Then Dan. 8 recapitulates and discusses the Persian and Greek empires in a little more detail, introducing the Greek ruler Antiochus IV. Then Dan. 9 recapitulates and covers the Greek empire, referencing the Greek ruler Antiochus IV. Then Dan. 11–12 recapitulates again, covering specifics concerning many Greek rulers and ending with a detailed summary of Antiochus IV. This is how many of the visions in Revelation work as well. It is sometimes hard to know when a vision in Revelation is totally new in its information or if it is a recapitulation of a previous one. This makes figuring out the chronological sequences of different visions difficult. There are some scholars who believe that the seven judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls are parallel recapitulations of the same judgments from different perspectives.

When interpreting Revelation, the reader must first realize that symbolic imagery permeates all of Revelation.<sup>12</sup> Symbols are attached to everything—people, things, places, institutions, events, colors, time, numbers, and so on. A lion is not a lion, a head is not a head, hair is not hair, a dragon is not a dragon. One cannot decide what it means based on his own view and then force the First Testament into that interpretation.

Second, the reader must look for the interpretation of the symbols from the context of *all* of Revelation. Sometimes Jesus, angels, or John gives interpretations. Or the symbol is used multiple times and in multiple contexts to help define the meaning of the symbol. When the symbols are defined, their meaning becomes fixed throughout the rest of the book.

Third, the reader must discover whether the symbol is an allusion to the First Testament and then find its interpretation from its First Testament context. Revelation references the First Testament more times than any other Second Testament book does. The symbols used in the book are implicit allusions to the First Testament and are developed and tied together in a new way to make the authors' points. You cannot decide from your own system of thinking what a symbol means for the book of Revelation and then force every use of the symbol that came *before* that into that meaning. The meanings of symbols in the Bible flow from Genesis to Revelation—not any other way.

Fourth, one must look to the original audience's cultural and historical use of the symbols and the extra-biblical writing that came out of that culture. John wrote to people who shared common cultural assumptions, and his images would have been understood by the original audience. We are not the original audience, and though the Bible was written *for* us it was not written *to* us. We must not force our modern or Western understanding onto the text. In fact, the later the interpretation is from the original audience, the greater skepticism one should have for it.

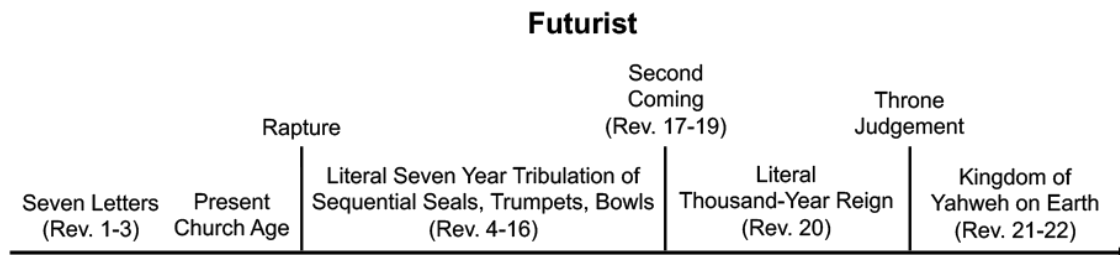
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<sup>12</sup> See Michael Kuykendall. *Lions, Locust, and the Lamb*, pp. 7-9 for a summary of interpreting symbols.

## The Varying Views of Revelation

Throughout the centuries, there have been many views within the church around how to interpret Revelation. There are four major views around how people have understood the seven-year tribulation (Rev. 6–16) and the second coming and reign of Christ on earth (Rev. 19–20). None of the views are rigid in their structure, and within each view are varying understandings. All these views have been held by different Christians throughout history since the first century AD. Some of them became more popular than others at different times in history. The millennial (thousand-year reign of Christ) views of premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism will be discussed in Rev. 20.

**Futurists** believe that all the events of Revelation 4–22 will happen in the future (this view is present in the *Left Behind* book series). Futurists deny that most of the imagery and numbers in Revelation is symbolic and take mostly a literal interpretation of the events described. They believe that the images of Revelation refer to specific events, institutions, nations, or people in the future. Some of them might be here now, depending how close we are to the second coming of Christ, but will not become significant until the future seven-year tribulation. They believe that the world will continue getting worse and worse until the second coming of Christ. Rev. 4–18 happens during a future literal seven-year period right before Christ’s second coming, where Yahweh’s judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls are poured out literally, as they are described, one by one upon humanity in chronological order. It is right before this seven-year tribulation or during it that the church will be raptured from the earth.



The great prostitute, who rides the dragon on the seven hills during this seven-year tribulation, is literally Roman Catholicism (Rev. 17). It is out of this institution that an antichrist will literally rule via a one-world empire and religion for three and a half years until he is assassinated and then comes back to life (Rev. 13). He will then force everyone in the world to take the number 666 on their forehead and wrist, which will allow them to buy and sell goods. This is followed by the second coming of Christ, with a literal battle, called Armageddon, between Christ and all the nations of the earth (Rev. 19). They believe that after Christ’s defeat of the nations, He will literally rule on earth for a thousand years (premillennialism) (Rev. 20). Then Yahweh will create a new heaven and a new earth and will bring the Kingdom of Yahweh to earth (Rev. 21–22). Thus, most of Revelation is yet to be fulfilled, and its only value is for the Christians living in that age to come, making it irrelevant to all the generations that have lived before the future seven-year tribulation. This view did not really become fully developed and popular—and only in America and Europe—until 1830 AD. The strength of this view is that it is very neat and explains every part of Revelation, putting it into a systematic chronological order.

The futurists do not take everything literally. They do not believe that Jesus is literally a seven-horned, seven-eyed lamb who has been killed (Rev. 5:7). They know from the greater context of the Bible that this is a figure of speech. However, in other places, like with the two witnesses

(Rev. 11:1-13), they believe that these men are literally Moses and Elijah coming back and will literally do miracles and breath fire out of their mouths, and then be killed, resurrected, and taken up into heaven. Futurists do not see any obvious figures of speech, so they take these things literally. Likewise, they take all numbers in Revelation literally—all the sevens, the three and a half years, the forty-two months, and the 1,260 days, which are all the same length of time.

The first problem is that this interpretation completely ignores the nature of apocalyptic literature (as discussed above). There is not any system or consistency as to which elements are interpreted literally or figuratively because they violate the rules of apocalyptic literature.

Second is that there are too many passages that would have been read by the first readers as referring to places and events in the first century. The great prostitute on the seven hills would have been understood as the Roman Empire, which was known to everyone at that time as being on seven hills. To say those readers misunderstood is to completely misunderstand the context of John's original audience. It does not make sense that John would use very well-known imagery with the original recipients of his letter and then say it actually means something completely different, something no one will understand until two thousand-plus years in the future.

Third is that nothing of Revelation 4–22 applies to anyone throughout the last two thousand years and going forward except a small group of Christians in some future seven-year period, making it irrelevant to most Christians and serving only as a warning. They would say that the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 1–3) apply to the original audience, but nothing else in the book does. Yet there is nothing in the book that even implies this division, and there are clear phrases that link these two parts of the book together (as will be discussed below in this commentary).

Fourth is that this view is completely based on there being a literal seven-year tribulation, yet nowhere in Revelation is a seven-year period even mentioned. They get this seven-year period from Daniel's seventy-week prophecy of the first coming of Jesus the Messiah (Dan. 9:20-27). In this prophecy, each week represents seven years, for a total of 490 years. This prophecy tells of different historical events that will happen in Israel at different times in the seventy weeks (490 years) before Christ comes the first time. The prophecy says that after sixty-nine weeks (483 years) the anointed one will be killed; in the seventy-seventh week (seven years), an antichrist figure will make a covenant with Israel, break it halfway through (three and half years), and desecrate the temple in the abomination of desolation; at the end of this final seventh week, he will come to an end. The overwhelming majority of scholars believe that the anointed one who is killed is the Jewish high priest Onias III, and the antichrist of the seventieth week is the Syrian king Antiochus IV, who did exactly what is described. Then, after the seventy-seven weeks, Jesus came on the scene.

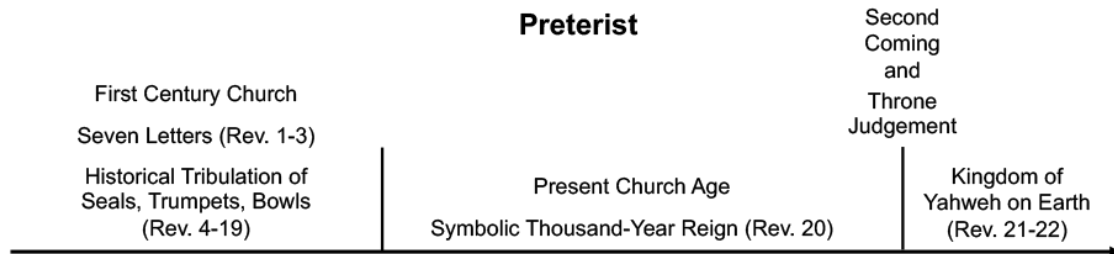
The futurist believes that the anointed one is not the high priest Onias III but Jesus, which means the antichrist figure must come after Jesus. Since they cannot find in history such a figure after Jesus, the seventieth week (the final seven years) has not happened yet. And since there are references to three and a half years (Rev. 11:9; 11:11) and an antichrist beast figure (Rev. 13) in Revelation, then Revelation 4–18 must be the seventieth week Daniel was talking about. That means there is a several-thousand-years gap between the sixty-ninth week and the seventieth week. There are many problems with this view, but a major one is that there is no hint of anything in the text that would make one read a gap into the seventy weeks. Another problem is that their entire system is based on two verses of a vision of the first coming of Christ in Daniel

that Revelation, which is about the second coming of Christ, does not even hint at in any way. (For an in-depth understanding, see the *Daniel* commentary.<sup>13</sup>) Likewise, as mentioned before, there are very few mentions of specific timeframes using numbers in Revelation (Rev. 11:2, 3, 9, 11; 12:2, 6; 13:5; 20:2-3) and they are very late in the book with no attempt to root them in time and space or in relation to any chronology of events.

Fifth is, since Roman Catholicism is nowhere even close to being a power in the world or influential anymore, then most of this view has to be reinterpreted, for it rested so heavily on Roman Catholicism being the major threat to the world.

Sixth is that they interpret all the events of Revelation as matching up with European and American history, neglecting to include historical events of the rest of the world. Also, the adherents to this view often point to how bad America's morality or economy is getting as proof that the seven-year tribulation and the end of the world are near. This view tends to be a very American view, from a geographical setting where life has been much more affluent and prosperous than most countries in the world; when things do get bad in America, people begin to assume it is the end of the world. Yet America is a very small part of the world and does not give an accurate picture of what life is like worldwide. In fact, globally speaking, the world has gotten better, not worse, compared to all of human history. There are fewer wars and conflicts and better living conditions in the last hundred years than ever in human history. And more people have converted to Christianity in the last hundred years than in the last two thousand years combined. Though the church may be dying in America, it is exploding in many other countries in the world. As a result of focusing on how bad things are getting, futurists unintentionally fill people with fear of every bad thing signifying the coming of the antichrist and the end of the world. The whole drive of Revelation, however, is about the hope and expectation of the coming of Christ to redeem creation and make all things new again.

**Preterists** (deriving from a Latin root for "past") believe that virtually all of the events in Revelation already happened in the first century of the church under the Roman Empire. Thus, when Revelation refers to "the world," it is referring to only the world of Israel in the first century. The letters to the churches were written to seven literal churches, preparing them for the things to come (Rev. 1–3). The events of Rev. 4–18 do not refer to a literal seven-year tribulation but describe in a symbolic way the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and then the fall of the Roman Empire. The seals, trumpets, and bowls are not sequential chronological events but were judgments that were all happening at the same time, which is known as recapitulation.



In the preterist view, the great prostitute who rides the dragon on the seven hills is literally the Roman Empire, which rested physically on seven hills (Rev. 17). The antichrist (Rev. 13) was either the emperor Nero (54–68 AD) or Domitian (81–96 AD); the letters of each of their names

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<sup>13</sup> See Cory Baugher. *Daniel* at [www.knowingthebible.net](http://www.knowingthebible.net)

add up numerically to 666. They both oppressed the Christians and made it difficult to buy and sell and live in the Roman Empire. Rev. 19 refers to Christ's first coming and His judgment on Israel, as seen in the Olivet discourse (Matt. 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). Some preterists believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ is symbolic fit it in sometime around 70 AD with the destruction of the temple. Others believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ is symbolic of the Christians being indwelt by the Holy Spirit and spreading the gospel during the time between the first and second comings of Christ (amillennialism) (Rev. 20). Christ will literally return to earth (Rev. 20:7-15) and bring the kingdom of Yahweh to earth (Rev. 21-22). This view has become very common among scholars since the mid 1900s.

The first problem with this view is that most of Revelation has already been fulfilled (Rev. 1-19) and so becomes largely irrelevant to the present struggles of the church or its expectation for the future fulfillment of Yahweh's promises.

Second is that Revelation is applied narrowly to Israel, where the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls (Rev. 4-17) are described as world judgments that include wiping out a third of the population and earth.

Third is that it requires an early date of the book, which most scholars find hard to defend.

There is a subgroup called full preterists, who believe there is no literal return of Christ or resurrection of the believers and that we are currently living in the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21-22). Yet we currently experience neither eternal life nor an end to evil, both promised in Scripture. Thus, this is a heretical view that does not line up with the rest of Scripture.

**Historicists** see Revelation as symbolizing a chronological sequence of events that will occur throughout the course of the history of the church, from Christ's first coming until His second coming at the end of the present age. Many adherents of this position view the seven churches (Rev. 1-3) as representing seven periods in church history, where we are currently in the Laodicean age of falling away. The seven-year tribulation is symbolic of seven time periods of history, and the judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls refer to specific events, institutions, nations, and people throughout the history of humanity—like the French Revolution and the two world wars. The breaking of the seals (Rev. 4-7) symbolizes the fall of the Roman Empire. The trumpet judgments (Rev. 8-10) represent the invasions of the Roman Empire by the Vandals, Huns, Saracens, and Turks. The two witnesses, the dragon, and the antichrist (Rev. 11-13) represent the true church in its struggle against Roman Catholicism, where the papacy is the antichrist. The bowl judgments (Rev. 14-16) represent Yahweh's judgment on Roman Catholicism (the prostitute who rides the dragon), culminating in the future overthrow of Catholicism (Rev. 17-18). Historicists believe that the thousand-year reign of Christ is symbolic of the Christians being indwelt by the Holy Spirit and spreading the gospel during the time between the first and second comings of Christ (amillennialism) (Rev. 20). Christ will return literally to earth (Rev. 20:7-15) and bring the kingdom of Yahweh to earth (Rev. 21-22).



The first problem with this view is that it is very subjective, and there is no consensus around which symbol or image matches up with which event in world history since nothing in the text is even remotely connected to specific moments throughout history. As time keeps passing, the matching of the symbols in Revelation with the events of world history must be readjusted to fit the growing timeframe of history; therefore, the view is constantly wrong.

Second is that they also interpret all the events of Revelation as matching up with European and American history and do not include historical events of the rest of the world.

**Idealists (Spiritualists)** interpret the book spiritually or symbolically rather than literally. The visions of Revelation are a portrayal of the church's struggle against the physical and spiritual powers of the world throughout the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ with no immediate historical connection to any social or political events. The book was first set down for one generation but speaks to every generation that follows. The letters to the churches were written to seven literal churches, preparing them for the things to come (Rev. 1–3). All the events of the book, the seven-year tribulation (Rev. 6–16), and the thousand-year reign (Rev. 20) are all happening at once, over and over again (recapitulation), between the first and second comings of Christ. Christ will literally return to earth (Rev. 20:7-15) and bring the kingdom of Yahweh to earth (Rev. 21–22).



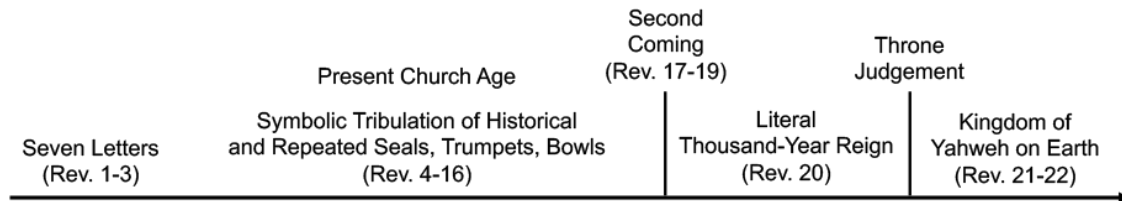
The first problem with this view is that some do not see the symbols rooted in the historical context of the original audience, and so Revelation becomes just one metaphorical poem of good overcoming evil. Thus, the points they make or the application they derive from the text is not rooted in any solid meaning since they ignore the historical and cultural context of the symbols and metaphors of the book. They are not faithful to the apocalyptic nature of the genre though their interpretations of the apocalyptic symbols are still rooted in historical events and has historical significance.

Second is that one could read Revelation too allegorically; reading spiritual meanings into the text could lead to random personal interpretations, based solely on a person's opinion rather than on Scripture.

### ***The Approach of This Commentary***

Revelation is incredibly difficult to understand, but the language of the text is rooted in the language and themes already established throughout Scripture. The goal of this commentary is to stay faithful to the nature of the apocalyptic genre, the symbols and themes already established in Scripture, and the language John is using to pull all of this together—rather than staying consistent to a particular view. Though all Christians would say this is what they are trying to do, it seems one cannot help but stay within the parameters of a particular camp. This commentary, however, acknowledges that Revelation is extremely difficult to interpret and so holds the views very loosely. If one had to put the views of this commentary is that the events of the tribulation

period (Rev. 6-16) were fulfilled on one level in the life of the Christians in the first century Roman Empire (preterist) but also are a typological model of how it will happen again and again throughout human history (a more rooted in history idealist). Christ will literally return and physically rule the earth for a long period of time (premillennialist) (Rev. 19-20) and then bring the Kingdom of Yahweh down to earth (Rev. 21-22).



As discussed already, there are major problems with seeing the majority of the events of Revelation as already fulfilled (preterist) or yet to be fulfilled (futurist). The idealist view correctly sees that Revelation is speaking to believers throughout all of history, yet it sometimes goes too far in application and misses the nature of apocalyptic literature and that the symbols used in Revelation are rooted in the First Testament. This is why many people have adopted a preterist idealism view, which sees the events of Revelation as rooted in the specific events of the original audience living in the Roman Empire; it also serves as a typology for events and themes that will keep recurring throughout human history until the second coming of Christ.

For example, Daniel uses the imagery of the four beasts coming out of the sea (Dan. 7) to refer to the specific kingdoms of Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece as becoming and acting like devouring beasts who have ceased to be in the image of God because of their rebellion against Yahweh. This imagery is rooted in a specific historical time, yet it is used again in Revelation, as two beasts during the Roman Empire (Rev. 13) even though these four kingdoms no longer exist. The beast imagery of Daniel serves as a typology of the later kingdom of Rome, which also has become a beast in its opposition to Yahweh. This typological imagery gets re-rooted in history with Nero and Domitian. Therefore, the text has shown that this imagery becomes a typology for any corrupt political or spiritual leader throughout history who opposes and or stands in place of Christ, offering a false physical, political, economic, or spiritual salvation (1 John 3:18; 4:1-3). Thus the imagery gets re-rooted in history over and over again to refer to very specific leaders throughout the different ages. This means one could also see the beast as some specific future antichrist. Another example is the prostitute who rides the dragon (Rev. 17), which is rooted in the Roman Empire (preterist). The imagery of the dragon, however, did not come from Rome (there is no imagery of dragons in the Roman Empire) but from the poetic images of chaos and evil in the First Testament. These are political images of a spiritual rebellion at work in and through human empires and government power structures. This imagery is anchored in the Roman Empire for the original audience, but calling it a dragon frees it from its historically limited Roman context to allow it to speak in any generation of any human institution that acts like a beast. It becomes imagery we can use to talk about current corrupt government institutions and those of future generations.

In the prophetic books, when Yahweh foretells the coming of the Assyrians to judge Israel, He uses certain language and metaphors to describe the Assyrians. Then, when He foretells the coming of the Babylonians, He uses the same language and metaphors He used of the Assyrians. When He tells of the Persians and Greeks coming to judge the previous nations, He uses the

same language and metaphors again. Thus, the Assyrians become a typology of how He will use nation after nation to punish the previous nation throughout human history.

Since there is no mention of a seven-year tribulation in the Bible and the word *tribulation* is only mentioned in Rev. 7:14, the book of Revelation is then covering all of human history between the first and second comings of Christ. Yahweh's judgments of the seals, trumpets, and bowls are symbolic of the many wars, plagues, and so on that have happened again and again throughout human history (recapitulation). The seals, trumpets, and bowls are in different stages in different parts of the world at different times in history, depending on the wickedness and repentance of the different people groups of the world and in history. This is what the world will be like, with these events happening again and again until the second coming.

The language of Rev. 17–22, referencing events so global and unique compared to anything that has ever happened, makes it clear that at this point Yahweh is speaking of future events. Thus, this commentary believes that the events of Rev. 17–22 will be fulfilled in the future and literal return of Christ in which He will then bring the kingdom of Yahweh literally to earth, where there will be no more sin, evil, death, or Satan (Rev. 21–22).

Viewing Revelation as typology rather than literally is consistent with all the other First Testament prophetic books (like Dan., Ezek., Zech., and Jer.) that used apocalyptic imagery. This view avoids the difficulty of harmonizing specific passages with specific fulfillments, a task that has plagued the futurist, historicist, and preterist views. It maintains the original interpretation for the original first-century Christians, while also making the book of Revelation applicable and relevant to all periods of church history facing the temptation to compromise their faith in the midst of corruption and suffering. The specific details and times are not as important as the idea being communicated. If the details and specifics were important, then Yahweh would have not revealed this message using apocalyptic literature. Ultimately, the point is not to give a chronology or playbook of how Yahweh is going to judge the world but to reveal the character of Yahweh and how He interacts with humans both as Judge and Redeemer. Unlike the other gods, Yahweh will eventually deal with all the rebellion and evil in the world, and He will redeem the righteous. This is why the Holy Trinity is worthy of devotion.

## I. The Exalted Christ's Message to His Seven Churches (1:1–3:22)

In the first division, Jesus Christ appeared to John in His glorified state in order to give His message to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Here, Jesus established Himself as the absolute authority as Creator and Savior of creation (Rev. 1). This is what gives weight to His commendation, rebuke, and encouragement to the seven churches. This division sets the stage for the rest of the book of Revelation, in which Jesus will show the churches what will begin to happen and continue to happen in the world until He returns. The coming persecution by the world against the church and the absolute judgement of Jesus Christ over the world for their rebellion will reinforce the seriousness of Jesus' rebukes and His call to them to persevere.

### A. John's Vision of Christ (1:1-20)

In this section, Jesus appears to John in a metaphorical and glorified state. It is metaphorical in that Jesus has fiery eyes and a sword coming out of His mouth. This is His glorified state, for it is clear from the scene that Jesus is absolutely powerful and emanates a great deal of power compared to how He first came—as a humble human—in His early life and ministry. John introduces a lot of imagery and concepts, the greater significance of which he unpacks in the following chapters. The appearance of Jesus makes it clear that He is God and that the believers are to maintain their faith in Him, for He is the one to whom we will give an account one day.

**1:1-3** This revelation came from God the Father to Jesus Christ and was given to John through Yahweh's angel so that John could communicate it to the churches. As seen in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks only what the Father tells Him (John 8:26-29; 12:49-50; 14:10). It is common in apocalyptic literature for an angel to explain what is going on. It is the exalted Jesus who addresses John and prepares for things to come. The angels move between heaven and earth and thus connect the two. The phrase "take place swiftly" or "soon" communicates the sure accomplishment of Yahweh's purposes, not the hasty consummation of history (Dan. 2:28).

John refers to himself and his audience as slaves. Many translations translate the Greek word *doulos* as "servant," but this word does not carry the idea of a free individual serving another. This word is used of one who is not free and who has been enslaved to another or has sold himself into slavery. Unlike in American history, there were many types of slavery, and not all were as bad as slavery was in America. Some people chose to become slaves in order to pay off debts. In fact, if one were a slave in a politically powerful family, like Caesar's, then the slave's status was actually higher than that of a free person. John sees Christ as the ultimate master, of whom he is a slave in that he has surrendered his will to Christ. Yet Christ is a good and loving master who bought John with His own life. And John's status in heaven as a slave to Christ is greater than his status as a free person in the world. This concept is also seen Rom. 1:1; Phil 1:1; James 1:1; Gal. 1:10; 2 Pet. 1:1; Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:24; 1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6.

The blessing John gives to those who hear the revelation and take it to heart assumes that hearing the prophetic witness will produce a response of faith and obedience. The blessings of salvation are not automatic but involve active participation in their outworking.

**1:4-5a** John sent this letter to the seven churches mentioned in Rev. 2–3, which were in the Roman province of Asia in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey). John sends a greeting to his audience from the Father, seven spirits (Holy Spirit), and Jesus Christ. The description of Yahweh being the God "who is, and who was, and who is to come" appears nowhere else in the Bible. It states that Yahweh has always existed in the past and will always exist through the

present and into the future. But in the context of the Bible (Ex. 3:14-15) it also refers to the fact that Yahweh is actively involved in creation and history to work out His plan of redemption for humanity. The God who was active among His covenant people is the same God who is at work in the trials of His people and will continue to work into the future to finish the work He began. It is in this fact of Yahweh's nature that the promises of this revelation are rooted.

In Rev. 1:4 it is not totally clear what "the seven spirits" before the throne are. John mentions "the seven spirits" four times (Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6), a hint that numerical symbolism is at work. Some scholars have associated the seven spirits with the seven angels that hold the seven trumpets or bowls or to seven other archangels. Though this is possible, the problem is that in Revelation numbers are not literal but symbolic. Likewise, there are no clues given that would associate them with a specific number of heavenly beings.

Most likely "the seven spirits" refers to the Holy Spirit, and the reference to seven is symbolic for completion. In Rev. 3:1, 4:5, and 5:6, it is referenced as "the seven spirits of God." In Rev. 1:4, 4:5 and 5:6 it is before the throne of Yahweh. In Rev. 1:4, 4:5, and 5:6, "the seven spirits" are placed with the Father and the Son, pointing to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit. "The seven spirits" are equated with the "seven torches of fire" burning before Yahweh's throne (Rev. 4:5) and with "the seven eyes" of the Lamb, which are sent on a mission into the world (Rev. 5:6). This imagery comes from Zech. 4:2, 10, where "seven lamps" are described as "the seven eyes" of Yahweh ranging throughout the earth. The one Spirit is symbolized by the two elements from Zechariah's fifth vision: the seven torches (Rev. 4:5) and the seven eyes (Rev. 5:6).<sup>14</sup> The seven torches may reflect the fire moving around the throne of Yahweh in Ezek. 1:13. The fact that they are specifically associated with the eyes of Yahweh (Zech. 4:2, 10) and the Lamb (Rev. 5:6) directly makes "the seven spirits" a part of the Lamb. Their association with the eyes that range throughout the earth means "the seven spirits of God" are the divine fullness of the Holy Spirit of Yahweh that covers all the earth. The unusual order of Yahweh on the throne and the Holy Spirit (seven spirits) before the throne and Jesus Christ is determined by the later appearance of the Godhead in the vision of Rev. 4-5.

Some see a connection with Isa. 11:2, where qualities of the Spirit of Yahweh are listed as resting upon the Davidic king. In the Hebrew text there are only six, but the Greek LXX adds a seventh quality of godliness. It is unlikely that John is making a connection to the LXX while ignoring the Hebrew. Likewise, Isa. 11:2 is listing character qualities, whereas Revelation is using the symbol of the seven spirits to refer directly to the Spirit of Yahweh.

Jesus is described as the faithful witness and is described as such only here and in Rev. 3:14 (Ps. 89:37; Isa. 55:4). He is the one who speaks faithfully on behalf of the Father and is the best witness to who the Father is (Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus is also described as the firstborn from the dead in that He is the first resurrection that leads to eternal life, where death no longer has a hold over the believer. His resurrection has made our future and permanent resurrection possible (1 Cor. 15:20-23). This also gives Him the right to rule over all the earth (Ps. 89:27; Rom. 3:25; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:3; 1 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 5:9-10-14).

**1:5b-8** John gives glory to Jesus, who proved His ultimate love to us by dying for our sins through his shed blood (death) in order to give us life. His atonement for our sins enabled us to become a kingdom of priests in the Kingdom of Yahweh (Ex. 19:5; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

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<sup>14</sup> See Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, pp. 424-427.

In John's praise of Jesus (Rev. 1:7), he combines the testimonies from Dan. 7:13-14 and Zech. 12:10. Dan. 7:13-14 portrays Jesus as the Son of Man who approaches the throne of Yahweh with the clouds. Yahweh or Jesus' coming on the clouds is used in the Bible as an image of divine judgment (Ex. 13:21; 19:16-23). The emphasis is on the sovereign kingship of Jesus as the Son of Man who is given the Kingdom of Yahweh (Matt. 26:64; Acts 1:9). Zech. 12:10 emphasizes Jesus as the suffering High Priest who atones for humanity's sin as the sacrificed lamb. Together, Jesus is praised for being both humanity's divine King and High Priest (Zech. 6:9-15). John declares the climactic event of Revelation (Rev. 19:11-16): the return of Jesus Christ to earth in order to rule over it. Revelation tells of what must happen before He comes back.

Yahweh then declared Himself to be the Alpha and Omega. *Alpha* and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Used together, they form a merism that states Jesus existed in the beginning before all things (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-2), is the end of all things, and is everything in between—"who is, and who was, and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4b). This emphasizes Yahweh's comprehensive eternal and sovereign control over all things through time. Therefore, He is the originator and terminator of all things. Thus, He is able to bring to pass what John just predicted, for He is the Almighty God (Luke. 22:61; John 20:28; Acts 2:47; Phil. 2:11; 1 Pet. 1:3; Rev. 1:8; 17:14; 22:21). When you are facing persecution and pressure from the world to compromise your faith, there is a throne above all thrones that will bring all things into account. Jesus is one with the Father as the divine king and one with the covenant people as High Priest. As such, He is in control of all things in heaven and earth, past and future, and will work for the redemption of His people. Therefore, one should place their faith and allegiance in Him despite the pressure to compromise in the face of the world's ideologies and persecutions. Jesus will one day bring them under judgment and will vindicate His people just as He was vindicated by His Father. The spiritual and material realm have become uniquely joined, and the blessings of eternity can be experienced in space, time, and matter (John 1:51).

**1:9-11** John begins his address to the seven churches by relating to their situation in three different ways. First, he described himself as their brother and companion with them in the religious persecution they were experiencing because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Second, they were both citizens of the future kingdom of Jesus Christ (Luke 12:32; 22:29; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; James 2:5; Rev. 20). Third, they were both exercising perseverance as they remained steadfast in the midst of affliction.

Patmos was an island in the Aegean Sea, about 37 miles southwest of Miletus. It was 10 miles long and 6 miles wide and served as a penal colony for political prisoners of Rome. According to the writings of several early church fathers, the Romans exiled John in 95 AD from Ephesus, where he pastored, to the island of Patmos, where he worked in the mines (quarries). John remained there until shortly after the emperor Domitian died in 96 AD. Domitian's successor, Nerva, allowed John to return to Ephesus. By the time of John, the island was well inhabited and an established center for the cult of Artemis and Apollo.

The Lord's Day was Sunday, the day of the week of Jesus' resurrection. It appears that the Holy Spirit projected the spirit of John into the spiritual realm to receive a vision in a way similar to Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:12, 14; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5). John heard a voice that sounded like a trumpet telling him to write on a scroll what he saw and then send it to the seven churches of Asia, which were in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey).

**1:12-16** John heard this trumpet-like voice (Rev. 1:10), but when he looked, he saw the divine and glorified Jesus (“someone like a son of man”) standing among the seven golden lampstands. This is the first instance of John hearing and then seeing in Revelation (Rev. 1:10-12; 5:5-6, 7:4-9; 21:9-11). John uses the combination of *hearing* and *seeing* to link the two images of the announcement of a trumpet and the glorified Jesus as one and the same thing. John hears one thing and then sees something completely different, but the pairing communicates that they are, in fact, one and the same. The vision thus merges two images to communicate the reality of one thing. In this case, John hears a voice like that of a trumpet. Trumpets are used in the Bible to announce good news, the arrival of Yahweh at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16), the arrival of a king, the charge into battle, or the victory of battle. All of these speak to how trumpets are used in connection to Jesus in Revelation. When John turned to look at the voice, he saw “someone like a son of man” standing amid seven lampstands.

Jesus’ appearing as “someone like a son of man” alludes to Dan. 7:13-14. This passage describes a human figure who approaches the throne of Yahweh with the clouds. The fact that He approaches the throne without dying communicates He is a sinless human. As well, the only beings that come with or ride upon clouds are Yahweh, angels, and the gods. This figure is portrayed as being both a sinless human and a divine being. Yahweh then hands this Son of Man all authority, power, and honor over all of creation, giving him the same authority, power, and dominion as Yahweh Himself. This passage portrays the figure of a God-man who is given equal status on the throne of Yahweh. Jesus made claim to this figure by using this title (“son of man”) of Himself more than any other title in the gospels. He also proved that He was this Son of Man by doing what only Yahweh could do—forgiving sins and healing people—which Yahweh would not have allowed Him to do if His claim were false (Luke 5:21-26). Throughout His ministry He continually claimed and validated His claim to be the God-man who sits at the right hand of Yahweh, rules over creation, and would return to judge His creation (Luke 20:42; 22:69; Acts 1:9-11).

The seven lampstands represent the seven churches, as Jesus states at the end of the chapter (Rev. 1:20). In the First Testament, the picture of the people of Yahweh (Israel) is that of one lampstand with seven branches in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:31-40), for Israel was the single nation that Yahweh chose out of all the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; Ex. 19:5-6). Now, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, there are many different churches from all the nations, and so the congregation of Yahweh is symbolized in this passage as seven individual lampstands, gathered around the voice of Jesus. This creates the image of both the church, centered and focused on Jesus their Lord sustaining them, and Jesus coming down and standing in their midst as one of them (John 1:14; Heb. 2:10-18).

Jesus dressed in a robe with a golden sash alludes back to the priestly garments (Ex. 28:2-4; 39:27-29), for Jesus is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14). The white hair represents wisdom and goes back to the image in Daniel of Yahweh sitting on the throne (Dan. 7:9-10). The fiery eyes (Dan. 10:5-6), bronze legs (Dan. 10:5-6; Ezek. 1:7), and thunderous voice like rushing waters (Ex. 19:16; 20:18; Ps. 29:3; Dan. 10:5-6; Ezek. 1:24; 43:2) are connected to Yahweh and His heavenly beings, and the imagery is of power and judgment.

The seven stars are the seven angels over the seven churches, as Jesus states at the end of the chapter (Rev. 1:20). In the ancient world and in the Bible, stars are often associated with angels (the word *host* means army; Deut. 4:19; 2 Kgs. 17:16; 21:3-5; 23:4-5; Job 38:6-7; Jer. 19:13; Dan. 8:10; Zeph. 1:5). The right hand represents power and protection. The sword that comes out

of His mouth is His divine judgment directed towards His people when they lack repentance (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 2:16) and against the world when it opposes Yahweh (Isa. 11:4; 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 6:8; 19:13-15). It is the word of Yahweh (Heb. 4:12). The word for sword, *hromphaia*, means a large broad weapon, as used by barbaric peoples, notably the Thracians (Rev. 2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21). The term for a more conventional sword or saber is *machaira* (Rev. 6:4; 13:10, 14; and elsewhere in the Second Testament). Yahweh's judgment is a harsh reminder of the war that will break out between the Godhead and its enemies in the churches (Rev. 2:16) or among the nations (Rev. 19:15). And His face shone with the glory of Yahweh (Luke 9:28-29; Heb. 1:3).

**1:17-20** As with all those who come into the presence of Yahweh or angels, John was immediately overwhelmed by Jesus' glory, and he fell down to the ground (Ezek. 1:8; Dan. 8:17; Matt. 17:6; Acts 9:4). Jesus then told John not to be afraid, the implication being that there is no judgment for those who are in Christ (John 3:18; Rom. 8:1; Heb. 4:14-16; 12:18). Jesus then declared Himself to be the first and the last (Rev. 2:8; 22:13), meaning He was in the beginning before all things and the origin of all things and the eternal future beyond all things. In addition, this phrase forms a merism to communicate He is everything in between (Rev. 1:4). He is responsible for and is over all things in creation. This is also a title Yahweh uses of Himself (Isa. 41:1; 44:6; 48:12).

Jesus also referred to Himself as the Living One (John 5:26; 1 John 5:11-13; Rev. 22:1) who once was dead but is now alive, which distinguishes Him from the Father. Yahweh is also called the Living One (Josh. 3:10; Ps. 84:2; Hos. 1:10; Matt. 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom. 9:26; Heb. 3:12; 1 Pet. 1:23). Therefore, as the one who conquered death, He holds the keys to death and Hades, which means He has power and control over them both (Matt. 16:19; Rev. 3:7; 9:1; 20:1), power exclusive to Yahweh alone (Deut. 28:12).

Jesus then told John that He would show him what is now and will take place, referring to the sequence of the visions, not to time. This leads into the letters to the seven churches. Jesus then explained what the seven lampstands and seven stars are, which has been discussed above. The stars are a reminder of the spiritual nature of the church, and the lampstand is the material embodiment.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 22.

## B. The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)

In this section, Jesus Christ addresses the seven churches of Asia, commending, rebuking, and encouraging them. The emphasis of each letter to the churches is not to specifically encourage them to endure in the midst of suffering but rather to remain faithful to Jesus Christ despite the temptation to compromise their beliefs and morality with the culture. Those who do not compromise, and as a result face persecution, Jesus encourages to remain faithful and endure, for He will make them victorious one day. The main focus of the letters is that of rebuking them for their compromise of faith in some kind of way. These rebukes are not mean spirited, however, for Yahweh and Jesus rebuke because they love their people.

It is clear that these churches were real, historical churches, seen in the fact that Jesus addresses very specific issues that were relevant to the early church in the Greco-Roman world. Likewise, the mention of specific historical places and peoples roots these letters in this time period.

These letters also root the rest of the book of Revelation in the specific historical time period of the Greco-Roman world, for why would the letters be included if they were never meant to be read with the rest of the book? Likewise, many of the concepts introduced in Rev. 1–3 are unpacked in the following chapters.

Each of the letters follows a similar structure: the letter is addressed to the angel of the church, a description of Christ drawn from Rev. 1 is applied to the letter's message, the church (five of the seven) is praised, the church (five of the seven) is rebuked, and then an individualized message is given to each church, followed by an encouragement and a final call to repent and persevere.



## To the Church in Ephesus

**2:1-3** Ephesus was a leading seaport and the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor. Paul used it as a base of operations for at least three years (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 1 Cor. 16:8). Timothy ministered there (1 Tim. 1:3) as did the apostle John. It was the largest city in Asia Minor and the place of prominent families, wealth, and luxury. It was a great port city, but it was beginning to die because the river was beginning to silt up and they did not have dredgers in those days to clear it. The church had taken on the characteristics of the city around it.

Jesus Christ begins by addressing the angel that was over each church. The word *angel* comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which can mean “angel” or “messenger.” This is not a normal human messenger, for it would not make sense for Jesus to address the messenger that was bringing the message to the church. Rather, he is addressing the angel who was the authority over the church in the spiritual realm. Jesus deliberately addresses their angels to remind them of the spiritual dimension of their daily life and witness, for they were rooted in both worlds.<sup>16</sup>

The title that Jesus used of Himself for the city of Ephesus was the one “who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 1:12, 16). This communicated that He was among them and was evaluating them but also wanted to assist them.

The first thing Jesus commended them for was of their good deeds in serving other people—that they were hard workers in the Kingdom of Yahweh and persevered no matter the struggle. They were a conservative, disciplined church, committed to right conduct and ministry to others. The second thing Jesus commended them for was that they did not tolerate the wicked people and had tested those who claimed to be apostles and exposed them as false teachers. That means they knew the word of truth well and were not afraid to remove false teachings from the church. The third thing Jesus commended them for was that they had remained faithful to Jesus despite suffering and had not grown weary nor drifted into apostasy. They had not backslid morally and had persevered despite the struggle.

**2:4-5** What Jesus had against them, however, was that they had lost their love for Yahweh and their intimate relationship with Jesus. They once were intimately connected to Jesus and passionate about serving Him (Eph. 1:15-16), but gradually they had fallen from this former intimacy and now were faithful to Jesus merely out of a sense of duty. They did not serve in the Kingdom of Yahweh because they loved Yahweh but because it was who they were and what they did; they may also have been prideful in their commitment to truth and perseverance. They were genuine believers (their lampstand), but they did what was right for the wrong reasons. Every believer goes through dry spells in their intimacy with Yahweh and passion, and it is nothing to be afraid of. But what is to be deeply concerned about is when the lack of intimacy and love characterizes the whole church. Churches that are committed to truth and right conduct might be filled with merely morally good people and possibly self-righteous people who heap condemnation on those around them, whether directly or indirectly. This kind of faith maintains the integrity of the church, but it lacks the intimate, vulnerable, and compassionate love that cares for others and attracts the broken world and thus brings life and joy (John 13:35; 1 John 4:7-21).

Jesus called this church to repent of whatever was hindering this love and to turn back to Him in an intimate relationship. There needed to be a love and delight in Him, and it was on them to

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<sup>16</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 58.

take the steps to make it happen. Repentance and remembrance of first coming to know Jesus can lead to the healing of a relationship (Luke 15:17-18). If they did not come back to Jesus in an intimate and passionate relationship, then Jesus was going to remove their lampstand. This means Jesus was going to take away their witness and their ability to influence others (Matt. 5:14-16), and eventually the church in Ephesus would wither and be no more.

Though they had lost their first love, they had not lost their hatred for the teachings and practices of the Nicolaitans. Many scholars have theorized, but ultimately we do not know who the Nicolaitans were. The word *Nicolaitans* is a transliteration of two Greek words that mean “to conquer” and “people.” Given the false teachings that show up in the rest of the Second Testament epistles, these people denied either the deity or humanity of Jesus, and they had very immoral lifestyles. Irenaeus, who lived in the late second century, wrote that they were without restraint in their indulgence of the flesh and practiced fornication and the eating of foods sacrificed to idols.<sup>17</sup> Hating what is evil or false is not self-righteousness; it is an alignment with the principles of Yahweh.

Jesus called those who had the spiritual ears to hear to respond and change (Isa. 1:10; Jer. 2:4; Hos. 4:1; Amos 7:16). To those who did respond to the message, Jesus would give the right to eat from the tree of life, which emphasizes promised intimacy and life to the fullest (Ex. 12:21-27; Judg. 16:23-25; Isa. 25:6-8; Luke 14:12-24; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

### **To the Church in Smyrna**

**2:8-9** Smyrna (modern-day Izmir) was also a seaport on the Aegean Sea. It stood about 40 miles north of Ephesus. Late in the first century, it was a large wealthy city with a population of about 100,000. The city of Smyrna was extremely loyal to Rome. Smyrna had collapsed economically on several occasions because of invasions and earthquakes, but the people had rebuilt the city each time. In Smyrna many residents worshipped a goddess named Cybele, whom they regarded as the personification of the yearly rejuvenation of nature. Her devotees claimed that she arose from the dead every spring. There was a large Jewish population that was hostile toward the church, making it difficult for Christians to survive economically in the city. Martyrdom for the faith was common.

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Smyrna was “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (Rev. 1:18). This communicated that Jesus had always been with the church of Smyrna and would continue to be with them in their suffering, sustaining them and giving them an eternal life that the world could not take away no matter how hard it tried (Luke 12:21; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; James 2:5).

Like the church of Philadelphia, Jesus had no rebuke for the church of Smyrna. It is interesting that the only two churches that Jesus did not rebuke—Smyrna and Philadelphia—were also the only two small and poor churches. They did not have size or money to make them arrogant and self-sufficient; rather, their poverty drew them to Jesus and made them dependent on Him.

Jesus made it clear that He saw them and cared for them in the midst of their material poverty and affliction. The church of Smyrna was a small, poor, and persecuted church in a big and hostile city. Despite this, they were rich because of who they were and what they had in Christ. The vast majority of persecution came from the Jewish synagogue. By their actions, those of the

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<sup>17</sup>See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 1:352.

synagogue had shown that they did not know Yahweh, though they said they did, but really belonged to the synagogue of Satan (Matt. 7:15-20).

**2:10** Jesus then told them not to be afraid, for though the persecution was not going to end soon, He would be with them as He always had been. The devil was going to imprison some and put them through trials, but it would only last for ten days. The number ten here should not be seen as literal; most likely, it represents a period that includes real suffering, but the amount of time is limited, and the limit is known to Yahweh (2 Cor. 4:17-18).<sup>18</sup> It may also be a reference to Dan. 1:14. Jesus called them to continue to be faithful even to the point of death. Though Yahweh is far greater than the devil, in this fallen world the devil has to be opposed and sometimes endured.

In contrast to their time of suffering and eventual death, Jesus would give them eternal life, which would make this period of suffering pale in comparison, and the victor's crown, which was of greater wealth than anything the city of Smyrna possessed. The victor's crown is probably an allusion to the garland or laurel wreath given to the victor at the games for which Smyrna was famous (2 Tim. 2:5; 1 Cor. 9:24-25; 1 Pet. 5:4). Ultimate victory is not found in humanity's power and dominance but in the self-sacrificial victory of Jesus Christ.

**2:11** Those who heard this message and responded, though they may die physically, would not experience the second death of Jesus Christ's eternal judgment when He comes back again (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 10:28; John 5:28-29; Rev. 20:11-15). Jesus would resurrect the believers of Smyrna in a more glorious and permanent way than the city of Smyrna had rebuilt themselves.

### **To the Church in Pergamum**

**2:12-13** Pergamum (modern Bergama) lay about 55 miles north of Smyrna, inland a few miles from the Aegean coast. The meaning of the name *Pergamum* is "citadel." The town was noteworthy for three reasons. It was a center for many pagan religious cults, and emperor worship was more intense there than in any other surrounding city. Second, it boasted a university with a large library. Third, it was the leader and center of the production of parchment for written scrolls.

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Pergamum was "he who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (Rev. 1:16). This communicated that the church was divided, and Jesus Christ would judge those in the church who had embraced false teachings (Rev. 2:16).

Jesus commended them for staying true and faithful to Him despite the fact Satan had established his throne in their city. Pergamum was the official seat of the imperial cult in Asia, and it was the first city in Asia permitted to construct a shrine dedicated to the emperor.<sup>19</sup> Rome was the heart of the emperor's power in the west, and Pergamum was the center of His power in the east. The throne (*thronos*) in the Second Testament is always a seat of state; either that of judges (Matt. 19:28), kings (Luke 1:32, 52), or Yahweh or Jesus (Matt. 5:34; 25:31; Rev. 4:2-11; 7:9-12; 19:5; 20:11-12; 21:3-5). There was also a large temple to the god of healing, who was represented by the Asclepius serpent symbol, which was everywhere in the city. For those who did not sacrifice to the emperor and pay their financial dues, it would be extremely difficult to make any kind of living or have any kind of social status, thus making survival in the city challenging. It would be very tempting to give in and enjoy the comfort of compromise.

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<sup>18</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 34.

Despite living with this intense persecution and the pressure to compromise, they had remained faithful to Jesus even in the days of Antipas. The “not even” implies a greater intensity of persecution at that time than at other times. Not much is known of Antipas except that he was condemned to death and then enclosed inside a brazen (or copper) bull, which was then heated until it was red-hot.

Antipas is called a faithful “witness” in most translations or “martyr” in the KJV. The Greek word *martyr* means “witness.” The Greek word *martyr* is never translated as “martyr” in modern translations except in many cases in the KJV and in Acts 22:20 in the NIV. Yet it was in the late first century AD that *martyr* started to be understood in the modern sense of the word because so many Christians were dying as a result of their witness for Jesus.<sup>20</sup> It is in this verse in Revelation that many translators make the linguistic transition from being just a witness for Jesus to being martyred for one’s witness begins to happen. However, the Greek word martyr should continue to be seen first and foremost as “witness” throughout the book of Revelation.

**2:14-16** Yet what Jesus had against them was that the people who were faithful in the church tolerated the false teachings of others in their church, specifically those who promoted the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Balaam was the prophet whom Balak, the king of Moab, hired to curse the Israelites as they came to the Promised Land under the leadership of Moses in Num. 22–24. Balaam was forbidden by Yahweh to curse Israel, but Balaam still wanted to be paid by Balak, who wanted the Israelites destroyed. So Balaam told Balak to send the Moabite temple prostitutes into the Israelite camp to seduce them into sexual immorality and idolatry, for then Yahweh would punish Israel for their sins (Num. 31:16; Rev. 2:14). The Israelites eventually killed Balaam as ordered by Yahweh (Num. 31:8). It is not clear whether the current teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans were philosophically the same, but it is clear that they both promoted idolatrous teachings about Jesus Christ and sexual immorality.<sup>21</sup> They had both disobeyed the edict of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:20, 29).

There were people in the church who had remained faithful to Jesus but, unlike the Ephesians, they had not been disciplined in what they allowed in the realm of teaching, and this was what Jesus was rebuking them for (2 Cor. 2:10-13; 2 John). It did not mean that the church should persecute the false teachers, but rather the church should have removed them. For whatever reason, they were unwilling and afraid to stand up to call out and drive out the false teachers in the church. It may have been that they did not know the truth enough to refute the false teachers, or perhaps they were afraid of being seen as judgmental or unloving. But either way, the church had been compromised, the unity of the church and their witness was collapsing, and they were under the wrath of Yahweh. The letter was addressed to all the people of the church as a whole. So the elders and the people were to be checking each other. The power flows both ways. Thus, if they did not repent, then just as Balaam was put to death by the sword (Num. 31:8, 16), so the Balaamites would die by the sword of the Spirit (Rev. 1:16; 2:12; 19:15, 21).

**2:17** Jesus declared that those who heard and responded would be victorious, and He would give to them the hidden manna. The manna is the bread that Yahweh provided supernaturally for Israel while they were in the wilderness (Num. 16). The hidden nature of the manna may refer to the fact that a portion of it was kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4). Once

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<sup>20</sup> See Leon Morris. *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> See R. H. Charles. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, pp. 1, 63-64.

again, Jesus is promising them an eternal life with Him that will provide for all their needs, just as He did in the wilderness, unlike the false promises of Balaam.

Jesus also promised them that He would give them a white stone with a new name written on it, known to only the person who received it. What the white stone is is unknown, for it is only mentioned here and in Acts 26:10 as a contrary vote. It could be a jewel from the priestly garments in the First Testament, a stone for the casting of a vote of acquittal, a token of admittance, an amulet with a divine name, a token of gladiatorial discharge, or a writing material with a significant form or color. The white of the stone represents triumph. The stone is most likely, given the context, a token of admittance or membership, or of recognition.<sup>22</sup> The name is a new name given to the Christian, which signifies their entrance into a new life and new covenant community (Isa. 62:2; 65:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). Those who are faithful are marked out for a special relationship with the triumphal Christ. They are promised now and in eternity a new character, a new protection, and a new joy.

### **To the Church in Thyatira**

**2:18-19** Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities and lay about 45 miles to the southeast of Pergamum. It was famous for its textiles, especially the production of purple dye (Acts 16:14), and its trade guilds. This is the longest and most difficult of the seven letters, addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable city of Asia.<sup>23</sup>

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Thyatira was the one “whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze” (Rev. 1:14-15). This communicated that Jesus would pour out His wrath on those in the church who had embraced false teachings. The introduction of this verse heightens the theme of judgment on false teaching within the church by associating the punishment with the flashing eyes of Jesus.

Jesus commended them for their good works. Their love and faith speak of the motivation for Christian works, which implies not only continuing trust and faithfulness but also right faith. The second pair—of service to others and perseverance—are the results of love and faith, particularly in the face of both internal conflict and external opposition.<sup>24</sup> In fact, they had grown and done more for Him than when they had first been established as a church.

**2:20-23** Yet what Jesus had against them was that they, like the church of Pergamum, tolerated false teachers among them. A woman claiming to be a prophetess had been influencing people in the church to join the local trade guilds, which was a big part of the economic life of a tradesman. Participation in the guild feasts, which included immoral acts and the worship of idols, was essential for membership.<sup>25</sup> She was encouraging them to go against the edict of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:20, 28-29). Her name was most likely not Jezebel, but her behavior reflected that of wicked Queen Jezebel (1 Kgs. 16:29-24; 18:19; 19:1-2; 21; 2 Kgs. 9:30-37), who had led Israel into immorality and idolatry by advocating Baal worship.

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<sup>22</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> See Colin J. Hemer. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 73; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation* pp. 85-86; Leon Morris. *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 86; George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 89-90.

Jesus had given her time to repent (2 Pet. 3:9), but she had not. So now He was going to bring some kind of illness into her life as well as to those who committed adultery with her until they repented. Sickness as punishment for sin was an accepted connection in the first century AD (John 9:1-3; 1 Cor. 11:27-30). The adultery here is not sexual but spiritual, for she was encouraging them to break their covenant with Jesus. If they did not repent, He was going to strike her followers (children) dead. “I will kill in/with death” is a Hebraism meaning “utterly to slay by pestilence” (Ezek. 33:27; Rev. 6:8). This would bring glory to Yahweh by making it clear that He was truly a righteous God and would punish evil in the world. We need to realize that the power of the Living One is dangerous.

**2:24-25** Then Jesus assured those who had not followed the deep teachings of Satan that the judgment He was going to bring upon Jezebel and her followers would not touch them. He then called them to hold on to the truth until He returned. The “deep things/secrets of Satan” refers to the growing thought that secret knowledge, to which only the worthy were privy, would grant one salvation of enlightenment. The prophetess may have appealed to Paul’s reference in 1 Cor. 2:9-10—to revelation by the Spirit and to the Spirit searching “the deep things of God.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus was saying that they thought they knew the deep things of Yahweh, but it was really satanic.

**2:24-28** Jesus declared that to those who were victorious in Christ and persevered to the end, He would give a Christlike authority over the nations as conquerors. This authority was His to give because the Father gave it to Him. Those who conquered were those who not only would maintain the traditional beliefs and behavior of the Christian church but would also “take to heart” the works of Jesus “until the end.” The works of Jesus are to be reflected in the life of the believer.<sup>27</sup>

The phrase “will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery” comes from Ps. 2:9 (Acts 2:33). Psalm 2 as a whole is about the nations rebelling against Yahweh, but He sends His Messianic King to judge them and smash them, followed by the embellishment of His kingdom on earth ruled over by His Messianic king. The Messianic king would smash like pottery the old world order, followed by the reconstruction of a new order in Christ. The image of the scepter connects directly to Gen. 49:8-12, which also prophesied the coming messiah (Amos 1:5, 8; Ps. 45:6). The victory over evil and ruling over creation was given to Jesus by the Father because of His obedience, even to death (Phil. 2:5-11).

The reference to the morning star is an allusion to Num. 24:15-19. Here, the prophet Balaam saw the rising of a star (Messiah) out of Israel who would rule over Israel and all the nations. The morning star is the planet Venus, which appears in the night sky just before the dawn of a new day. It is the first and brightest light that appears in the sky before the sun rises. From ancient Babylonian to Roman times, the ancients regarded the morning star as a symbol of sovereignty and victory (Isa. 14:12; Ezek. 32:7; Rev. 22:16).<sup>28</sup> To those who heard and responded Jesus was offering the same status to those who remained faithful to Him even to the point of death (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 1:6; 12:5; 19:15; 20:4-6).

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<sup>26</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 93.

<sup>28</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 93-94.

## To the Church in Sardis

**3:1-3** Sardis (modern Sart) stood about 33 miles southeast of Thyatira on a major highway that led all the way to Susa in Mesopotamia. It was famous for its military history, jewelry, dye, and textiles. The manufacture and dyeing of woolen goods were the leading occupation.<sup>29</sup> Due to its situation on a steep hill, many people thought the city was impregnable. However, Cyrus II, the Persian king, had captured it in about 549 BC by following a secret path up a cliff. Antiochus invaded the city in the same way around 218 BC.

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Sardis was he “who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (Rev. 1:4, 16). This communicated that Jesus Christ was the only true authority over their lives and church, and thus they answered to Him.

Sardis received the strongest condemnation from Jesus; the only positive thing He said was that there were still a few who had not defiled themselves with the ways of the world. Jesus stated that even though they had a reputation of being alive, in reality they were dead. He called them to wake up and nurture what was left of their relationship with Him so that they could truly be alive. The key to their revitalization was to remember what they had first received from the apostles who had established them and to repent of their sins.

If they did not hold fast and repent, then Jesus would come like a thief in the night to take them. Some have said that this statement refers to Jesus’ parable in Matt. 24:43-44 (1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). There are two arguments against this verse being a reference to Jesus’ parable.

First, the final advent of Jesus cannot be said to depend on the vigilance of the church at Sardis. Second, similar commands to repent, in the face of an alternative coming of Jesus, are issued to the communities at Ephesus (Rev. 2:5) and Pergamum (Rev. 2:16). In both cases, the reference is to an imminent historical advent of Jesus in judgment. He is coming to judge these specific communities with a specific judgment. Same with Laodicea (Rev. 3:19). And the command to Laodicea is followed by the fact that He is already at the door promising present table fellowship (Rev. 3:20).<sup>30</sup>

**3:4-6** Jesus did acknowledge that there was a small number of faithful ones who had not soiled their clothes and still walked with Him in white clothing (1 John 1:5-7). Clothing is a metaphor for moral as well as spiritual purity (Rev. 7:13-14; 22:14) and is associated with priests (Zech. 3), martyrdom (Rev. 6:11), and the resurrected, which results in a victorious morality.<sup>31</sup> The faithful in this context are marked out by their loyalty to Jesus in the face of pressures to compromise and become disloyal. Those who were faithful would never be blotted out of the Book of Life, which was a registrar of the faithful (Ex. 32:32-33; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Isa. 4:3; Luke 10:20; Heb. 12:33; Rev. 20:11-15). The primary setting for this Book of Life is judicial (Dan. 7:9-10; Rev. 20:12-15; 1 Enoch 47:3; 90:20). To be blotted out is to die (Ex. 32:32-33), but it came to be understood as “disenfranchise.” Instead, Jesus would acknowledge them before the Father and the angels as one belonging to Him. Those who heard and responded would be victorious.

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<sup>29</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 84.

## To the Church in Philadelphia

**3:7-8** Philadelphia (modern Alasehir) lay about 30 miles southeast of Sardis. A Pergamian king, Attalus II (159–138 BC), founded it. The town received its name from his nickname, “Philadelphus” or “brother lover.” This king had a special devotion to his brother, Eumenes II. The city stood in a wine-producing area and was the so-called gateway to central Asia Minor.

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Philadelphia was “holy and true, who holds the key of David.” This statement does not come from the previous chapter. This communicated that Jesus is true to His promises and will usher them into the Kingdom of Yahweh as the Davidic King (Rev. 2:7-8).

Like the church of Smyrna, Jesus had no rebuke for the church of Philadelphia. The key to the open door is an allusion to Isa. 22:22. Jesus was declaring that He is the promised Messiah who had the key to opening the kingdom of Yahweh for those who believed and that nothing else in the universe had the power to shut the door on people (Matt. 16:19; John 10:7, 9; Acts 14:27; Rev. 3:20).

Some have said that the open gate denotes an opportunity for effective evangelism (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). However, this does not fit the context. First, seeing evangelistic activity as a major challenge to the church of Philadelphia is out of place in the sentence considering they have been commended in their steadfastness. Second, preaching of the gospel does not show up in any of the other letters nor in the whole book of Revelation. Third, the promise that they will inherit the kingdom fits the context.<sup>32</sup> Even though they are exhausted from persecution, they had remained faithful to Jesus.

**3:9-10** Once again, Jesus referred to the Jews who persecuted the Christians as the synagogue of Satan and promised that He would make sure these Jews saw that He is the true King and that the believers of Philadelphia are loved by Him. This means either that the Jews would be converted to Christianity or that on judgement day they would finally recognize the Christian church as the true Israel of Yahweh. The former meaning fits the open door but is unlikely. The second meaning is preferred because it makes sense of the fulfillment of Isa. 60:14.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus promised the church that because they had remained faithful through so much persecution already, He would spare them from the great judgement to come. Intense suffering would precede the eschatological victory of Yahweh (Dan. 12:1), like the pangs of childbirth (Isa. 26:16-19; Hos. 13:13; Mic. 4:9-10; Mark 13:8). The promise that the people will be kept safe does not mean they will escape it physically but will not be harmed spiritually. Jesus keeps His people because they keep their word and His call to endure.

**3:11-13** Jesus encouraged them to remain faithful so that they would not lose their crown, for He would be coming soon. He would make them a pillar in the temple of Yahweh (Isa. 22:15-25; 1 Tim. 3:15) as the new temple. A lasting existence in the new Jerusalem would be appealing after many fled the city due to earthquakes and invasions. Jesus would write His name (ownership and character) on them as pillars, just as Yahweh put His name on Jerusalem in Israel (2 Chron. 6:6). He would bring the true temple of Yahweh (Ezek. 48:35; Isa. 60:14; Rev. 3:9) down to earth and make those who heard and responded a part of it.

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<sup>32</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 89.

<sup>33</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 91.

## To the Church in Laodicea

**3:14-16** Laodicea (modern Eski-hisar) lay about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia and 90 miles east of Ephesus. It was a wealthy town that specialized in banking, the production of black woolen cloth, and health care. It was the wealthiest city in Phrygia, and, after a serious earthquake, the city was rebuilt out of its own wealth with no assistance from Rome.

The title that Jesus Christ used of Himself for the city of Laodicea was “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” Other than the reference to being the “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5), this title does not come from the previous chapter. This title communicated that Jesus was true and faithful not only to His promises of blessings but also His promises of judgement and that He is the only one who has the authority to fulfill them all.

Jesus had nothing positive to say about the city of Laodicea, for there was no faithful remnant in the city. Jesus told them that they were neither cold nor hot, but they were lukewarm. Some have said this means that Jesus Christ would rather have them either completely against them or on fire for Him but not apathetic. That interpretation, however, does not make sense in any context of the Bible or the character of Yahweh. Being against Yahweh or being apathetic are both apostate and disobedient. Yahweh has never communicated a desire for people to be against Him, and why would He ever want that? Jesus was most likely using an analogy from their city’s drinking water, which came from neighboring cities along the Roman aqueducts. The neighboring city of Colosse had a cold spring, but by the time it arrived in Laodicea through the aqueduct, it was lukewarm and no longer refreshing to drink. The neighboring city of Hierapolis had hot spring water, valuable for its medicinal effects. But by the time it arrived in Laodicea through the aqueduct, the water was no longer hot and had lost its medicinal value. Thus it had no purpose, and if you did drink it, it would make you throw up because it came from a sulfur spring.<sup>34</sup> Neither of the two aqueducts provided desirable or beneficial water. What Jesus was saying was that the church was neither refreshing, as from a cold spring, nor beneficial medically, as from a hot spring, and that interacting with them made one want to spew them out of their mouth.

**3:17-18** The church of Laodicea had prided themselves on their wealth and self-sufficiency, but in reality, they were wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. Nakedness is symbolic of judgement and humiliation (Isa. 20:1-4; 2 Sam. 10:4; Mark 15:20; John 19:23-24). But despite threatened judgement, repentance is still possible.

Jesus called them to buy from Him, first, gold refined in the fire. Instead of looking to worldly riches for their security, they were to look to Yahweh. In the refining process, gold would be heated in a cauldron, which would cause the impurities to rise to the top; this dross would then be scraped off, leaving pure gold behind (Ps. 66:10; Isa. 1:25; 1 Pet. 1:7). 1 Peter 1:3-9 says the trials of life refine one’s character like gold in the fire and draw one closer to Yahweh. This is the inheritance the believer receives, which can never lose its value. However, Laodicea’s wealth made it extremely difficult for them to go through trials and be refined. Second, they were to buy from Him white clothes. The receiving of fine clothing is symbolic of vindication and honor (Gen. 41:42; Esth. 6:6-11; Zech. 3:4-6). They were to cover their shameful wickedness and clothe themselves in the righteousness of Yahweh. Third, they were to buy from Him salve for their eyes so that they could see the truth of Yahweh, themselves, and the world. The school of

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<sup>34</sup> George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 105.

medicine in the city exported a powder, which was made into a doughy paste and was used extensively to make ointment for the eyes.<sup>35</sup>

**3:19-22** Despite the harshness of His rebuke, Jesus made it clear that it was because He loved them, for His judgment is inseparable from His love. Then, in a heartfelt exhortation, Jesus told them that He was standing at the door waiting for them to let Him into their lives (John 14:23). Jesus waits for a personal relationship to be restored and holds out His hands continuously (Isa. 65:1; Hos. 2:16-23; 11:7-9; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). If they repented, they would enter into close table fellowship (John 6:53-56; 14:23), which would lead to His entering their house (Mark. 9:28; Acts 11:3). The eating with them refers to the eschatological Lord's supper in His second coming (Luke 14:15-24). The primary emphasis here is restored fellowship. Those who heard and responded would be victorious and be seated with Jesus in the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth.

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<sup>35</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 99-100.

## II. The Seven Seals (4:1–8:5)

In this division John is taken up into heaven, where he is given visions of the things that are to come. Just as Jesus revealed himself on earth to John—to reveal the mysteries of Yahweh’s plan of salvation for humans—He now reveals the mysteries of Yahweh’s plan to judge and redeem the creation, which will allow Him to bring the kingdom of Yahweh to earth.

First, Revelation will establish the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh and Jesus over creation as the ones who created creation, redeemed creation, and are enthroned over creation (Rev. 4–5). This then establishes the basis for why Yahweh and Jesus have the right to judge creation (Rev. 6). The division closes with Yahweh and Jesus sealing and then preserving the believers from this divine wrath (Rev. 7). This is the foundation for the purpose of the book, and everything that is threatened or promised in the letters to the seven churches comes to pass here.

Revelation from this point on is apocalyptic literature, filled with metaphors and symbolisms. By definition, symbols point to a reality that is greater than themselves; they are pictures, usually incorporating a material element or object, and are used to represent and evoke a spiritual reality.<sup>36</sup> You cannot draw tight boundaries around the pictures; it is like poetry in that it overlaps with prophecy and wisdom literature. One should not read the text and try to tie down John’s symbolism in an attempt to domesticate it to something simplistic and easily identifiable. Numbers in the apocalypse are always symbolic.

### A. Yahweh and Jesus Enthroned in Heaven (4:1–5:14)

In this section, Rev. 4 and 5 are one vision, and John uses a lot of metaphors to describe Yahweh and Jesus on the throne in their glory and power. Yet his description could never fully and accurately create a true image of what he is seeing. John mixes a lot of metaphors in order to explain what he is seeing. But in reading these chapters, the reader is not meant to draw pictures, for there is no picture that can do Yahweh justice. Apocalyptic literature and its metaphors are meant to communicate *ideas* about who Yahweh and Jesus are, not for one to see in a physical sense who they are. The language is peculiar because it is evocative. It calls to mind images but leaves you with nothing you can draw. This is important so that we do not try to domesticate Yahweh, as though we could control Him.

It is kind of like the mystery of electricity. We can see electricity in a way when it sparks, and we see what it produces, but we do not have any idea what electricity is. And if we tried to explain electricity and picture television to someone in the ancient world, we might talk about how electricity is like lightning and that it can make things go. And television is like the mental images in your mind. But we would have no way to truly explain this strange reality to them with the words we have. And there would always be aspects we would be leaving out, like protons and electrons of electricity and the conductors and resistors used to harness the electricity and make things like televisions work. So it is with John in how he will describe the visions he is seeing.

This section is also filled with several songs that are used to recapitulate and reflect on the scenes that immediately preceded them. They look back to the people of Yahweh on earth, seen in the

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<sup>36</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 47.

seven churches, by setting out the theological perspective given to this life by the church for eternity.

“With the consummate skill of an artist, John structures his material in the Revelation so as to advance to his central, Christological subject in a series of dramatic disclosures towards a climax. This ‘spiraling’ technique can also be found in John’s Gospel, and in 1 John. So at each stage of the Apocalypse, including this one, we learn something fresh about Jesus Himself. He is the exalted Son of man (Rev. 1), who is also involved in the life of the local churches (Rev. 2–3). He is the Lion, and also the sacrificial Lamb of God (Rev. 4–5).

Rev. 4–5 together create what Beasley-Murray (108) calls a ‘fulcrum’ in Revelation. In relation to chapters 1–3, they provide a fuller understanding of the Christ who is seen in glory during the vision of Rev. 2, and who walks among the lampstands of the seven Johannine Churches of Asia in Rev. 2–3. In relation to the rest of the book (Rev. 6–22), they initiate a series of messianic judgments in the form of seven seals, which follow immediately (Rev. 6.1-17; 8:1-5), and which lead to the final advent of Christ and the descent of the city of God to earth (Rev. 21–22).

But chapters 4 and 5 also form by themselves a self-contained scene in the drama, revealing the grounds for assurance that God’s sovereign purposes of grace for the universe will be achieved, whatever the problems besetting the Church in the world: either persecution outside, or theological tensions within. Universal adoration and praise inevitably follow.”<sup>37</sup>

**4:1-2a** After Jesus Christ spoke the letters to the seven churches to John, He gave John a vision of a door opening to heaven and then called him to walk through it to show him what must take place after what had just been spoken to him about the seven churches. John was then transported into heaven in his spirit. Whether this happened in a vision or he was transported physically in the spirit is not clear. Even Paul states that when this happened to him, he did not know what was really happening to him or how (2 Cor. 12:1-4).

The futurist who believes in the pre-tribulation rapture believe that Rev. 4:2b is the future rapturing of the church out of the way and into heaven. Rev. 4–19 is the seven-year tribulation and then the millennium reign of Christ on earth in Rev. 20. Thus John represents the entire church in its rapture.

The problem is that this view is loading too much into the phrase “after this” with no context. There are other instances of “after this” in Revelation that obviously do not point to a rapture. There is nothing else in the context to say it should be read this way. And once John is in heaven, there is no portrayal of a large group of believers there as in Rev. 7. Heaven being opened up is frequent in apocalyptic literature, and the first century reader who would have read a lot of apocalyptic literature would not read it this way. It requires adopting a whole eschatological schema of a pre-tribulation rapture first and then interpreting this verse that way without understanding the literature.

**4:2b-6a3** The first thing John saw was Yahweh sitting on His throne in the center of heaven as the focal point of all creation. He is described with the imagery of gemstones, which symbolize Yahweh’s sovereign glory and majesty and the unapproachable light in which He dwells (Ex. 24:9-10, 17; Ps. 104:1-2; Ezek. 1:22, 27; 1 Tim. 6:16). He had the appearance of jasper (white)

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 110.

and ruby (red). Jasper is either the white stone of an opal or a diamond. In the ancient world, diamonds were not clear because they had not yet learned how to cut them with perfect symmetry. These stones anticipate the fuller list of precious stones in Rev. 21:11, 18-21, where the glory of Yahweh is revealed not just in heaven but through all of creation.<sup>38</sup> A rainbow encircled the throne and shone like an emerald (green). The Greek word for “rainbow” is *Iris*. When light is cast through the stone it produces a halo like rainbow, Here the rainbow of brilliant light that would evoke the imagery of Yahweh’s covenant with Noah. This image of Yahweh is rooted in Isa. 6, Ezek. 1, and Dan. 7 (see Ps. 48). Yahweh is described in all His ineffable majesty—how does one describe a god that is beyond all words (Ps. 104, 1 Tim. 6)? The most important thing is that Yahweh is not and cannot be described. Any anthropomorphic language of Yahweh would be turned into an idol. It is important that our image of Yahweh is not too small.

**4:4** John then saw surrounding the throne of Yahweh His heavenly court of divine beings. John saw twenty-four elders sitting on twenty-four thrones. Some believe that this group around the throne represents the church in heaven because they wear the crowns and white robes of the victorious believers (Rev. 2:10; 3:4-5, 11, 18). Their number of twenty-four is emblematic of the twelve tribes of the old covenant of Israel and the twelve disciples or the church brought together. Also, the only other time the number twenty-four appears in the Bible is of the twenty-four divisions of priests during the reign of David (1 Chron. 24), which suggests these are human priests in heaven.

But this understanding has been largely dependent on a mistranslation of Rev. 5:9, where the four living creatures and the elders sing “hast redeemed us to God by thy blood” (KJV). Jesus did not come to redeem heavenly beings, only humans (Heb. 1:14; 2:10-18); therefore, the elders here would be humans. But this is not the correct translation of Rev. 5:9. It should read, “because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation” (NIV, NET, NASB, RSV). The KJV translation does not work theologically either because the four living creatures also sing this.

The elders are heavenly divine beings (the Sons of God).<sup>39</sup> The first reason for interpreting it this way is that the believers in Rev. 14:3 are singing a new song about being redeemed, which the elders cannot sing. Once again, heavenly divine beings and angels cannot be redeemed (Heb. 1:14; 2:10-18). Likewise, in Rev. 5:9 the elders sing a song about humans, not themselves, being redeemed.

Second, in Rev. 7:9-11 and Rev. 19:1-4 there are concentric circles of beings around the throne of Yahweh. Moving outward from the throne, the first is the four living creatures (cherubim) (Rev. 4:6b), then the twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:4), then the angels (Rev. 5:11), then the great multitude of human believers (Rev. 7:9). If the elders were believers, they would be with the great multitude. The fact that the elders are between the low-ranking angels and the highest-ranking four living creatures (cherubim) shows that they are heavenly beings.

Third, Rev. 7:9 specifically introduces humans in heaven for the first time and makes it clear that they are believers before the throne. Yet Revelation 4 does not talk about the elders being human.

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<sup>38</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 320-321.

<sup>39</sup> See R. H. Charles. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, p. 1, 133.

Fourth, both elders and angels explain what is going on in Revelation (Rev. 5:5; 7:13), which is common for angels to do in apocalyptic literature, not humans.

Fifth, angels are also described as wearing white (Acts 1:10; Matt. 28:3) and sitting on thrones (Col. 1:16).

Sixth, the elders offer the prayer of the believers to Yahweh (Rev. 5:8). In apocalyptic literature, this is the function of angels, not humans, as seen in Rev. 8:3 (Dan. 9:20-23; 10:10-14; Matt. 18:10; Rev. 1:1b).

Seventh, the term *elder* may be used of angels, seen as early as Isa. 24 (see Isa. 24:23).

These elders represent some high order of angels. The fact that there are twenty-four of them means they represent the people of Yahweh in the old and new covenants, just as the angels represent the seven churches on earth.<sup>40</sup> They look human because they are intermediaries between the heavenly realm of angelic beings and the earthly realm of humans. What is more important from the point of view of Rev. 4 is their function, which is to praise Yahweh continually and to enhance the One who sits on the throne. Just as kings and presidents are surrounded by functionaries, so is Yahweh. Even Yahweh's functionaries are spectacular. Thus the emphasis is on Yahweh's transcendence and otherness. By the end, Yahweh's angels are uncountable.

**4:5-6a** From the throne of Yahweh came flashes of lightning and thunder, like when Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). Before nuclear power, and still today, thunderstorms have been one of the most spectacular displays of sheer power. As mentioned above (Rev. 1:4), “the seven torches,” which are “the seven spirits of God,” is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Yahweh is sitting on the throne, representing His sovereign kingship (Rev. 4:2-3). Before the throne can be seen, the Holy Spirit (“the seven spirits”) (Rev. 4:5) and the Lamb come before the throne to take the scroll from the hand of Yahweh (Rev. 5:6-7). Not only is the Holy Spirit a symbol of bringing us close to Yahweh in the Bible, but here He is a symbol of Yahweh's distance from us. He is a sign that Christ has not come back yet.

Before the throne of Yahweh was a sea of glass as clear as crystal. All through the Bible, *clear* means sparkly or shiny, and thus it should be translated here as such. This makes sense in that it is said to be sparkly as crystal, which we think of as being sparkly. Likewise, in the ancient world they did not know how to make glass clear, so they would not have read it any way other than sparkly. It is also unlikely that the sea here is calm and clear when there is a thunderstorm coming out of the throne of Yahweh. It is sparkly not because it is calm but because it has edges that can reflect light. Thus the image is of a chaotic sea in a storm that is sparkly from reflecting all the lightning. In the ancient world and in the Bible, the sea is an image of chaos or disorder. Throughout the Bible the sea represents the fallen order of creation, and by the time of the prophets, it also came to symbolize the chaos of humanity. In the First Testament Yahweh is often portrayed as being enthroned above the chaotic waters as absolutely supreme and in control over the fallen and chaotic creation (Ps. 104:3; 148:4; Job 28:25; 37:18). The point is that between Yahweh and John is a whole sea of chaos that represents the fallen order of creation that

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<sup>40</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 116-117.

John has to cross to get to Yahweh. By Rev. 21:1, in the new and fully redeemed creation, there is no more sea because there is no more chaos in creation.

**4:6b-8a** “In the center of the throne (Rev. 4:6b) communicates that the four living creatures are the closest to the throne of all the other beings. The four living creatures that surround the throne are taken from the chariot throne of Yahweh in Ezek. 1 and Ezek. 10. In Ezekiel, the four living creatures each has the face of a lion, ox, human, and eagle. Here, they each have only one face that is different from the others. They are set up to look like the thrones of ancient kings, where they had the heads of animals carved into their throne in order to communicate their grandeur. The head of the lion symbolizes royalty and kingship. The head of the ox symbolizes power, strength, and stability. The head of the human symbolizes intellect and wisdom. And the head of the eagle symbolizes divine protection and care. The six wings come from Isa. 6:1-3, where the divine beings had two wings covering their face, communicating reverence and humility, two wings covering their feet and lower part, communicating modesty, and two wings used to fly, communicating speed with which to execute Yahweh’s commands. The eyes covering them symbolize Yahweh’s omniscience and infinite intelligences. These are fantastic beings through which John would have to navigate to get to the throne of Yahweh. These are the highest angelic beings, orchestrating the praise of the Almighty and reflecting the transcendent administration of the Almighty. The living creatures are eventually associated with the outworking of Yahweh’s judgment in His creation (Rev. 6:1-7; 15:7-8).

**4:8b-11** The primary function of the living creatures is to declare the holiness, sovereignty, and eternity of Yahweh day and night. First, they declare Yahweh to be holy. But what does holiness mean? The Bible often communicates holiness as a communicable attribute of Yahweh (that is, characteristics of Yahweh that we as His image bearers can share—love, gentleness, etc.). Yet the Bible also seems to communicate different concentric circles of meanings of holiness, in that holiness is one of Yahweh’s non-communicable attributes (that is, characteristics of Yahweh that we as His image bearers *cannot* share—omnipotence, omniscience, etc.). The question is, what does the holiness of Yahweh mean at its most concentrated center?

Some have understood holiness by its etymology, or what it means. Holiness is then defined as being separate, as in Yahweh being separate from all things. But this is very lacking in its meaning when you get to the throne room of Yahweh in Isa. 6, where the angels would be declaring Yahweh as *separate, separate, separate*. This sounds very lacking and unimpressive if this is all they are saying. Others define holiness in terms of morality. But once again, are the angels really declaring Yahweh as *moral, moral, moral*? It is not morality, for the shovel that was used to remove the ashes from the altar was declared holy (Ex. 27:23; 29:37), not because it was moral but because it was reserved peculiarly for Yahweh’s service and nothing else. Anything else was and is common.

In its most concentrated meaning, holiness is an adjective reserved for Yahweh alone. The angels are declaring that Yahweh is holy, holy, holy (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). Only He is truly God, and He is God in a way unlike anything in all of creation. He is utterly unique and supreme in His holiness, and He is not like anything else in creation, nor can He be compared to anything else.

The repetition of three communicates *very* holy or *extraordinarily* holy. There is no other attribute of Yahweh that is repeated in the Bible like the word *holy* (Isa. 6:3). This means before you come to the great truths of Rev. 5 of Yahweh’s love, grace, and provision, you must come to

grips with the truth that Yahweh is unique, almighty, and eternal in His being (who was, and is, and is to come). He is transcendent, He is not like us, He does not need us, and He is not easily approachable. He is awesome and terrifying. This is the aseity of Yahweh, in that He does not need humanity, because He is separate from humanity.

**4:9-11** Whenever the living creatures declared this truth, the elders would fall before the throne of Yahweh as the reigning King over creation, lay their crowns before Him, and praised Him as well. This communicates their absolute submission before Yahweh as the greatest king of the universe. Despite how amazing and powerful these heavenly beings are, they are nothing compared to Yahweh, and they willingly submit to His authority.

They declared Yahweh to be worthy of worship for who He is and because He created all things. The statement “because of your will” communicates both the operating cause *and* the intention of creation. Creation came into existence by the operating will of Yahweh, but creation came into being through Him so that His holy purpose for humanity could be accomplished.<sup>41</sup>

When an emperor of Rome was crowned, the people would chant, “You are worthy.” But this declaration belongs to Yahweh alone, for all things owe Him allegiance, obedience, and worship because He is the Maker of everything and everyone. In Dan. 4:34 and 12:7, the affirmation of Yahweh’s eternity contrasts with the temporary rule of evil monarchs, whose power has been abrogated because they have claimed to be divine (like Nebuchadnezzar, Dan. 4:30-33) or have persecuted Yahweh’s people (like Antiochus IV and others, Dan. 11:30-35; 12:7).<sup>42</sup> They acknowledge that their authority is delegated and to be returned to their sovereign Lord, who is alone worthy of universal glory and honor.<sup>43</sup>

All these elements of Rev. 4 put together communicate the vast distance that exists between such a Holy God and fallen humanity. Each concentric circle—of brilliant light from the throne, lightning and thunder, the elders, the seven spirits, and the living creatures—is a barrier that separates the fallen human from the almighty sovereign God of all creation. Before you can be introduced to, understand, and receive the redemption of Jesus the Lamb in Rev. 4, you must first understand and come to grips with the absolute holy aseity of the sovereign God of creation. It is only when we embrace how puny, finite, and sinful we are in His presence and then bow before Him in total submission that we are ready to receive the atonement of the Lamb.

The main setting for this scene is a First Testament vision of the throne room of heaven, before the death and resurrection of Jesus, where humans are so separated and distanced from Yahweh because of their sin that they do not appear in heaven like all the other visions of the First Testament (Isa. 6; Dan. 7; Ezek. 1; 10). Recognizing this is crucial for a correct understanding of what is happening in the following chapters of this division (Rev. 4–7) and what will be unpacked further in the following chapters.

**5:1** Now the scene in heaven switches from Yahweh as Creator and sustainer of creation to Jesus Christ as Lord and redeemer of creation. John saw a scroll written on both sides and sealed with seven seals in the hand of Yahweh. Scrolls in the ancient world were made of two kinds of material. One was vellum, which was animal skin and was not common because of how

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<sup>41</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 125.

<sup>42</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 334.

<sup>43</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 124.

expensive it was. The other, and more common, was made from papyrus. Papyrus is a reed that grew largely in the delta of Egypt and is like rhubarb or celery. You would peel strips from the stalk with a knife and lay the strips side by side vertically until you had a square shape. Then you would lay strips horizontally on top of the vertical strips and glue them together with some kind of organic sap. Then you would attach a whole bunch of these pages together end to end until you had a whole scroll. Scrolls were between 32 and 34 feet. You would then write along the horizontal strips, which is the inside of the scroll. You would not normally write along the vertical strips because your quill pen would go over all the bumps. The only two reasons you would ever write on both sides is if you were dirt poor or if it were a legal document, where you wanted everything to be contained on one scroll. Yahweh is not communicating that He is poor, especially after Rev. 4.

This is a legal document that contains the fullness of Yahweh's disclosure. There is so much to say that it is written on both sides. And it is so important it needs to all be kept together so that parts are not left out or ignored. This legal document is like the title deed to creation and Yahweh's promises and purposes in judgment and redemption of a chaotic, fallen creation and humanity (Ezek. 2:7-10; possibly Dan. 8:26; 12:9).<sup>44</sup> "This symbolizes God's salvific plan, to assert His sovereignty over a rebellious world and to achieve His loving purposes in creation through the victory of the lamb."<sup>45</sup> It contains Yahweh's judgments (Rev. 6:12-17; 8:6-9:6; 18:1-24) and His salvation and joy (Rev. 12:7-12; 21:1-22:21). This is Yahweh's redemptive prophecies, promises, and purposes—to reclaim creation and humanity and restore it to order and goodness. It is in His right hand, symbolizing Yahweh's authority and power to execute the legal document.

This scroll was sealed with seven seals. When you were done writing on a scroll, you would roll the two ends together on their spindles, and then you would tie the two spindles together. But if it was an important document, you would wrap the two spindles together with another papyrus sheet and then drop a blob of wax on the seam, sealing the papyrus sheets together. And while the wax was still hot, you would press a metal signet ring or seal imprinted with your emblem into the wax to leave an impression of your emblem in the wax. If you were really important, you would drop multiple blobs of wax on the scroll. In fact, the last will and testament of Emperor Vespasian was sealed with seven seals.

The opening of the seals then meant the enactment of the contents—the bringing about of Yahweh's purposes of judgment and blessing. A sealed scroll did not mean you could not see what would happen until the seals were broken but that it would not happen until the seals were broken. In fact, there could have been unsealed copies for you to keep for your own knowledge. But the sealed scroll was the official, untampered-with legal document. Probate then happened when the seals were broken. Yahweh could not bring to pass what He had promised until the seals were broken.

**5:2-4** Then a mighty angel declared, "Who is worthy to break the seals and enact the purposes of Yahweh for creation and humanity?" There are three mighty angels in Revelation that appear in Rev. 5:2; 10:1; and 18:21, all of which make a great proclamation over the earth on behalf of the

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<sup>44</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 120; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 126.

throne. No one in all of creation was worthy to break the seals. Originally, in the Garden (Gen. 1:26-31; 2:15-25), Yahweh had given creation to humanity through the first humans, Adam and Eve. But they gave up the right to rule over creation when they chose to implement their own law over creation by seizing wisdom for themselves in their own way (Gen. 3:1-7). As a result of their rebellion, they plunged all of creation into sin, chaos, and death. Yahweh cannot just redeem creation back because, first, the penalty for sin is death, and there is no human who is sinless or powerful enough to take the judgment of Yahweh upon himself and make atonement for creation and humanity. Second, He gave the rule of creation to humans; therefore, it requires a human to restore order. The angel issues a challenge to any human in all of creation who is able to do the above. This means they would have to be righteous and worthy enough in authority and morality to get through all the barriers seen in Rev. 4: to approach the throne of Yahweh, take the scroll from Yahweh's hand, and break the seals without dying. That is why the setting of Rev. 4 is so important.

John wept because there is no human who is worthy or capable of doing this (Rom. 3:23b); therefore, the redemption of creation and humanity cannot come to pass. All of creation is trapped in a fallen and chaotic world.

**5:5-7** Then John heard one of the elders telling him that there was no need to weep, because the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, had triumphed and was worthy to break the seals. The imagery of the lion of Judah alludes back to the prophecy of Gen. 49:9-10 of a future king who would rise up out of the tribe of Judah and whose person and kingdom (donkey imagery) would be characterized by an abundance of joy (wine imagery) and life (milk imagery). The imagery of the Root of David alludes back to the prophecy of Isa. 11:1-10, wherein, although Yahweh had allowed the Davidic line of kings in Israel to be cut down in judgment, a stump or root remained, and Yahweh promised to restore a shoot from the stump of the Davidic line. This person would be filled with the Holy Spirit, would judge the world with righteousness, and would redeem creation, removing all evil and chaos from creation. The Messianic Lion has triumphed, which denotes an action completed in the past, which has ongoing effects into the present and future.

When John turned, expecting to see the Lion, he instead saw a Lamb that had been slain and that had seven horns and seven eyes. The imagery of this lamb alludes to Isa. 52:13-53:12—the prophecy of the Messiah, who would suffer for the sins of the world (John 1:29-30). The lamb is a symbol of weakness and sacrifice for atonement (Ex. 12). Yet this Lamb has seven horns, symbolizing authority and power, meaning the lamb's authority and power are absolute and complete (denoted by *seven*). As mentioned above (Rev. 1:4; 4:5), “the seven eyes” of the Lamb, which are “the seven spirits of God,” are a reference to the Holy Spirit. The seven eyes are an imagery of knowledge and awareness of what is going on, meaning the Lamb's knowledge and awareness are complete, fill all the earth, and are without limit (Zech. 4:10).

John uses the combination of *hearing* and *seeing* to link the two images of the Lion and the Lamb together as one and the same thing. John *hears* about a Lion, but he *sees* a Lamb, which equates the two as the same. First, John *hears* about Jesus the Messiah as a powerful Lion and authoritative King as spoken in First Testament and what the Jews expected. But then, John *sees* Jesus as a sacrificial Lamb, which is what the Jews got in Jesus the Messiah in the Second Testament, defying Jewish expectations. But then John realizes that this Lamb does have power and authority, which brings the two images together and reveals that just because Jesus was willing to be led to His slaughter does not mean He is weak or without authority and power (John 18:1-14). This is a mingling of metaphors, as in Ezek. 34, where Yahweh says that the lamb will

be the shepherd who is also the lion. In addition to this, John sees the Lamb standing in the center of the throne, meaning Jesus Christ and Yahweh are one and the same, for they share the same throne. Jesus is separated from the other throne creatures (elders and living creatures) but is intimately linked with Yahweh on the throne (Col. 1:19).

The focus here is that this Lion-Lamb has triumphed and thus is worthy to break the seals and to execute the purposes of Yahweh (Rev. 5:5). Yet how has or could have this slain Lamb triumphed over creation? This is the question that the praise of the living creatures and the elders will answer. Likewise, this imagery is extremely significant and even foundational to who Jesus is as the Messiah; it will also be unpacked in the praises of the living creatures and the elders at the end of this chapter.

**5:8-10** When the slain and exalted Lamb had taken the scroll, the living creatures and the elders began to worship the slain and exalted Lamb as they had Yahweh the Creator, and they fell before Him in submission to His authority and reign. They played their harps, which are instruments of joy and exaltation. And they burned their incense, which was used to create a pleasing aroma (Ex. 25:29; 37:16; Ps. 141:2) and cover the stench of life (before people showered regularly).

They then sang a new song that had never been sung before—a song about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This means that, in order for it to be a new song, what John is seeing in heaven is taking place chronologically immediately after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Jesus the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll and break the seals because He was slain, and His death redeemed all peoples back to Yahweh into a right relationship. By becoming a human, Jesus Christ could represent humanity, having the right to take the title deed to the earth and rule. Also by being human, He became capable of dying, which God cannot do. But by being God, He could do what humanity could not: live a sinless life and take the place of humanity by dying on their behalf—since He did not need to die for His own sins. Also as God, He was able to conquer sin, death, and the devil, freeing humanity and redeeming them back to Yahweh. This is why one cannot deny the divinity nor the humanity of Jesus; He had to be the God-man (Dan. 7:13-14) in order to make atonement for sins. This is how He triumphed and received the right to rule over all the universe as God and over the earth as the true human. He was triumphant, not through conquering His people and oppressing them with His power but by sacrificing Himself on their behalf (Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:1-4).

His death did not purchase just Israel but *all* peoples—man and woman, free and slave, wealthy and poor, from every tribe and language and people and nation (Micah 4:1-5). All peoples are now able to become a part of the New Covenant people of Yahweh and to enter His kingdom. The song they sing also states that all peoples are now able to serve as priests, giving them total access to Yahweh and to rule with Jesus Christ over the earth. Yahweh had made humans kings and priests in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:26-28), but they had lost this right when they sinned. Yahweh offered it to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1-6), but they failed to become this when they worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32). Now Jesus had done what no one had done, becoming king and priest over earth when He triumphed over sin and death. And because of Yahweh's desire for humanity to have this right, the believers now can be kings and priests with and in Christ (Eph. 2:4-6; 1 Pet. 2:4-9). Because Jesus is one with Yahweh and one with humanity, He can receive (take) the qualities usually reserved for Yahweh alone (1 Chron. 29:11-12; Dan. 2:37; Matt. 11:27; 28:18). Unlike every other human, who gains power and holds it for himself in

order to maintain control, Jesus has the utmost power, which He gave up for us by going to the cross. When His power was restored back to Him because of His sacrifice, He shared it with us as co-heirs in Christ (Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 1:1-4). Because of this, all through Revelation the Lamb is exalted—except for the counterfeit lamb in Rev. 13:11.

This new song sings, first, of a very *bloody and violent* atonement through which Jesus was willing to go on our behalf. This is why we owe Him the utmost awe, respect, gratitude, obedience, and praise. Second, the song sings of a *broad* atonement of all people groups. We have, therefore, no right to despise, mistreat, or ignore anyone, regardless of their race, gender, or social status, for Jesus purchased them with the high price of His blood. The word *purchase* was used when slaves were “redeemed” or “ransomed” at a price in the marketplace (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Gal. 3:13; 4:5). Third, this new song sings of a *directed* atonement, in that Jesus died to redeem us back to Yahweh and Himself. Therefore, we now belong to Him in obedience and worship, for He purchased us with His blood. “Not my will but Your [Yahweh’s] will be done” must be our prayer. Fourth, the song sings of a *triumphant* atonement, where what seems ridiculous to us—a slain lamb triumphing and being exalted—is exactly what power looks like in the Kingdom of Yahweh, for it is selfless and directed toward others.

**5:11-14** The angels of heaven responded with their own worship of the Lamb. The phrase “thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand” is a way of indicating an uncountable number. All the angels also recognize the sovereignty of the Lamb and exalt Him (Heb. 2).

Then every creature in all of creation sang the praise of the Lamb. Everything dies awaiting its redemption, and now it all joins in praise of the Lamb, knowing that He is the only true life and life giver in all of creation.

This scene in heaven (Rev. 4-5) takes place immediately after the ascension of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). In order to understand this, we must connect the dots of multiple passages in the Bible. The first scene in biblical history starts in the First Testament, where no human is able to enter heaven due to their sin and fallen nature. Every scene of heaven in the First Testament there are no humans (1 Kgs. 22:19-22; Isa. 6; Ezek. 1; Dan. 7). All that exists in heaven is the Godhead and the heavenly divine beings. The second member of the trinity (Jesus) is fully God but not *yet* human and He has all authority, glory, and sovereign power over creation (John 1:1-5; Heb. 1:1-3a).

The second scene is the incarnation of the second member of the triune Godhead, where He took on human flesh and became the God-man Jesus (Luke 2:1-21; John 1:14). When Jesus became human, He was still fully God and equal to God, but He chose not to access and exercise His divine power so that He might fully understand what it meant to be a human and to suffer, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:5-8). Jesus gave up His divine right to exercise His authority and sovereign power and rule over creation, and He was made a little lower than the angels for a little while (Heb. 2:5-8). As fully God and fully human, He made atonement for humanity’s sin through His death and resurrection.

The third scene is after Jesus Christ’s resurrection, where He ascended into heaven from earth (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11). There He stood before the disciples and ascended into the clouds, and then angels appeared before them to announce the future, second coming of Jesus Christ.

The fourth scene is Jesus appearing in heaven and walking up to the throne of Yahweh to receive all authority, glory, and sovereign power (Dan. 7:13-14; Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 1:3b-4; Rev. 5:1-8). In this scene, the first camera angle, so to speak, is Rev. 5:1-8, where Yahweh is sitting on the throne with the scroll, which is the title deed to the earth and the promises and purpose of Yahweh to redeem creation. Only the Lion of Judah is worthy to take the scroll. The second camera angle is Dan. 7:13-14, where the God-man (sinless Son of Man) is approaching the throne of Yahweh and is given all authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Returning to the first camera angle (Rev. 5:1-8), we see that He had the right to reclaim His rule on the throne and is made greater than the angels because He is still fully God and is also the Lamb who made atonement for sins. Now all of creation knows Him, and a multitude now worship Him on the throne of God (Dan. 7:14b; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:9-14).

The fifth scene will be the breaking of the seals (Rev. 6), and the humans are now able to enter heaven because of the atonement of Jesus Christ, the God-man and Lion-Lamb. This will be unpacked in Rev. 6–7.

The futurist sees Rev. 4–5 as some future event in which the church is raptured into heaven with John, Jesus begins to unleash on earth the future judgments of Rev. 6, and then those who die in the seven-year tribulation enter heaven (Rev. 7). But as one can see and will continue to see, this does not fit the context. Just because Jesus said He was going to show John what was going to “take place after this” (Rev. 4:1), it does not mean that everything He reveals has to be future. Every scholar agrees that Rev. 12 is a summary of Israel in the First Testament, followed by the birth, life, and death of Jesus, which had already happened when John was receiving this vision. Likewise with Rev. 4–5. John is not as interested in explaining future events as in demonstrating the sovereignty and authority of Jesus as the exalted Lion-Lamb over all creation and why He deserves all glory and worship, for He opened heaven by making atonement for sin.

## **B. The Opening of the Seals (6:1-17)**

In this section, John sees a vision of Yahweh's righteous judgments for the unfaithfulness of humanity, known in Scriptures as the Day of Yahweh. The Day of Yahweh is any event during which Yahweh enters into space and time in a direct way to bring judgment upon a nation or nations for their rebellion. It is a day of unprecedented woe (Isa. 13:6-22; Ezek. 30:2-19; Joel 1:15-2:11; Zech. 14:1-5; Mark 13:7-8). The Day of Yahweh is seen in the plagues sent on Egypt for what they had done to Israel (Ex. 6:1-8; 14:30) and in the exile of Israel for their sins (Isa. 7:17-20; Ezek. 30:3). This then became a typology for the greater and final Day of Yahweh (Rev. 18-19).

The seals are organized by four major judgments, followed by two secondary judgments, and concluding with the final seal, which brings the storm and earthquake of Yahweh and unveils the seven trumpets. The first four are the horsemen, and the second two deal with the righteous and wicked of humanity. The point of the judgments is not only to judge the world for its rebellion against Yahweh but to lead them to the truth of who the Lion-Lamb is so that they may be redeemed and sealed by the Lamb.

The previous vision of Jesus Christ, as the risen and vindicated Son of man (Rev. 1, 4-5), provides the basis for His authority to judge and redeem creation in the following revealing of Yahweh's purposes. Then, the supreme power and love of Yahweh are seen clearly in Rev. 4-5 as the Lamb is slain for humanity so that they may escape Yahweh's judgment and dwell with Him. Therefore, Yahweh is justified in judging humanity for having rejected Him and His will. But He also judges them for their lack of love for His creation and for the way they misused their power to oppress others for their own gain. Yahweh cares deeply for His creation and shows His love for those who have been victimized by doling out justice on those who violated them (Gen. 4:8-12). For example, the great earthquake that kills many (Rev. 6:12-17) is offset by the cry of the martyred believers for justice (Rev. 6:9-11).

Sometimes the justice of Yahweh appears harsh to us and therefore seems unjust. First, however, as finite and sinful beings we do not fully understand the gravity of sin and how it truly affects others; therefore, we cannot fully understand what the judgment for sins truly demands in order to bring justice.

Second, for those living as Westerners, we find ourselves in a very sanitized world, where we have been sheltered from truly horrific governments and crimes against humanity. Not only have we not really been oppressed as a people group, but our history books and media sanitize or gloss over the true horrors of what has happened to people throughout history, what our government has done to people, and what others are doing to people, even in our own neighborhoods. It is easier to go back to the convenience, luxury, and entertainment that make us feel comfortable than it is to dig into the facts and face the reality of the true evil humans can do—and are doing on a larger scale than we would like to admit.

Third, we must realize that we really do want a God who hates sin and punishes evil justly. No one wants a God or an authority figure who is not angered by evil and does not execute justice. In fact, the problem of evil and the injustice of our governments anger all people more than anything else in our lives. The desire for justice is foundational to the core of every human.

In the judgments of Yahweh, heaven and earth are linked together; the judgments are initiated in heaven by the Lion-Lamb but take place on earth. And the martyred believers in heaven cry out

for justice for what has been done to them on earth. Though these judgments are initiated by Yahweh in heaven, they are also, in some sense, the natural consequences of human choices and rebellion.

The most common way by which Yahweh judges people is giving them over to their sinful desires and allowing them to reap the natural consequences of their choices (Rom. 1–2). Yahweh has created the world according to His wisdom and law of love (Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18) so that life can flourish in His creation. He has also given humans the freedom to live their lives the way they want, but it is only when they submit themselves to His will, within a creation that operates according to His will, that they experience life to the fullest.

When humans choose to devote themselves to counterfeit gods and live contrary to the will of Yahweh and the way He has designed creation to work, then chaos begins to reign in their lives. Since humans are so stubborn, Yahweh allows them to go on living the way they want and thus continue down their own designed path, which ends in destruction. The things of creation are good because they were created by Yahweh, but they are not the source of life and joy, for they are finite creations—not the creator. So, when we lift them up as the highest good or try to make them the source of our life and joy, they will fall horribly short. And because we pursue these things to the exclusion of others, then we fail to love others. This leads to hurt and broken relationships with Yahweh and others, which causes us to turn again to the things of creation, now as a means of medication for the pain and isolation, which makes them even more of an idol. If we shake our fists at Yahweh and blame Him, then this is when He gives us over to the thing we have chosen, and we spiral into chaos and destruction. Yahweh allows this so that hopefully we will see how broken our path is, repent, bury our idols, and turn back to Him so we might experience life to the fullest. It is a judgment on our pride, arrogance, and self-sufficiency. It is vital to learn that Yahweh is in charge. If one is truly honest about human nature and history, then one will realize that Yahweh does not need to actively judge us but merely remove Himself, and we will create a hell on earth that destroys us.

This can be seen in the fact that Israel wanted a king like all the other nations had, instead of Him, and so Yahweh gave them a king in the person of Saul, who brought chaos and death into the nation during his reign (1 Sam. 8). Then, latter kings pursued false gods, and when they demanded Yahweh to save them, but had no repentance, He told them to go to their own gods for help (Judg. 10:6-18; 1 Kgs. 1:1-4; 3:10-14). This is exactly what Jesus said in the Olivet discourse (Mark 13) when He talked about Israel falling apart under the Romans because they chose their own law rather than Yahweh.

The two most common ways by which Yahweh judges nations are sending natural plagues and using other nations to invade and conquer that nation. Examples of plagues are when Yahweh judged Egypt with the ten plagues for their crimes against humanity (Ex. 6:1-8; 7:1-5) and when He punished the Canaanite people groups (Judg. 5:19-23). Examples of using other nations in judgment are when Yahweh used Israel to destroy the Canaanites (Deut. 7), used the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish Israel (Deut. 27:15, 64-68; 29:19-29; 2 Kgs. 17:1-23; Hab. 1:1-11), and then promised that the Assyrians and Babylonians would be punished by the following nations (Hab. 2:2-20), establishing a typology for nations throughout history. This is what we see with the seal and trumpet judgements in Revelation.

But now, in the book of Revelation, the chaos to which Yahweh will give over humanity will be far greater since it is after Jesus Christ's work of redemption on the cross. The book of Hebrews

makes the argument that because Jesus is the Son of God, is God, and died for humanity in order to save them, He is far greater than the angels, Moses, the Law, the priesthood, and the tabernacle. Therefore, the message of redemption and the salvation Yahweh provided through His Son are greater than the message of redemption and salvation that He provided through all of these previous First Testament beings and institutions. Therefore, the judgment for rejecting His Son and His provision of salvation is also greater (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39). With each set of judgments (Rev. 6; 8–9; 15–16) and the second coming of the Son (Rev. 18–19), the judgment will be ever increasing in severity. The world now has a greater understanding of the Father and His Son; therefore, the consequences for rejecting them are far greater, just as the consequences for a rebellious eighteen-year-old are far greater than for a disobedient three-year-old. As Creator and Provider, He has every right to judge the world. And His love for His creation demands that sin and evil be punished.

**6:1-2** Regarding the seals being broken, it is debated among scholars as to whether the scroll is being opened and read with each judgment in Rev. 6 or the scroll is not opened until all the seals have been broken. With the latter view the seal judgments would then be seen as seven preliminary judgments before the scroll has been opened. The silence in Rev. 8:1 is because the scroll is now being opened, which then leads to two sets of seven judgments, the trumpets and bowls. However, Rev. 8:1 does not say it was now possible to open the scroll. Some have suggested it should be understood as a seal is broken, the scroll is unrolled a little, and the first judgment is read. Then another seal is broken, a little more is read, and so on. However, this is impossible, for no one in the ancient world would have thought of it that way since scrolls were never designed to work like that. The breaking of the seals is a metaphor, and one is not meant to make a metaphor walk on all fours. It does not matter technically how it works, for either way you still have three sets of seven judgments. What is interesting is that nowhere in Revelation is the scroll said to have been read.

As the Lamb breaks each of the seals, one of the four living creatures invites John to “come,” which does not communicate “come and see” but to physically approach the horsemen and follow them as they each execute the commands of the scroll. Yahweh is mediating His will through the angels to John. This is the first place we see angelic beings give orders to other supernatural creatures, suggesting an implicit hierarchal order (Rev. 7:2-3; 14:15, 18; also Zech. 2:3-5).

The first four seals are the four horsemen, who ride on different-colored horses. The imagery comes from Zech. 1:8-17 and Zech. 6:1-8, where different-colored horses carry riders who are sent out by Yahweh to patrol the earth. Though the idea of horsemen sent out by Yahweh across the earth is connected to Zechariah’s visions, there is no direct dependence. Zechariah’s visions are a demonstration of this kind of symbolism operating in this kind of apocalyptic literature. The difference is that the riders in Zechariah are to patrol to see what is happening on the earth in order to know what to do next. In Revelation they are bringing judgments on the earth, and each horseman has a different task. Also, there is no connection between the color of the horses. In Zechariah they are portrayed as just being different-colored horses, where in Revelation the colors are associated specifically with what the riders bring. The form of the vision, horsemen, is tied to Zechariah, but the content, judgments, is tied to Mark 13.

These horsemen are either heavenly beings or demonic beings that Yahweh commands to carry out military conquests and war on the earth. They could also be a metaphoric image of military conquest happening on the earth. Either way, it is Yahweh who has given them the power to act

in the way they do. The phrase “there was given to him to do [such and such]” is used when divine permission is granted to evil to do something.

The first seal/horseman is the white horse whose rider wore a crown, carried a bow, and rode to conquer in conquest. This horseman represents military power that brings destruction. Yahweh gave this horseman the power of allowing military figures or governments to rise to power, invade, and conquer nations and people groups, putting them under their oppressive regimes.

Some think this is Jesus because the horse is white, a symbol of victory and purity, and the rider wears a crown. However, the Second Testament is never vague when it comes to identifying Jesus; when He appears in Rev. 19:11-21, it is very clearly Him. Second, their themes are different. The first horseman brings bloodshed, death, and slaughter that brings chaos, whereas Jesus in Rev. 19 brings righteous retribution that brings redemption. This horseman needs divine permission from Yahweh to act, yet Jesus acts without a divine mandate because He is God. Third, it does not make sense for Jesus Christ to be the one breaking the seals and then riding out as the first horseman, and then having to return in some kind of way to continue breaking the seals. There is also no reason He would be this seal rather than any of the other seals.

Some say this the antichrist because he carries a bow, but no arrows are mentioned, which means he comes in the guise of peace but really brings conquest. Plus, the white also adds to the guise. However, when the antichrist figure appears Rev. 13, is it very clearly him. And just because arrows are not mentioned, that does not mean there are none. The mention of a bow refers to both the bow and arrows as a whole. This first horseman cannot be a very specific figure because none of the following three horsemen are portrayed as specific figures.

The bow is a symbol of military power (Ps. 46:9; Isa. 21:15; Jer. 50:42; Hos. 2:18), and the crown is a symbol of victory (Isa. 22:21; Zech. 6:9-14; Rev. 2:10-11; 4:4). These images are not unique to Jesus nor do they communicate some deeper meaning. In the time of Rome, the bow was a Parthian weapon, not a Roman one. Parthians rode white horses into battle,<sup>46</sup> but victorious Roman generals rode white horses through the streets in victory parades of military conquest.<sup>47</sup>

The point is that this horseman allows for military leaders throughout history to invade and conquer nations, establishing their oppressive regimes over people groups. This can be seen over and over again in history with the European city states of the medieval period, the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, the United States of America over the natives, and Nazi Germany, just to name a few of all the thousands upon thousands throughout history.

**6:3-4** The second seal/horseman is the fiery red (or red with a tinge of yellow) horse who had a large sword and was given power to take peace from the earth and make people kill each other. This horseman represents political power that brings civil disorder and bloodshed. Yahweh gave this horseman the power of allowing political powers to eliminate peace in their nations through their abuse of power and oppression of the people, which then causes civil disorder among the people so that they begin to turn on each other. The first horseman focused on military conquest and invasion, whereas this horseman focuses on people within a city or nation slaughtering each

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<sup>46</sup> See M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, p. 122; Martin Kiddle. *The Revelation of St. John*, pp. 113-114.

<sup>47</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 86, Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 150; Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, pp. 5:17-519; R. H. Charles. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, pp. 1, 163-164; Leon Morris. *The Revelation of St. John*, pp. 101-102, George Raymond Beasley-Murry. *The Book of Revelation* pp. 131-132

other. Under corrupt and oppressive governments, people take sides. Some sell out to the government for security and comfort, like those who served Hitler in Nazi Germany and turned against their own people. Others break under the yoke of corrupt governments until they revolt against their own government and people in civil wars (Zech. 14:13; Isa. 19:2). Notice how governments intentionally divided people by making every topic political so people would get censored or canceled for having differing opinions. Look at how people are slaughtering each other in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York City.

**6:5-6** The third seal/horseman is the black horse, whose rider had a pair of scales for weighing out food throughout nations. This horseman represents economic power that brings social breakdown and famine. Yahweh gave this horseman the power to disrupt the economic stability of nations. A quart (two pounds) of wheat would be a day's food for one man,<sup>48</sup> and a denarius is a day's wage (Matt. 20:2). This means he is spending all his money on food; if he has a family, he cannot support them. These prices are inflated to ten to twelve times the normal prices. Barley was cheaper than wheat, three times cheaper and the food of the poor.

Some have suggested that the command to not harm the oil and wine could mean that the elite would not be affected by this economic collapse. The rich have the scales and measure the economic structures of a fallen world, whereas the poor are deprived of food and have need of Yahweh's bounty.<sup>49</sup> It could mean things are not as bad as they could be, though that will come. Or "do not spoil" may mean do not fraudulently withhold the wine and oil.<sup>50</sup>

Famines were common in the First Testament and the Roman Empire (Isa. 14:30; Ezek. 6:11-12; Mark 13:8). Economies are fragile, and it does not take much mishap to have famine. In the ancient world, the price of food might have risen because of famine in the land; today it might rise because it has to be flown in from somewhere else (Ezek. 4:16). The combination of government or corporate oppression and people living in fear of what may happen to them leads most people to look out for only themselves, contributing to an economy's collapse and starvation. Even in America, during the recent government shutdown of Covid-19, many grocery stores were bare because of people's fear of not having enough. World history is full of famines and plagues due to natural causes and government corruption. Starting in 1334 AD, the bubonic plague killed between 30 and 50 percent of the European population and caused tens of millions of deaths in China. There are many other plagues in world history and today with staggering death statistics from famine and plagues. Many economists say with all of our engineering of viruses and the mutation of viruses due to resistance to medicines, we could have an outbreak at any moment that would be far worse than the bubonic plague. And we saw with Covid-19 how the whole world is affected by one nation because of how interconnected we are.

**6:7-8** The fourth seal/horseman is the pale horse whose rider is death, and all of Hades followed him. This horseman represents the negation of power that brings death. Yahweh gave this horseman the power to wipe out a fourth of the earth by wars, plagues, famine, and wild animals. This horseman is given a name, Death. Death is personified four times in Revelation (Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14) as a person who controls the domain of Hades, his kingdom. And in all of these cases, Hades always follows Death. The Greek word *chlōros*, translated as "pale-colored" when

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<sup>48</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> See Robert. W. Wall. *Revelation*, p. 110.

<sup>50</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 154.

used of plants, means “green” or “light green” but also can be used of the color of people when they are sick or dead. The sword that Death carries is a large barbaric weapon, easily capable of killing people. The fourfold pattern of sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts is a direct allusion to Ezek. 14:21.

When political powers oppress their people, eventually everything begins to fall apart into civil disorder, which then means all chaos breaks out in famine and plagues and wild animals and in nature reclaiming that which humans have failed to bring order to in creation. This is when everyone loses power, death reigns over everyone, and Hades gathers up all the victims. This is the total collapse of institutions, cities, and nations into death. We create our own hell on earth. Even when the West was reveling in how great we had become with our modern civilizations, we produced World War I and II. When nations put themselves above Yahweh, they collapse under the judgment of Yahweh.

Because unrighteous humanity has rejected the Prince of Peace, they are now at war with each other.<sup>51</sup> The powers of evil become the agents of Yahweh used for His victory over them in order to turn human wickedness to the service of Yahweh’s saving plan.<sup>52</sup> Because Christ reigns from the cross, the four horsemen ride out as his emissaries of His redemptive love.<sup>53</sup> Everything is under Yahweh’s control.

**6:9-11** The fifth seal shifts from the calamities Yahweh has allowed to fall upon the world—because of their rejection of the Lamb—to how the world has brought calamity into the lives of the believers—because of their commitment to the Lamb. Heaven is portrayed here as a temple with the earthly temple language of the altar (Hab. 2:20). Under the altar is where the martyrs are after they have died and gone into heaven to be with the Lamb (Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 4:14, 17). They are under the altar because in the First Testament the blood of the sacrifice was poured out on the side of the altar, and they have sacrificed their life for the Lamb (Lev. 4:7; 17:11; Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6).

Though the emphasis is on the believers who have been slain, this could also refer to all the believers throughout history. As discussed in Rev. 2:13, the Greek word *martyr* (also *martyr* in English) means “witness,” a term used of all the believers throughout history. The reference to their being slain may not have meant to exclude those who have not been slain, but because at the time of John’s writing the majority of the believers had been slain in the Roman Empire, it was an appropriate description of the believers. What is emphasized in Revelation concerning the slain witnesses is not that they have been killed for their faith but that they did not take the mark of the beast or worship it, which led to their being marginalized or attacked (Rev. 2:3, 6, 13, 19, 24; 3:4, 10; 7:14; 12:4, 10, 13, 17; 13:7-8, 15; 16:15; 17:8; 20:4) in contrast to those who did (Rev. 2:14, 20; 13:4, 8, 16; 17:1-2, 8; 18:3, 9; 19:20; 20:3). This is the main identity of the witnesses.

Here the slain witnesses are crying out for justice from Yahweh for what the world has done to them (Gen. 4:10). The point is not that they are merely bitter and want vengeance but that they seek the necessity and expedience of justice (Ps. 13:1-2; 74:9-11; 79:5-10; 89:46; Isa. 6:11; Jer.

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<sup>51</sup> See W. Milligan. *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, pp. 88-87.

<sup>52</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 148.

<sup>53</sup> See George B. Caird. *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 82-83.

5:9; 15:15; 47:6; Amos 7:16-17; Hos. 4:9; Nah. 1:2; Hab. 1:2; Zech. 1:12; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30) especially when the wicked prosper (Neh. 4:4-5; Ps. 73:2-20).

Yahweh responds with first giving them white robes, white being symbolic of victory. Those who reject the Lamb die in the judgments of Yahweh, and Hades gathers them all up. Those who follow the Lamb die by the hands of the world, but they are taken to the altar of heaven, where Yahweh and the Lamb are seated because death has lost its sting and has no hold over them (1 Cor. 15:50-58; Rev. 20:4-6). The point here is that you might die, but you will overcome by the blood of the lamb.

Second, He tells them that they have to wait a little longer until the number of all the killed believers in human history has reached its full number. This refers to the final judgment of Yahweh in the second coming of Christ (Rev. 20:11-15). One cannot say things are getting better because the end cannot come until the number has reached its fullness. There have been more Christians martyred in the last hundred and fifty years than in the previous eighteen centuries.

**6:12-14** The sixth seal returns to the calamity on earth as a judgment from Yahweh. The background to this seal is the cosmic destruction of the last days (all the time between the first and second comings of Christ) in Isa. 2; 34; Hag. 2; Joel 2:30-31; Isa. 34; Mark 13:24-25 = Matt. 24:29; Acts 2:19-20. Here, John sees a great earthquake, the sun going black, the moon going red, stars falling out of the sky, the sky rolling away, and the mountains and islands being removed.

The futurist says this language describes the cosmos literally falling apart. The problem with this is that the language does not say this is happening everywhere in the world, is happening all at once, or is permanent and final. We know that these events are not literally happening and are temporal because they happen again in the judgments of the trumpets (Rev. 8-9) and bowls (Rev. 16). If these things were literal and permanent, then no one on the planet could survive and be left alive for people to be afflicted again in the trumpets and bowls.

This description is a mingling of poetic language with the language of natural disasters. It is not literal but an omen or anticipation of judgment (Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10; 3:15; Mark 13:25). Yahweh uses this exact language of the coming destruction of the Babylonians on the nations (Hag. 2:6-7, 21-22), yet no one points to those as final and complete cosmic destruction. Nor have these cosmic events described by the First Testament as having happened in the past ever happened literally, so why should this cosmic language be seen as literal? Peter quotes Joel 2 (Acts 2:17-21) as though he sees these cosmic events happening in his lifetime, but they did not happen literally.

There could be a sense that this language is a metaphorical description of the natural phenomena and disasters that happen continually throughout human history and of the gradual destruction of creation that we inflict on it due to our own neglect, pollution, and exploitation. This could describe the devastation that human wars have brought to creation, like the nuclear bomb. Devastating earthquakes happen all the time. The sun going black here could merely be from an eclipse, as happened at the death of Jesus (Luke 22:24), from volcanic eruptions, or from the smog of pollution. The moon going red happens a lot and even recently with the Canadian forest fires. The stars falling out of the sky are merely meteorites, some of which have destroyed villages.

Ultimately, this is not related directly to the cosmos nor is it geographical language. The physical geography of creation has nothing to do with the idolatry and rebellion of humanity; therefore, there is no reason for Yahweh to alter or destroy it in His judgment. What Yahweh is judging are people and the power institutions they have created, where their misuse of power is put in opposition to Yahweh and intended to oppress people. All throughout the First Testament this is what He has condemned and judged—not the geography of creation—and Revelation is no different.

The sun, moon, and stars can be used in the Bible as a metaphor for the pagan gods (Deut. 4:19; 2 Kgs. 23:5, 11; Jer. 15:9; 43:13; Ezek. 8:16). The sun, moon, and stars going dark is also a metaphor for Yahweh's judgment on the nations (Isa. 5:30; 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Micah 3:6; Zech. 14:6).

Earthquakes are harbingers of Yahweh's advent (Ex. 19:18; Isa. 24:18-20; 29:6; Joel 2:10; 3:16; Mic. 1:4; Nah. 1:5). When He comes, it brings the shaking of creation (Isa. 13:9-10; Ezek. 32:6-8; Joel 2:30-31; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:13). The darkening or altering of the sun, moon, and stars is used in the First Testament of the coming Babylonians (Isa. 13:9-10; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10, 31; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:15; Mark 13:24-25; Acts 2:20; 2 Pet. 3:10). Yahweh is going to snuff the light and life out of their nation for their sins. Falling stars can sometimes refer to the work of demons in creation (Jude 13; Luke 10:18).

The splitting of the sky is not literal but is a metaphor used for the coming of Yahweh, down into creation, in order to judge and redeem (2 Sam. 22:10; Ps. 18:9; Isa. 34:1-4; 50:3; 64:1-4; Ezek. 1:1; Mark 1:10-11; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; Rev. 19:11; 20:11).

The image of a mountain is used for Yahweh's strength and presence (Gen. 22:2; Ex. 19; Deut. 11:29; Ps. 65:6; Micah 4:1-5; Isa. 2:1-5; 40:4; Jer. 4:24; Dan. 2:35; Hab. 3:6). The pagan gods were also portrayed as dwelling on mountains. Mountains are metaphorical for "strength" (Rev. 6:14-16; 8:8; 14:1; 16:20; 21:10) and symbolize the kingdoms of the world (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 5:3; Dan. 2:35; 1 Enoch 52:1-7; Rev. 8:8; 14:1).<sup>54</sup> Humans created their own mountain and kingdom in the Tower of Babylon (Gen. 11:1-9). When Yahweh arrives, the mountains shake and are removed to make way for His coming in judgment (Judg. 5:5; Ps. 18:7; Ps. 46:1-3; 95:1-7; Isa. 5:25; 40:1-5; 41:14-16; 45:1-2; 54:10; Jer. 4:23-26; Ezek. 26:18; Mic. 1:4; Nahum 1:5; Hab. 3:6-10; Zeph. 2:11; Zech. 14:4). The image of a mountain being removed is used of the fall of Babylon (Jer. 51:25; Rev. 17:1-3) of fallen angels (1 Enoch 21:3-4). After Yahweh's judgment, only His mountain is still standing (Rev. 14:1; 21:10).

The imagery of islands refers to the far-flung cities and nations scattered throughout the world. Yahweh states that He will judge them (Isa. 23:1-6; 40:15; 41:1-5; 49:1; 59:18; Ezek. 26:18) but longs for them to repent and return to Himself (Isa. 11:11; 24:15; 42:4, 10, 12; 51:5; 66:19). They are a reminder that the furthest and most remote parts of the earth cannot offer sanctuary nor escape the judgment of Yahweh.<sup>55</sup>

You can see all this imagery of Yahweh entering into creation to judge the nations in Ps. 18. The authors of the Bible use this metaphorical language of creation being split and collapsing to communicate the intensity of the horrific tragedy of Yahweh's judgment on the nations. If your

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<sup>54</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 869; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 435-436.

<sup>55</sup> See Michael Kuykendall. *Lions, Locusts, and the Lamb*, p. 96.

city was invaded, your family massacred, and carried off into captivity you would say that your world was collapsing, and creation was falling apart.

**6:15-17** As a result of the judgments of Yahweh, the elites hid in caves, which in the ancient world would have been caves and fortresses; now it could be hurricane-proofed homes, bomb shelters, and bunkers that only the rich can afford. Yet even these are not enough to protect them from the judgments of Yahweh. Those whose status normally makes them secure are now at risk.<sup>56</sup> Eventually, the devastation of nature, the violence of humans, or the collapse of a company, government, or economy touches even the elite. Yahweh holds all people to account.

Even so, though they cry out to Yahweh for relief and physical salvation, they do not repent. Those who seek to control their lives do not repent, seen in the rich man in Jesus' parable, who, even when he ended up in Hades, still did not repent and treated Lazarus and Abraham as his servants to command.

Now six chapters into the book, the reader must ask what here would force one into a particular interpretation yet. There is no structure yet nor mention of time. Nowhere have we been told when this starts or how long it lasts, nor has it been placed in a chronological order with other events. There is no mention of the start of a seven-year period. There is no mention of a rapture or an antichrist (as mentioned previously, one must work hard to see the first horseman as the antichrist). Nowhere does the text even say that the judgments of Rev. 6 are all happening back to back in a sequence of events. The most dogmatic answers for a particular view of when these things are happening must come about from artificially imposed sequences of structures that have been developed in advance, based on a particular view of Revelation, and then forced on the text to early.

How would this be read by those who have just suffered and will continue to suffer? The original audience would not have read it as some literal, distant-future undoing of the world as we know it. They would have seen these events in the context of the Roman Empire and of the non-believing Jewish communities who persecuted them for maintaining devotion to the God-man of Jesus Christ, along with the temptation to reject some aspect of Jesus in order to have a more comfortable and prosperous life.

And just as the Babylonian Empire was a very real empire that threatened Israel in the First Testament and became a typology for the Roman Empire in the Second Testament, so these events, which were originally fulfilled in the Roman Empire, become a typology for the next empire. Nation after nation will fulfill this typology throughout time and space until history reaches its climax in whichever nations are dominating the world arena in the second coming of Jesus Christ. All generations can relate to this, for it happens to be true again and again throughout history.

The main point is not necessarily around which specific things are going to happen or when but that the world empires are puny in the grand shadow of the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh and Jesus, who sit on the cosmic throne over all creation. All things owe the Father devotion and obedience because He created them, and they owe Jesus their devotion and obedience, for He died for them to redeem them from sin, chaos, and death. Those who shake their fist at Him in rebellion and seize power for themselves and exploit others will face the judgment of the Lion-

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<sup>56</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 152.

Lamb. This is why Christians of all ages should never give up their faith in the God-man, no matter the temptation for a comfortable life; one day all will answer to the Lion-Lamb. It does not matter if you are a street sweeper or a king on high, eventually everyone dances with the reaper; his name is Death, and Hades follows him. Only the God-man provides salvation as the Lion-Lamb.

### C. The 144,000 Sealed (7:1–8:5)

In this section, the author deals with the first aside in Revelation. Some call these sections interludes, but *interlude* is not quite the right word because there is no sense of a break in the action from Rev. 4–6, to be picked up again in Rev. 8. The idea is that while all this going on there is also this in Rev. 7 going on, a recapitulation.

This is the first aside in the drama of the Apocalypse, placed between the sixth and seventh seals. All the asides in the book of Revelation focus on the people of Yahweh rather than the corruption of the earth and Yahweh's judgments. John pauses before the final seal of judgment on the earth to focus on Yahweh's sealing of the believers, showing that they belong to Him and are protected from His judgments.

**7:1** Then John saw four angels at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds. Angels are regularly involved as Yahweh's agents as to what is happening on the earth. The four corners and winds refer to the cardinal points of the compass. In Jewish thought, the four winds of heaven represented the whole of the known world and all the winds (Jer. 49:36; Ezek. 37:9; Dan. 7:7:2; 8:8; Zech. 2:6; 6:5; 1 Enoch 18:2; 4 Ezra 13:5). The imagery is of Yahweh being in control of all the earth and the winds (Ps. 135:7; Jer. 51:16; 1 Enoch 18:1; 2 *Enoch* 40:10). The four winds also represent the manifestation of Yahweh's providence and His activity of saving judgment (Jer. 49:36; 1 Enoch 76:1-14). In general, the winds in the Bible are Yahweh's agents of divine judgment (Ps. 18:10; 104:3-4; Isa. 40:7, 24; Jer. 23:19; Ezek. 5:12; Hos. 13:15-16; Zech. 9:14).<sup>57</sup> The idea is that Yahweh is not ready to unleash His judgment on the earth (Rev. 6) until the following has happened (Rev. 7).

**7:2-3** Another angel comes from the east—meaning he is moving westward into the presence of Yahweh, which is the direction one would travel to enter the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle. Moving eastward, on the other hand, is Yahweh's imposed exile (Gen. 3:23) or one's choice to walk away from Yahweh (Gen. 4:16).

This angel commanded the first four not to harm the earth until the servants of Yahweh were sealed with the seal of the living God that he carried. In Ezek. 9:4, 6 the Hebrew word for "mark" (*taw*), is the full spelling of the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which at the time of Ezekiel was written as a "+" or "X." To see this as a typology of the cross on which Jesus died is reaching too far and should be firmly rejected.<sup>58</sup>

The purpose of the mark in Ezek. 9 was to protect the righteous from the four deadly judgments from Yahweh that were to be carried out by the Babylonians against Judah (Ezek. 14:12-23). The divine protection for the true people of Yahweh was a physical protection, in the same way that the marking of the blood on the doorpost the night before the exodus was a physical protection (Ex. 12:7-28). Here, the believers can physically die, as seen in the martyred believers below the altar (Rev. 6:9-11), but no one can destroy their spirits and separate them from Yahweh (Matt. 10:28; Rom. 8:38-39; 1 Cor. 15:50-58; Rev. 20:4-6) because they are sealed and belong to the Lamb (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). This seal communicates possession as well as protection (Rev. 14:1; 22:3-4). They are protected because they belong to Lamb, who purchased them with His blood (Rev. 5:9-10).

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<sup>57</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 180.

<sup>58</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 182.

This seal was to be placed on the forehead of the believers. This is not meant to be a physical and visible mark, just as it was not in Ezek. 9. The seal on the forehead comes from Deut. 6:4-9, where the Israelites were to bind on their foreheads, hands, and doorposts the truth of Yahweh as their only God. This was a metaphor communicating that Yahweh, as the only true God to whom they were to be devoted, should permeate and transform the way they think (foreheads), work (hands), and live and do family (doorposts).

**7:4-8** Then John *heard*—the *seeing* is coming—the number of the sealed believers, which was 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. He then hears that there are 12,000 from twelve of the tribes in Israel.

Some say that this is the number of Jews who put their faith in Christ during the seven-year tribulation (Rev. 7:14) after the rapture of the Christian believers. In a way this makes sense because they are literally named “the tribes of Israel” and the tribes are listed out.

But as mentioned above, there has been no mention of a seven-year tribulation nor a rapture. Nowhere does the Bible ever refer to the tribulation as a technical term or associate it with a specific number of years. In Matt. 24–25 tribulation is the entire period between the two comings of Jesus Christ.

*Israel* here has to be symbolic because Israel as twelve tribes did not even exist in the first century AD and beyond. By the Second Testament it was impossible to say which tribe someone had come from; there was no tribal purity because they were all mixed up, and no tribal lines were left. And nowhere does the Bible ever say that tribes would be reconstituted. The fact that the numbers are rounded off and each tribe has exactly the same number of people means they are symbolic. All the other numbers in Revelation are well established as symbolic numbers. In addition, not even all the tribes are listed, for Dan and Ephraim are missing, and Joseph is mentioned along with Manasseh. Why is this significant? In the beginning, Jacob had twelve sons (Gen. 35:22-25), and one of his sons, Joseph, had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 41:51-52). At the end of Jacob’s life, he blessed his sons (Gen. 49:3-28) along with the two sons of Joseph (Gen. 48), giving Joseph a double inheritance through his sons, thus elevating them to equal status with his other sons and making them part of the tribes of Israel. This meant the two tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim replaced the single tribe of Joseph, resulting in thirteen tribes in all. When the Bible lists the tribes, there are, nearly every time, twelve tribes listed.

When the Bible wants to include all the tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim are merged together and called Joseph, making a total of twelve (Deut. 27:12-13; 1 Chron. 2:1-2; Ezek. 48:31-35). When the Bible leaves one out, such as Levi because they were not allowed to go to war, both Manasseh and Ephraim are listed, still making a total of twelve (Num. 1:3-15; Deut. 33:7-26). There are some cases in which all thirteen are listed (Num. 25:5-62; Ezek. 47:13-48:30). But if in Rev. 7:4-8 this list is supposed to be complete, then why is Dan missing? Dan may be excluded because it was the tribe that opened the nation to idolatry (Judg. 18:30; 1 Kgs. 12:29; Rev. 12:9). But what is even odder is that Manasseh is mentioned, while Ephraim is replaced by Joseph. It is always Manasseh with Ephraim or only Joseph, not this hybrid. No explanation is given in the text. Ephraim may have been replaced by Joseph because of his enmity toward Judah (Isa. 11:13; Hos. 5:9-15; Luke 3:33).

The identity of the 144,000 becomes clear as one continues to read about the great multitude gathered at the throne of Yahweh.

**7:9** Matching his earlier experience with the Lion-Lamb (Rev. 5:5-6), John *heard* about the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, but when he turned, expecting to see the 144,000, he instead *saw* a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Rev. 5:9-10). This great multitude is clearly the Gentile believers, for Gentiles were anyone who was not Jewish, and this group is from all the nations. Their presence in heaven before the throne communicates clearly that they are believers in heaven.

Once again John uses the combination of *hearing* and *seeing* to link the two images of the tribes of Israel and the great multitude as one and the same thing. John *hears* about Israel, but he *sees* the great multitude, which equates the two. First John *hears* about Yahweh's chosen nation, Israel on earth. But then John *sees* the Gentile church in heaven before the throne of Yahweh. Israel and Gentiles have been merged into the same people, and earth and heaven have been joined together through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Lion-Lamb. This is the totality of the redeemed.<sup>59</sup> They are the same—a mixed metaphor like the Lion-Lamb.

Some say that the great multitude is the Gentiles who put their faith in Christ during the seven-year tribulation after the rapture of the Christian believers. But once again, there has been no mention of a seven-year tribulation or rapture. The idea that they are the remnant of the Church or Israel, or the last generation of Christians at the end of time, or a special group of martyrs is too limited and exclusive and violates the language of an uncountable number.

Jews and Gentiles together in the kingdom of Yahweh was always Yahweh's original intention. When Yahweh chose Abraham, who was a Babylonian Gentile (Gen. 11:31; Josh. 24:2-3), He blessed Abraham so that he could be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). Many Gentiles joined Israel from the very beginning, in Israel's exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:38). Many other Gentiles throughout Israel's history joined Israel, also becoming a part of the genealogy of Jesus, including Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabite, making Jesus Himself part Jewish and part Gentile (Matt. 1:1-17). The Jews were never just the Jews. Yahweh also spoke through the prophets that when the Messiah came, all the nations would come to the cosmic mountain of Yahweh (Mic. 4:1-5; Isa. 2:1-5). Jesus said He had come for the Gentiles (Luke 4:14-30), and the Holy Spirit came upon the Jews and Gentiles in the same way in the book of Acts (Acts. 2:1-13; 10:34-48). The epistles make it very clear that the church is the continuation of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6; 19:28; Luke 1:68-79; John 1:47; 5:43-47; Acts 26:14-23; Rom. 9-11; James. 1:1; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). All those who put their faith in Christ are adopted into Israel and its promises (Rom. 11:11-24). In the Second Testament, the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles are broken down with the coming of Jesus (Rom. 2; Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Pet. 2). Jesus is the true Israel; therefore, those who are in Him are Israel. Rev. 7 is directly alluding to Mic. 4:1-5 and Isa. 2:1-5.

Both groups are uncounted in the sense that the great multitude is said to be uncountable and that the number for the tribes of Israel is clearly symbolic since there is no way that there just happened to be precisely 12,000 from each tribe. The number 144,000 is broken down as 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 and is symbolic of both the Jews of faith from the First Testament and the Gentile church of faith from the Second Testament. The 12 x 12, represents the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of the church, like with the twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:4). And added to

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<sup>59</sup> See R. H. Charles. A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, p. 1, 201; Stephen S. Smalley. The Revelation to John, pp. 184-186; Isbon T. Beckwith. The Apocalypse of John, pp. 534-537.

this the 10 x 10 x 10, represents completeness and a great multitude. Multiples of thousand is used biblically to mean a very large number (Ex. 20:6; Num. 10:36; Deut. 7:9; 1 Sam. 18:7; Ps. 84:10; Dan. 7:10). This communicates an endless throng beyond all reckoning.<sup>60</sup>

To see these two groups as distinct does not fit the book, for nowhere else in the book of Revelation is any distinction drawn between Jewish and Gentile Christians. In Rev. 2–3 Christ walks among all the churches of Asia, which are Jew and Gentile together. He is trying to erase distinctions. In Rev. 5 all are redeemed from every tribe.<sup>61</sup> The rest of Rev. 7 speaks of them as the same group. This is the only interpretation in Rev. 14 when the 1444,000 show up again.

That it is all believers from all time is seen in two inclusive expressions. First, in Rev. 7:1 the winds are restraining judgment from all the earth, which is inclusive of everyone. Second, Rev. 7:3 is broad in character and meaning. *Servants* is a designation for Christian believers in general (1 Cor. 7:22; Col. 4:12; 1 Pet. 2:16; Jude 1; Rev. 1:1; 2:20; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6).<sup>62</sup>

**7:10-12** The believers then exalted the Lamb, for He provided them with their salvation and is enthroned over creation. Then the angels joined the believers and exalted the enthroned Lamb, who has all glory, wisdom, honor, power, and strength.

**7:13-17** Then one of the elders asked John who the believers wearing white robes were, assuming John should be able to figure it out. But John responded in ignorance. The elder told him these are the believers who came out of the tribulation, who now wear the white robes of victory because they have been washed and purified in the blood the Lamb. They belong to the Lamb because He purchased them with His blood (Rev. 5:9-10).

Therefore, they are now allowed before the throne of Yahweh in heaven (Heb. 4:14-16) and serve Him in the heavenly temple. Because they belong to Him, He will protect them from the evils of the world, and now that they are in heaven, they will never again experience the pain and suffering of the world (Isa. 49:10), for the Lamb is their Shepherd (Ezek. 34). He will give them everlasting life and comfort them with a perfect comfort when they weep.

The mark that has sealed them means they belong to Yahweh, and no one can harm them anymore. Yahweh promised the believers of Smyrna and Philadelphia that He would reward them for their enduring faithfulness to Him. And now here is their reward. Though the world may have killed them, unlike the world they are spared the wrath of the Lion-Lamb because they are sealed as the covenant people of Yahweh and can enter the eternal blessing of Yahweh.

This is the main point, which began with the letters to the seven churches: that everyone will have to choose whether they belong to the world or to Yahweh, and whatever they choose, they will reap the consequences. If they remained faithful to Jesus as both God (specifically directed to the Jewish believers) and man (specifically directed to the Gentile believers), they would inherit the promises of Yahweh found in Rev. 4–5, 7. But if they traded the Lamb for the temporary comforts of the world, then they would reap the wrath of the Lamb seen in Rev. 6 and the remaining judgments to come. This division (Rev. 4–7) sets the foundation for all that is to come. Everyone will bear one of the two marks. They will either choose the *taw* of the Lamb and experience His blessings, or they will bear the mark of the beast that will be revealed later (Rev.

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<sup>60</sup> See M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, p. 130.

<sup>61</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 187-188. See also Milligan pp. 116-123.

<sup>62</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 187-188. See also Milligan pp. 116-123.

13:16-17; 14:9; 16:2; 20:4) and reap the wrath of the Lamb. You cannot be neutral; you are going to bear a mark. If you escape the wrath of one, you will endure the wrath of the other.

The bigger picture of this division (Rev. 4–7) is that because of humanity’s sin, heaven was closed off, and only the divine heavenly beings were able to enter the presence of Yahweh, where they worshiped and served Him as sovereign creator (Rev. 4). Then Jesus went to earth to die for the sins of the world and defeat sin, death, and the devil in His resurrection. This gave Him the right to ascend back into heaven and retake the throne of heaven, where He is worshiped and served as creator and redeemer (Rev. 5). Those who stand against the sovereign rule of the Lion-Lamb will reap His wrath (Rev. 6), but for those who sacrifice their lives in devotion to Him, heaven has been opened to them (Rev. 7). For the first time in all the Bible, we see humans in heaven in Rev. 7, made possible by Jesus Christ purchasing people of every tribe and language with His blood (Rev. 5:9-11). These chapters are not about some distant future event that will not apply to the majority of Christians in history but about the idea that, for the first time in thousands of years, those who put their faith in Yahweh can now immediately enter His presence in heaven because of Jesus and the cross (Luke 23:42-43). This revelation is a foundational truth that is applicable to all believers throughout history. This revelation of hope encourages one to persevere in the faith despite the temptation to compromise, whereas any futurist view motivates one with fear of the world coming to an end and a revelation that applies only to a distant and small group of believers.

**8:1-2** The vision then transitions back to the seal judgments in order to break the seventh seal. When they opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for thirty minutes. Yahweh is not saying it was a literal thirty minutes in history, as if He were watching the clock. The point is that it was a significant amount of time, but the silence did not last. The vision of the throne of Yahweh (Rev. 4-5) and the seal judgments (Rev. 6) brought a lot of visual and auditory noise. But now there is neither sight nor sound—only silence that allows for contemplation and preparation for the trumpet noise that is to come. The silence in itself is a dramatic event.

In the Bible, silence is associated with the shock and awe of witnessing a great judgment. The silence leaves you with anticipation, like “my God what is next?” The seventh seal brings the shock of seven more judgments to come. But most often, silence in the Bible provides the space to enter Yahweh’s presence and prepare oneself with prayer for the performance of the temple liturgy (Ps. 62:1; Hab. 2:20; Zech. 2:13), which is the liturgy of the seven trumpets.

**8:3-5** Another angel appears with a golden censor and was given incense from the altar of incense to offer to Yahweh. Incense represented the prayers of the believers and were a pleasing aroma to Yahweh (Ex. 25:29; 37:16; Ps. 141:2). The angel took the fire from the altar and mixed it with the incense inside the censor. The angel then hurled the fire from the censor upon the earth, which caused great thunderstorms and earthquakes, like when Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). Fire is symbolic of judgment or a cleansing of what is sinful (Gen. 19:24-25; Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:9-14; Josh. 7:15; Isa. 64:1-2; Amos 7:4; Zech. 3:2-5; Mal. 3:2; Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). Now the prayers of Yahweh’s people for justice can begin to be answered (Rev. 6:9-11; Ps. 58:10-11). The prayers and the devotion of the people help fuel the judgment of Yahweh on the earth.

Thunder and lightning storms are associated with the coming of Yahweh to earth (Ex. 19) and His judgment upon the earth (1 Sam. 2:10; 7:10; Ps. 77:18; 104:7; Isa. 29:6; Joel 2:11). Earthquakes are associated with divine judgment (2 Sam. 22:8; Isa. 24:18-20; Hag. 2:6-7, 21;

Heb. 12:26; Rev. 8:5; 16:18-21), with the advent of Yahweh or His agent (Ex. 19:18; Judg. 5:4; 1 Kgs. 19:11-12; Ps. 68:8; 114:7-8; Isa. 64:1, 3; Ezek. 38:19-23; Matt. 28:2), and with the advent of a significant event (Ex. Ps. 77:18; 114:1-8; Hab. 3:6; Matt. 27:51-54; Mark 13:8). This is the coming of Yahweh to earth in order to judge it.

### **III. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19)**

In this division there are seven more judgments announced by trumpets (Rev. 8-9). Then there is an aside that once again deals with the people of Yahweh in the midst of the seven trumpet judgments.

#### **A. The Blowing of the Trumpets (8:6–9:21)**

In this section Yahweh reveals the seven trumpets that bring seven more judgments. As with the seals, the trumpet judgments are organized by four major judgments, followed by two secondary judgments, and concluding with the final trumpet, which brings the storm and earthquake of Yahweh and unveils the seven bowls. The first four affect creation, and the second two deal with the demonic spiritual realm.

Some of these judgments can be identified, and some cannot. In fact, these are the most difficult one to connect to real-world events. The plagues affect many people—but not everyone and not those who are sealed. With the seven trumpets, the judgments escalate because they are directed against people who are increasingly defiant against Yahweh. And the escalation warns of more to come. Yet as always with the love of Yahweh, there is always a call to repentance for those being judged. It is only at the end of time that there is no chance to repent. Until then, anyone can repent and be sealed by the Lamb.

Some see the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls happening sequentially, one after the other. This is possible, but nothing in the context suggests this except that they are listed. But as mentioned already, a to-do list does not communicate sequential chronological order, nor that each item is being done one at a time. The odd thing about these three sets of judgments is that the seventh seal does not unleash a judgment, but the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet unleashes the seven bowls.

Another possible view is that each of the three sets of seven judgments are happening in parallel with each other, all three categories being different perspectives of the same seven judgments. Each set of seven judgments is a recapitulation of the previous seven judgements. The seven seals focus on how the judgments are affecting humans and the civilizations and institutions that they have created. The seven trumpets are from Yahweh's perspective from heaven and focus on the demonic spiritual realm that is allowed to affect the earth. The seven bowls focus on how the judgments are affecting creation itself. This idea is strengthened by the fact that the seventh judgment of each of the three sets of judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls) ends with a great earthquake, usually associated with the coming of Yahweh and a great judgment (the Day of Yahweh). And the fall of all the nations, symbolized by Babylon, is triggered by a great earthquake (Rev. 16:17-21) that is followed by the second coming of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:11-16). The difficulty with this view is that each of the seven judgments does not match up with each other, so there is no easy alignment. The first of the three, the second of the three, and so on do not match up. But with apocalyptic literature, it is not necessary to have exact matches and nail down all the plagues.

Another possible view is that, like the previous view, the three sets of judgments are happening in parallel with each other, but within each of the seven judgments sets is no sequential chronological order. There is progression, but one cannot force them into patterns. They are spiraling rather than linear. These plagues have similarities with the plagues of Egypt and with the covenant curses of Deut. 27-29. In Deuteronomy Yahweh tells Israel that if they rebelled

against His covenant law, then He would send famine on the land, and if they continued to rebel, then He would bring plagues upon the land, and if they continued to rebel, He would allow nations to invade their land, and if they continued to rebel, He would allow them to be carried off into exile. The plagues in Revelation are similar in that they are escalating with time as people rebel against Yahweh and refuse to repent. One does not have to view each plague as covering all the earth. It could be escalating at different rates in different nations throughout history, depending on the progress of rebellion of that nation. And just as when Israel repented at different times, it deescalated the judgments of Deuteronomy. The same could be true of the plagues of Revelation. History has shown that nations are not all at the same point in their morality or rebellion, and some nations fall while others keep going for a time. This is the pattern of how Yahweh judges the nations until the second coming of Jesus Christ and the final judgment.

Symbolically, there is a significance to the fact that Revelation unveils the judgments in three sets of seven plagues, rather than listing them as twenty-one plagues. Three is symbolic of redemption, and seven is symbolic of completion. So, Yahweh's salvific judgments on the earth bring a complete redemption to the world, represented by the number 777.

**8:6-7** Trumpets were used in the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6:1-27). They provide an alarm (Ezek. 33:3-6), signal an attack (Judg. 7:8-22), are a cry for help (Num. 10:9-10), summon a retreat (2 Sam. 18:16), herald a victory (Ps. 47:1-5), summon a theophany (Ex. 19:13-19), and accompany the anointing of kings (1 Kgs. 1:34; Joel 2:15). In apocalyptic imagery, trumpets signal salvation (Isa. 27:13; Zech. 9:14-15) and judgment (Matt. 24:31; Isa. 58:1; Joel 2:1-2; Zeph. 1:14-16; 4 Ezra 6:23; Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52), which are associated with the end of time.

The first five trumpets are patterned after the plagues inflicted on Egypt before the exodus of Israel (Ex. 9:22-25). The first trumpet was a mixture of hail, fire, and blood hurled down on the earth (Joel 2:30). This could be literal hailstorms or, most likely, metaphorical hailstorms of judgment being hurled down on the earth and causing great bloodshed on the earth.

This judgment caused a third of the earth, trees, and grass to be burned up. This is a judgment on the natural order of creation. One cannot take the third in apocalyptic literature literally. It has already been established that numbers in apocalyptic literature are symbolic. For example, with the sun going black in Rev. 6:12, then going a third dark in Rev. 8:12, but then becoming so intense that it scorches everyone in Rev. 16:8—no one would be able to survive this kind of physics. The one-third destruction of trees and grass can be seen in humanity's deforestation and asphaltting of the earth.

**8:8-9** The second trumpet sent a large mountain into the sea. Spiritually speaking, the Jews thought fallen angels looked like burning mountains (1 Enoch 21:3-7; 108:3-6). In the Bible, mountains are associated with kingdoms that have been judged (Jer. 51: 24-26; Rev. 6:14; 14:1; 17:9; 21:10 also Rev. 1:14; 3:18; 8:7; 13:13; 14:10, 18).<sup>63</sup> This then could be metaphorical of a kingdom being thrown like a stone of judgment into the sea (Rev. 18:20) and denotes the fall of Babylon. It could be the literal eruption of a volcano spewing its lava into the sea, like Mount Vesuvius did in August of 79 AD.

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<sup>63</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 475-476; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 220-221.

This judgment caused a third of the seas and rivers to turn to blood, alluding to Ex. 7:20-24, and a third of the sea creatures and ships to perish. This can be seen in our pollution of the seas and our sea battles in war.

**8:10-11** The third trumpet sent a great blazing star into the fresh waters. In the Bible, stars are associated with angelic beings (Rev. 1:19); angels stand for people and kingdoms, and fire symbolizes judgment. John could be depicting the judgment of a fallen angel who represents a sinful community, such as Babylon (Isa. 24:21; 1 Enoch 18:13, 15; 21:3; 86-88). If Rev. 8:10 alludes to Isa. 14:12-15, then it becomes more convincing.<sup>64</sup> The fact that it is named points to it being seen as a fallen angel. Streams were associated with supernatural spirits even demons<sup>65</sup> In Rev. 7:17; 21:6 streams are used to represent spiritual life. This could be a demonic attack against the spiritual lives of the people of the earth.

The name Wormwood comes from the Greek word *apsinth*, which is a plant that has a bitter taste and produces a dark green oil, which can be used medicinally to kill intestinal worms—thus the translation “wormwood.” Though it is not poisonous, water contaminated by the plant can cause sickness and lead to death if drunk over a long period of time (Ex. 7:14-24; Jer. 9:13-15; 23:15).<sup>66</sup> Bitterness and severe affliction from the wrath of Yahweh is the result of His judgment (Deut. 29:17-18; Prov. 5:3-4; Lam. 3:15, 19; Amos 5:7; 6:12; Hos. 10:4; Rev. 10:10). This is a reversal of Ex. 15:25, a taking away of the blessings of Yahweh.

A third of the fresh waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. This could also be a reference to humans poisoning their own drinking water with pollution.

**8:12** The fourth trumpet struck a third of the sun, moon, and stars so that they went dark. In the Bible darkness is symbolic of judgment (Isa. 13:10; Joel 2:1-2; Amos 5:18; Mark 13:24), demonic power (2 Cor. 6:14-15; Matt. 8:12; Col. 1:13; 2:13-15), and death (John 1:4-5; 8:12; 9:4-5; 11:9-10; 12:35-36; 13:30; 1 John 1.5-7; 2:8-11). This could refer to an eclipse (Amos 8:9) or the total absence of light for a third of the day.<sup>67</sup>

**8:13** Then Yahweh sent an eagle to declare a woe over the earth, for the next three trumpets are going to be far more intense. In the Bible eagles are associated with swiftness and strength (Matt. 24:28 = Luke 17:37). In the Greco-Roman world, the eagle is a herald of Zeus. A woe in the Bible is a deep lament as a result of death or coming death. The next three trumpets seem to lift the veil on the spiritual realm and reveal the demonic world’s attack upon the humans of the earth. This demonic attack is part of what the humans have allowed into their lives through their choices and what Yahweh has allowed to affect them as a judgment.

**9:1** The fifth trumpet/woe gave a star the keys to the abyss to unleash a demonic horde of locusts upon the earth. In Judaic cosmology, the stars were living beings, who possessed a conscious personal nature (Judg. 5:20; Job 38:6-7; Dan. 8:10).<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere, falling stars can symbolize evil angelic beings or demons (Jude 13; 1 Enoch 18:15-16; 21:6; 86:3; 88:1, 3; 90:24) and

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<sup>64</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 478-479; George B. Carid. *The Apostolic Age*, p. 115; Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, pp. 163-164; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 222.

<sup>65</sup> See J. Moffatt. “The Revelation of St. John Divine,” p. 405.

<sup>66</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 479.

<sup>67</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 223.

<sup>68</sup> See Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 560.

occasionally Satan himself (Luke 10:18; Rev. 6:13; 8:10-11; 12:9; 1 Enoch 86:1). Here it is more positive, for Yahweh is giving him keys to a prison in the abyss (Rev. 20:1). The fact that this star is given keys shows that this star is symbolic of an angelic being.

The abyss refers to the deep sea (Gen. 1:2; Job 28:14; 36:16), the deep hollows of the earth or occasionally underground rivers (Deut. 8:7; Ps. 71:20; 1 Enoch 17:7-8), or the underworld (Ps. 71:20; 88:6; Rom. 10:7), where imprisoned demons dwell (Luke 8:31; 2 Pet. 2:4-6; Jude 6-7; 1 Enoch 18-21).

**9:2-6** When the angel opened the abyss, smoke came out of the abyss, bringing darkness upon the earth because of the evil that was inside it. Out of the abyss came demons that looked *like* locusts. These are not literally locusts, based on where they come from, the fact that they harm humans (unlike locusts), and that they are said to have a king (Rev. 8:11) when Prov. 30:27 says that locusts have no king. These are most likely the Sons of God or the fallen angels of Gen 6 who slept with humans; Yahweh punished them by throwing them into the abyss until their day of judgment (2 Pet. 2:4-6; Jude 6-7). They have now been unleashed as a judgment on the earth before they face their own judgment. In Joel 1-2 Yahweh describes the invasion of a foreign army with the metaphorical language of a horde of locusts that wipe out everything they come across. So Yahweh portrays an invading demonic army with their king as a horde of locusts that will bring spiritual famine.

These demons (locusts) were given the sting of a scorpion to torment humans, but they were not allowed to harm nature or the believers, who were sealed by Yahweh (Rev. 7). The scorpion sting can be literal (Deut. 8:15), but more often its meaning is figurative and psychological (Deut. 28:25-29; 1 Kgs. 12:11, 14) and is used as a symbol of demonic forces (Luke 10:19).<sup>69</sup>

The torment is also figurative of psychological torment (Rev. 11:10; 14:10-11; 18:7-15; 20:10). The demons were allowed to harm humans for five months. Five is used frequently as a round number meaning a few (Lev. 26:8; Judg. 18:2; John 6:9; Acts. 20:6; 1 Cor. 14:19).<sup>70</sup> The point is that the period will be limited, and it allows for a reprieve and for repentance. The idea of humans seeking death and not finding it is most likely not literal but refers to the fact that people will be suicidal and prefer death in place of torment (1 Kgs. 19:1-4; Job 3:1-26; 7:14-16; Ps. 55:4-8; Jer. 8:3; Jonah 4:3, 8; Luke 23:27-30). It is difficult to know how far to take this statement.

The idea is just as King Saul lost Yahweh's protection after rejecting Him and Yahweh sent a spirit to torment him (1 Sam. 16:14), so now the demonic world is allowed to harm those who have rejected the Lamb. This is also a just punishment for the world's idolatry and occultic practices. All throughout human history, humans have given themselves over to idolatry, which is really worship of demons (Deut. 32:16-17; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:20; the NIV inaccurately has *false gods* instead of *demons*), and even today the vast majority of people are involved in occultic practices and witchcraft. Eventually, these demons will turn on the people who worship them; Yahweh allows it to happen, for this is what the people chose instead of Him (Judg. 10:6-16). Yet in Yahweh's mercy He always gives them a chance to repent and be sealed under His protection (Judg. 10:15-16; Rev. 7:1-4; 9:4). The judgment that was previously limited and

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<sup>69</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 497-498.

<sup>70</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 6-16*, p. 530.

restrained to the demonic region is now being extended to and unleashed on the earthly realm for giving themselves over to the demonic realm.<sup>71</sup>

**9:7-12** John describes these locusts as almost humanlike, with long hair but with animalistic characteristics, like iron teeth. The hair may represent dishevelment, which communicates disrespect while coming into the presence of Yahweh (Lev. 10:6; 13:45; Num. 5:18). It could be the hair on their bodies and legs, emphasizing the speed at which they carry forth their mission.<sup>72</sup> The teeth communicate destruction (Job 4:10-11; Joel 1:6), and the tails of scorpions communicate torment and death (Hos. 13:14; Acts 26:14; 1 Cor. 15:55-56; Rev. 13:11)

John gives a more detailed description of these super-locusts than any other creature in the book of Revelation. This has led many to think that John is trying intentionally to describe what they look like so that the readers can figure it out. So much so that many modern readers see a mechanical description and connect it to attack helicopters or go the other way and imagine this is really what these demons look like. But once again, this approach makes the apocalyptic genre say something it is not designed to. Just as the apocalyptic literature of Dan. 7 describes the Babylonian, Median, Persian, and Greek empires as horrific, unnatural beasts that come out of the abyss of the sea, so now John uses metaphorical language to describe the unnaturalness of the demons coming out of the abyss. No one thinks the former is literal, so one must not see the latter as literal. All throughout the Bible, the sons of God or angels are described as looking like humans and are often mistaken for men (Gen. 19). And just like humans, they were created by Yahweh to portray wholeness, beauty, and order. But just as the nature and character of the human kings of the ancient empires of Dan. 7 had been twisted into something unnatural and unrecognizable because of their rebellion and the evil they had embraced, so the fallen angels/demons have become twisted into something unnatural and recognizable due to living in the abyss of evil for the last several millennia. The point is that this is all your worst nightmares realized in an instant. The king that rules over them is *Abaddon* in Hebrew and *Apollyon* in Greek, which means “destroyer.” *Abaddon* in the First Testament is usually personified as the place of death, the grave, and destruction (Ps. 88:11; Prov. 15:11; Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12). There is an etymological connection between *Apollyon* and the name of the Greek god Apollo. This is most likely not Satan, since he is mentioned specifically in other places in Revelation (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 7).

Most likely this is not an event that humans will see happening literally before them and that will make the news. Rather, this is something that is happening in the spiritual realm, which has been revealed for John to see, just as Elisha was able to see with spiritual eyes the angelic army of Yahweh that no one else could see (2 Kgs. 6:16-17).

**9:13-19** The sixth trumpet/woe unleashed the four angels bound at the Euphrates River. The altar with the four horns is the bronze altar for sacrifices. The horns announced to the angel with the trumpet that the four angels were to be unbound and unleashed upon the earth. These four angels are evil. First, the use of “set free,” “unbind,” “chained up, and “bound” puts these beings on a level with bad angels who have been restrained until a predetermined time (Jude 6–7).<sup>73</sup> Second, they release considerable destruction and death.

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<sup>71</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 494.

<sup>72</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>73</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 236.

These angels were bound at the Euphrates River and lead an army of soldiers who are uncountable. The Euphrates River is the northernmost border of the Promised Land to Israel (Ex. 23:31, Psa. 72:8), and it is from north of the Euphrates that the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires came to take Israel into exile in the First Testament (Is. 8:5-8; 14:31; Jer. 10:22; 46; Ezek. 39:2; Hab. 1:7-8; Joel 2:1-11, 20-2). It is their horses that bring the greatest amount of destruction. Their horses are described like the fire-breathing monsters (Chimera) of Greek mythology. The language of fire and sulfur indicates demonic origins and is used of a fatal judgment from Yahweh (Deut. 29:23; 2 Sam. 22:9; Ps. 18:8; Isa. 34:9-10; Ezek. 38:22) and the final judgment of those who bear the mark of the beast (Rev. 14:10; 21:8; 20:10) and the beast's followers (Rev. 19:20). These four angels may be the demonic force behind political military armies that invade nations in order to destroy. This was Israel's worst political nightmare.

**9:20-21** Yet despite all the horrible things happening, people still did not repent of their idolatry or turn to Yahweh for salvation. This is not Yahweh punishing humanity for sin in general but specifically for their idolatry and rebellion against Him. They have sought other gods, so Yahweh has given them over to those gods (Deut. 4:28; 2 Chron. 34:25; Ps. 115:4; 135:15; Isa. 2:8; Jer. 32:30; Mic. 5:13; Acts 7:41). Murder, magic arts, immorality, and thieving are connected to idolatry at different times (2 Kgs. 9:22; Isa. 47:9-48:5; Jer. 7:5-11; Hos. 3:1-4:2; Mic. 5:12-15; Acts 15:20; Rom. 1:24-29; Gal. 5:19-20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). They experience the second death (Rev. 21:8) and are excluded from the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:15). Murder, immorality, and theft are mentioned together in Mark 7:21, Luke 18:20, and Rom. 13:9.

Just as with the plagues of Egypt, the whole purpose of all these judgments from Yahweh is to bring humans to repentance so that they may know Yahweh and be spared from chaos, sin, suffering, and death. Throughout the vision, John wants his readers to know that Yahweh and the Lamb remain sovereign, even though for evil to be finally conquered it has to be allowed to come out into the open and do its worst. Idolaters reflect the inertness of the objects they worship and become spiritually inactive (Ps. 115:8; 135:18; Isa. 6:9-10). If you worship power, money, sex, or entertainment then you will become nothing more than these things. You cannot become greater than the thing that you worship. And because these things are finite and limited in nature that they cannot protect you when everything is falling apart.

“For many Jewish and early Christian thinkers, the sequence of thought goes like this. Granted the deep-rooted and destructive wickedness which emerges from the depth not only of the individual human heart but even more so from the systems of domination and oppression that humans together create, what is God to do? As we have seen before, if he were simply to wipe out his creation, the whole thing would be a massive failure. But if he allows people space to repent, to come to their senses, to worship him as the source of life rather than demons and idols which are the source of death (Rev. 9:20, 21), then that patient mercy always risks the possibility that people will use the breathing space to make matters worse. The result is that the human systems and individuals that continue to rebel will simply make themselves all the more ripe for eventual judgment, which will at least in part consist of evil bringing about its own downfall, as we shall see in Rev. 16.5-6.”<sup>74</sup>

Notice that we are nine chapters in and about halfway through, and there is still no sense of structure—no numbers of days, weeks, months, or years to tell you when this is happening or

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<sup>74</sup> N. T. Wright. *Revelation for Everyone*, pp. 90-91.

how long it is lasting. It should be clear by now that one cannot press everything in the book of Revelation into well-defined patterns that leaves no loose ends.

“The eschatology of the scene in Rev 8–9, finally, cannot be interpreted in a linear fashion. As in all parts of this drama, time and eternity are drawn together; the present is viewed in light of the end, just as eternity gathers up the circumstances of times. The apocalypse is already and constantly in progress; and that is why, in Revelation, theology is more important than chronology. The trumpets, like the seals and the bowls and similar images, do not refer to specific and consecutive events in time which can be identified, but to principles of right and wrong, divine goodness and human evil, which operate throughout history of the world and its society. This interpretation is supported by the universal scope of John’s imagery, in this passage and beyond.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 245.

## **B. The Angel, the Witnesses, and the Seventh Trumpet (10:1-11:19)**

In this section there is the second aside in Revelation that is placed between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets. This section is a recapitulation of the previous events, which focus on the lives of the believers in the midst of persecution on earth, between the first and second comings of Christ.

The announcement of a mighty angel and the two witnesses seems like they are two separate events but form one unit. First, there is nothing to suggest a new unit or material is being introduced. Second, the location is still earth, and John plays an active role in both of the events rather than being passive observer. Third, the language of “peoples, nations, languages, and rulers” is used in both events.

**10:1** John then saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. Some have said that because this angel is described as being wrapped in the clouds and having a halo and a face like the sun, and because he has a little scroll in his hand, this is Jesus. But this cannot be Jesus for the reason described previously: when Jesus appears in Revelation (Rev. 1; 4; 19:11-16), it is very clear that it is Jesus. Second, nowhere in the Bible is Jesus ever described as or called an angel. In fact, the book of Hebrews spends two chapters (Heb. 1–2) making the point that, not only is Jesus not an angel, He is greater than the angels. It would be absolutely contradictory here to refer to Jesus as an angel. Third, this angel is called “another” angel, making it clear that he is one of other angels, whereas Jesus is not. Fourth, Rev. 10:6-7 is not the language of Jesus, who does not take oaths on the name of other beings nor upon Himself. It is not uncommon in the Bible for descriptions to be applied to different groups. The description of this angel is similar to the one in Dan. 12:7; 8:16.

Because the characteristic of the angel is similar with Christ, however, one can conclude that this angel is a very high-ranking angel that is so closely associated with Christ that He has taken on the character of Christ and is a direct representative who speaks on Christ’s behalf and mediates between heaven and earth. Three mighty angels in Revelation appear in Rev. 5:2; 10:1; and 18:21. All of these make a great proclamation over the earth on behalf of the throne.

This mighty angel came from Yahweh in heaven, not from the abyss. He bridges the gap between the three tiers of creation, with his head in the sky, a foot on the sea, and a foot on the land. All the realms of creation are being brought together for the announcement that he is about to make.

**10:2-4** The little scroll in this angel’s hand is not the scroll that the Lamb took, for it is called *little* scroll, and only Jesus was worthy of the first scroll. This scroll is also digested, whereas the scroll of Rev. 5:1 is continuing to reveal the unfolding of Yahweh’s plan of redemption in the drama of Revelation. This is the little scroll of Ezek. 2:8-3:3. It is likely that this scroll contains the revelation of what unfolds in the rest of Rev. 10–11, for John is told to actively take the scroll and eat it, and then he actively participates in the measurement of the temple. The little scroll contains the promises of Yahweh to protect His people in Rev. 11.

Then the mighty angel gave out a large roar like that of a lion, which signaled for the seven thunders to speak. It is not clear what the seven thunders are, but they may be the voice of Yahweh, whose voice is often described as thundering in the Bible (Job 37:4-5; 40:9; Ps. 18:13; 29:3-4; 77:18; 104:7). There are instances in which angels (Ezek. 3:12-13; Rev. 6:1) and large groups of people’s voices also sound like thunder (Rev. 14:2; 19:6). There being seven thunders

would associate it with completion, rather than a literal seven. The fact that they are thundering means what they spoke is judgment. What the seven thunders spoke is not the same as the content of the little scroll.

When John went to write down what the thunders had spoken, he was commanded by a voice in heaven to seal up what had been said and not to reveal it to anyone (Deut. 29:29). This scene may be communicating that Yahweh is making it clear that He will not and does not have to reveal everything to us, that He is not going to give a pattern for all of history or explain everything to us. A more plausible explanation is that the sealing of the judgments is Yahweh's gracious offer to an unrepentant humanity to cut short the judgments of the thunders and halt the advance of human self-destruction, and some can still be saved.<sup>76</sup> But this judgment is merely delayed, for the seven bowls are still coming. What is clear is that the seven thunders are sealed because the message of the *little* scroll is the focus.<sup>77</sup>

**10:5-7** Then the angel took an oath in the name of Yahweh, who is sovereign over all creation, that whatever delay has happened would now end, for the seventh trumpet is about to sound, which would announce the seven bowls. It does not matter what others say; the divine Yahweh of the Universe has spoken. The mysteries of Yahweh will be accomplished. The mysteries of Yahweh are things that were not revealed in past times but now are through His Son (Col. 2:2; Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:15; Rom. 16:25-27).

**10:8-11** The revealing of the *little* scroll resumes as the mighty angel told John to take the *little* scroll and eat it. The point here is that John was to consume the word of Yahweh and allow it to become a part of him and change him. John now becomes an active participant in the visions of Yahweh. When John ate it, it was sweet in his mouth but bitter in His stomach. There is the sense that the Word and promises of Yahweh are sweet and bring hope and anticipation for the coming of His kingdom (Ezek. 3:1-3). But when one really begins to understand the judgment that must first come to cleanse the earth, then it brings a queasiness to one's demeanor (Isa. 6; Hab. 3:17-19). Yahweh's saving offer of life and love is available for all, but it cannot be separated from His thundering judgment on evil and His triumph over it. John is then commanded to "prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings." The ultimate purpose of the unveiling of the vision is not to lay out chronologically what will happen in the future but to call the people of the nations to Yahweh in repentance so that they may be redeemed and sealed by the Lamb and spend eternity with the Holy Trinity on the earth that has been restored to the Garden.

**11:1-2** For the futurist, everything in this chapter is literal. The temple will literally be rebuilt in the city of Jerusalem. There will be two literal witnesses who will have supernatural abilities and with literally breathe fire. They will literally die and be resurrected, and there will be a literal earthquake with seven thousand deaths exactly in the city.

The problem with seeing this as the literal rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem is that, first, Revelation says nothing about it being rebuilt. For the original audience, this is the original Herodian temple in Jerusalem. If Revelation was written post 70 AD, after the destruction of the temple, then they would have seen this chapter as talking about the temple being trampled by the Gentiles and destroyed, not some future rebuilding.

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<sup>76</sup> See George B. Caird. *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>77</sup> See Richard J. Bauckman. *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 259-261.

Second, this ignores the theme around Christ and the church having replaced and become the temple of Yahweh, which permeates the Second Testament and is a foundation theological principle for who the church is. Christ said the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13; John 2:19) and then said He was the temple (John 2:20-22) but said nothing about a physical temple being rebuilt. The Second Testament writers then clearly develop the idea that the church is the temple of Yahweh (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Rebuilding the temple is going backwards according to the argument of Hebrews, which contends that Christ is greater than and replaces all the offices and institutions of the First Testament. The only place where the Bible talks about a new temple is in Ezek. 40–47, but this is highly symbolic apocalyptic literature that is pointing to Christ and the church as discussed.

Even if the temple in Jerusalem is in mind as the setting here, its literal existence is less important than its figurative significance. The symbolic imagery of the temple has been understood in three ways. The first view is that the temple, altar, and worshipers refer to the Jewish remnant that will be protected by Yahweh, and the outer court and holy city refer to Israel as a whole being given over to the Gentiles as judgment for their sins. The problem with this view is that all of the temple and the court were considered a part of the temple, holy and sacred, and anything that entered even the courtyard unlawfully was punishable by death. Likewise, the sacrificial altar that is mentioned is in the courtyard. Also, this view assumes that only the Jews are in view here and not the church, which is highly unlikely given that the whole focus of the books of the Second Testament has been on the New Covenant Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

The second view is that the temple, altar, and worshipers refer to the Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ, who are protected, and the outer court and holy city refer to the non-believing Jews who will be given over to the Gentiles for judgment. But this runs into the same problem above of making a distinction in holiness between the temple and the courtyard.

The third view is that all of the temple and the courtyard are seen as a whole and represent the believers in Christ, where the Second Testament has consistently used the temple as a metaphor for the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Temple worshipers and the 144,000 are synonymous. The temple represents the inner, more protected life of the church, and the courtyard represents the outer, more vulnerable life of the church. The point is that some will survive persecution, and some will die at the hands of the Gentiles. There is no language of the temple being sealed and courtyard not being sealed, which would make a distinction between believers and non-believers. It only says protected. This view is reinforced by the fact that immediately following this the two believing witnesses of Yahweh are physically killed. Even in the First Testament, when Israel was given over to the Gentiles for judgment and exile, many believers were affected by this and were killed or carried off into exile. The believers were sealed from spiritual harm but not from physical harm.

The fact that the altar of sacrifice is separated out from all the other temple articles indicates that it is only through the sacrifice of Christ that the believers are made holy and included in the temple. This draws attention to Jesus as the Lamb who was slain.

The rod was a bamboo-like cane, grown in the Jordan River valley, and was slender and straight for measuring. The measuring of the temple is an allusion to Ezek. 40–42, where Ezekiel is given the dimensions of the eschatological temple, which is Christ and the church as His body (1 Cor. 6; Eph. 2). The difference is that Ezekiel watched as an angel measured out the future temple (Ezek. 40:3-5), whereas here John is told to actively measure out the temple. As a new covenant

believer sealed by the Lamb, John is in the temple of Yahweh and can be more active in it. Notice that the holy city is not named Jerusalem. It does not refer to a specific city, for there is no city; it is the holy people of Yahweh from every tribe and language throughout history (Isa. 2:1-5; Rev. 7).

The Gentiles will be allowed to trample the holy city for forty-two months, the same timeframe as the 1,260 days of the two witnesses prophesying, which is three and a half years. This is the first mention in Revelation of any numerical length of time, but still there is no chronological reference to any other timeframe in relation to other events or of what this comes after or before. This is where the futurist gets the three and a half years that is half of the seven-year tribulation. The problem is that the only mentions of a numerical length of time are Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:3; 20:2. These references are not enough to build an entire chronology scheme into which all the events of Revelation are to be placed. They are not even matched up with any other lengths of time to create a system of chronology.

This three and a half years is an allusion to Dan. 7:25; 8:9-14; 9:27; 11:29-32, which refers to the period of Jewish suffering under the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV in 167–164 BC, where he went into the temple and defiled it by sacrificing a pig to the Greek god Zeus. The Jews fought him and eventually took back the temple and cleansed it. This became known as the celebration of Hanukkah, which has deeply shaped their identity as Jews. In Dan. 7:25; 12:7 Antiochus IV's period of trampling the holy city of Jerusalem and the temple was limited by Yahweh to a time, times (or "two times"), and half a time. In early Judaism the Jews understood this as three and a half years, which is how long Antiochus trampled the city. In all these contexts, this time reference becomes symbolic of a restricted amount of time during which evil is allowed to triumph.<sup>78</sup> In Dan. 8:14 the temple is taken back and cleansed. Thus, considering the context of Daniel, Jewish history, and the disembodied nature of this number in Rev. 11, this number is a metaphor for the limited period of time during which Yahweh will allow the world to persecute the church, just as Yahweh promised the believers under the altar that He would bring it to an end eventually (Rev. 5:9-11).

**11:3-6** Yahweh then appoints His two witnesses to prophesy during these three and a half years. The futurist interprets this literally, as in this is the beginning of the seven-year tribulation, where Moses and Elijah will literally come back to earth and preach for three and a half years. They take this from the fact that Moses (Deut. 18:18) and Elijah (Mal. 4:5; Mark 9:11-12) were expected to return and that these witnesses were given the power to stop the rain, like Elijah did (1 Kgs. 17:1), and turn the water to blood, like Moses did (Ex. 7:14-20), and bring other plagues when they want (2 Kgs. 1:10-17). They will spew fire from their mouths when anyone opposes them. At the end of the three and a half years, the antichrist will kill them, and then they will be resurrected and taken up into heaven, which then will mark the beginning of the second three and a half years.

The problem with this view is that, first, it is way too literal, detailed, and specific for an apocalyptic genre of literature. Also, the Bible never said Moses would return but that one *like* him would come (Deut. 18:18), and Jesus made it clear that Elijah was not going to return literally, and that John the Baptizer fulfilled Malachi's prophecy by ministering in the same way

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<sup>78</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 215.

as Elijah (Matt. 11:11-15). Lastly, their powers are not divided, but they are both able to do the same things without distinction. They are identical prophetic witnesses.<sup>79</sup>

John tells the reader who they are: they are “the two olive trees” and “the lampstand.” This is an allusion to Zech. 4, where Zechariah receives a vision of a single golden lampstand. The lampstand’s seven branches with lamps (the menorah from the tabernacle, Ex. 25:31-40) are a symbol of Yahweh among His people Israel, and the seven lamps of the menorah represent the eyes of Yahweh (Zech. 4:10). The menorah is flanked by the two olive trees, which supply the oil for the menorah. The angel states clearly that the two olive trees are the governor Zerubbabel, a descendant of King David, and the high priest Joshua, a descendant of Aaron. They are the king and priest ruling over and guiding the people of Yahweh (the lampstand). Later, Yahweh commands Zechariah to take the Davidic crown and put it on Joshua’s head (Zech. 6:9-15), merging kingship and priesthood in one person, which is a clear prophecy of the coming of Jesus since under the Mosaic Law this combining these roles was forbidden.

Now, in John’s vision, there are two lampstands, clearly pointing to Jewish believers as one lampstand and the Gentile believers as the other lampstand—as they are the lamps of Yahweh (2 Peter 1:19), as seen with the seven lampstands representing the seven churches (Rev. 1:12-13, 20). We have already seen this pairing of Jewish and Gentile believers with the 144,000 and the great multitude (Rev. 7) They are also the two olive trees, who Peter says are kings and priests like Christ (1 Peter 2:9-10). The sackcloth they wear represents the prophets (2 Kgs. 1:8; Zech. 13:4; Mark 1:6), which the believers are now in Christ.

The two witnesses are symbolic of the Christian church as a whole, who preach the Word of Yahweh during the time between the first and second comings of Christ.<sup>80</sup> They will preach boldly and will do miracles to validate the Word of Yahweh that they preach. Fire symbolizes judgments and refining (Gen. 19:24-25; Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:9-14; Josh. 7:15; Isa. 64:1-2; Amos 7:4; Zech. 3:2-5; Mal. 3:2; Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 3:12-15), so when people oppose them, they will have authority to rule and judge in the name of Yahweh with the Word of Yahweh. The sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth is not literal (Rev. 1:16).

**11:7-14** However, some believers will be killed by the beast (Rev. 13), which comes from the abyss and brings with him the chaos and torment of the abyss. The identity of the beast is not important at this point in the drama, but he represents a worldly authority and direct opposition to Yahweh. Some non-believers will celebrate the death of Christians and leave them unburied in the great city. To be left unburied was disgraceful in the Biblical world (1 Sam. 17:44; Ps. 79:1-4; Isa. 14:19-20; Jer. 8:1-2). The “great city” has to be Rome, which is a symbol of the world (Rev. 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21, 24). It is not relating to geography but to the heart of the sinful human, as seen when it is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, two representations of the corruption of power and the wickedness of humans in the Bible. This city is every city and no city; it is the city of man, the lofty city (Isa. 2:6-22). “Where their Lord was crucified” does not mean Jerusalem but the jurisdiction that belongs to Rome.

The three and a half days communicates that this death and mocking of the believers will be temporary, for death has no hold over them. At the end of the tribulation, in the second coming,

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<sup>79</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 574-575.

<sup>80</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 183-184; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 275-276.

they will be resurrected. Their resurrection also communicates symbolically that no matter how many Christians are killed, there will always be another to preach, for nothing can stop the Word of Yahweh. While part of the city is being trampled, the church continues to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 5). Then Yahweh will come with an earthquake and judge the world for how they have treated His people (Rev. 5:9-11).

**11:15** The drama comes back to the seventh trumpet judgments with the seventh and final trumpet. The seventh angel is the same as the third woe, since the previous two trumpets were woes, even though there is no mention of the third woe. Unlike the silence that followed the breaking of the seventh seal (Rev. 8:1), a heavenly chorus erupts with the sounding of the seventh trumpet. The silence was preparation for the coming of Yahweh; here, the praise is for His actual coming. This is what the whole thrust of the book of Revelation is about. Heaven breaks out in praise as a reminder to the reader of the Lion-Lamb's purpose for taking the scroll.

The heavenly beings praise Yahweh, for He has taken the kingdom of the world as His own kingdom and will reign over it for all eternity. The past tense here communicates that it has already happened, but it is not fully taken back since there is still evil in the world and the judgments are still happening.

**11:16-18** Then the twenty-four elders fell on their faces before Yahweh and sang their own song. They sing that Yahweh has begun to reign over the earth. What is not implied is that Yahweh has not always been God over creation; rather, He is taking the earth back from corrupt and sinful humans and is entering directly into creation to rule completely and perfectly over His creation.

Throughout human history the nations were angry and in opposition with Yahweh, but now He is going to pour out His wrath on the nations. This will end with all those who are dead being judged and rewarding those who have been sealed by the Lamb. The judgment is for those who destroy the earth and others. There is a clear division now for those who belong to Yahweh and those who do not.

**11:19** Then the temple doors of heaven opened, and John could see the heavenly ark of the covenant. In the First Testament, the ark of the covenant represented the presence of Yahweh with His covenant people. Just as with the seventh seal (Rev. 8:1-5), the seventh trumpet ends with lightning and a thunderstorm of Yahweh's wrath and with an earthquake and hailstorm falling upon the earth. This is the coming of Yahweh to earth.

## IV. The Great Signs (12:1–14:21)

In this division, there are three different aside visions that are placed between the trumpets and bowls (Rev. 12; 13; 14). Each of the asides recapitulates the events of Revelation between the first and second comings of Christ. These asides have an almost mythological feel with dragons and winged women. They are meant to be understood with imagination rather than analytical precision.<sup>81</sup>

### A. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1-18)

In this section the aside recapitulates and summarizes the persecution of the believers at the hands of Satan after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The focus is on how Yahweh preserves the believers despite the attacks of Satan.

**12:1-2** In the Second Testament, the word *sign* is used in connection with a celestial spectacle or calamity that carries a warning for the future (Luke 21:11; Mark 8:11). It can also be used of a miracle that is either false (Mark 13:22; 2 Thess. 2:9-11) or genuine (Mark 16:20; 1 Cor. 14:22). This is how it is used in Revelation (Rev. 12:1, 3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). John in his gospel often uses signs to draw attention to the life that is available to the believer since the coming of Christ.

The first sign is a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and the stars around her head. The woman and the child are not named, unlike the dragon, which means they are to be interpreted symbolically and collectively rather than historically and as an individual. The catholic church teaches that this is Mary, but that is too specific and does not fit how the First Testament defines her and the context of her actions in Rev. 12 of fleeing into the desert and the dragon attacking the rest of her offspring.

The woman is Israel, as defined by Joseph's dream in Gen. 37:9, where the sun and moon are his parents and the eleven stars are his brothers, and he is the twelfth who would become the start of the nation of Israel. Throughout the First Testament, Israel is referred to as a barren woman for whom Yahweh miraculously provides a baby (Isa. 54:1-3; 66:7-9), and the Second Testament picks this up with the church being the bride of Christ (Gal. 4:26-27; Eph. 5:31-32; 2 John 1, 5). The child that she is pregnant with is the First Testament prophecies of the Messiah that grow until she gives birth to the Messiah, who is Jesus Christ.

**12:3-6** The second sign is a large dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads, who is Satan (Rev. 12:9). Throughout the First Testament, the dragon, leviathan, or Rahab is a mythological symbol of evil chaos, often portrayed as having seven heads to communicate the totality of its chaos. The dragon should be viewed more as a sea dragon or leviathan because in the Bible it is associated with a chaotic, which is a symbol of chaos (Job 26:12-13; Ps. 74:13-15; 89:9-10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10). Sometimes it represents evil nations, like Pharaoh (Ezek. 29:3; 32:2-3), Egypt (Ps. 74:13-14; Jer. 51:34; Amos 9:3; Hab. 3:8-15), the Assyrians (Isa. 27:1), or Babylon (Ps. 87:4). Thus, the idea is that the dragon is also associated with the Roman Empire and every other evil and corrupt nation that follows. The Dragon is everything that opposes Yahweh.

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<sup>81</sup> See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, p. 149.

The ten horns connect the dragon to the fourth beast that comes out the sea in Daniel's vision (Dan. 7:7, 24). In Daniel's vision the ten horns represent the kings of the evil nation, ten being symbolic of completion as well as government authority.

The tail of the dragon swept a third of the stars out of the sky and brought them down to the earth as fallen stars. As mentioned already, stars in the ancient world and in the Bible are often associated with angels (the word *host* means army; Deut. 4:19; 2 Kgs. 17:16; 21:3-5; 23:4-5; Job 38:6-7; Jer. 19:13; Dan. 8:10; Zeph. 1:5). This could be Satan leading the fall of many angels of Yahweh. This is also an allusion to Dan. 8:9-10, which is about Antiochus IV, who metaphorically brought down the pagan gods when he declared himself to be the most high god and demanded to be worshiped as one.

The dragon then stood in front of the woman so that he might devour the baby when she gave birth. This could be Herod the Great's attempted extermination of Jesus, along with the many other times in Jesus' life that the Jewish authorities tried to eliminate Him and, ultimately, the crucifixion. The Son to whom she gave birth was prophesied to rule the nations with an iron scepter. This is an allusion to Gen. 49:8-12 and Num. 24:17-19, which prophesied that Israel would give birth to a king who would rule with an iron scepter, and to Ps. 2:7-9, where Yahweh said that the descendant of David would rule the nations. But before the dragon could devour the child, He was snatched up into heaven, which is the ascension of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:50-52; Acts. 1:9).

The woman then fled into the wilderness, where she was protected for 1,260 days or three and a half years. It is clear at this point that the woman represents the people of Yahweh, for Mary is nowhere in the biblical story after the ascension of Jesus. The futurist says the three and a half years refer to the time during which the church is protected in the second half of the seven-year tribulation. But there is nothing here to even suggest where we are in the tribulation. In fact, it does not make sense that Rev. 12:1-5 is all about the first coming of Christ, and then all of a sudden Rev. 12:6 is thousands of years in the future during the second half of a future seven-year tribulation. There is nothing here to even hint at such a jump. The disembodied three and a half years is symbolic of the fact that the woman being attacked and having to flee will be a temporary trouble, and then she will be delivered.

**12:7-9** The heavenly counterpart to the earthly conflict that has just been discussed is a war in heaven, in which the archangel Michael and his angels are fighting against the dragon. This alludes back to Dan. 10:12-14, 20, where the angel Gabriel was delayed in coming to Daniel because the prince (demon) of Persia opposed him, and the only way he could get away was through the aid of the angel Michael. And he had to get back to Michael because the prince (demon) of Greece was coming. Yet here in Revelation, the dragon is cast down to earth, for he has been defeated through Jesus' victory on the cross. Now we are told that the dragon is the ancient serpent, also known as the devil and Satan, who leads the world astray. This is not saying that Satan is literally all the First Testament references to the serpent, dragon, leviathan, or Rahab. Rather, Satan is a driving force behind all of these symbolic images of serpents and dragons.

**12:10-12** Then John heard a loud voice in heaven make a proclamation. What is proclaimed is that now the salvation of the kingdom of Yahweh and the authority of the Messiah have hurled Satan down. What has enabled this is that the Lamb has triumphed through his sacrifice and atonement. It is not that Yahweh and Jesus could not defeat Satan until now but that the cross

stripped Satan of His power to enslave people because they have been freed from his grasp through the cross. The sacrifice of the Lamb and sealing of the believers now gives them the courage and power to resist Satan; they no longer have to fear him killing them since they have eternal life and a hope in the future resurrection. The contrast now is that those who are in Christ can rejoice because they have nothing to fear, for He who is in them is greater than the Satan (1 John 4:4). But woe to those who belong to the world, for Satan is enraged that he has been defeated and is lashing out on them in a great fury because his time is short. This connects to Dan. 7, where all the beasts that came from the sea, symbolic of different worldly nations, were stripped of their power by Yahweh but were allowed to live for a little while longer until their final doom (Dan. 7:11-12).

**12:13-17** Once the dragon had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman again, meaning the new covenant believers in Christ. But the woman was given the wings of an eagle and flew away. In Egyptian and Greek mythology, the gods transform people into eagles so they may escape harm. In the Bible, the wings of an eagle are associated with the deliverance and protection of Yahweh (Ex. 19:4; Deut. 32:10-14; Isa. 40:31; Jer. 48:40; 49:22; Mic. 4:9-10). As before, Yahweh protects His people spiritually from the demonic attacks of Satan. Time, times, and a half time, or three and a half years, refer to the temporary period of time she will have to hide from the attack of Satan before she will be delivered.

Seeing the woman was safe, the dragon tried to attack the woman by spewing a river from its mouth in order to engulf the woman in the wilderness. The wilderness is not only a symbol of barrenness but of land that is so far removed from the chaotic sea that it becomes a place of refuge. Scripture portrays Yahweh as driving the chaotic waters back (Job 38:8-1; Ps. 104:6-9) in order to provide land where humans can live and flourish (Ps. 32:6; Hos. 5:10). The raging river is then portrayed as chaos encroaching on the land and threatening life (Isa. 8:7-8; Jer. 46:8). So Satan as the sea dragon, restrained by Yahweh in what he can do to harm the believers, now tries to reach the believers through other attacks, as seen in the river. The fact that the river came from his mouth may communicate that although he can no longer harm us spiritually, he can spew his lies at us. But as the land swallowed the river, so Yahweh gave us His Word and Spirit to swallow the lies of Satan. Enraged, the dragon went after the woman's other children. Since the woman is the people of Yahweh, it is hard to know who the people of Yahweh's other children are. It may be since the woman appears first before the birth of Jesus that the woman is the First Testament Jewish believers, whereas her other children are the Second Testament believers, made up of Jews and Gentiles who follow Jesus, the first child of the woman. This seems to be the most likely understanding since this vision ends by stating the other children are those who hold to the teachings about Jesus. It is by holding fast to the testimony of Jesus that the Christians protect themselves from the rage and lies of Satan. We overcome not because we are always victorious but because we persevere in Jesus' name.

## **B. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)**

In this section the aside recapitulates how the dragon raises up two beasts in order to wage war on humanity. Their goal is to enslave humanity and eradicate the believers.

**13:1-2** The dragon raises up a beast from the chaotic seas that is just like him. The fact that it comes from the sea makes it clear that it is coming out of the chaos of humanity. The beast is what humanity becomes when it seeks its own power, stands against the will of Yahweh and seeks to exploit others.

The preterist says this is the Roman emperor Nero or Domitian. The futurist says this is the antichrist of the future seven-year tribulation, who will create a one-world government and religion. The problem with these interpretations is that, just like the pregnant woman, the beast is never named, meaning it is not just one specific person. And, in the same way the woman represents the collective believers, the beast should be seen as a collective of many political leaders and nations.

In fact, the vision itself says the beast should be seen as a collective by the way it is described, which is an allusion to Dan. 7. There, Daniel has a vision of four beasts coming out of the sea. The reader knows immediately that they are evil and bring chaos because they come from the sea. Likewise, they are unnatural, mutated, hybrid animals, which was considered unclean in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). The four beasts were a winged lion, a hunchbacked bear, a four-headed and four-winged leopard, and a great beast with ten horns. The angel states that these beasts are four consecutive human kingdoms that will rule in opposition to Yahweh and will conquer and rule oppressively. These beasts parallel the metals in the statue of Dan. 2, where Daniel says the first is the Babylonian Empire, which means the following are the Median, Persian, and Greek empires.

The description of the beast in Rev. 13 is a conglomeration of all the beasts of Dan. 7, which means the beast is all these kingdoms and all the kingdoms of the earth that follow throughout history. The fact that this beast is a conglomeration of Daniel's beasts, which died long ago, means they serve as a typology of all kingdoms to come. The seven heads of the beast are also the total number heads of the beasts from Dan. 7, of which the beast is a composite. And the ten horns are from the four beasts of Dan. 7, which according to the angel of Daniel 7 represent ten kings, further making the point that this is not just one individual. The blasphemous names on all its horns means its authority is extremely arrogant, and it is thoroughly opposed to Yahweh. It may also represent the prideful and grandiose titles that people of power give themselves.

Thus, the beast is symbolic of all the political kingdoms and states throughout human history that reject Yahweh's authority over them, in rebellion establishing themselves as a power in opposition to Yahweh's will and then misusing their power in oppression and exploitation of others for their own gain.

John in his other letters says that the antichrist people have heard of is coming and is already here in his time (1 John 4:3), for there are many antichrists (1 John 2:18). An antichrist is anyone who denies that Jesus is both God and human and teaches this to others (1 John 2:22; 2 John 1:7). It makes sense that Satan would have more than one antichrist.

The fact that it looks just like the dragon, with ten horns and crowns and seven heads, means the power of the dragon is in the beast as his representative. Satan is the power behind world governments. The beast does the will of the father that begat him. One of the major points

Yahweh is making with Daniel's vision of the empires portrayed as beasts is that when people gain great power, they become corrupt and oppress people. When this happens, they become subhuman beasts that devour people like animals.

**13:3-4** John then saw that one of the heads of the beast seemed to have a fatal wound, but it had been healed. The preterists look to Nero, who killed himself, but after his death imposters took his place, confusing the people as to whether he was dead. The futurists say the antichrist will be shot in the head but then recover, making everyone think he had been resurrected and giving him a greater cult following. The text, however, says *one* of the heads had received the fatal wound. This means that although one of the antichrists Satan lifted into power in human history has been killed, there will always be another one to take the place of the previous to keep the satanic worldly beast going.<sup>82</sup> No matter how evil or corrupt a leader or government becomes, a massive number of people will still be devoted to them and follow them unquestioningly, or, if they do have doubt, they will not give it serious thought because the reality is too scary to face. "The deification of secular power is nothing less than worship of Satan, whose authority is evidently wielded by the beast, whereas in the tradition of Judaism God alone deserves to be worshiped (Ex. 20:2-7; Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:10)."<sup>83</sup>

**13:5-8** The beast boasts proudly of what it is and is capable of doing for the people and how it alone can save them, putting itself in the place of Yahweh as the people's hope of deliverance—like a true antichrist. In Daniel's vision, out of the fourth beast comes a little horn that arrogantly claims to be a god and opposes Yahweh, which symbolizes Antiochus IV. The language is the same here as in Dan. 7. The fact that the beast was "given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation" is what the futurists point as a one-world government and religion. But all this is to say that the influence of Satan is in every government that rules over its people. There is no government that is untouched by Satan's leading. When you read through the whole Bible about what Yahweh has to say about governments, none of it is kind or has Yahweh's approval. Yahweh allows humans to be deceived by arrogant leaders and governments as a judgment for their own pride and rebellion, like when Yahweh gave Israel over to Saul as a judgment against them.

The beast is another means for the dragon to attack Christians, imprison them, and kill them. History is full of governments eliminating Christians in various ways. Even western governments have become ever-increasingly anti-Christian, mocking them and even taking their freedoms away. But the beast was allowed to have authority for only forty-two months, or three and a half years. This means that, like with Antiochus IV, the power of the beast over the world is restricted, and eventually Yahweh will bring it down. At last he will crush all the heads of the leviathan (Job 26:12-13; Ps. 74:13-15; 89:9-10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10).

Jer. 15:2 is then quoted for all those who have the ears to hear and respond. The context of Jer. 15:2 is that Israel has become so bad that Yahweh is going to send them into exile. And Yahweh says they have become so evil that even if the great prophets like Moses and Samuel were to intercede on Israel's behalf, He would not relent. So, when the people ask Jeremiah where they can go to be safe, Yahweh's response is that there is nowhere, so who are guilty will suffer and/or die for their unrepentant rebellion. This is the call to repentance for all generations. And until the second coming of Christ in "forty-two months," Yahweh's people are to faithfully

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<sup>82</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 339.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 339.

endure until Christ establishes His rule on earth and vindicates them. Satan takes over the interest of the state until it becomes Satan's toy. Therefore, you cannot fight the state; it is too powerful.

**13:11-12** Then a second beast came, this time from the earth rather than the sea, whose primary purpose is the promoting of allegiance to and worship of the first beast. The land is a prominent image of life and blessing in the Bible. In the beginning, Yahweh created the land separate from the waters and made a garden there to provide life and blessing for humans as they worked, created, and expanded the garden as Yahweh's image bearers (Gen. 2). Yet humans corrupted the land with their rebellion (Gen. 3) and created for their own glory and image (Gen. 4; 11). Then Yahweh promised Abraham a land where He would restore the garden to humanity (Gen. 12; 15). As mentioned above, the chaotic sea is the place of demons, where humans cannot survive, and the land is the place where humans live.<sup>84</sup> In Dan. 7 the beasts (inhuman) come from the sea, but when the angel interprets the vision, he says the beasts are human kings who come from the land (Dan. 7:17). So here is a marriage of the demonic and human as kingdoms and governments are created.

The second beast looked like a two-horned ram (NIV has "lamb") but spoke like a dragon. It looked natural and harmless, like a part of Yahweh's creation, but, in reality, it is devious and dangerously harmful with the message of Satan.

It had the authority and backing of the first beast and was dedicated to getting everyone to follow and worship the first beast. The first beast is the inhuman government, created by the dragon/Satan, that comes from the sea, the place of demons, whereas the second beast is the ideologies created by humans based on what they have seen from Satan and the first beast.<sup>85</sup> Later in Revelation, this second beast is called the false prophet (Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). A prophet speaks the will of the god it represents. So, after buying into the lies of the dragon/Satan as spoken through the first beast/corrupt state, the people now create their own beast to repeat the lies to themselves and to others. The second beast is the propaganda machine that humans create to sell the lie of Satan and make sure everyone buys into it and does not think for themselves or, worse yet, follow the Lamb. This would be the priesthood of the ancient religions that represented the gods embodied in the state/kings.<sup>86</sup> Today the priesthood is the media that sells the lies through the words of the news networks, the images of film, and emotions of music.

**13:13-15** It had the ability to do miracles to convince people. It created an image and then breathed life into the image so that it could also speak the lies of Satan. In the ancient world, the people believed that their leaders had magical powers, and they did rituals that they believed would infuse their idols with life so that the gods could be with them to protect and bless them. Today we believe that politics or science can miraculously fix our problems and create a utopian society. We create idols in our own image, like movies, social media, and AI to repeat the lie that these things will make our lives better and happier, but all they do is control, enslave, and isolate us. The destruction of family and community is exactly what Satan wants. Anyone who does not go silently along with this and speaks out against the dangers is mocked and canceled, which is a type of death. In other countries, governments literally kill you.

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<sup>84</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 345.

<sup>85</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 345.

<sup>86</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murry. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 215-217

The dragon and two beasts form a demonic anti-trinity. Just as Yahweh rules from heaven in the spiritual realm and gives authority to His Son in the physical realm and the Holy Spirit to promote devotion and obedience to the Godhead, so the Dragon rules from the demonic spiritual realm and gives authority to his antichrist leaders, and the propaganda machine promotes allegiance to the state.

**13:16-18** The second beast then forced people to receive a mark on their right hand or forehead so that they could not buy or sell without it. The number of the mark is 666. The preterist says this is Gematria for the name Nero. Gematria arises from the fact that in the ancient world there were no separate symbols for letters and numbers. So each letter of the alphabet is assigned a number—A is 1, B is 2, and so on—so letters were used for counting, like with roman numerals. In Gematria, each letter had a numerical value. One could add up the letters of word, and it would give them a number. There is even Gematria graffiti in the ancient world. A famous one says, “I love her whose number is 545.” The problem is you cannot work back from the number to the name. There are many people whose name equals 545. This rarely appears in the Bible, but it does in Matt. 1 in the genealogy of Christ, where there are fourteen names from Adam to David, fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to Christ. Fourteen is the number of David, from whom Jesus comes as king of the Jews. Nero’s name equals 666. The problem is that, until the invention of the printing press, people did not spell their name the same way all the time, and it depends on the language being used. Nero is 666 only in the Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of the Latin name. That is a lot of linguistic gymnastics to make it work. The abbreviated Greek form of the full Latin title of Domitian equals 666. If you spend a few minutes trying different combinations and spellings, you can make anyone’s name equal 666. As mentioned above, there is no way to work back from the number to the name.

The futurist says this is going to be a literal number 666 tattooed on people by the future antichrist. The problem with this is that it is not a literal number or mark, for apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic, and numbers are not literal. Some have seen this mark in barcodes, credit cards, and, now, implanted microchips, because they all deal with money. However, the computers at fast-food restaurants do not even work all the time, let alone in a world system. None of this has panned out as forcing anyone into allegiance.

Rev. 13:18 does not say let him who has education and intellect figure it out, but he who has wisdom or discernment should. First, this is the Satanic version of the mark placed on the believers when they are sealed by the Lamb (Rev. 7:3). People do not see that as a literal mark, so why must this be one? It is also the anti-Shama. The Shama (“hear”) comes from Deut. 6:4-9, where Yahweh tells the Jews to bind the truth of singular devotion to Yahweh on their foreheads and arms. Yahweh did not mean for us to do that literally; nor is it literal here. The idea is that this singular devotion to Yahweh was to permeate every part of your mind (forehead) and deeds (arms). Thus the beast requires those who follow him to bear his mark on their heads showing their devotion to him.

Second, it does not say that this is the mark of the beast but the mark of humans. Seven was seen as the number of completion, so six, being one less than that, makes it the number of incompleteness. Just as Yahweh’s judgments to redeem the earth equal 777 and bring a complete redemption, so man promises a redemption of 666 that is incomplete and falls short (Rom.

3:23).<sup>87</sup> The number 666 is anytime a leader, religion, institution, or government promises to save you or deliver you if you just follow them. Sometimes they will intentionally create a way of thinking (cult), a law, or a system that will force you to follow them or you will not be able to survive. Other times it could be that we willingly sell out to them, an ideology, or institution and convince ourselves that we cannot live without it, becoming economically or philosophically dependent on it for our survival. Our devotion to it becomes the focus of our thoughts and deeds. This is the manmade way of thinking we can save ourselves; all the beast is doing is ramping it up and turning it back on us. The church has been so busy looking for a singular antichrist and a literal number or barcode of 666 that will control us, they have missed the *message* of 666: “follow your heart,” “you need this to be complete,” “I did it my way,” “you can do/be anything,” and so on. This message has been subtly woven into the media we consume. The anti-Shama message is the idolatry of ideology, materialism, and disordered love of what we value or what we think we need more than Yahweh to be happy.

This could physically manifest itself in a logo, emblem, or microchip, but that is not the point. Could a major world antichrist come someday and truly enslave many nations and force them to follow him? It is possible. But he would be just a final one in a long line of many. Personally, I do not think one man could pull off a world government with total world devotion, when the Republican and Democratic parties in America cannot even work together, get everyone to like them, or get anything done. The futurist view has far too much confidence in the ability of government.

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<sup>87</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 220-221; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 352-353; G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 720-728; Philip E. Hughes. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 154-155.

### **C. The Song of the 144,000 and the Angelic Judgment (14:1-20)**

In this section the aside is contrasted to the rises of the beasts. The believers before the throne of Yahweh are a reminder that Yahweh will preserve His people despite the attack of the beast and even despite their deaths at the hands of the beast. The section ends with three angelic announcements that declare the eventual fall of the beast's kingdom.

**14:1-3** John then sees the Lamb with the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the spiritual name for the true city of Yahweh (Ps. 2:6; Isa. 4:5; Joel 2:17; Heb. 12:22). It is sometimes poetically associated with the temple mount in Jerusalem since the temple represented Yahweh's dwelling continually with His people. But because of Israel's constant idolatry and rebellion, it is separated theologically from Jerusalem, which is sometimes associated with judgment (Jer. 9:11; Zeph. 1:4). Mount Zion is the cosmic mountain of Yahweh, where He promises that one day His covenant people who come out of all the nations will dwell with Him (Isa. 2::1-5; Mic. 4:1-5). Now John sees the fulfillment of that promise with the Jewish-Gentile covenant people from all the nations, represented in the 144,000 (Rev. 7) standing with Yahweh on Mount Zion. Written on their foreheads were the names of the Father and the Son, which indicates character. Then the 144,000 broke out in praise for the Father and Son with a new song that only they could learn. This new song is a song about the redemption of Jesus that only they could learn because only they had embraced the redemption of the Lamb and believed it to be true.

**14:4-5** The 144,000 are described in four ways. First, they have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. Since the 144,000 refers to all the believers of the world, it is impossible to say they are all literally virgins. Nowhere in the Bible does Yahweh call believers to be celibate, and nowhere is sex within marriage portrayed as defiling. This is a metaphor for abstaining from idolatry and remaining faithful to Christ.<sup>88</sup> In the Bible, idolatry is often associated with spiritual adultery (Hosea 2; Isa. 57:1-13; Ezek. 6:9; 22:23-23:27; Rev. 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2). This adultery is where something demands the kind of allegiance that belongs only to Yahweh, making it an idol. The faithful are Israel, who is metaphorically referred to as the virgin daughter of Zion (2 Kgs. 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Jer. 14:17; Lam. 2:13; Amos 5:2) and the bride of Yahweh (Isa. 61:10; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2). In the letters to the seven churches, there were some in the church whom Jesus condemned for their spiritual adultery (Rev. 2:9, 13-15, 20-25; 3:4-5).

Second, the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever He goes. Unlike the world, which follows whatever message the beast and its propaganda machine disseminates, the true believer meditates on the word of Yahweh and obeys the commands of the Son (Josh, 1:8; Ps. 1; Matt. 10:38; John 8:12; 10:4; 12:26; 14:23-24).

Third, they were purchased with the Lamb's blood (Rev. 5:9-10) and have responded to His great sacrificial love by offering their lives to Him as an offering (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 John 4:19).

Fourth, no lie was found in their mouths. This does not mean that no believer has ever lied but that they remained faithful to their confession to follow Christ and persevered in the faith (Rom. 1:25; James 1:12; 1 John 2:19).

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<sup>88</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 357-358.

The contrast is between the world, which has been marked by the beast, and the believers, who have been marked by the Lamb. Those who belong to the beast are deceived and defiled and live in chaos and war, and their end will be judgment. But those who belong to the Lamb live in the truth and in purity and experience joy, which is manifested in song, and their end will be eternal life with Yahweh. Here Yahweh is reminding the believers why they must remain faithful to the truth of Jesus as the God-man and persevere in faith for a little while (“three and a half years”); then they will receive eternal life with Him on His cosmic mountain on earth.

**14:6-7** The theme of this section is that of Yahweh’s salvific judgment on the world for its sin and rebellion. The point of their messages is to warn the people of the world and call them to the Lion-Lamb. One should not see these as literal angels flying over creation for all to hear and see but that angels do this continuously as they work behind the scenes in the spiritual realm to influence humanity.

The first angel is called “another” angel. Any other angel mentioned in the text, however, is too far removed for this one to be understood as “another” angel. Most likely this should be understood as a “new” angel, which amounts to a literary variation.<sup>89</sup> This is the only place in the Bible where an angel is said to have flown. But this is apocalyptic literature, where, symbolically, things that do not normally fly can (Zech. 5:1, Rev 12:14). The first angel announces not so much the gospel of the salvation that Jesus provided through the cross, rather the gospel of the certainty that Jesus will discriminately separate those who are in Him and those who are not on the day of judgment. This is a warning to the world to be sealed by the blood of the Lamb; otherwise, they will face the wrath of the Lion.

The angel announces this to all nations, tribes, and languages, which means all have heard this message in some way or form and so are without excuse. The angel calls the people of the world to fear Yahweh and give Him glory, which is the appropriate response one should have for the Creator King, who sits on the throne of creation.

**14:8** The second angel announces that Babylon has fallen (Isa. 21:9). It is also called the “the great city” in Revelation. Though the title “the great city” is used of Jerusalem once (Rev. 11:8), everywhere else it is used of Babylon. This is the first of six mentions of Babylon in Revelation. The reference to Babylon here is obviously not literal, since the city did not exist anymore. Historically, Babylon was the political and religious capital of a world empire renowned for its material luxury, paganism, and moral corruption. It used its power for the oppression of people and was known as the enemy of Yahweh’s people (Dan. 4:28-31; 5:1-4; Matt. 1:12). Babylon is symbolic of the secular and unjust spirit of humanity, in any age, that seduces through glamour, entertainment, and luxury or coerces and bribes others to compromise truth, to give themselves over to the dragon and beast, and to worship idols rather than the creator.<sup>90</sup> The nature of Babylon will be unpacked more in Rev. 17.

John then mixes two evocative images when describing Babylon. First, Babylon did not keep her idolatry and immorality to herself but forced them on others, like an intoxicating wine. Intoxication represents spiritual blindness and idolatry. People were willing to cooperate with Babylon and become drunk on the drink because Babylon promised economic security and comfort or pleasure (Rev. 2:9; 13:16-17; 18:3). Second, the drink offered by Babylon contained

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<sup>89</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 360-361.

<sup>90</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 364.

the desire to think and act immorally. The Greek word *thymos* can mean “anger” or “passionate longing” in the immoral sense. The NIV translates it as “maddening” and the NET translates it as “passion.” The idea is that those who take the drink are driven by a lust for pleasure and entertainment that leads to immorality. Once people consume the drink they become just like Babylon, the beast that is no longer human or in the image of God. Ironically Yahweh will make Babylon drink her own mixture, but it will become the wine of His wrath in retribution for her immoral deeds (Rev. 16:19).

In the final judgment of Christ, Babylon will fall because of its idolatry and misuse of power. There is no redemption for Babylon because it is the world itself in its philosophy of idolatry, rebellion, and self-pleasure. What the world places its hope in for salvation cannot stand in the face of Yahweh’s judgment.

**14:9-13** The third angel announces that those who choose to be a part of Babylon and worship the beasts will fall as well. Because they drank the cup of Babylon, they will then have to drink the cup of Yahweh’s wrath. The cup is mixed and undiluted. *Mixed* originally referred to adding spices to the wine before it was dispensed, which would increase its strength (Ps. 75:8). *Undiluted* refers to the strength of the wine, since it was common to dilute wine with water (Prov. 9:2). In the ancient world, wine was often cut by water three to one or ten to one. The potency of wine depends on the sugar content of the wine and the heat in the land. A good wine is fifteen percent alcohol. If you cut it three to one, it is at five percent; ten to one, it is one and a half percent. A beer can be between three to five percent. Most people drank wine cut. To drink it uncut was to drink “strong” drink, which was frowned upon. So John is using both of these terms to emphasize the severity of Yahweh’s wrath (Job 21:20; Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15-38; Matt. 10:28). All the wrath of Yahweh that has been poured out on earth up to this judgment day has been cut. Though there is a chance for all people to repent and be sealed by the Lamb, it will be too late when Babylon falls.

The image of their torment is graphic and severe. The imagery of fire and sulfur as a means of torment appears three other times in Revelation 19:20; 20:10; 21:8. The allusion is to the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24; Luke 17:29). This combination is used of divine judgment (Deut. 29:23; Job 18:15; Ps. 11:6; Isa. 30:33; Ezek. 38:22) that involved a spiritual and psychological torment rather than physical.<sup>91</sup> Fire symbolizes judgment (Gen. 19:24-25; Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:9-14; Josh. 7:15; Isa. 64:1-2; Amos 7:4; Zech. 3:2-5; Mal. 3:2; Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). This is not a literal place of fire where people will burn for all eternity; rather, it is a place where people will experience endless spiritual and psychological torment due to their idolatry.

The three angels announce that the world will come under judgment, that Babylon will be sacked, and all those who chose the corrupt and lofty city of Babylon will follow the city into torment. Until then, the believers need to endure patiently and remain faithful to Jesus. John concludes by stating, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” The “from now on” cannot refer to those Christians who die in some future seven-year tribulation—what about all the Christians before them? Instead, this refers to the tribulation that is *all* the time between the first and second comings of Christ (2 Cor. 6:2). They will be blessed and can find rest in Christ.

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<sup>91</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 760.

**14:14-16** Most likely the figure John sees on the cloud is Jesus Christ, for it said to be “one like a son of man.” This title is a direct reference to Dan. 7:13-14 and is used specifically of Jesus in the gospels. Outside of the gospels, Rev. 1:7, 13; 14:14 are the only times the “son of man” title is used in the Second Testament. Likewise, this figure is clearly portrayed as divine and exalted and one who judges the earth, which is the work of Yahweh. In the gospels, Jesus said He would come back on the clouds to judge the world (Mark 14:62).

The difficulty here is that an angel is issuing a command to Jesus. This can make sense, however, by the fact that the angel is coming out of the temple, meaning it is relaying a command from the Father. This then shows the subordination the Son to the Father (Mark 13:32; John 5:19-20; Acts 1:7; Phil. 2:5-8). The time for judging the earth has been set by the Father. The image of the Son of man swinging a sickle over the earth to harvest it in judgment is obviously a metaphor of Christ’s judgment of the world. The grain harvest is an allusion to Joel 3:13, which portrays the inevitability of judgment at the right time.

**14:17-20** A second angel came, this time from the altar, and gave a command to harvest the earth. This time it was an angel with a sickle that did the harvesting, rather than the Son of man, and he gathered up the grapes, which were thrown into the wine press of Yahweh’s wrath, where they were trampled on until the blood flowed. The blood measuring up to the bridle of a horse and flowing for 1,600 stadia is not meant to be a literal measurement. Sixteen hundred is four squared, symbolizing the earth, multiplied with ten squared, which is symbolic of completion. This means Yahweh’s judgment covered all of the earth. Up to the bridle of the horse would be above most people’s heads, meaning all people were included. The reality is so ghastly that we need metaphors to understand it. This is not angry “fire and brimstone” preaching that just incites shock or fear or pummels us with hateful condemnation; rather, it’s meant to open the reader’s eyes to the reality of the terrible judgment to come. The gospel is not designed to make us feel better but motivate us to flee the wrath of Yahweh.

This seems to be a picture of two discrete harvests, separating the wheat from the tares (Matt. 3:13; 13:24-30), rather than recapitulation of one harvest.<sup>92</sup> The first is merely a gathering up, and the second is a gathering up and trampling. Likewise, two different figures do the two different harvestings. The first seems to be the gathering of believers, and the second is the gathering of the non-believers, who are then given into the wrath of Yahweh.

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<sup>92</sup> See Richard J. Bauckham. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p.p. 94-98; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 373-374.

## V. The Seven Bowls (15:1–18:22)

In this division Jesus pours out the bowls as His final act of judgment on the earth. This is followed by the fall of Babylon, which is all the world systems that entice the world to follow the beast. This division has a final exodus imagery, in which plagues are brought down on a corrupt empire, bringing the defeat of that kingdom, which leads to the deliverance of Yahweh's people through their Messiah Jesus in Rev. 19. Once again, there is no mention of the beast or Babylon repenting. This does not mean individual people during the tribulation will not repent, but major powers very rarely repent. This is also seen in the next chapter with the fall of Babylon.

### A. The Pouring out of the Bowls (15:1–16:21)

In this section the final judgments of Yahweh are poured out on the kingdom of the beast. Like the seals and trumpets, the bowl judgments are organized by four major judgments, followed by two secondary judgments, and concluding with the final bowl, which brings only the storm and earthquake of Yahweh, with no unveiling of further judgments. The first four are poured out on creation itself, the second two affect the beast and his kingdom, and the seventh leads to the fall of Babylon—the end of the beast.

This may be recapitulation of the seals and trumpets but goes further into the future with a sense of finality and completion in Yahweh's judgment on the earth, especially in the sixth and seventh plagues. There is a sense that the whole earth is affected and that it is the final judgment, since there is no mention of one third being destroyed.

**15:1-2a** Seven angels appeared before John, and they will pour out the last seven plagues and complete Yahweh's wrath on the world. In the vision John saw a sea of crystal glowing with fire. As discussed in Revelation 4, this sea represents the chaos of fallen humanity. But now it is on fire, which represents judgment. The chaotic world is being judged, and the believers who rejected the beast are standing beside the sea of fire rather than in it. Just like the Israelites came through the chaotic Red Sea that Yahweh used to defeat Egypt (Ex. 14), so have the new covenant believers escaped the sea of judgment.

**15:2b-4** After Israel's Red Sea crossing, they broke out in praise to Yahweh (Ex. 15), just like the believers do here. By referring to their song as the song of Moses, John links the song of the exodus (Ex. 15) directly with the song of the new covenant believers. But now it is even greater because it is also the song of the Lamb.

The song begins by praising the active and marvelous deeds of Yahweh in creation on behalf of His people. Revelation 4 focused on praise for Yahweh as creator; now the focus is on His deeds. All the deeds of Yahweh are just—both His acts of deliverance for the righteous and His judgment on the wicked. The “fear of Yahweh” is a deep awe, respect, and trust in Yahweh as ultimate king and judge who is good (Prov. 1:7). He is also holy, which means He is unique and unlike anything in creation. Nothing can compare to who He is in His essence and character. He has made it possible for people from all the nations to come to Him and dwell with Him on His cosmic mountain. And people from all the nations have come to Him, for they have seen His righteous acts, and they are greater than all the false gods and philosophies of Babylon.

**15:5-8** Then John saw the temple of heaven, which is the tabernacle, open for all to come in. Right after the exodus, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, where Yahweh gave them instructions for how to build the tabernacle. But before they built the tabernacle, Israel sinned against

Yahweh by creating and worshiping the golden calf. For this reason, when the tabernacle was built, it was closed off from them because of their sin. They had to go through a detailed and tedious cleanse in order to gain access to the tabernacle. Even then, only a member of the Abrahamic covenant with an animal sacrifice could enter the courtyard. Only a sanctified priest could enter the Holy Place, and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year with an animal sacrifice. Even then, they encountered only the pillar of smoke and fire in an earthly tent. But now the heavenly tabernacle, where Yahweh and the Lamb dwell, is open to people of all nations because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-16; 9:11-15; Rev. 9-10).

But as the believers are able to enter the heavenly tabernacle of Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1-5), out of the tabernacle come seven angels with seven plagues to pour out on the world outside the heavenly tabernacle because they refused to repent and come to the Lamb. The white linen robes represent purity and victory, and the golden sash represents glory. Like a liturgical ritual, one of the four living creatures handed each of the angels a golden bowl filled with the wrath of Yahweh, which he was now going to make Babylon and those who took the mark of the beast drink.

Like on Mount Sinai when Yahweh gave the Law (Ex. 19), the temple of Yahweh was filled with smoke, and no one was able to enter until all the plagues were poured out on the world. Some have said that no one was able to enter because at this point it was too late for anyone to repent and come to Yahweh. Yet there is nothing in the text that indicates this. The most likely reason is that the majesty and glory of Yahweh have become so intense at this moment that no one is able to enter into His presence.<sup>93</sup> The righteousness of Yahweh makes it impossible to enter His presence (Ex. 40:45; 1 Kgs. 8:11; 2 Chron. 7:2; Isa. 6:5; Mark 9:2-6; Rev. 5:13-14).

**16:1-2** The first bowl is poured out on the idolaters, for they are the ones who took the mark of the beast and worshiped him. They are struck physically with a plague of bowls and sickness. But it does not affect those sealed in the Lamb because they are victorious in Christ (Rev. 15:2).

**16:3** The second bowl is poured out on the sea; all of it turned to blood, and every living thing in it died. This would affect the food supply and everyone who depended on the sea for economic survival.

**16:4** The third bowl is poured out on the rivers and springs; these also turned to blood, and everything in them died. This does not affect just those whose economic survival depended on the rivers and springs; fresh water is the very source of life for *all* living things.

**16:5-7** The hymn provides a theological reflection on why Yahweh is just in this judgment. The angel of the waters is not the angel who poured out the plague on the waters. In Jewish thought, spiritual beings represented and controlled earthly realities and elements.<sup>94</sup> The angels and nature celebrate the just nature of the judgment (Ps. 119:137).

The threefold expression “who is, who was, and who is coming” appeared in Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8 (the order differs). Here “the Holy One” takes the place of “the one who is coming,” because Yahweh’s complete and saving activity in history is being revealed continuously in His final

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<sup>93</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 238; Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 679; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 392-293.

<sup>94</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 244; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 294.

eschatological judgment.<sup>95</sup> Yahweh's sovereign holiness, as expressed in His acts of justice, develops His salvific role as the "coming one."<sup>96</sup>

The phrase "You are just in these judgments" is not explaining *how* Yahweh is just but *why* He is just. He is just because He is punishing evil and the evil people in the world. For the world has attacked and shed the blood of His people who are righteous and His prophets—all believers—for speaking the will of Yahweh to the people. Now the world must reap what they have sown. A good father fights for the ones He loves when they are hurt by others. The drinking of blood may be in reference to the fact that the rivers have turned to blood as a result of Yahweh's plague.<sup>97</sup> It is a metaphor for having to drink their own suffering because they have killed the people of Yahweh. The altar responded with an affirmation of what the angel had declared.

**16:8-9** The fourth bowl was poured out on the sun; it became so intense that it scorched the people of the earth. The sun is usually a positive symbol (Ps. 89:36; Eccles. 11:7; Mal. 1:11), but the heat can be dangerous, and one would have to be sheltered from it (Ps. 121:6; Jonah 4:6-8; Isa. 4:6; 49:10). Fire is associated with judgment (Gen. 19:24; Deut. 4:24; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Pet. 3:7). The light that Yahweh created, which normally provides life and illumination, is now turned against them.

The result is that they cursed Yahweh instead of repenting. As already mentioned, there has been no repentance throughout all these judgments. Those who are being judged have become so beastly and callused, they refuse to repent and cannot not see the truth, which justifies Yahweh's judgments even more.

**16:10-11** The fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast so that His kingdom is thrown into darkness. The darkness is symbolic of spiritual anguish, and the biting of tongues is their mental and emotional agony (2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13).<sup>98</sup> They become aware of their isolation from Yahweh and others and are thrown into despair. As a result, they continued to harden their hearts against Yahweh (Ex. 7:3).

**16:12-16** The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the Euphrates River so that the waters would dry up and allow the armies of the east to come. The Euphrates River was one of the great geographical boundaries of the ancient world, separating Israel from its main enemies (Ex. 23:31; 1 Macc. 3:32). The river is so large, it has never been known to dry up. This is an antitype of the Red Sea crossing, where now the evil armies come into the kingdom of the beast. This is Yahweh allowing the new empire or antichrist to come and destroy the previous empire, again and again, until the whole demonic kingdom collapses.

Then the demonic spirits that were in the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (second beast) came out of their mouths looking like frogs. The point is that what has been guiding and empowering the world rulers were demonic spirits. The imagery of the frogs goes back to the plague of frogs in Egypt (Ex. 8:2-11). They are unclean in the Mosaic Law (Lev. 11:9-12, 41-47). Philo said their croaking is loud and meaningless.<sup>99</sup> This, and that the demons come out of

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<sup>95</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 402-403.

<sup>96</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 817-818.

<sup>97</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 6-16*, p. 888.

<sup>98</sup> See George B. Caird. *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 204-205; Philip E. Hughes. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 175; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 406.

<sup>99</sup> Philo. *De Som*, pp. 2:259-260.

their mouths, points to the fact that the words of the dragon and beasts are demonic, unclean lies that have no value. The fact that they are coming out means they are revealing themselves for who they really are. Eventually, most antichrists become exposed for who they really are—usually when they have gained so much power and manipulated so many people, and they think they couldn't possibly fall now, but they do. In order to deal with the great threat from across the Euphrates, they have to reveal themselves for who they really are. They are able to distract people from the horror of who they really are by performing amazing acts. They rallied others to follow them, but eventually they will fall.

Jesus then admonishes the believers to remain faithful because He could come back at any moment, like a thief in the night (Matt. 24:42; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). Blessed is the one who does not slack off but remains diligent and alert. They are to remain clothed in their righteous purity (Ezek. 16:36-39; Rev. 3:18).

Then all the kings gathered at Armageddon. Armageddon is a transcription the Hebrew word *harmegiddo*, which means “the mount of Megiddo.” This was a city in the northern part of Israel, located in the southwestern section of the Valley of Jezreel. It was the major northern entrance into Israel, so many major battles were fought there (Jud. 5:19; 2 Kgs. 23:29; 1 Chron. 7:29; Zech. 12:11). The futurist says this is going to be a literal final war with all the armies of the world being led by the antichrist. The problem with this is there is no mountain anywhere close to the city Megiddo.

Most likely, this is taken from the apocalyptic text of Ezek. 38–39, where the prophet Ezekiel sees a vision of the enemies of Israel being destroyed in numerous ways, communicating their total defeat, on the mountains of Israel (Ezek. 38:8-21; 39:2, 4, 17). This then gave the area a general reference as Megiddo because that is where the major battle normally took place.<sup>100</sup> It represents the hostile nations assembling against the people of Yahweh.

**16:17-21** The seventh angel poured out his bowl on the sky. A voice declared that it was finished, which was followed by the arrival of Yahweh in the storm and earthquake and the earth's shaking at His arrival (Isa. 13:9-10; Ezek. 32:6-8; Joel 2:30-31; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:13). The earthquake was more intense than any before, meaning the judgment of Yahweh was greater than any other judgment He has brought down on nations. The earthquake split the great city, Babylon, into three parts (Hag. 2:6-7 Zech. 14:4; Heb. 12:26-27). All the nations were no more, and Yahweh made Babylon drink the cup of His wrath. The islands and mountains collapsing point to the awesome severity of Yahweh's judgment. Hailstones are a part of Yahweh's arsenal for judgment (Josh. 10:11; Job 38:22-23; Isa. 28:17; Ezek. 38:22; Hag. 2:17). The weight of the hailstones at one hundred pounds points to the severity of Yahweh's judgment. Once again, the people refused to repent because their hearts have become so callused.

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<sup>100</sup> See Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 685

## **B. The Fall of Babylon (17:1–18:24)**

In this section John provides a commentary on the preceding scene of the bowls being poured out on the beasts and Babylon, bringing them to their end, by explaining what the fall of Babylon will entail. But it also sets the stage for the next section of the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth in the place of Babylon. The religious, idolatrous side of Babylon is seen in Rev. 17, and the commercial side of Babylon is seen in Rev. 18.

There is no recapitulation in this section, for this is the end of Babylon. The language of Babylon's fall, destruction, and end is so absolute and final that it is clear that the city is forever gone, never to return. This leads to the physical return of Jesus Christ to earth, the total defeat and end of the beasts (Rev. 19:11-21), and the total defeat and end of Satan (Rev. 20). All of this makes it clear that this section is the turning point in Revelation, which moves from the recapitulation of sinful human history to the future and final events of the end of all evil and the coming of the Kingdom of Yahweh (Rev. 21–22) down to earth. From this point on, the text is clearly speaking of the future and final coming of Jesus Christ, which will bring the restoration of the Garden of Eden on earth.

**17:1-2** One of the angels showed John a vision of the punishment of the prostitute who sits by the waters. There are some who say the prostitute is the Catholic church, the apostate church, or the unfaithful Jews or Jerusalem. First, however, the prostitute is called Babylon, and the name Babylon has never been used of apostate believers (Rev. 17:5). Second, she is said to rule over all the kings of the earth (Rev. 17:18), which has never been said of the believers, let alone the apostate believers. Third, there has never been a time when Jerusalem or the Catholic church has ruled over all the nations.

Literal sexual prostitution is not what is in mind here. Here, “prostitute” is symbolic for that which tempts, seduces, and draws people away from Yahweh (Isa. 23:17; Hos. 4:11-12; Rev. 18:3, 9; 19:2).<sup>101</sup> It was used in the First Testament to communicate religious apostasy (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:20-28; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15-41; Hos. 2:5), which is why some say the prostitute is the apostate believers. But it is also likened to the “great city,” which is a secular kingdom (Rev. 17:18). The more immediate background to the symbolism is Isa. 23:16-17, where the pagan city of Tyre is called the forgotten prostitute, and Nahum 3:4, where the city of Nineveh is the prostitute. It is used specifically of anyone who rejects their creator and goes after idols. It is the prostitution of all that is right for the gain of power, which becomes misused power.

Enthroned by the waters would be the system of canals of the Euphrates River, beside which the historical city of Babylon sat. The angel later tells John that the waters are the peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages of the world. So these waters are the chaotic waters that represent humanity in all its chaos and rebellion. In the ancient world, the imagery of a being sitting on or by the sea communicated it as a god or king claiming to rule over the chaos (Ps. 144:7; Isa. 17:12-14; Jer. 47:2). The Bible uses this imagery to show that Yahweh is the true God of creation who sits enthroned over the waters (Ps. 29:10). The vision could be using the image of the woman by the waters to show she is trying to usurp the power of Yahweh as she makes herself a world ruler.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See William Hendriksen. *More than Conquerors*, p. 167.

<sup>102</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 427.

This prostitute has many kings who belong to her, who have committed spiritual adultery against Yahweh. The kings and the people of the earth were intoxicated with all she had promised, and they followed her into adultery. Now they will be punished.

**17:3-6** The wilderness is the place of testing and trials (Ex. 15:22–16:36; Num. 11:1-35; 1 Kgs. 19:4-10; Mark 1:12). People either fail and face their doom in the wilderness (Num. 14:26-35), or they pass and are rewarded (Matt. 4:1, 10-11). Like Israel was doomed to die in the wilderness, a place of desolation is an appropriate place for her destruction (Isa. 13:19-21; 14:22-23; 21:1-10; Jer. 51:24-58).

She was sitting on the scarlet beast that came out of the sea (Rev. 13:1). She was dressed in scarlet, connecting her to the beast (Rev. 17:3) and the dragon (Rev. 12:3), and purple. Scarlet was an expensive dye that represented luxury and magnificence (Nahum 2:3), but, like purple, it had royal associations (Judg. 8:26; Dan. 5:7; 1 Macc. 10:20). She is also adorned with fine and glamorous jewelry, which communicates ostentatious luxury and glamour of a seductive nature (Isa. 1:15-22; Jer. 2:34; 4:30; Ezek. 16:8-15) and speaks of a false and rebellious glory.

She carried a golden cup filled with abominable things and her unclean adulteries. Abomination is often used of idolatry (Lev. 11:10-12; 18:22; Deut. 12:31; Isa. 1:13; Jer. 13:27; Dan. 27). Uncleanliness or filth is associated with demonic and deceptive spirits, which lie behind the idols (1 Thess. 2:3; Rev. 16:13-14; 18:2; 21:27). Fornication or adultery is used of idolatry (Rev. 2:14, 20-21; 9:21). The cup promises carnal satisfaction but offers only obscenities. It has blinded people not only to her evil nature but also to the goodness and justice of Yahweh (Jer. 51:7-9). She is like a bewitching woman of Greek mythology. On her forehead she bears three names, which reveals her true character and her mocking rebellion against Yahweh. The mystery of her name and character is hidden in the past with typology but is unpacked in this new vision, for those who are sealed in the Lamb and refuse to submit to her she attacks and kills. She then becomes drunk with their blood, which drives her to kill more.

The woman is associated closely with the beast but is not equated with it. The distinction is a fine one. The dragon is Satan and the demonic world, which seek to deceive, entrap, and destroy humanity as Yahweh's precious image. The beast is the ungodly world, which is willing to submit and align itself with satanic and ungodly ideologies, philosophies, and worldviews. This then produces unrighteous political, economic, and social systems that the world's beastly governments, institutions, and corporations are then built upon. The woman is a symbol for the state in all its alluring forms. Babylon the prostitute is the seduction and allurements by the satanic world, enticing the human world to abandon Yahweh and to sell out to the beast. She is the adornment of media propaganda, economic comfort, and political power that denies freedom to the individual and tries to seduce secular society, which is already rebelling against Yahweh, into committing impious acts, unjust oppression, and wickedness that will ultimately lead to its death.<sup>103</sup> It is the widespread systemic evil and Satanic pagan idolatry of humans and their institutions that turn them into heartless and devouring beasts due to their corruption and misuse of power (Dan 7:1-8).

**17:7-8** This is the first time in the book of Revelation an angel interprets a vision. The angel explains that the beast “once was, now is not, and yet will come up.” This threefold description is

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<sup>103</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 429; Frederick D. Maurice. *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, pp. 252-257; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 308.

not meant to help one know when the beast is going to appear in human history; rather, it parodies the attributes applied to the Godhead—“who is, who was, who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). Also, the “now is not, yet will come up out of the Abyss” is a caricature of the death and resurrection of Christ. The beast’s desire is to take the place of Yahweh in the hearts of humanity, but in the end his rising out of the abyss starts the clock for his destruction. And there will be no resurrection for him. This threefold description is repeated, but the last statement is altered to “yet is about to ascend,” which means before he goes to his destruction he must first ascend to power over the world. This will amaze the world, and they will want to follow him.

**17:9-10** The angel then says that the seven heads of the beast are seven hills but also seven kings. Preterists see this as a reference to Rome, which was often referred to in the ancient world as the city on seven hills. The kings then would be the Caesars of the Roman Empire. However, the preterist have never agreed on which Caesars would be the seven kings from the vision. It cannot be literal kings of Rome, since this is the ultimate fall of the beast and Babylon, and there have been many kings and kingdoms since then. While the Greek word *oros* can mean “hill,” elsewhere in Revelation it always means “mountain” and is used symbolically for “strength” (Rev. 6:14-16; 8:8; 14:1; 16:20; 21:10) and “kingdoms” (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 5:3; Dan. 2:35; 1 Enoch 52:1-7; Rev. 8:8; 14:1).<sup>104</sup> This points to the fact that the seven mountains to are pointing to something beyond Rome; they are pointing to all the nations to come.

Yet Rome is the basis for the typology of all the kingdoms that will follow. This is a metaphor for all the kings and kingdoms throughout human history that belong to the beast and that misuse their power in oppressive ways. Numbers in apocalyptic literature are not literal, so the total number of kingdoms is to be understood in transtemporal terms. John is writing against a historical background of Rome that would be familiar to his audience. These images then transcend history and apply to any kingdom that is satanic and misuses its power.<sup>105</sup> Since Babylon is not really Babylon, for it no longer exists, then not only does it represent Rome symbolically, but it is freed from a specific historical kingdom to represent any kingdom.

No matter where you are in human history a antichrist and beastly kingdom have already come and you are currently being ruled over by one, and there will be more to come. This is emphasized by the fact that when the seventh comes, he will remain only for a little while, and then there will be an eighth. This is the only place in Revelation where an eighth king is mentioned. The eighth king is said to belong to the seven, so it symbolizes the fact that they will just keep coming. The number eight symbolizes a change or new beginning. The eighth king will end with the destruction of the beast. So, although they just keep coming, there will be a change or break in this pattern; the beast is destroyed, leading to a new beginning in how the world is ruled.

**17:12-14** The ten horns also represent kings and connect this beast to the fourth beast from the sea in Dan. 7:7-24. They cannot be ten Roman rulers, for they have not yet received power. The number ten is symbolic of an abundance of stately power, sometimes satanic. These are the continuing kings throughout human history, who just keep giving themselves over to satanic influences. Satan is the constant that keeps moving throughout history, ensnaring kingdom after kingdom. Satan then will use these nations to wage war against the Lamb and His followers.

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<sup>104</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 869; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 435-436.

<sup>105</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 869; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 437.

Throughout human history all nations have imprisoned, killed, or marginalized Christians. But in end, the Lamb will triumph over the nations and the beast to which they have yoked themselves.

**17:15-18** As mentioned previously, the waters are the people of the nations. Eventually, the beast will hate the prostitute, strip her naked in humiliation, and then eat her. This speaks to the fact that corrupt powers and institutions eventually turn on each other and destroy each other (Ezek. 23:29), bringing the whole thing down upon themselves. Yahweh is the one who directs them and gives them over to their own evil desires and destruction (Rom. 1:18-32) to expose them for who they really are and bring them to an end (Jer. 13:26-27; Ezek. 16:37-41; 23:11-35; Hos. 2:3). Yahweh uses evil kings to bring down evil nations (Isa. 44:28; 45:1).<sup>106</sup>

**18:1-3** The text switches to a poetic lament over the fall of Babylon, structured as an arrangement of lines in triplets to add dramatic intensity to the fall.<sup>107</sup> The background for this chapter is Ezek. 27. It is a prophecy of the future ruin of future nations in the words of the past fall of Babylon, Tyre, and others. Babylon has become such a desolate wasteland due to the devastating judgement of Yahweh that only demons and unclean animals haunt the place. Yahweh is justified in His destruction of Babylon, for it led the nations into adultery, and the merchants became rich off the suffering of others.

**18:4-8** A second poem calls the individuals who live in the nations to leave Babylon so that they do not join her in her sins and adultery and thereby reap the judgment of Yahweh's plagues. Once again, Yahweh is just in His judgment against Babylon, for He is merely allowing what she has done to others to happen to her. All the glory she received will be balanced out with torment. She boasted that she was a queen, but Yahweh will dethrone her with fire (Isa. 47:14; Jer. 51:25-58; 1 Cor. 3:13; Rev. 1:14; 8:7-8; 9:17-18; 11:5; 13:13; 14:10; 16:8; 19:20; 20:9-10; 21:8).

**18:9-20** Then the text goes into a series of woes involving the merchants. When the merchants, CEOs, and investors, who made lots of money by committing adultery with Babylon, see her fall, they will mourn but stay far away as not to join her. But they have no sympathy for her and are really weeping for themselves because they know they will no longer be able to make an obscene amount of money from her; they weep also because they know their own downfall is coming. The long list of things they sold emphasizes their obsession for stuff and wealth to the exclusion of others. They will weep for the loss of the comfortable life they had at others' expense. They mourn not because she was loved but because commerce was cut off. This emphasizes how Yahweh's judgments are just, for they are not mournful over what they did to others but because of what they lost. Yahweh then calls His righteous people to rejoice over the fall of Babylon, for Yahweh has judged her. All the unjust things that have been done to them and others have now been dealt with in the burning down of Babylon.

**18:21-24** Then an angel took a millstone and threw into the sea. A millstone was a large circular stone that could weigh multiple tons and was driven by animals to grind grain. It was used metaphorically of grinding people under the judgment of Yahweh or tying to people and casting them into the sea (Mark 9:42). Babylon, which grinded people down, is now thrown into the sea, never to rise up again. A poem is then sung about how Babylon will never be heard of again. Babylon is no more, and she will never return, for she has been brought down by Yahweh for the blood she has shed.

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<sup>106</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 887.

<sup>107</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 324.

## **VI. The Restoration of Creation (19:1–22:21)**

In this division, John receives a vision of the ultimate and final demise of Satan, evil, sin, and death that then allows the world to be free from defilement so that Yahweh and the Lamb may dwell in creation with humanity once again. The main point in this division is that all the prophecies of the Bible are leading to the restoration of the Garden of Eden, where Yahweh and the Lamb dwell and rest with humanity in a good creation and intimate community of fellowship.

### **A. The Return of Christ (19:1-21)**

This section reveals the long-awaited return of Jesus Christ to earth as King, where He will crush His enemies (Num. 24:17-19) and take the throne of David in order to rule over earth and establish a kingdom of peace and joy (Gen. 49:8-12).

**19:1-3** In the previous chapter, the people of the world mourned the fall of Babylon, but now the believers and angelic beings of heaven celebrate the fall of Babylon. This is a celebration of divine justice and victory over the systemic evil of the world.

The great multitude are the believers who were sealed by Yahweh (Rev. 7:9). They gave praise to Yahweh for being just and true, for destroying Babylon, and for freeing the world from its seduction into doing what is wicked and rebellious. The fall of Babylon is also the beginning of justice, which Yahweh had promised earlier, for the believers who had been killed (Ps. 58:10-11; Rev. 6:9-11). Yahweh is true to His promises.

The smoke of her burned body goes up to Yahweh in heaven forever and ever. In the First Testament, smoke going up is associated with sacrificial animal offerings to Yahweh. It is the smoke of the sacrifice that is a pleasing aroma to Yahweh, for it is the atonement for the sin (Ex. 29:25). Now Babylon has been burnt on the altar, and her death is a pleasing aroma to Yahweh, for her evil and adulteries no longer exist. The “forever and ever” is the unquenchable fire of judgement for that which is wicked (Gen. 19:28; Isa. 66:24; Jer. 17:27; Ezek. 20:48; Mark 9:43).

**19:4-5** Then the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures responded by praising Yahweh. The voice from the throne cannot be Yahweh or Jesus, for it commands that the people should praise God. So it must be an angelic being who stands close to the throne and represents the throne. The command it gives is for all of Yahweh’s servants who fear Him to give praise to Him. The implication based on the context is that He is worthy, for He has destroyed Babylon.

**19:6-8** Then the great multitude of believers responded to the command and praised Yahweh, for He reigns over creation and has prepared them as a bride for their wedding day to the Lamb. The First Testament saw Israel as a bride prepared for Yahweh (Isa. 54:6; 61:10; 62:5; Ezek. 16:7; Hos. 2:14-23). Jesus often spoke of Himself as the bridegroom and that His return would be for the great wedding banquet (Matt. 22:1-14; Mark 2:19-20; John 3:29) for, like Israel, the church is the bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33). This is the first mention in Revelation of the believers being the bride of the Lamb. This imagery will become the focus in Rev. 21–22.

The text says that the bride’s clean linen garments are the righteous acts of Yahweh’s people. This cannot refer literally to the believer’s own righteousness because the Bible makes it clear that none are righteous (Ps. 53:1-3; Rom. 3:10-12). Their righteousness must then be the

righteousness Yahweh credited to them because of their faith, as He did with Abraham (Gen. 15:6).<sup>108</sup>

**19:9-10** Then an angel declared a blessing over those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb (Isa. 25:6; Matt. 8:11; Luke 14:15-24). They are invited because they were sealed by the blood of the Lamb, rejected the mark of man, and did not give themselves over to Babylon and the beast. John was so overwhelmed by the awesomeness of this declaration that without thinking He bowed to the angel in worship. Yahweh is so glorious and awesome that even His heavenly servants reflect this glory. John has been so wowed repeatedly and now enraptured by the praise for the fall of Babylon, he is so moved by emotion that, without thinking, he worshiped a reflection of Yahweh rather than Yahweh Himself. The angel told him quickly to cease because he was just a fellow servant of Yahweh, like John, devoted to the testimony of Jesus. It is the Spirit of Yahweh, not the angel, that is the true voice of the words and declarations John has been hearing. The point is that even these glorious heavenly beings that are so close to Yahweh in proximity and character are still so far removed from the holy uniqueness of Yahweh and His grandeur that they are not worthy of worship. This also sets the stage for the triumphant and glorious arrival of Jesus Christ as king in the next scene.

**19:11-12** The splitting of the sky is a metaphor used of the coming of Yahweh down into creation in order to judge and redeem (2 Sam. 22:10; Ps. 18:9; Isa. 34:4; 50:3; 64:1-4; Ezek. 1:1; Mark 1:10-11; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; Rev. 20:11). From the sky came a warrior, who is Jesus Himself, riding a white horse and coming back to the earth. He is coming to bring both the final judgment on earth and the redemption of creation to completion (2 Thess. 1:6-10). In the Roman Empire, it was customary for a victorious general to celebrate his victory by leading a procession through Rome called the “triumph.” He would ride a white horse followed by his army and then his captives from battle. This is how Jesus returns to earth—as a victorious general. Even though the battle has not yet been fought, He rides a white horse, for there is no question about His victory, and He has already defeated sin, death, and the grave on the cross. The white horse also connects to His coming on the clouds as He said He would (Matt. 26:64; Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus is called Faithful and True. In Judaism, *faithful* and *true* are closely related; the fact that Yahweh is true is what makes Him faithful. These titles are used of Jesus not only because this is His character but because He has been faithful to His promise to return and judge and redeem creation. In the book of Revelation, the adjective *true* is used only of Yahweh (Rev. 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 9) and Jesus (Rev. 3:7, 14; 19:11; see also John 1:9; 8:16; 15:1; 1 John 2:8; 5:20; 2 John 3). But before He can finalize the redemption of creation, He must first come as the Warrior-King to judge and make war on all those who oppose Him and promote wickedness (Jer. 10:10).

His eyes are blazing fire, which communicates that He has come to judge, for fire is symbolic of judgment (Gen. 19:24; Deut. 4:24; 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Pet. 3:7) and links back to Jesus’ first appearance in Revelation (Rev. 1:14). On his head were “many” crowns. This is contrasted with the crowns of the dragon (Rev. 12:3) and the beast (Rev. 13:1), which were limited. Jesus’ crowns are so numerous that they are not even counted, for His kingship and dominion are cosmic and eternal and far greater than anything in the world (Rev. 1:5; 17:14; 19:16).<sup>109</sup> It is hard to know where the name that no one knows is written, but most likely it is written on His

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<sup>108</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 935-938.

<sup>109</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 489.

head or on the crowns. This name is contrasted with the blasphemous names of the beast and the prostitute that were written on their heads and crowns (Rev. 13:1; 17:3, 5).<sup>110</sup> “The new name” denotes the intimate covenantal relationship with Yahweh that is written on Israel (Isa. 62:2-5; 65:15; Rev. 3:11-12).

The question is what the “name” is. It has been suggested that it is He who is named “Jesus,” who has been lifted above all other names because of His obedience to Yahweh (Phil. 2:9-11).<sup>111</sup> The problem with this is that Revelation says that only He knows the name. Some scholars say it is the name *Yahweh*, for its pronunciation has become unknown since the Jews refused to pronounce it.<sup>112</sup> This would link Him with Yahweh as sovereign king over creation, who has the right to render judgment. But the problem with this is that Yahweh’s name was not supposed to be unknown, for it is the name Yahweh gave to Moses and told him to use (Ex. 3:14-15), and it is the name that the psalmists and prophets used regularly. Others say that this name is mysterious and completely unknown as the text says.<sup>113</sup> In the ancient world, it was believed that if someone could learn the personal name of a spirit or god, then they would gain power over them or be able to harness their power for their own use. The point is not about the actual name but that no one has power over Jesus Christ.

**19:13-16** He is dressed in a robe that is dipped in blood. Is this His own blood from the cross or the blood of His defeated enemies? Some say it is His own blood, for it is through His sacrifice that He has gained victory over the evil and death of the world.<sup>114</sup> The problem is that this is not at all what the imagery of the context is communicating. The context is that He is coming to judge and wage war, the armies of heaven are following Him, and He has a sword to strike down the nations and will tread upon them like one treads upon grapes. This is the blood of those He has conquered.<sup>115</sup> The background for this scene is Isa. 63:1-7, which portrays Yahweh as treading the nations like grapes in a wine press, and their blood splatters upon His clothing. Like Yahweh He comes as the cosmic Warrior-King to judge the nation (Ex. 15:11-18; Judg. 5:1-31; Isa. 59:15-20; Zech. 14:1-21). The imagery may also connect Him to Roman commanders, who wore red uniforms in battle.

His armies follow behind Him, dressed in white linen and also riding white horses. Some have said that these are the believers since they are dressed in white, which often indicates believers.<sup>116</sup> But this imagery is also used of angels (John 20:12). Others say the armies of Yahweh are always the heavenly angels (Dan. 7:10; Zech. 14:5; Matt. 13:40-42; 25:31-32; Mark 8:38; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14-15).<sup>117</sup> There is a possibility that His armies include both the angels and the believers.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 955.

<sup>111</sup> See Philip E. Hughes. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>112</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 954-955; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 490-491.

<sup>113</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 252; George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 279-280; Richard J. Bauckham. *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 1302.

<sup>114</sup> See M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, pp. 196-197; Robert W. Wall. *Revelation*, p. 231.

<sup>115</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 491; Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 733

<sup>116</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 439; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 354.

<sup>117</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22*, p. 1059; George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 281.

<sup>118</sup> R. H. Charles. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, pp. 2, 135-136; G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 960.

The sword coming out of His mouth is the sword of Yahweh (Deut. 32:41; 1 Chron. 21:12; Ps. 17:13; Jer. 47:6; Ezek. 30:24; Zech. 13:7; Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:21). This is the appearance of Jesus at the beginning of the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:16). He is the chosen Servant of Yahweh who will strike down the nations with the words of His mouth (Isa. 11:4; 49; Heb. 4:12). He will rule them with an iron scepter—a weapon used to crush one’s enemies—which is an allusion to the first prophecies of the Messiah (Gen. 49:8-12; Num. 24:17-19; Ps. 2:7-9). He will tread the nations, as in a winepress, in the wrath of Yahweh against all the great evils the nations have committed (Isa. 63:1-7; Joel 3:13).

Most translations translate the text such that the name was written “on His robe and on His thigh”—in two places. But most scholars agree that it should be translated “on His robe, that is on His thigh.” The name was written on the part of His robe that covered His thigh, where His sword would be strapped.<sup>119</sup> Thus His name—the Warrior-King—is connected to His sword.

The names of gods were written on the thigh of their sculpture. The thigh was the place of the sword (Ex. 32:27; Judg. 3:21; Ps. 45:3; Song of Song 3:8) and of the symbolic swearing of oaths (Gen. 24:2; 47:29). The Warrior-King will carry out Yahweh’s promise to judge the nations by His victory over the enemies of righteousness.<sup>120</sup>

The title “king of kings and lord of lords” was used of ancient kings, like Cyrus III of Persia and Caesar of Rome, when declaring their rule over many nations and client kings. Jesus uses the title to declare His sovereignty over all the nations.

**19:17-21** Then an angel called all the birds of the air to feed on the dead bodies of all those who had opposed Jesus and died. The imagery of birds eating the dead is used in the Bible to communicate victory over one’s enemies in battle and, most of the time, as a judgment from Yahweh. (Deut. 28:6; 1 Kgs. 14:11; 16:4; 21:23-24; Jer. 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Ezek. 39:17). The fact that the birds are invited to eat the dead before the text even describes the battle means the victory is certain.

Then the two beasts, leading the kings of all the nations and their armies, marched out to oppose Jesus Christ and to try to destroy Him like they did His followers throughout history. But the battle is never described—only what is done with the beasts and the kings and their armies in the aftermath of the battle. The fact that the battle is not described means it is not an epic battle. Most of the time, battles in the Bible are not described because they are not epic. Epic battles last for a while because the enemy is formidable, making it a difficult victory. But because Yahweh is far greater than any nation or army, when He fights on Israel’s behalf the battles are never epic and so are never described. The only time they are described is when the people are not trusting in Yahweh or when He has handed them over in judgment to the foreign army, leaving them on their own to fight the battle. Here, all the nations together stand no chance. Though the defeat of the beasts and the kings and their armies is literal, the battle is not a literal one but rather is a metaphorical image of Jesus bringing an end to rulers of the nations. There is no reason for Christ to fight a battle, for there is no contest between the Creator and the creation.

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<sup>119</sup> See Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 255; J. Moffatt. “The Revelation of St. John Divine,” p. 468; Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, pp. 733-734; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 356; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 495.

<sup>120</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 963; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 495.

The beast (the state) and the prophet (the propaganda machine) were captured and thrown into the lake of fire, which is their total demise; they will never return again. The kings of the earth and their armies were then killed with the sword that came out of Jesus' mouth. This seems to be a defeat of only the kings and the armies of the world; nothing is said of the everyday, normal people who live in the nations, meaning many unbelievers and believers are alive on earth after the second coming of Christ. Now that the state (beast), the propaganda machine (the prophet), the rulers, and the armies have been eliminated, the people of the nations have no rulers or armies to protect them. Therefore, Christ takes all the thrones of the earth as the King of kings and the Lord of lords and begins to rule over all the nations, both believers and unbelievers. This is what Rev. 20 will unpack.

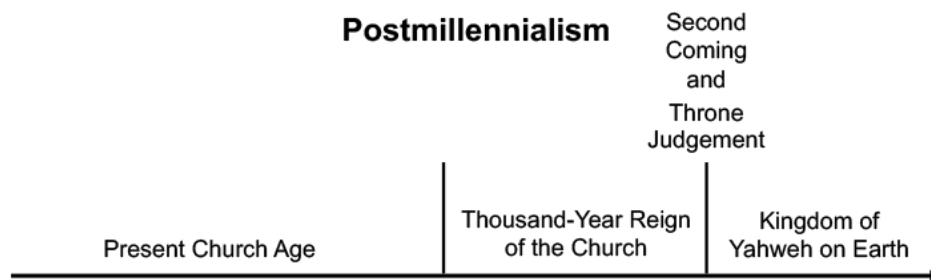
## B. The Thousand-Year Reign of Christ (20:1-15)

In this section Satan is bound in the abyss while Christ rules over creation for a thousand years. At the end of this, Satan is released for His final defeat.

**20:1-3** The vision begins with John seeing an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain. He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan. This is not saying that Satan is the serpent from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) any more than he is literally every mention of the serpent in the Bible or a literal dragon (Ps. 74:12-15; 89:8-11; Isa. 27:1). Rather, it is saying he is the ultimate embodiment of chaos, which is symbolized by the serpent and the dragon. Satan is bound, thrown into, and sealed in the abyss for a thousand years so that he cannot deceive the nations anymore. After this, he is set free on the earth again to face his final defeat. In Rev. 9:1-3 the angel used the key to the abyss to unlock it and release the bound demons onto the earth, whereas here, in Rev. 20, he throws Satan into the abyss and locks and seals it. In the same way creation began with the subduing of the sea and the sea monster of chaos (Isa. 74:12-18; 89:8-11), so does the final redemption of creation (Isa. 27:1).

Christians have interpreted the thousand-year reign of Christ in three different ways.

Postmillennialists do not believe that Jesus will literally and physically reign on earth or that Satan will literally be thrown into the abyss for this thousand-year period. They believe the thousand-year kingdom is symbolic of the Church, not Jesus, establishing the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth at the very end of history, right before the second coming of Christ. The tribulation (Rev. 6–19) is all of history between the first and second coming of Christ, when the church will grow throughout history. Right at the end of human history, the church will become powerful enough that it will literally rule over the nations, establishing peace on earth. Their righteous rule on earth is the binding of Satan, such that he no longer rules over or can deceive creation. The church's righteous rule on earth will usher in the second coming, Christ's return to earth. Very few hold this view since nothing in Scripture even hints at Christians ruling over creation or being able to pull off world peace on their own.

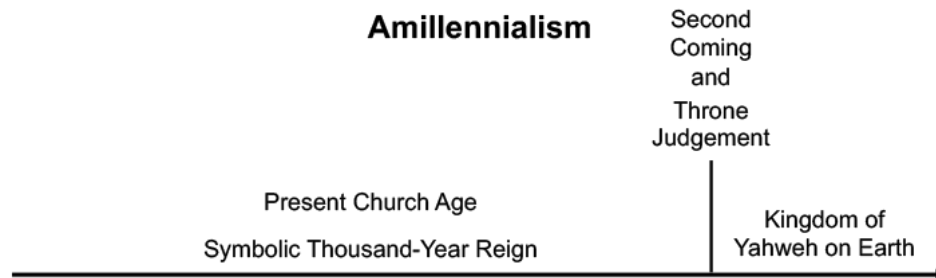


Amillennialists also do not believe that Jesus will literally and physically reign on earth or that Satan will literally be thrown into the abyss for this thousand-year period.<sup>121</sup> They believe that the thousand-year kingdom is symbolic of the present age and is a recapitulation of all history between the first and second comings of Christ. The number is symbolic, just like every other number in the book of Revelation. Satan's being thrown into the abyss is symbolic of his defeat at the cross, such that he can no longer deceive Christians, harm them spiritually, or hinder the

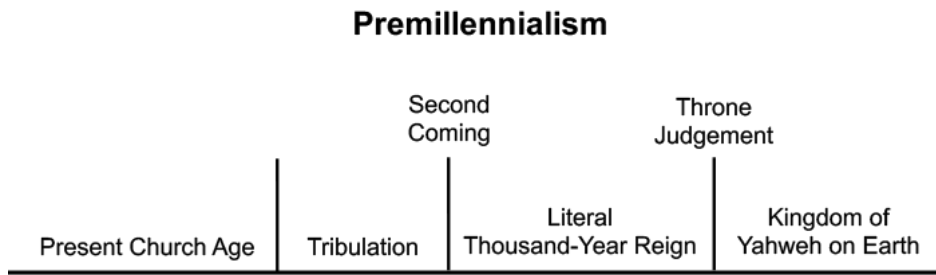
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<sup>121</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 972-983; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, pp. 502-505; M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, pp. 197-198.

spread of the gospel.<sup>122</sup> His release from the abyss (Rev. 20:7) does not happen chronologically after his binding but is symbolic of the fact that he still has influence over the nations to deceive them and that evil is still at work. His binding in the abyss and his release are simultaneous realities of his power over the world. It does not mean the influence of the demonic powers in society has come to an end (2 Cor. 4:3-4; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Pet. 5:8-9), rather that Jesus is sovereign over Satan (Matt. 12:29). Satan cannot prevent anyone from being drawn to Christ (John 12:31-32), nor can he delude and attack the covenant community of Yahweh (2 Thess. 2:6-12).<sup>123</sup> At the end of human history, Christ will come and bring the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth. They would argue that nowhere in this chapter does it state that the thousand-year reign of Christ and the believers happens on earth; rather, they are reigning from heaven after their death. This view has a lot of merit to it, especially because seeing it as symbolic fits in with the rest of the previous chapters. I am open to this view but lean more toward the premillennialist view.



Premillennialists believe that Jesus will literally and physically reign on earth and that Satan will literally be thrown into the abyss for this thousand-year period after Jesus' second coming (Rev. 19:11-21).<sup>124</sup> Satan is sealed in the abyss so that he cannot affect anyone on earth in any way during this time. Within this view, some see the thousand years as a literal thousand years, and some see it as symbolic of a long period of time. The latter is preferred, based on how numbers are used throughout Revelation. After this period of time, Satan is literally released to deceive the nations, followed by his final and complete defeat. Though most of Revelation so far has been a recapitulation of the tribulation history (Rev. 6–19) and seen as highly symbolic, there is a point at which the account switches to a future reality of the arrival of Christ, the end of Satan, and the Kingdom of Yahweh established on earth. As already discussed, there is strong evidence for this happening in Rev. 17–19 with the arrival of Christ. So, it makes sense to see Rev. 20 as a future event after the arrival of Christ rather than a recapitulation of all the tribulation history.



<sup>122</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 985-986.

<sup>123</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 505.

<sup>124</sup> See George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 287-292, 314-318; Craig S. Keener. *Revelation*, pp. 463-469. Robert. H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 360-370.

There are many factors that do favor the premillennial view. First, it is hard to interpret the binding of Satan as being symbolic of his having less influence in the world. Nowhere does Revelation make a distinction that he cannot harm the believers spiritually or impede the spread of the gospel but that he can harm non-believers. To the contrary, the Bible makes it clear that he can make it difficult for people to respond to the gospel (Luke 8:12) and can deceive the believers. As one looks at history and the current state of the world, it is clear that Satan has not been bound but is deceiving believers and non-believers (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 6:12; 1 Tim. 3:7; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 Pet. 5:8).

When the demons were bound and locked in the abyss, they could not harm anyone in any way until they were released (Rev. 9:1-6). Jude 6 states that they were locked away and bound as a punishment until judgment day. And in other Jewish writings, this is seen as a literal imprisonment, where they cannot harm anyone (Jude 6; 1 Enoch 10:4-12; 14:5; 2 Enoch 7:1-2; 2 Apoc. Bar. 56:13; Jub. 5:6). Satan's being thrown into the abyss and locked away has to be seen in the same way, in that he cannot harm anyone. But this is not what we see in the present age. It does not make sense that the demons cannot harm people while in the abyss but Satan can.

Second, it says that Satan was locked and sealed in the abyss, which communicates an unbreakable bond. The word "seal" is used of the scroll, meaning its edicts could not be put into effect until the seals were opened, which only the Lamb was worthy of doing (Rev. 5:1-5). The 144,000 were sealed by Yahweh and could not be harmed (Rev. 7:3, 4, 5, 8). The seven thunders were sealed and could not be known (Rev. 10:4). This intensifies the idea of "locking" and "sealing," which communicates an absolutely secure lock; what is in it cannot have an effect on what is outside it.

Third, if Rev. 20 is a recapitulation of the tribulation history of Rev. 6–19, that means the release of the demons from the abyss is happening at the same time as Satan's binding in the abyss. How can the abyss be open to release the demons at the same time it is sealed with Satan in it? Why is it that demons are allowed out but Satan is not? What difference would it make on the world to have one kind of demon out and another kind of demon in?

Fourth, if Rev. 20 is a recapitulation, then it should end with the coming of Christ again, since He had already returned at the end Rev. 19.

Fifth, the idea of an intermediate period of the Messiah's reign on earth—between the present age and the Kingdom of Yahweh coming to earth—appears frequently in Jewish writings (1 Enoch 21:6; 2 Enoch 32:1–33:2; 4 Ezra 7:28-29; Barn. 15; Jub. 23:27-28). These passages portray history as a cosmic week of symbolic thousand-year days. The present age is six thousand years followed by the seventh thousand-year reign of the Messiah. There are some of these Jewish writings that have a different number than a thousand, but the vision could still be drawing from this idea. A literal Messianic reign of Christ would fulfill many of the prophecies of Jesus' being the descendant of David taking the throne on earth, which was seen in the disciples' anticipation of Jesus as King (Act 1:6).

**20:4-6** During this thousand-year reign, the martyrs ("witnesses") who did not worship the beast were resurrected and reigned with Christ during the thousand-year kingdom. The amillennialist does not see this as a physical bodily resurrection but as a spiritual resurrection.<sup>125</sup> The only

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<sup>125</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1000-1006; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 510. Philip E. Hughes. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 317.

reason for this view is they see the thousand-year kingdom as symbolic of the present age; thus, they cannot see it as a physical resurrection because that would mean the dead believers would be resurrected in the present age. That is clearly not happening, nor is it what the Bible teaches. So, they say this resurrection is either the regeneration of the human spirit upon being born again as a Christian or, after the believer dies, is a symbolic and spiritual resurrection into heaven, where they are free from sin and receive the promises of Yahweh.

The problem with this is that no place in the Bible ever describes being born again or dying and going to heaven as a “resurrection.” Resurrection is always a physical bodily resurrection (Matt. 9:18; Rom. 14:9; Rev. 2:8; 13:14). The amillennialist points to Rom. 6:3-11, which talks about baptism, where Paul connects the resurrection of Christ with our new life as Christians. But baptism is an imagery of death and resurrection with Christ, and Paul does not equate the two.

Rev. 20:4 clearly states that the believers who had already died and have been dead, came to life, and then reigned with Christ. This clearly refers to a physical bodily resurrection. John calls this the first resurrection. The rest of the dead did not come back to life until after the thousand-year kingdom, which would be the second resurrection. Some believe that the first resurrection refers to the martyrs only—those who were killed for their faith. This will be followed by the second resurrection—of all the other believers and the unbelievers—after the thousand-year kingdom (Rev. 20:12).<sup>126</sup> Though this is possible, it is more likely that this is the resurrection of all the believers followed by just the unbelievers in the second resurrection.<sup>127</sup> As discussed in Rev. 2:13, the Greek word *martyr* (also *martyr* in English) means “witness,” a term used of all the believers throughout history. It states that they had been killed by beheading, but that was not how most of the believers were martyred in the Roman empire nor throughout history.

Beheading is a metaphor for their execution. What is emphasized in Revelation concerning the slain witnesses is not that they have been killed for their faith but that they did not take the mark of the beast or worship it, which led to their being marginalized or attacked (Rev. 2:3, 6, 13, 19, 24; 3:4, 10; 7:14; 12:4, 10, 13, 17; 13:7-8, 15; 16:15; 17:8; 20:4), in contrast to those who did (Rev. 2:14, 20; 13:4, 8, 16; 17:1-2, 8; 18:3, 9; 19:20; 20:3). This is the main identity of the witnesses. No place in the Bible describes multiple resurrections of the believers.

The first death is that of dying physically, and the second death is that of being thrown into the lake of fire. Those who experience the first resurrection are blessed, for the second death has no power over them. This also points to the first resurrection being all the believers; it specifically states that those who experience this resurrection will not go into the lake of fire, whereas it never says that of those who experience the second resurrection in Rev. 20:12.

It is difficult to know what the text means—that the witnesses will reign with Christ for a thousand years. As mentioned above, it is possible that many unbelievers are still alive on earth after Christ has returned and the beasts and the kings of the earth have been defeated, meaning Christ is now ruling over all the nations. This would mean the Christians have been resurrected and are ruling over creation as the vice regents and governors under the kingship of Christ. They will then rule over those who oppress them, but they will reign with peace, justice, and joy, like

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<sup>126</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22*; Isbon T. Beckwith. *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 744; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 364-370.

<sup>127</sup> See Craig Keener. *Revelation*, p. 467; G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1006; Grant R. Osborne. *Revelation*, p. 707.

Christ. And as they are witnesses of Christ, the implication is that some of the unbelievers will come to Christ under His holy and righteous reign.

**20:7-14** After the thousand-year kingdom, Satan is released on the earth. He will go out and deceive the nations again, which will lead to a countless number of people (Josh. 11:4; 1 Sam. 13:5; 1 Mac. 11:1) gathering against Christ to make war against Him (Ps. 48:1-8; 76:1-12; Ezek. 38-39). The background for Gog and Magog is Ezek. 38-39. In Ezekiel, it is Gog of Magog, and He is described as the chief prince of Meshek and Tubal. Nothing has been discovered from the ancient East to match up with these names. The names Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, and Togarmah appear in Gen. 10:2-3 as the descendants of Japheth located in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Gog is used as a personal name in 1 Chron. 5:4. In Ezek. 38-39 Gog is described as leading an alliance of nations against Israel. The number of the nations being seven suggests a completion or conglomeration of all the nations. Thus, Gog is a typology of all the nations. This is how the early Jews interpreted it, for they morphed Gog of Magog into “Gog and Magog”—a symbol of the ultimate enemies of Yahweh.<sup>128</sup> The fact that John uses the phrasing Gog and Magog instead of Gog of Magog means he is tapping into the Jewish idea that this is symbolic of all the nations that oppose Yahweh, not some specific geo-political nation. It is clear in the book of Revelation that Babylon is symbolic of all the evil nations, so Gog and Magog should be seen in the same way.<sup>129</sup>

Like before, Christ easily defeated the army that opposed Him. The fire from heaven is a metaphor for the judgment of Yahweh upon the army. Satan is finally and completely dealt with by being thrown into the lake of fire where the two beasts are. There they will live in psychological torment forever, having been cut off from the presence of Yahweh for all eternity. The “forever” communicates that this is not annihilation but a permanent existence of separation from Yahweh.

Why would Christ bind Satan and then release him to deceive humans into opposing Christ again? Perhaps this is meant to reveal the true sinfulness of humanity and righteous justice of Yahweh. With Satan bound in the abyss, he is no longer able to deceive, tempt, and harm humanity. Christ is physically on earth, ruling over all the nations as a righteous and just ruler. Despite this, humans still oppose the will of Yahweh and seek to dethrone their righteous Creator so that they can be autonomous and rebel. Satan’s release gives them the master they truly want and an opportunity to act upon that choice. This shows that when humanity has been under the long reign of Satan (present age) and Christ (thousand-year age), many would choose to align with Satan. This demonstrates that Yahweh is truly just in the judgment that follows and in sending rebellious sinners to the lake of fire to join Satan, the master they have chosen.

**20:11-15** Yahweh’s sitting on the throne to judge creation finds its background in Dan. 7:9-10 and Ezek. 1:25-28. It is not clear whether it is Yahweh or Christ sitting on the throne. Normally it is Yahweh who sits on the throne (Rev. 4:2, 3, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5), but Christ is also portrayed as sharing the throne of Yahweh (Rev. 7:17; 14:3; 22:3, 22). John sees a unity between Yahweh and Christ (John 5:19; 10:30; Rev. 5:11-13; 11:15; 12:10; 22:16), and

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<sup>128</sup> See M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, p. 209.

<sup>129</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 372; George Raymond Beasley-Murray. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 297; G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1022-1023; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 512; George B. Caird. *The Apostolic Age*, pp. 256-257.

judgment is executed through Christ (Matt. 25:31-46; Acts 10:42; Rom. 2:16; 2 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 20:11-15).<sup>130</sup> Thus a co-reign should be seen here.

The Hebrew word *ouranos* can be translated “heaven” or “sky,” which is usually understood by the context. Here it is difficult to know, but usually when it is paired with the earth, it means “sky” and forms a merism referring to everything in creation. Also, it would not make sense for heaven to be fleeing when heaven is good and that is where Yahweh, the Lamb, and all the angels are. The earth and sky fleeing is not literal, as this is used as a metaphorical description of Yahweh’s entering into creation (2 Sam. 22:10; Ps. 18:9; Isa. 34:4; 50:3; 64:1-4; Ezek. 1:1; Mark 1:10-11; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; Rev. 19:11; 20:11). Nor is it possible for the earth and sky to be no more, since after this the sea gives up its dead (Rev. 20:13). The point is that the boundaries and structures of the world have been removed for the arrival of Yahweh’s kingdom on earth.<sup>131</sup>

This is the second resurrection, which is only the unbelievers since the believers were already resurrected (Rev. 20:4-5). “The dead, great and small” refers to the fact that all people, regardless of their social status, will stand before Yahweh in judgment. The books are a record of all the deeds of humans. The books are not literal but are a metaphor for the divine, accurate record of people’s actions (Rev. 19:2). The other book is the book of life, which records those who are sealed in the blood of the Lamb (Ex. 32:32-33; Isa. 4:3). The death of Christ paid for everyone’s sins regardless of whether they accepted Him. The only sin for which people are sent to hell and then the lake of fire is the rejection of the sacrifice of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). People will not be judged based on their works but on their life and activities that demonstrated whether they had faith in Yahweh (Job 34:11; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; Rom. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:17). All this imagery is not meant to be seen as though Yahweh will carry out literal judgments with a literal line of people before His throne with literal books He looks through to determine their judgment. Rather, it shows the knowledge and preciseness of Yahweh’s judgments over humanity.

The sea, death, and Hades gave up all their dead for the judgment of Yahweh. This is a mixed element here, where the dead, who were literally residing in these places, are now released but also the sense that these places represent chaos and so the demonic leaders are forced to release their captives for judgment.<sup>132</sup>

Once the judgment of humanity was finished, the power of death and Hades was thrown into the lake of fire. Then those who were not found in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is not annihilation, for those who are in it are tormented forever (Rev. 20:20). This is the second death. It is not literally fire, for fire is symbolic of judgment (Gen. 19:24-25; Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:9-14; Josh. 7:15; Isa. 64:1-2; Amos 7:4; Zech. 3:2-5; Mal. 3:2; Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 3:12-15). It is then some kind of location in an alternate dimension that is outside the presence and covenant community of Yahweh. From the first moment Adam and Eve sinned against Yahweh, the judgment for sin was exile from His presence (Gen. 3:21-24). It is in exile, ruled by autonomy and sin, that humans create their own torment with their selfishness, sinful desires, corrupt power institutions, and wars—their own living hell on earth. However, Yahweh is still active in creation and history, drawing people into His covenant community. Faith in

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<sup>130</sup> See Robert H. Mounce. *The Book Revelation*, p. 375. Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 516; Milligan p. 353.

<sup>131</sup> See John Philip McMurdo Sweet. *Revelation*, p. 294; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 516.

<sup>132</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1034.

Yahweh is what allows one to be sealed in the blood of the Lamb and redeemed back into the presence of Yahweh. Therefore, an absence of faith is continued exile.

Since the lake of fire is the final judgment of Yahweh, this would be an eternal exile. The lake of fire represents a total and permanent separation from Yahweh, where He is no longer active and where His fruits of love, peace, joy, hope, and so on are no longer present in the lives of the people who dwell there. People completely devoid of the fruits of the Spirit and living for themselves are going to create an even greater torment for themselves in the lake of fire. The lake of fire then represents the tortured existence of those who live outside the community of Yahweh and belong to an evil society that opposes Yahweh and His will. It is very important to understand that Yahweh does not create this place of torment to punish and torture them; that is not His character. Rather, they turn this place into a place of torment through their own choices and actions. In addition, the real torment is not a physical one; rather, it is the psychological, emotional, and spiritual torment of living without Yahweh, their creator and redeemer, for all eternity (Rev. 9:5; 14:10-11; 18:7, 10, 15). Yahweh gave them the choice to live for and with Him or for themselves, and they choose the latter. Therefore, He is giving them exactly what they want. The Bible makes it clear over and over again that this is their choice, and He is giving them over to their choice. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, even when the rich man was in torment in hell, he never repented and even continued to see himself as superior to others by treating Lazarus and even Abraham as servants to do his will. This parable shows that these people are so committed to living for themselves and unwilling to repent, they would not choose to live and join Yahweh's covenant community.

Yahweh uses the imagery of fire and torment to communicate the intensity of the suffering that one will experience being separated from Him for all eternity. How do you explain the intensity of this suffering to people who do not care about being separated from Yahweh for all eternity? The Bible uses the imagery of fire, for being thrown into fire communicates intense suffering to every human.

### C. The Marriage of Heaven and Earth (21:1–22:21)

In this section John sees the coming of Yahweh, the Lamb, and the Kingdom of Heaven down to earth to dwell permanently with humanity. This is the conclusion of all the prophecies of the Bible and is the full restoration of the Garden of Eden. The reality of the marriage of heaven and earth (Matt. 6:9-10) is so awesome and indescribable that John stretches human vocabulary to its limits to convey truths that are spiritual and everlasting.<sup>133</sup>

**21:1** The Greek word *ouranos*, translated “heaven,” should be understood here as “sky,” since in Rev. 21:2 the Holy City is coming down out of the heaven where Yahweh dwells and into this sky (heaven) and land (earth). The context makes it clear that heaven, where the Holy City is coming from, is separate from the sky and land that are passing away, for it would not make sense for heaven to be passing away at the same time the Holy City is coming out of it. The idea of a new sky and earth taking the place of the first sky and land that had passed away should not be understood as literal, as though the first was destroyed and then replaced with a new one. There are two Greek words for *new*. *Neos* means “fresh” in the sense of a new thing in time or has just recently come into existence. It is usually used of a new batch of something (Matt. 9:17; 1 Cor. 5:7) or young people (Luke 15:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:1-2). While *kainos*, which is used here, means “renewed,” “an unknown newness,” or “improved,” in the sense of new in quality or different in nature from the old. It is frequently used of something that is superior to the old (Mark 1:27). The church is said to be “new” (*kainos*) humanity (Eph. 2:15)—not that it is a brand-new humanity or people of Yahweh who had never existed but a merger of the Jews, who had already been the people of Yahweh, and the Gentiles as a renewed and changed people and as a new community of humanity superior to the previous community. Paul says that those who are in Christ are a new (*kianos*) creation, for the old has gone and the new (*kianos*) is here (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul is not saying that those who become Christians are destroyed and somehow created into something brand new; rather, they are renewed and transformed into new kind of person who can know Yahweh and live like Him. Paul says to put on the “new” (*kianos*) self (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10)—not that you are to get rid of your body or person and get a brand new one, but that you are to put off your old way of thinking and living and put on a new way of thinking and living.

Thus the idea here is that creation (“sky and land”) will remain but is going to be transformed or renewed into something new and superior, bringing a new quality of existence (Matt. 19:28).<sup>134</sup> Yahweh is not going to destroy the old creation and then create a totally brand-new creation to replace the old one any more than He does with our bodies (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). In fact, He values His original creation so much that when our original bodies die, He resurrects them (1 Cor. 15). Yahweh’s desire is to redeem what is lost, fallen, broken, and defiled back to Himself—not to destroy it and start over. Love is restoration and redemption, not replacement. What this looks like is described in the following verses.

We have already seen that the renewal of creation began with the total removal of sin, evil, Satan, death, and Hades (Rev. 19-20). Here John states that there was no more sea in this new creation. This does not mean that seventy-five percent of the earth’s surface will be eliminated, rather, sea is a metaphor for the chaos that will no longer exist in the new creation. Because

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<sup>133</sup> See M. Eugene Boring. *Revelation*, pp. 213-215; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 379-381.

<sup>134</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 524; G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1041.

Satan, unbelievers, and sin have been removed, there will be no more chaos in creation.<sup>135</sup> The imagery of the sea as chaos has been a very prevalent image all throughout the Bible and history, and now the day has come when it has been eliminated. This also means that the chaotic sea in Rev. 5:6, which separated humanity from Yahweh, is now no more, meaning humanity can fully come to the throne of Yahweh, as will be seen in Rev. 21:9-11.

**21:2-5** Then John saw the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down from heaven onto the earth. This is the merger of heaven and earth. Just as heaven and earth were merged together in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1–2), but earth fell from heaven due to sin (Gen. 3), now they are rejoined in a spiritual renewal after the removal of sin and evil and the restoration of Yahweh’s rule (2 Pet. 3:12).<sup>136</sup> This Holy City is the true Jerusalem, built by Yahweh, not the earthly Jerusalem built by humans, which became corrupted and was therefore destroyed (Isa. 48:2; Joel 4:17; Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10; 12:22; 13:14). It is the embodiment of all the promises of Yahweh for His covenant people. This would be encouraging to those who witnessed (late date of Revelation) or were about to see (early date of Revelation) the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD) and were likely to think the promises of Yahweh were at risk.

But this is not a literal city, for it is described as a bride prepared for Yahweh, which will be unpacked more in the following verses. Instead, this is describing the reborn and resurrected people of Yahweh, who are sealed in the blood of the Lamb.<sup>137</sup> In the Bible, Israel is described as a woman or bride (Isa. 1:8; Jer. 4:32; Gal. 4:22-31; Rev. 12:1) dressed in the purity of white (Isa. 49:18; 52:1-10; 61:20; 62:1-5) and prepared for an intimate relationship with Yahweh, her husband (Jer. 31:31-34). The bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7; 21:9) is contrasted with the Woman of Babylon (Rev. 17:3-4, 6-7, 9, 18).

Once again, as in the Garden of Eden, Yahweh dwells with humanity on earth. After the fall of humanity, Yahweh came and dwelt with Israel in His Shekinah Glory, which was a pillar of fire that rested on the tabernacle with Israel (Ex. 25:8; 29:45-46; 40:34; Lev. 26:11; Num. 10:11; Deut. 12:5; Ezek. 37:27). But only the high priest, and only once a year, had access to the dwelling of Yahweh, and this access was only to the fire and not to the actual presence of Yahweh. The Hebrew word for tabernacle, *miskan*, meant “dwelling.” Because of the idolatrous sin of the people, the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh departed from the temple right before the Babylonians came (Ezek. 1; 10). Yahweh then promised that after the exile He would return to dwell with them again (Ezek. 43:7), but after the exile the glory of Yahweh did not return again until have the coming of Jesus. John said, “The Word became flesh and made his *dwelling* (*tabernacled*) among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jesus is the fulfillment (John 1:14; Rev. 7:15; 12:12; 13:6; 15:5; 19:7-8) of Yahweh’s promise to return, and His death and resurrection now allow Yahweh to return and dwell fully on earth (Ex. 3:12; Deut. 20:1; 1 Chron. 22:18; Ezra 1:3; Ezek. 34:30-31; Zeph. 2:7; Zech. 8:23; Matt. 1:23; John 3:2). The ultimate goal is not for us to die, leave earth, and go to heaven to be with Yahweh but for Jesus to redeem the world and for Yahweh to come down out of heaven and dwell with us again on earth.

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<sup>135</sup> See Richard J. Bauckhman. *Theology*, pp. 49-50; Henry Barclay Swete. *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 275; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 524.

<sup>136</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1041; Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 524.

<sup>137</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1045; Martin Kiddle. *The Revelation of St. John*, pp. 410-411; Philip E. Hughes. *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 222-223; Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 382.

In this new Jerusalem there will be no more suffering, crying, mourning, or death (Isa. 35:10; 51:11; 1 Cor. 15:54-55), for the old order—the old, sinful way of thinking and actions that are contrary to the will of Yahweh—has passed away (Isa. 43:18-19; 65:15-25). This emphasizes that the new sky and land are not literal sky and land; rather, the old world of sin and the anti-God philosophy that ran the world have passed away (Isa. 43:18-19; 65:15-25). Yahweh states that He is making all things new, and you can record and trust in that promise, for He is trustworthy and true.

**21:6-7** Yahweh declared that the redemption of creation was now done. Just like creation was not complete until the seventh day, when Yahweh entered creation and dwelt with humanity in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:1-3), so once again Yahweh's dwelling in creation completes the redemption of creation. Yahweh from the very beginning of creation has been working out the redemption of creation (Rev. 1:4, 8). Whoever thirsts for eternal life Yahweh will freely give with no cost to those who come (Ps. 42:1-2; Isa. 49:10; 55:1; Rev. 7:17). But only to those who are victorious in maintaining their devotion to Jesus Christ despite the pressure to compromise will inherit eternal life (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 15:2). The mutual relationship that Yahweh and His people will have comes from the wording of His covenant with David in 2 Sam. 7:14. There Yahweh made a promise that He would always have a descendant sitting on the throne of Israel, which was fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, this promise is made to Yahweh's covenant people, who are in Christ, that they will be rulers in the New Kingdom (Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; 1 Pet. 2:9).

**21:8** There is a moral component to the list of those who will be excluded from the Holy City and be thrown into the lake of fire (Mark 7:21-23; Luke 18:11; Rom. 1:28-31; 2 Cor. 12:20; Eph. 5:3-5; Titus 3:3; Rev. 22:15). But the fact that the list begins with “cowardly” and ends with “liars” means this is not a general statement about cowards; rather, it is specifically about those who compromise truth and righteousness under the pressure of doctrinal or government sources (1 John 2:21-22).<sup>138</sup> “Unbelieving, sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, and idolaters” are associated with pagan idolatry. The “vile” or “detestable” is also associated with idolatry, for those who worship detestable things become detestable (2 Kgs. 17:15). Murder may be associated with the fact that Satan is a murderer (John 8:44; Rev. 12:9) and when anyone acts like him and does not love, they metaphorically—and maybe even literally—become a murderer (1 John 3:15).

Jesus already addressed these behaviors in the letters to the seven churches when He exhorted the believers to be the opposite of many ungodly character traits.<sup>139</sup> The opposite of cowardly is fearless (Rev. 2:10) and conquerors (Rev. 3:21). The opposite of unbelieving is faithful (Rev. 2:19). The opposite of vile, murderers, sexually immoral, and sorcerers is unsoiled (Rev. 3:4) and persevering (Rev. 3:8). The opposite of idolaters is having not denied His name (Rev. 3:8). The opposite of liars is keeping His word (Rev. 3:10).

**21:9-11** One of the angels said to John that He would show him the bride of the Lamb and then carried him to a great and high mountain. In the ancient world, the pagan gods lived on top of a cosmic mountain that towered into the heavens completely separated from humans. Unlike the pagan gods, however, Yahweh's cosmic mountain was the Garden of Eden, where He placed Adam and Eve on it to dwell with Him (Gen. 2). Because of sin they were no longer able to be

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<sup>138</sup> See Eugen M. Boring. *Revelation*, p. 217.

<sup>139</sup> See G. K. Beale. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 1059.

on the cosmic mountain (Gen. 3:21-24). Yet because Yahweh was a relational God who desired to redeem humans back to Himself, He made Mount Sinai His cosmic mountain in the wilderness and invited the Israelites to come to its base, where He spoke to them (Ex. 19). He then dwelt in their midst in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:8; 29:45-46; 40:34; Lev. 26:11; Num. 10:11; Deut. 12:5; Ezek. 37:27). And then in Israel He made Mount Zion His cosmic mountain (Ps. 2:6; 48:2; 74:2). But Yahweh promised that one day He would redeem humanity and they would be able to once again dwell on His cosmic mountain with Him (Isa. 2:1-5; 4:5; Mic. 4:1-5; Joel 2:32; Obad. 1:17) and all the nations would be included (Mic. 4:1-7; 7:16-17; Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:18-25; 40:6-7; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:3-8; 60:1-11; 66:12; Zeph. 3:9-12; 66:17-19; Jer. 3:16-18; Ezek. 17:22-24; Hag. 2:6-7; Zech. 8:20-23; 14:16-19; Rom. 9:6-8; 11:13-18; Rev. 2:17; 7:4-9; 12:5; 22:3-4).

John was told (*heard*) about the wife of the Lamb, but instead he was shown (*saw*) a Holy City coming down out of heaven. This coupling shows that the wife of the Lamb and the city are one and the same. The fact that she is called the bride and the wife means the believers are no longer waiting to be fully redeemed back to Yahweh—it has now happened. The Holy City shown with the glory of Yahweh means He is dwelling in it, the wife of the Lamb (Isa. 60). The only other time jasper has been mentioned in Revelation is in association with Yahweh on the throne in Rev. 4:3 (Ezek. 28:13). Now this is directly associated with the wife of the Lamb, communicating the intimacy that Yahweh and the believers now share. “Clear as crystal,” as mentioned earlier, means sparkly.

**21:12-14** The vision of Ezekiel’s temple (Ezek. 40–48) is the background for the Holy City that comes down from heaven. The Holy City had a high wall, which communicates security (Isa. 26:1; Zech. 2:5), with twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes written on the twelve gates. There were three gates on each side only whereas there was only the one gate in the eastern wall in the original First Testament temple. This communicates that all the nations from every direction are welcomed to enter. The wall had twelve foundations, with the names of the apostles on the foundations. This clearly refers to the merger of Israel and the church into one city (Isa. 56:1-8; Ezek. 37:1-28; Zeph. 3:20; Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:16-36; Rom. 9-11; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22) just as the 144,000 and the great multitude (Rev. 7).

**21:15-21** The angel then measured the city, like the angel who measured the temple in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 40-41; cf. Zech. 2:1-13). The city was a perfect cube. The only other time a cube appears in the Bible is the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant sat and the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh dwelt. This implies that the entire Holy City is one large Holy of Holies. Only the high priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies, one time a year, communicating that access to the presence of Yahweh was extremely restricted due to humanity’s sin.

When Jesus came, who was the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh (Matt. 17:1-2; Heb. 1:3), He went into the temple in Jerusalem and cleansed it of the corruption that had turned it into a place of greed and oppression rather than a place of worship (Jn. 2:13-22). Jesus referred to the temple as His Father’s house and told the Pharisees that the temple would be destroyed and that He would raise it up again in three days. Jesus was referring to His body in His death and resurrection, making the point that His body was the true temple and the Father’s house. Therefore, Jesus as the God-man was the more perfect temple (2 Pet. 2:4-8).

The night before His death, Jesus said that in His Father’s house are many rooms and that He was going to the cross to prepare a room for His covenant people (Jn. 14:1-4). Jesus was going to

establish a new temple, which is a metaphor for His body, that would have many rooms for all believers. They would be able to enter and dwell with Yahweh because Jesus was going to become the more perfect sacrifice and more expansive temple. This is why the veil tore in the temple building on the day of His death—to show that there was now total access to Yahweh for all through Jesus (Matt. 27:50-51). Jesus was the new temple of Ezekiel’s vision and the glory of Yahweh returning to it (Ezek. 40–48).

Ten days after Jesus’ ascension, at the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples of Jesus, appearing as little pillars of fire, and filled them with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13). The Holy Spirit coming as fire connects back to the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh. Just as the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16-20) and indwelt the tabernacle/temple (Ex. 40:34-38), so now the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh was entering the believers, making them the new cosmic mountain (Garden of Eden) and the new temple with “the many rooms” (Jn. 14:1-4; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5; 2 Pet. 2:4-8). This was the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s temple (Ezek. 40–48). Christ and His body are the believers who fill the whole earth, making it a garden as they make disciples of all nations. The believers are the New Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem. This is the marriage of the believers as the bride and wife with the Lamb.

The angel measured each side as 12,000 stadia, which is about 1,400 miles or about 2,200 kilometers wide, long, and high. This measurement is not to be taken literally. 12,000 is 12x10x10x10, where twelve is the number of the people of Yahweh, ten is the number of completion, and three is the number of redemption. The wall was 144 cubits thick, which is about 200 feet or about 65 meters. This is 12x12, referring to Israel and the church. The point is that it includes all the people of Yahweh and fills the whole earth.

Each foundation was a different gemstone, matching up with the stones of the high priest’s breastplate (Ex. 28:21; 39:14; Isa. 54:11-12) and signet (Ex. 28:36-38), signifying that the believers are all priests (2 Pet. 2:4-8).

In the past century, it has been discovered that gems can be classified as either anisotropic or isotropic, and only recently have scientists discovered cross-polarized light. When light comes from the sun, fire, or a lightbulb, it travels as a wave and reflects or bounces in all different directions when it hits objects. When this light passes through isotropic gemstones, it goes straight through and at the same speed from all different directions. When light passes through anisotropic gemstones the light separates into two polarized rays and travels at different speeds at different angles, called refraction. Placing a polarized lens (like polarized sunglasses) over the gemstones focuses the light as a beam, which can be used to identify whether a gemstone is isotropic or anisotropic. When viewed in cross-polarized light (similar to “pure” light), isotropic gemstones (diamonds, rubies, and garnets) do not show any color and just look grey. Anisotropic stones produce a colorful array of all the colors of the rainbow (see above image). The twelve gemstones of the foundations of the Holy City are all anisotropic and will look shiny with the colors of the rainbow in the pure light of Jesus. Science just discovered this, thousands of years after John wrote Revelation, yet Yahweh knew this because He created it this way.



Each gate was made up of a single pearl. It is hard to define the significance of the pearl because it does not really show up in the First Testament nor is it talked about in the Greek world. The Second Testament refers to pearls as priceless (Matt 7:6; 13:45-46; 1 Tim. 2:9). The city street was transparent gold, which was symbolic of the glory of Yahweh.

**21:22-27** The original audience would have had an expectation for a temple but here John states that there was none in the redeemed creation (Ezek. 40-48; Hag. 2:9; Zech. 1:16; 6:12-15; 1 Enoch 90:28-29). Yahweh told David that He never wanted a temple (2 Sam. 7:5-7; Jer. 3:14-18; Acts. 7:47-51; Heb. 9:1-14), and Jesus stated that He was the replacement for the temple (Mark 13:2; John 2:18-22; Acts. 6:14) and that a day would come when there was no need for a temple because the believers are the new temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). Dwelling with Yahweh and the Lamb on earth is far more majestic and intimate than any earthly temple.

There would also be no sun or moon, for the glory of Yahweh and the Lamb would be the light of creation (Isa. 24:23; 60; Ezek. 43:2-5; John 1:4-5; 8:12; 12:35-36; 1 John 1:5). The believers will walk and live by the light that Yahweh provides. The gates will never be shut, for no security is needed when all evil has been eliminated and Yahweh dwells on earth (Isa. 26:2).<sup>140</sup> Also, there will be no need for closed gates because there will be no more darkness, which is a symbol of evil and absence of life. The unrighteous, who have made themselves impure with idolatry (Ezek. 14:6-11; 18:31; 20:7; 37:23), consciously exclude themselves from the presence of Yahweh by rejecting Him as their God (John 3:5; Rev. 21:8; 22:11, 14-15). Only those who are sealed in the blood of the Lamb (John 13:1-12; 1 John 1:7, 9; Rev. 7:13-15; 19:13-14) will enter the sanctuary of Yahweh (Ex. 15:17-18; Isa. 35:8; 52:1; Ezek. 44:9-10; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 2 Pet. 3:13).

**22:1-2** Then John saw a river clear as crystal flowing out from the throne of Yahweh and the Lamb and through the Holy City. Clear flowing waters symbolize life (Isa. 35:5-7; Ezek. 47:1-12; Joel 3:18), eternal life (John 7:38-39), and the Holy Spirit (John 14:6; 15:26). This is the river that Ezekiel saw flowing out of the new temple (Ezek. 47:1-12), which is the Lamb.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing fruit all year long. The Garden of Eden had the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This gave humanity a choice of whether they would go to Yahweh for wisdom and life or become autonomous (self-law) and seek out their own path, which is idolatry. Now there is no Tree of Knowledge of God and Evil, but there are two Trees of Life, meaning there is no longer an opportunity to choose autonomy and sin in the new creation. I do not think this means our free choice will be taken away but that when we freely chose to follow Christ, we surrendered our lives to Him, knowing He is a good and trustworthy God (Ps. 143:10; Matt. 6:9-10; 16:24-26; 26:39; Rom. 12:1-2). Yet our sin nature makes this difficult, and we kept trusting in ourselves rather than Yahweh (Zech. 4:6; Matt. 26:41). With our sin nature gone and us resurrected into our new nature, we will have the ability to completely surrender ourselves to Yahweh and not want to seize our will back.

It is hard to know what the leaves for the healing of the nations are, when there is no more evil or suffering. The word *nations* is used both of those who are a part of the nations that oppose Yahweh (Rev. 11:2) and those who are from the nations and now belong to Christ (Rev. 5:9; 21:24-26). It could be that in the New Jerusalem those who are outside the city (Rev. 21:6-27;

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<sup>140</sup> Robert H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 397

22:15) will have the opportunity to accept healing and embrace Yahweh’s universal invitation of love.<sup>141</sup>

Another possibility is that, even though there will be no more sin and evil, we who are without sin may still have trauma from our sin, and the earth may still be damaged from what humans inflicted on it. In the Garden of Eden, Yahweh created and put humanity in a garden of life but then commanded us to rule and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). This meant we were to rule over creation with order, subduing the chaos by expanding the garden across the earth and filling it with more images of Yahweh by being fruitful and multiplying. Perhaps we will rule and subdue creation by healing the ravaged earth and restoring it to its original state of life. Likewise, we will need healing from our own psychological and emotional wounds from generations of sin and trauma.

Maybe one of the reasons our universe is so expansive and empty is humanity was meant to expand the garden until it covered all the earth, and then to move outward into the universe, continuing to expand the kingdom of Yahweh. This may explain our innate desire to explore the universe and set up colonies on other planets. Except now it will not be to build corrupt and exploitive human kingdoms but to build the kingdom of Yahweh that brings life and joy.

**22:3-5** John repeats again with emphasis that there will be no more curse, and the throne of Yahweh and the Lamb will be in the Holy City on earth. The righteous will have an intimate relationship, in which they will see His face—meaning they will be close to Him—and His name (character) will be written on their head (thinking and will) (Ps. 11:7; Isa. 62:2; 65:1). There will be no more night or sun, for the Lamb will be their light in an intimate relationship (Isa. 60:19-20; Zech. 14:7). The believers will reign with the Lamb forever. “Their reign” refers to their share in the divine judgment of the unfaithful (Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; Rev. 2:26-27; 17:14; 19:14-16).<sup>142</sup>

**22:6-9** The angel declared that the message of Yahweh was trustworthy and true. For just as His message has been consistent throughout the ages with the prophets, so is the message the same of what is to come soon. The pronouncing of Jesus’ coming soon does not necessarily mean His second coming is soon; it could just be His involvement in the lives of the believers.

John’s worship before the angel is a repeat from Rev. 19:9-10. It seems odd that John would make the same mistake again, but perhaps in the vision the distinction between Jesus and the angel is not always clear. For whatever reason he does this again, the emphasis is on the denunciation of idolatry of any kind, even of the most holy and awesome angels that stand as representatives for Christ. The call to devotion and obedience to the covenant with Yahweh is the central theme throughout the book.

**22:10-11** The angel then told John not to seal up the words of the revelation but to make it known, for the time of their fulfillment is near. Since what John has seen in the revelation takes place during the time between the first and second comings of Christ, then “the time is near” means it is truly near.

The call for those who do wrong to keep doing wrong is not a command for them to not stop sinning as though repentance is not possible, for this is contrary to the gospel message. The point

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<sup>141</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 563.

<sup>142</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 566.

is that those who are on the outside (Rev. 21:8) have the freedom to keep doing so (Dan. 12:10).<sup>143</sup> Those unwilling to receive the good news increase their evil by refusing to listen, while the righteous develop their faith by continuing to hear the Word of Yahweh. The righteous are called to continue to live righteous and holy lives.

**22:12-15** Jesus stated that He is coming with His reward and that each one will get what they deserve in accordance with what they have done in life (Prov. 24:12; Isa. 40:10). They will reap what they have sown (Gal. 6:7-9).

There is a contrast between those who may enter the Holy City because they have remained spiritually pure, abstaining from idolatry, and those who are outside because they pursued idolatry and its practices. In the ancient near east, dogs were not pets but unwelcomed scavengers that lived in the filth of the streets. The term *dogs* in the Bible is used as a metaphor for male prostitutes (Deut. 23:18), people with immoral habits (Prov. 26:11; Luke 16:21), Gentiles (Mark 7:27-28), and heretics (Phil. 3:2; 2 Pet. 2:22). The metaphor is not used just of wicked behavior but of those who are unclean and so have defiled their relationships with Yahweh and others (Matt. 7:6).<sup>144</sup>

**22:16-17** The title *Root of David* does not mean only that He is the descendant who grows up out of the line of David and therefore is legally the Messianic King but also that, as the Word of Yahweh, He is the very origin of the line of David (Isa. 11:1, 10; Rom. 1:3; Rev. 5:5). He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The Morning Star was discussed in Rev. 2:28 and goes back to the prophecy in Num. 24:17-19, which foretold a star that would come out of Jacob and rule over all the nations (Isa. 60:1-3). The bride, who is one with the Lamb in the Spirit of Yahweh, welcomes the coming of Jesus Christ and offers the water of eternal life that He provides to all those who are thirsty (Isa. 55:1; John 7:37-38).

**22:18-21** Jesus states a serious warning against altering His prophecy in any way, which would result in reaping the plagues of His judgment and being excluded from the eternal life He provides (Deut. 4:1-2). The “book” or “scroll” He is referring to is not the whole Bible but specifically the book of Revelation. With the plethora of false teachers in the church, some would change the message of how it spoke of the nature of Jesus Christ, how He acts in creation, and the reward He will bring one day (Gal. 1:6-9).<sup>145</sup> Therefore, the believers are called to test all teachers against all the other books of the Bible to make sure that what they teach from Revelation is true (1 Cor. 12:1-3; 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19-21; 2 Thess. 2:1-2; 1 John 4:1-3).

Jesus Christ ends the revelation by stating that, ultimately, all that has been revealed in all these visions should lead one to the undeniable conclusion and belief that He is coming back to earth as the Lion-Lamb to establish His kingdom on earth for all eternity. No matter what we struggle with understanding in this book or disagree on in interpreting its message, what binds us are the belief, hope, and expectation of His return. This is the focus of our proclamation to the world. The gospel is that our Lion-Lamb has already come to save us from our enslavement to sin and to grant us access to the Kingdom of Yahweh and that He will come back to earth with the Kingdom of Yahweh and to usher us into it.

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<sup>143</sup> See Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation to John*, p. 571.

<sup>144</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22*, p. 1222.

<sup>145</sup> See David E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22*, p. 1232.

## Conclusion

The main focus of Revelation is the Lion-Lamb is coming to His establish His Kingdom on earth, first, by judging the world systems for their rebellion and misuse of power, destroying its power structures and influence over the world, and eliminating all evil. Then heaven and earth will be reunited when Yahweh, the Lion-Lamb, and the Kingdom of Yahweh come to earth and dwell with the covenant people of Yahweh forever as material and spiritual beings.

The focal points of Revelation are Rev. 4–5, with the enthronement of Yahweh and Jesus, and Rev. 21–22, with the Kingdom of Yahweh coming to earth and redeeming creation and humanity. Rev. 6–20 is the judgment of humanity for rejecting the sovereign throne of the Godhead and its coming Kingdom.

Throughout this revelation John urges the believers to maintain moral separation from the world and to remain faithful to Jesus Christ as the God-man, even to death, and to bear faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus in the midst of a compromising, idolatrous church and world. Their refusal to take the mark of the beast and their perseverance in expanding the Kingdom of Yahweh are the fruit testifying that they have been sealed by the blood of the Lamb and will dwell with the Godhead on the redeemed earth for all eternity.

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