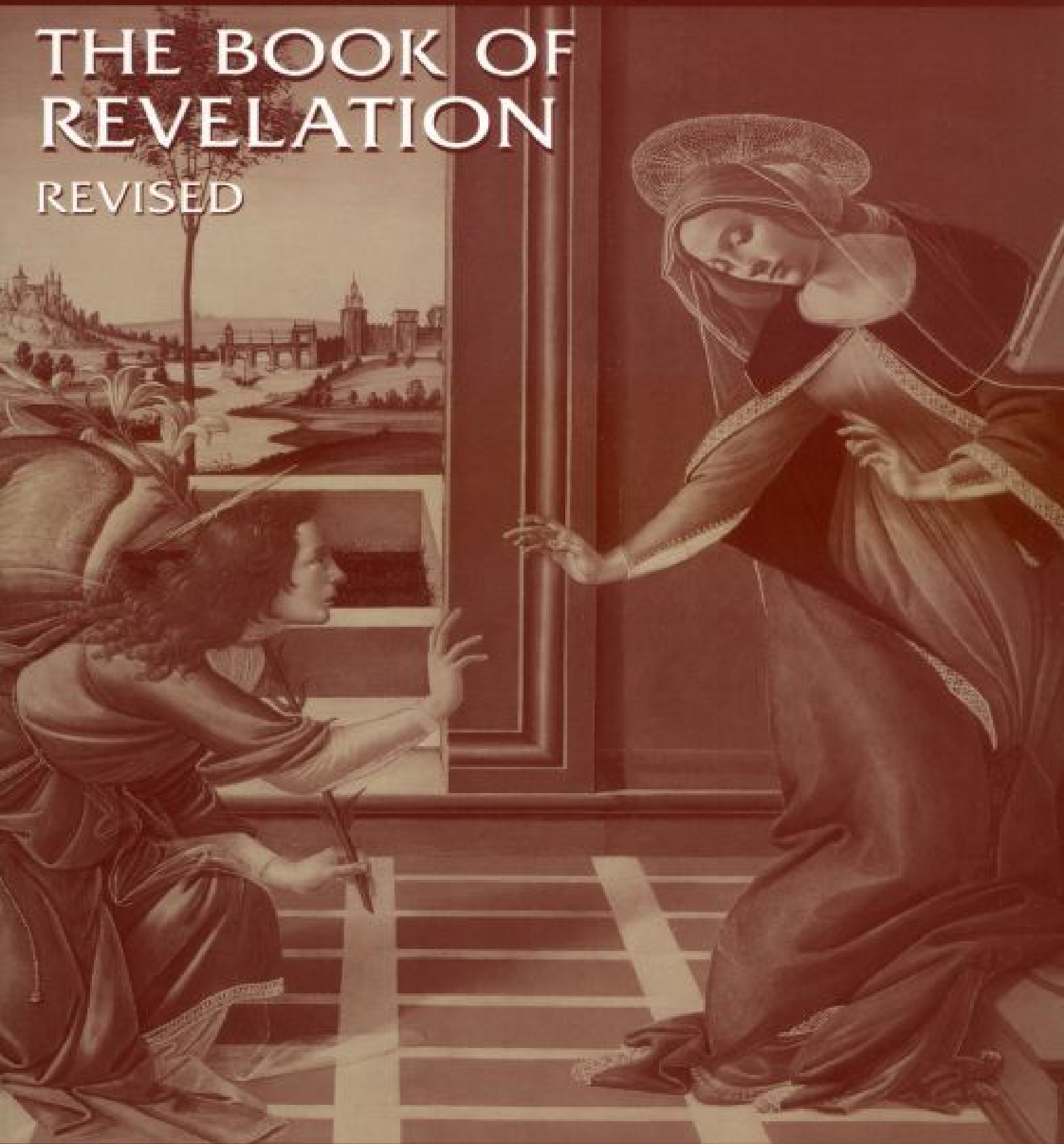


The New International Commentary
on the New Testament

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

REVISED



ROBERT H. MOUNCE

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THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

General Editors

NED B. STONEHOUSE
(1946-1962)

F. F. BRUCE
(1962-1990)

GORDON D. FEE
(1990-)

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Revised Edition

ROBERT H. MOUNCE

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

First edition © 1977
This revised edition © 1998 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
255 Jefferson Ave. S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503 /
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.
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Printed in the United States of America

03 02 01 00
76543

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mounce, Robert H.
The Book of Revelation / Robert H. Mounce. — Rev. ed.
p. cm.
(The new international commentary on the New Testament)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-802-82537-7 (cloth: alk. paper)
1. Bible. N.T. Revelation — Commentaries
1. Title. II. Series.
BS2825.3.M69 1998
228'.06 — dc21
97-25322
CIP

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*TO MRS. GEORGE D. MOUNCE, SR.,
in grateful appreciation for the
profound impact of her godly life.*

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

(First Edition)

The volume on Revelation in the New International Commentary on the New Testament was one that the former General Editor, the late Ned Bernard Stonehouse, had reserved for himself. His interest in this book was of long standing: his doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam was awarded in 1929 for a dissertation on *The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church*, and a sample of his exegetical study appeared in the article, "The Elders and the Living-Beings in the Apocalypse," which he contributed to the Festschrift for his former teacher, Professor F. W. Grosheide, *Arcana Revelata* (1951). But when he died in 1962, the projected commentary had not taken shape, and it became necessary to find someone else to undertake the task. Happily, Dr. Robert H. Mounce was willing to undertake it, and he has devoted nearly all his spare time to it in the intervening years. The finished product now lies before us.

Dr. Mounce received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Aberdeen in 1958 for a thesis entitled "The New Testament Herald: His Mission and Message." (A somewhat less technical version of this was published by Eerdmans in 1960 under the title *The Essential Nature of New Testament Preaching*.) Shortly after that he was appointed to the teaching staff of the Department of Religion in Western Kentucky University, where he is now Dean of the Potter College of Arts and Humanities. To the nonacademic reading public he is known, among other things, as the contributor of a regular feature, "Here's My Answer," in *Eternity* magazine.

Dr. Mounce has thought long and deeply about the problems of the Apocalypse, and his conclusions deserve careful consideration. The Seer, he judges, should be identified with the apostle John. There is certainly no question about the authority with which the Seer speaks. He writes as a prophet — one who, like the great prophets of Old Testament times, has been admitted to the inner council of heaven, and has seen things there that no previous prophet had seen. If his book is called "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him," this is because John has actually seen God handing over the revelation, recorded in the seven-sealed scroll, to the

Messiah who has won the victory of the ages by submission to violent death. The denouement that John sees unfolded before his eyes belongs to the end time, but from his perspective the end time is at hand. The return of the Lamb from the place of sacrifice to the heavenly glory and his enthronement alongside the Father have inaugurated the process; the consummation will not be long delayed.

The message of the Apocalypse was well calculated to instill resolution in hard-pressed Christians under the Roman Empire. Their Savior had been invested as Lord of history, and the destiny of the world was firmly secured in his hands. As he won his victory, so they were encouraged to win theirs “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.” Since the future was his, it was also theirs, for they were on his side: “our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.” With but little modification, the same message speaks a word of encouragement to all those in any age who suffer for their Christian faith.

As in all first editions of this series of commentaries, the English text adopted as a basis is that of the American Standard Version of 1901. Despite its archaisms, this version with its extremely literal rendering (which no doubt makes it unsuitable for many other purposes) is admirably designed to serve as the basis of a commentary that endeavors to pay close attention to the details of the text.

F. F. BRUCE

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

(Revised Edition)

This revised edition of Dr. Mounce's commentary on the Revelation represents a third line of tradition in this series, all of which began under the editorship of my predecessor, F. F. Bruce. Some hitherto unpublished commentaries are still scheduled to appear (as of this writing: Matthew, the Pastoral Epistles, and Jude/2 Peter), while several replacement volumes have already appeared (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and the Johannine Epistles). In other cases (Mark, John, Acts, Colossians/Philemon, Hebrews, and the present commentary) the original authors were asked to revise by updating their original volumes.

The first edition of this commentary appeared just twenty years ago. Its brisk sales record demonstrated what several reviewers prophesied, that it would become a standard within the nondispensationalist, evangelical tradition. The present edition, besides being based on the NIV and being reworked to conform to the new format of the series, has given the author an opportunity to reflect on the text once again, as well as to interact with recent scholarship.

As noted in the original Editor's Foreword, Dr. Mounce was serving as dean of the college of arts and humanities at Western Kentucky University (Bowling Green) when the first edition appeared in 1977. Since then he served seven years as president of Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington (1981- 1987), and in "retirement" extended a three-month interim into three and a half years of pastoral ministry with Christ's Community Church in Walnut Creek, California. We welcome this revision as part of an ongoing process to upgrade and thus increase the usefulness of this series of commentaries.

GORDON D. FEE

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

(First Edition)

The commentary on Revelation in the New International Commentary on the New Testament was to have been written by the late Dr. Ned B. Stonehouse, who was also General Editor of the series. His death in 1962 was a serious loss to New Testament scholarship. A year later Professor F. F. Bruce, who took over the task of editing the volumes still in preparation, invited me to write on Revelation. Unfortunately, the only access I had to Dr. Stonehouse's thinking was a set of class notes supplied by Dr. William Lane, formerly of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and now my colleague at Western Kentucky University.

For the first several years I occupied myself with reading as much of the literature as I could lay my hands on. Discovering in depth the world of apocalyptic was an exciting experience. Primary literature has an appeal all its own, especially for those whose professional responsibilities require that they spend much of their time and energy reading each other. Considerable attention was given to the development of a detailed syntactical outline of the Greek text. I wanted the book to disclose to me from within whatever organizational structure it might possess. All too often it has been thrust into a predetermined outline. Commentaries tend to begin with an openness to the text that before many chapters have passed narrows into a rigidity that allows the text to say only that which the developing schema allows. Statements that in the early chapters would have been qualified by such adverbs as "perhaps" or "probably" attain a degree of certainty out of all proportion to the evidence.

During the early period of study I was discouraged to learn that R. H. Charles had spent twenty-five years preparing his two-volume classic on Revelation for the International Critical Commentary. As I more fully realized the magnitude of the task, the same bit of information was a constant encouragement. Several geographic relocations, a determination not to leave five growing children fatherless, and a vocational shift into administration in higher education have not hastened the completion of the commentary.

A critical problem facing every writer on the book of Revelation grows out of the literary genre in which the book is cast. It is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means. What kind of literature are we dealing with is the essential question. An informed sensitivity to the thought forms and vocabulary of apocalyptic is the *sine qua non* of satisfactory exegesis. The vivid and often bizarre symbolism of Revelation has led many contemporary writers into either an indefensible literalism or a highly imaginative subjectivism. I have attempted to steer a middle course because that is the way I believe the ancient text fell upon the ears of the seven first-century churches in Asia to whom it was written. How well this course has been navigated the reader will need to determine.

My indebtedness to critical scholarship in apocalyptic is amply footnoted throughout the commentary. Of the many helpful commentaries on Revelation, those of Swete, Hort (alas, he writes only on chaps. 1-3), Charles, and Beckwith have supplied the most helpful observations on the Greek text. Among recent writers Austin Farrer and G. B. Caird have most often challenged my thinking. The excellent, although relatively brief, commentaries of F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, and George Ladd represent a common interpretive approach to which I have been drawn through my own study of the text. At times their works gave me pause to wonder whether anything else needed to be said.

A note on my method of reference to the standard works on Revelation is in order. Rather than footnoting each commentary I have simply used the author's name and the appropriate page number. All names used in this way are found in the Abbreviations, and full publication information is supplied in section A of the Select Bibliography. My intention has been to keep the text and footnotes as clean as possible while not depriving the reader of the additional information necessary for further study.

While the printed text upon which the commentary is based is the American Standard Version (1901), I have used the Revised Standard Version for all biblical quotations apart from the book of Revelation (except where otherwise noted). I have also followed the third edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek text, although I have normally cited the somewhat simplified apparatus of G. D. Kilpatrick in the second edition of the British and Foreign Bible Society text (1958). Bruce M. Metzger's *Textual*

Commentary on the Greek New Testament (1971) has been especially helpful.

I am deeply appreciative of the many individuals who have helped in many different ways. Professor Bruce read an early chapter and made important suggestions. Later he carefully edited the entire manuscript. My wife Jean has read extensively in the literature and time and again has forced me to support a position on firmer ground than I had at that time provided. Two excellent secretaries, Phyllis Rzeszowski and Nelda Steen, have typed and retyped many portions of the manuscript. Drs. Dorothy and Bill McMahon have graciously given of their time to read and correct galley proofs.

I am also profoundly thankful for the opportunity of having lived in the world of John the Seer for the past decade or so. While the specific meaning of every detail may not be clear, the great central truths of Revelation emerge with tremendous force to those who prayerfully open themselves to its pages. Evil has overextended itself, persecution will come, but God, who is sovereign over all, will step into human history to vindicate the faithful and forever defeat the forces of evil. To the promise, "Surely I am coming soon," the church responds with confidence and anticipation, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).

ROBERT H. MOUNCE

Bowling Green, Kentucky

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

(Revised Edition)

It was thirty-four years ago that the late Professor F. F. Bruce invited me to write the commentary on Revelation for the New International Commentary on the New Testament. Fourteen years later, in 1977, it was published, and it has enjoyed modest success. In the intervening years a sizable body of literature on apocalyptic has been produced. In English alone I count over eighty commentaries and closely related works on Revelation — to say nothing of all the articles that have appeared in scholarly journals. All of which is to say that it was high time to bring my commentary up-to-date.

The reader will find a number of stylistic changes in the Revised Edition. I have used the New International Version as the basic English text rather than the American Standard Version of 1901. Then, too, I have replaced the critical apparatus of G. D. Kilpatrick with the twenty-seventh edition of Nestle-Aland. I have also brought the Abbreviations into conformity with the update of the 1994 JBL guidelines.

All that, however, is of secondary importance to the changes I have made in the commentary itself. While my basic position remains premillennial, I can now appreciate more fully why scholars of other persuasions have taken the interpretive tacks they have. For example, although I still reject the idea of strict recapitulation, I can see that the numbered visions do in fact cover the same period of time in what is best described as a spiral of intensity. Those who have also read the first edition will find that this more mature reflection on Revelation leans less heavily on the insights of others and attempts to provide the reader with my own struggle to understand what the author is saying. Technical discussions regarding the text and scholarly debates with others are by-and-large kept to the footnotes.

I want to thank Gordon Fee, the current editor of the series, for his most helpful suggestions. He reminded me that while the First Edition was written by a fledgling scholar no more than five years into his teaching career, this revised edition should reflect the additional thirty-some years of thoughtful contemplation on the Apocalypse. Obviously, this required a rather extensive rewriting of the work. It was not exactly what I had

planned, but now that the work is done I can appreciate Gordon's insight. I also wish to thank Milton Essenburg at Eerdmans for his careful editing of this commentary. In addition, I would like to recognize Tim Straayer, who painstakingly did all the technical work required by a thorough revision.

One final note of appreciation. Having reached the age of 75, I am especially grateful to the Lord for granting me good health, and to my wife Jean for providing me a happy home, without which I could never have completed the revision.

ROBERT H. MOUNCE

Bend, Oregon

ABBREVIATIONS

ASV	American Standard Version
AT	An American Translation (Goodspeed)
ATR	Anglican Theological Review
AusBR	Australian Biblical Review
AUSS	Andrews University Seminary Studies
AV	Authorized Version (= KJV)
BA	Biblical Archaeologist
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i> (2nd ed., Chicago, 1979)
BDT	<i>Baker's Dictionary of Theology</i>
Beck	W. F. Beck, <i>The New Testament in the Language of Today</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BibNot	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BT	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
ca.	<i>circa</i> (about)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
chap.	chapter
Churches	William Barclay, <i>Letters to the Seven Churches</i>
comm.	commentary
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
CurTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
DNTT	<i>Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i>
EB	<i>Encyclopedia Biblica</i>

ed.	editor, edition
<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
<i>Epigr. Graec.</i>	<i>Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus conlecta</i> (ed. G. Kaibel)
esp.	especially
<i>ET</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
Feine-Behm-Kümmel	<i>Introduction to the New Testament</i> , 14th ed.
Gk.	Greek
GNB	<i>Good News Bible</i>
Goodspeed	Edgar J. Goodspeed, <i>The New Testament: An American Translation</i>
<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>Grammar</i>	Dana and Mantey, <i>A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament</i>
<i>HDB rev.</i>	Hastings' <i>Dictionary of the Bible</i> (rev. ed. F. C. Grant and H. H. Rowley)
<i>HDB</i>	Hastings' <i>Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IB	The Interpreter's Bible
<i>IBD</i>	<i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i>
<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> (ed. G. A. Buttrick)
<i>Idiom Book</i>	C. F. D. Moule, <i>An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek</i>
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JB	Jerusalem Bible
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSP</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>JTC</i>	<i>Journal for Theology and the Church</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>LAE</i>	A. Deissmann, <i>Light from the Ancient East</i>
<i>Letters</i>	W. M. Ramsay, <i>The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia</i> (updated ed.)
lit.	literally

<i>Local Setting</i>	Colin J. Hemer, <i>The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting</i>
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MajT	Majority Text
<i>Moods and Tenses</i>	E. deW. Burton: <i>Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek</i>
Moffatt	James Moffatt, <i>The New Testament: A New Translation</i>
Moult. Grammar	J. H. Moulton, <i>A Grammar of New Testament Greek</i> , Vol. I
MM	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i>
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
n.	note
NA ²⁷	E. Nestle and K. Aland, <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> (27th ed.)
<i>NBD</i>	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i>
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJ	New King James
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NT	New Testament
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OT	Old Testament
Phillips	J. B. Phillips, <i>The New Testament in Modern English</i>
REB	Revised English Bible
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
rev.	revised
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
<i>SE</i>	<i>Studia Evangelica</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Studia theologica</i>
<i>Seven Churches</i>	E. M. Blaiklock, <i>The Seven Churches</i>
Str-B	H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i>
TCNT	The Twentieth Century New Testament

<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (eds. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich)
<i>TDNT abr.</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (one-vol. abridgment by G. W. Bromiley)
<i>Textual Commentary</i>	Bruce Metzger, <i>A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament</i>
<i>Tg. Jer.</i>	<i>Jerusalem Targum</i>
tgs.	targums
TR	Textus Receptus
trans.	translated by
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TToday</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UBS ⁴	United Bible Societies Greek New Testament (4th ed.)
v. (vv.)	verse(s)
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
vol.	volume
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
Weymouth	R. F. Weymouth, <i>The New Testament in Modern Speech</i>
Williams	Charles B. Williams, <i>The New Testament: A Translation in the Language of the People</i>
<i>Word Pictures</i>	A. T. Robertson, <i>Word Pictures in the New Testament</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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INTRODUCTION

I. REVELATION AND APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The book of Revelation is normally considered as belonging to a class of literature referred to as apocalyptic. The term “apocalypse” used to denote a literary genre is derived from Rev. 1:1, where it designates the supernatural unveiling of that which is about to take place. In contemporary discussion “apocalyptic” applies more broadly to a group of writings that flourished in the biblical world between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 and to the basic concepts contained in those writings.¹ While it is not possible to establish with any precision the exact boundaries of apocalyptic (it often verges off into other literary styles and conceptual modes),² it is generally true that an apocalypse normally purports to be a divine disclosure, usually through a celestial intermediary to some prominent figure in the past, in which God promises to intervene in human history to bring times of trouble to an end and destroy all wickedness.³ The writers were normally pessimistic about people’s ability to cope with the evil world. The great cosmic forces that lie behind the turmoil of history are portrayed by vivid and often bizarre symbols. Visions abound. The apocalyptists followed a common practice of rewriting history as prophecy so as to lend credence to their predictions about that which still lay in the future.

The problem of the origin of apocalyptic is far too complex a subject for adequate discussion at this point. Some scholars, such as Betz, who understands apocalyptic as a Hellenistic phenomenon,⁴ and Conzelmann, who takes it as a development from Iranian religion,⁵ argue for a non-Jewish origin. While various influences were undoubtedly at work in shaping apocalyptic, the stubborn fact remains that it is essentially a Jewish and Christian phenomenon. ⁶ Rowley is correct in his judgment that “apocalyptic is the child of prophecy.”⁷ D. S. Russell acknowledges that while apocalyptic drew nourishment from many sources, “there can be no doubt that the tap root, as it were, went deep down into Hebrew prophecy.”⁸ Later he writes that apocalyptic is not a substitute for prophecy but a readaptation and development of the same message for a new historical

situation — “prophecy in a new idiom” is the phrase he borrows from B. W. Anderson. Paul Hanson, in an important work entitled *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, holds that “the rise of apocalyptic eschatology is neither sudden nor anomalous, but follows the pattern of an unbroken development from pre-exilic and exilic prophecy.”⁹

George Ladd holds that apocalyptic rose out of a historical milieu that involved a historical-theological problem consisting of three elements: (1) the emergence of a “righteous remnant” who maintained loyalty to the law over against the prevailing mood of compromise; (2) the problem of evil in the sense that even when Israel was apparently keeping the law she was under-going suffering and national abuse; and (3) the cessation of prophecy at the very time when the people needed a divine explanation for their historical plight.¹⁰ A major role of the apocalypse was to explain why the righteous suffered and why the kingdom of God delayed.¹¹ Prophecy had dealt primarily with the nation’s ethical obligations at the time when the prophet wrote. Apocalyptic focused on a period of time yet future when God would intervene to judge the world and establish righteousness.

The genre apocalyptic may be distinguished by the presence of certain basic elements that combine to form an overall religious or philosophical perspective. In the first place, it is always *eschatological*. It treats a period of time yet future when God will break into this world of time and space to bring the entire system to a final reckoning. While prophecy was also predictive (contrary to the opinion that the prophets were preachers only), a distinction remains. Rowley put it this way: “Speaking generally, the prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while the apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present.”¹²

Secondly, apocalyptic is *dualistic*. This dualism is not metaphysical but historical and temporal. There exist two opposing supernatural powers, God and Satan. There are also two distinct ages: the present one that is temporal and evil, and the one to come that is timeless and perfectly righteous. The first is under the control of Satan and the second under the immediate supervision of God. Closely related to the teaching of two ages is the idea of two worlds, the present visible universe and the perfect world that has existed from before time in heaven. While some are of the opinion that this dualism betrays the influence of Persian thought, it should be observed that it may also be accounted for by ideas contained in the OT prophets.¹³

Apocalyptic is also characterized by a *rigid determinism* in which everything moves forward as divinely preordained according to a definite time schedule and toward a predetermined end. While this led to a rather complete pessimism about people's ability to combat the evils they encountered,¹⁴ it nevertheless bred confidence that God would emerge victorious even in the apocalypticist's own lifetime. It also shed some light on the problem of suffering. Concern about why the righteous suffer abated with the growing conviction that all of life had been determined by God and that what he did or allowed was by definition good. Other features that went to make up the apocalyptic outlook include the willingness to abandon the historical process in favor of the all-important consummation,¹⁵ an interest in consoling the righteous rather than rebuking them for their failures, and the conviction that they were living in the last days.

Not only may apocalyptic be distinguished by certain motifs that combine to form its general outlook, but also by several distinctive literary characteristics. Russell identifies apocalyptic as "esoteric in character, literary in form, symbolic in language and pseudonymous in authorship."¹⁶ Beckwith writes that "the highly elaborated vision, or similar mode of revelation, is the most distinctive feature in the *form* of apocalyptic literature."¹⁷ The content of apocalyptic normally comes to the author by means of a dream or vision in which he is translated into heavenly realms where he is privileged to see revealed the eternal secrets of God's purpose. Often an angelic interpreter is present to guide him on his heavenly journey and disclose the meaning of the extraordinary things he is seeing (e.g., many-headed monsters, cosmic catastrophes, etc.). Such visions are held to have been given to ancient seers and handed down for generations by means of a secret tradition that now in the last days is being revealed to the people of God. The apocalypticist was a "wise man uncovering the mysteries of God's purpose."¹⁸

While the prophets were primarily preachers whose messages were written down at a later time, the apocalypticists were literary men who put their confidence in the written word as a method of propagating their point of view. The prophet spoke out of an immediate relationship with God. His message was properly prefaced with the open declaration, "Thus says the LORD." The apocalypticist, on the other hand, adopted a conventional literary style and adapted his message accordingly. Much of his basic material was drawn from a common tradition.

Symbolism plays a major role in apocalyptic. In giving free rein to the imagination, symbols of the most bizarre sort became the norm.¹⁹ Over the years a common stock of remarkable symbols developed. The origin of a specific image is difficult if not impossible to determine with any degree of certainty. While much of it stems from the OT, some of it extends back into ancient mythology. Russell discusses the Babylonian account of a combat between the Creator and a great sea-monster as an example of the influence of primitive mythology on both the canonical and apocalyptic writings.²⁰ The extensive use of symbolism in apocalyptic literature may be accounted for in part by its subject matter (the close of this age and the dawning of a new age to come) and by the temperament of its spokesmen. It comes as no surprise that visionaries who specialize in the world to come feel compelled to resort almost completely to symbol.

With only a few exceptions,²¹ the apocalypses are pseudonymous. The apocalypticist did not write in his own name but projected his work back into the past by assigning its authorship to some outstanding person of antiquity. As a result, past history is rewritten as prophecy. Although symbolically portrayed, this march of events is usually quite clear until the time of the actual writer (who understood himself to be standing at or near the end of time). From this point on “prediction” loses its clarity. Pseudonymity is usually explained as an excusable method of gaining a hearing in a time when prophecy had ceased and the law had been elevated to such prominence that there remained no other way for a new voice to be heard.²² Some have explained it as a precautionary measure taken in times of danger. Others, that it resulted from a sort of fascination with antiquity. Rowley holds that the phenomenon grew out of the genesis of the book of Daniel. The stories in the first part were circulated separately and secured immediate popularity. They were mainly about Daniel. Later, the second part of the book containing visions was written under the guise of Daniel, “not in order to deceive his readers, but in order to reveal his identity with the author of the Daniel stories.” Thus the purpose of pseudonymity was “the precise opposite of deceit” and became artificial only when woodenly copied by imitators.²³

A more satisfying explanation is suggested by Russell, who brings to bear on the discussion the idea of corporate personality (which stresses the identity of the person and the group to which that person belongs), the peculiar time consciousness of the Hebrews (which could telescope the past

into the present and establish such a strong sense of contemporaneity that the Seer became in a sense a spiritual reproduction of the ancient worthy), and the significance of the proper name in Hebrew thought (to take the name of an ancient would be to think of oneself as an extension of his personality).²⁴ Although these perspectives are relatively unfamiliar to the modern reader, they played a significant role in the world-and-life view of the Hebrew. While we may remain unconvinced that pseudonymity involved no element of deception, there is no reason to doubt that it was the accepted standard of apocalypticism.

The book of Revelation is regularly regarded as belonging to that literary genre we have described as apocalyptic. It is the NT counterpart to the OT apocalyptic book of Daniel. There are good reasons to support this classification. The extensive use of symbolism, the vision as a major instrument of revelation, concentration on the close of this age and the dramatic inauguration of the age to come, the unveiling of the spiritual order lying behind and determining the course of events in history, the use of common apocalyptic motifs — all combine to justify the application of the term “apocalyptic” to the book of Revelation. These similarities account for the ease with which the first word of the Greek text (*apokalypsis*) came to serve as a technical designation for all the other literature of the same general class. What is sometimes overlooked, however, are the dissimilarities between Revelation and the rest of apocalyptic literature. Consider, for example, the fundamental fact that the author himself considers his work to be prophecy (1:3, “the words of this²⁵ prophecy”; cf. 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Ladd notes that although apocalyptic literature had lost its prophetic self-consciousness, the entire NT is the product of the revival of the prophetic spirit.²⁶ We have already indicated that while apocalypses were regularly pseudonymous, the author of Revelation identifies himself clearly as “John” (1:4, 9; 22:8; cf. 1:1). He does not search out some notable person in history in an attempt to gain a hearing or to heighten the significance of the present, but writes in his own name with the conviction that he himself speaks the word of God and that therefore his message is both authoritative and binding upon his readers. Bruce Jones emphasizes that John’s direct communication with his contemporaries in his own name is too deliberate to be accidental: “We are forced to the conclusion that John wants to stress the difference between his book and previous apocalyptic writing.”²⁷

While the apocalyptists are generally pessimistic about the present age (Boring calls it a “pessimism” that was not ultimate²⁸), John maintains the balance expressed in the gospel logion, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Although there will be an outbreak of Satanic activity in the last days, history remains under the sovereign control of God. Redemption has already been won by the Lamb, who conquered through death (5:9) and whose great act in history provides victory over Satan for the faithful (12:10-11). While the prospect of suffering is realistically set forth, a genuine optimism permeates the entire work.

Revelation differs from standard apocalyptic in its view of history. G. von Rad stresses that apocalyptic and prophecy have distinctly different views of history.²⁹ For the apocalyptists the present age is evil and without meaning. It is only a passing interlude on the way to that all-important final period preceding the end. In contrast, the book of Revelation takes as its starting point the redemptive activity of God in history. John does not present a survey of world history as a prelude to God’s eschatological intervention, but interprets the period bounded by the two advents of the Lamb in which all the forces opposing righteousness will be destroyed. It is from the perspective of a prophetic *Heilsgeschichte* that the author is able to comfort and challenge a church about to enter into severe persecution.³⁰

Other differences between Revelation and apocalyptic could be cited, such as the moral urgency of the biblical book (cf. the call for repentance in 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19), its practice of simply narrating visions and leaving the interpretive task to the reader instead of supplying a heavenly tutor (17:7ff. and a few other passages are exceptions), its open declaration of eschatological truth rather than transmitting esoteric knowledge secretly preserved from antiquity (cf. Dan 12:9; 2 Esdr 12:35-38), and the remarkable inclusion of seven pastoral letters to churches in Asia. While there can be no doubt that Revelation shares certain characteristics common to the apocalyptic genre, it would be wrong to overlook all the ways in which it resists being placed without qualification in that category.³¹ After surveying a number of features in Revelation that are prophetic rather than apocalyptic, David Hill concludes that the author of the book considered himself a prophet and that although he employed much of the traditional apparatus of apocalyptic his work lacked many of the most characteristic

features of that genre. It “may justifiably, and probably correctly, be regarded as prophetic in intention and character.”^{[32](#)}

II. AUTHORSHIP

The author of the Apocalypse identifies himself simply as John. The epistolary introduction of 1:4 reads, “John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia.” Apparently it could be assumed that there could be no possibility of mistaken identity. The author’s matter-of-fact approach and his extensive knowledge of the precise conditions that existed in each of the seven churches indicate that he wrote as a person of authority to Christian communities that were in some sense under his jurisdiction. The name John occurs four times in Revelation. In 1:1 he designates himself as a “servant” who serves as a vital link in making known “what must soon take place.” In 22:8 he is the one “who heard and saw these things.” His role as Seer is joined with that of faithful witness in 1:9, where he writes, “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (cf. also 1:4)

Within the book itself, however, there is no specific indication as to who exactly this John was. Some suggestions need not detain us long. Dionysius of Alexandria speculates that it may have been John Mark, the young man who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5), but then appears to dismiss the idea on the historical grounds that John returned to Jerusalem instead of going with them into Asia.³³ There exist no significant linguistic similarities between Mark’s gospel and the Apocalypse, nor does the Evangelist display characteristics of a visionary possessed of a strong prophetic consciousness.

That the work is not pseudonymous has been argued convincingly by Charles.³⁴ The reasons for Jewish apocalyptists’ resorting to using the name of an ancient worthy (the centrality of law in postexilic Judaism and the formation of the canon) were no longer valid with the advent of Christianity. Furthermore, nothing in the book itself in any way suggests pseudonymity. Charles concludes that there is not “a shred of evidence” or even “the shadow of a probability for such a hypothesis.”³⁵ His own

position is that the author was “John the prophet — a Palestinian Jew, who late in life migrated to Asia Minor.”³⁶ The argument rests on the basis that the author distinctly claims to be a prophet (never an apostle) and that he used the Greek language awkwardly (it is “unlike any Greek that was ever penned by mortal man” ³⁷). Charles’s solution to the problem of authorship has won few advocates. Actually, it does not go much beyond what the book itself teaches, that is, that the author was John and that he was a prophet. It is worth noting that the author of the Apocalypse exercised an authority over the Asian churches that went beyond that normally associated with NT prophets. This points to the conclusion that although he wrote as a prophet, he functioned among his churches as an apostle. Other variations of an “unidentifiable John” have been offered, but these as well fail to move us toward a solution.³⁸

A considerable number of modern writers favor the ancient conjecture of Eusebius that the author of the Apocalypse was probably John the Elder, who is mentioned by Papias as distinct from John the disciple of the Lord.³⁹ There is some doubt, however, that Papias intended to distinguish between two separate Johns.⁴⁰ But even if Papias spoke of two Johns, and if the report mentioned by Dionysius that there were two monuments in Ephesus each bearing the name of John⁴¹ was accurate, it does not follow necessarily that the Elder John was the author of the Apocalypse. It is difficult to see how a single reference in an obscure fragment can supply any convincing basis for establishing authorship. Guthrie brings up the problem of the confusion that would result from the author’s failure to identify himself if in fact two authoritative leaders with the same name resided at Ephesus. He writes, “The Elder theory seems tenable only on the supposition that John the apostle had never lived at Ephesus, and that from the early second century the whole Church mistakenly assumed that he had.”⁴²

J. Massyngberde Ford argues that the Apocalypse is a composite work emanating from the circle of John the Baptist and his later followers.⁴³ Her hypothesis is that chapters 4 — 11 originated with revelations given to John the Baptist before the public ministry of Jesus; chapters 12 — 22 (except for a few passages in the last chapter) were written before A.D. 70 by a disciple of the Baptist who knew about Jesus but was only partially informed; and chapters 1 — 3 (plus 22:16-17a, 20-21) were added still

later by a Jewish-Christian redactor. Revelation is neither a Christian apocalypse nor a Jewish apocalypse with Christian additions.⁴⁴ It is a “composite work from the ‘Baptist School’ which represented a primitive form of Christianity and inherited the Baptist’s prophetic, apocalyptic and ‘fiery’ (boanergic) tendencies.”⁴⁵ Professor Ford acknowledges that she has advanced a “bold hypothesis” and hopes, not necessarily that it will be accepted, but that it will stimulate further discussion.⁴⁶ A major question that Ford does not answer is how an essentially Jewish apocalypse ever found its way into the Christian canon. How did it happen that during the same period of time a number of Christian apocalypses were excluded from the canon and a decidedly Jewish apocalypse was included? Until this question is answered, many will suspect that Revelation is more Christian than Ford’s hypothesis will allow.⁴⁷

Early tradition is unanimous in its opinion that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle. Justin Martyr, who lived for some time at Ephesus during the first part of the second century,⁴⁸ was familiar with the Revelation and held that the apostle John was its author.⁴⁹ This is corroborated by a remark in Eusebius (who himself did not accept the apostolic authorship of Revelation), who says that Justin mentioned the Revelation of John, “plainly calling it the work of the apostle.”⁵⁰ In his work against heresies Irenaeus frequently cites from the Apocalypse and holds it to be the work of “John the disciple of the Lord,”⁵¹ by which title few would deny that he means the apostle. This witness is of special interest because as a boy Irenaeus had known Polycarp, who in turn sustained a close relationship with John.⁵² Clement of Alexandria cited the Apocalypse in several places and accepted it as the work of John the apostle.⁵³ Writing from Carthage Tertullian quotes from all but four chapters of Revelation (mostly in his Montanist works), holding it to be the work of the apostle John.⁵⁴

An important witness for the apostolic authorship of Revelation has more recently come from the Gnostic materials discovered in 1945 at Chenoboskion in Upper Egypt. One of the documents is the *Apocryphon of John*, which cites Rev 1:19 and claims to be written by “John, the brother of James, these who are the sons of Zebedee.” Helmbold cites authorities who date the *Apocryphon* as early as the end of the first century and notes that in any event it cannot be given a date much later than about A.D. 150.⁵⁵ He

concludes, “Either date establishes the Apocryphon as an early witness, alongside the secondary testimony of Papias and Justin Martyr in Eusebius, for the Apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse.”⁵⁶

Although there was some hesitation in the East after the time of Dionysius (mid-third century), it cannot be disputed that the Apocalypse was widely accepted by the second-century church as the work of John the apostle. Morris cites B. W. Bacon (who himself did not accept the view) as saying, “There is no book of the entire New Testament whose external attestation can compare with that of Revelation, in nearness, clearness, definiteness, and positiveness of statement.”⁵⁷ Opposition to the apostolic authorship apparently began with Marcion, the second-century heretic, who, in promulgating a “gospel of love,” ruled that the Evangelists were blinded by Jewish influence and thus rejected all non-Pauline writings (except an edited recension of Luke). Slightly later the Apocalypse was attacked by a group of heretics in Asia Minor who in their opposition to Montanism rejected both the Gospel of John and Revelation. According to Epiphanius, they attributed the Apocalypse to the Gnostic Cerinthus.⁵⁸ Apparently this same ascription was made by Gaius of Rome in the early third century.⁵⁹

In spite of the strong external evidence for apostolic authorship the majority of modern writers are unwilling to assign the work to John the apostle. A number of reasons are set forth.

(1)The author of Revelation calls himself John (1:1), a servant of God (1:1), a brother of his readers (1:9), and a prophet (22:8), but nowhere does he call himself an apostle. In answer to this objection it only needs to be noted that the authority with which he writes reveals an implicit assumption of apostolicity and in no way would be materially strengthened by insisting on a title. To the contrary, that he does not feel obliged to remind his readers of apostolic rank strengthens the authority with which he writes.

(2)There is nothing in the Apocalypse that indicates that the author knew the historical Jesus, nor are there any indications that he was present at those events depicted in the Gospels that involved the disciple John. This, of course, is an argument from silence and fails to consider the specific purpose of the Apocalypse. While the Gospels dealt specifically with the ministry of the historic Jesus, the Revelation looks forward to the consummation of history.

(3)There exists a tradition that John the apostle suffered an early martyrdom, which would preclude the possibility that he wrote any of the

“Johannine” material. Charles reviews the testimony and concludes that “John the Apostle was never in Asia Minor, and that he died a martyr’s death” between about A.D. 64 and 70.⁶⁰ Beckwith, on the other hand, writes an excursus of some 15,000 words on “The Tradition of John the Apostle at Ephesus”⁶¹ and concludes that “in every instance there appear good grounds for questioning the validity of the inference drawn against the tradition (that John was martyred and never lived in Asia).”⁶² The weakness of the tradition and the compelling evidence to the contrary have led most writers to avoid arriving at a conclusion about authorship on the basis that the apostle could conceivably have been martyred at an early date.

(4) Another argument against apostolic authorship was first advanced by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, about the middle of the third century. Disturbed by the excessive chiliasm in his diocese, Dionysius attempted to remove the Apocalypse from the arsenal of his theological opponents by comparing it with the Gospel and the Epistle, concluding that it could not have been written by the same author.⁶³ Assuming that the other works were apostolic in origin led to the conclusion that the Apocalypse must necessarily have been the work of some other John. He mentions a report⁶⁴ that in Ephesus there were two monuments each bearing the name of John and leaves the impression that the other John was perhaps the author of Revelation. In dwelling on the distinctions in language, style, and thought, Dionysius set the pattern for much modern biblical criticism. He notes the many similarities between the Gospel and the Epistle and then declares that the Apocalypse contains “not ... a syllable in common with them.” While the former are “most elegant in diction,” the latter includes “barbarous idioms, and in some places solecisms.” Charles concludes that “the theory of Dionysius as to diversity of authorship has passed out of the region of hypothesis and may now be safely regarded as an established conclusion.”⁶⁵

While dissimilarity with the Gospel neither proves nor disproves the apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse (since more often than not the Gospel is held by modern critics to be the work of someone other than John the apostle),⁶⁶ it inevitably enters the discussion. The linguistic evidence that would indicate separate authorship has been assembled by Charles.⁶⁷ A comparison of the two works reveals a number of differences. While the Greek of the Gospel is relatively simple and normally correct, the Apocalypse seems to pay little attention to the basic laws of concord. There

are differences in vocabulary, style, and thought. For instance, the verb “to believe” is found ninety-eight times in the Gospel, but is absent from the Apocalypse. Words with one meaning in the Gospel have a somewhat different meaning in the Apocalypse.⁶⁸ Swete notes that one out of every eight words in the Apocalypse is not found elsewhere in the NT.⁶⁹ While the eschatological focus of the Apocalypse is on a time yet future in which God will bring salvation, the Gospel is concerned with an eschatology that has already been “realized” in the present age. Note, however, that John’s Gospel clearly reflects an eschatology that is already/not yet. Other theological differences are thought to exist in such areas as the doctrine of God (creatorship and majesty vs. love), Christology (conquering Messiah vs. revealer of God), and the doctrine of the Spirit (the seven spirits of Rev 1:4 vs. the Paraclete).

The dissimilarities just mentioned are widely acknowledged. They have been discussed at great length in the literature. What is less often stressed is the significant number of similarities that exist between the books. The Gospel and Revelation share a number of characteristic words and phrases. Certain words are used with the same special meaning. For example, *logos* is used in a personal sense in Rev 19:13 and elsewhere in the NT only in John 1:1, 14 and 1 John 1:1 in the same way. The prophecy of Zech 12:10 regarding Jerusalem looking on the one they have pierced is quoted in both Rev 1:7 and John 19:37 using the same Greek verb (*ekkenteō*), which in turn is not used by the LXX and is found nowhere else in the NT. At the close of a substantive discussion of the vocabulary, grammar, and style of the Apocalypse, Swete concludes that the evidence “creates a strong presumption of affinity between the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse.”⁷⁰

Guthrie argues that various internal considerations pose serious difficulties if authorship is denied to the apostle John.⁷¹ Unless the writer John were the apostle and his authority therefore recognized, how can we account for such a bold departure from the apocalyptic tradition in which he dispenses with the device of pseudonymity and writes in his own name under the conviction that the spirit of prophecy had once again become active? If we remember that in the Synoptics John and James are called “Boanerges ... Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17) and that they wanted the Lord to call down fire from heaven upon a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54), it does not appear out of character for this same John to be the one who in the

Apocalypse describes the plagues that are about to fall upon the enemies of God in the final days.

Who, then, was the John who wrote the Revelation? Internal evidence has convinced the majority of writers that whoever he was, there is little possibility that he was also the author of the Fourth Gospel.⁷² Apart from the possibility that in some way the apostle may have given rise in Asia to a tradition that later found expression in the Apocalypse, John the son of Zebedee is held to have had no part in the last book of the Bible. On the other hand, the unusually strong and early external evidence supporting apostolic authorship should cause us to hesitate before accepting a conclusion based on subjective appraisal of internal considerations. Smalley holds that “the case for apostolic authorship, as such, appears to remain entirely plausible.”⁷³ Since internal evidence is not entirely unfavorable to apostolic authorship and external evidence is unanimous in its support, the wisest course of action is to accept as a reasonable hypothesis that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee and disciple of Jesus.

III. DATE

The book of Revelation has been dated as early as Claudius (A.D. 41-54) and as late as Trajan (A.D. 98-117). The early date⁷⁴ interprets certain statements and allusions as best understood in light of the political, cultural, and religious milieu of the middle of the first century. The late date is found only in authorities many centuries removed from the events. Dorotheus, a sixth-century ascetic, and Theophylact, an eleventh-century Byzantine exegete, place John's exile in the time of Trajan.⁷⁵ The majority of scholars place the composition of the Apocalypse either during the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96) or toward the end or immediately after the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68). Since the Domitian date is accepted by most writers, it will be examined first.

The earliest external reference placing Revelation in the reign of Domitian is that of Irenaeus.⁷⁶ Speaking of the Apocalypse, he says, "For it was seen, not long ago, but almost in our generation, near the end of Domitian's reign."⁷⁷ Although Hort, along with Westcott and Lightfoot at Cambridge, regarded the work as originating during the reign of Nero or shortly thereafter, he admitted that "if external evidence alone could decide, there would be a clear preponderance for Domitian."⁷⁸ The words of Irenaeus are later quoted by Eusebius.⁷⁹ While Clement of Alexandria⁸⁰ and Origen⁸¹ in the early third century do not actually use the name of Domitian, there is little doubt that he is the emperor they have in mind. Later references quite explicitly place the Apocalypse in the time of Domitian: Victorinus,⁸² Eusebius,⁸³ and Jerome.⁸⁴

When one turns to Revelation itself, it is evident that the background is one of conflict between the demands of a totalitarian secular power and allegiance to the Christian faith.⁸⁵ The Roman Empire is personified as a beast who demands universal worship (13:4, 15-17; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20), insisting that everyone bear his "mark" or be put to death (13:15-17; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). These references can be reasonably interpreted only in terms of the development of the imperial cult, specifically in Asia Minor.

The concept of emperor worship had a natural evolution in the ancient Gentile world, aided by polytheism, ancestor worship, and the subsequent deification of legendary heroes. In the Roman Empire an earlier deification of the state among the provinces provided the rationale for emperors to strengthen their authority by making certain claims to divine status. Julius Caesar accepted worship as a god during his lifetime.⁸⁶ Augustus was more cautious in the city of Rome, but he sanctioned temples to himself in the provinces. Following his death he was worshiped widely in Asia and the western provinces. Caligula was not content with voluntary worship. He demanded that his subjects everywhere do homage to his statue. By the time of Nero the imperial cult was firmly established as a religious institution, although the persecution of Christians under Nero resulted not from the emperor's claims of deity but because he needed some group on which to lay the blame for the great fire in Rome. It was not until the reign of Domitian that failure to honor the emperor as a god became a political offense and punishable. W. G. Kümmel notes that under Domitian "persecution of Christians by the state on religious grounds took place for the first time."⁸⁷ While the picture of universal enforcement of the imperial cult given in Revelation 13 is a forecast rather than a descriptive account of the conditions under Domitian, all the elements were present in the final decade of the first century from which a reasonable projection could be made.⁸⁸ The imminent conflict of loyalties between Christ and Caesar indicates that the Apocalypse should probably be placed no earlier than the reign of Domitian. Kümmel writes, "The picture of the time which the Apocalypse sketches coincides with no epoch of the primitive history so well as with the period of Domitian's persecution."⁸⁹

Within the book itself are indications that the storm of persecution is about to break. The author has been banished to the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Even if this exile resulted from the action taken by a local authority, it is not unreasonable to assume that behind the decision was a general policy emanating from Rome. In the letter to Pergamum we learn of Antipas, God's faithful witness, who was put to death, presumably for refusing to deny his faith (2:13). Believers at Smyrna are warned of impending suffering and imprisonment in which some may be called upon to sacrifice their lives (2:10). The Philadelphians are promised that as a result of their faithfulness, they will be kept "from the hour of trial that is going to come

upon the whole world” (3:10). When the fifth seal is removed, there appear those “who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained” (6:9). While this description could be interpreted broadly enough to include martyrs of all times, the instruction that they “wait a little longer” until their number be complete suggests that yet more persecution awaits. Persecution is obviously implied in a number of passages about the great prostitute (Rome) being drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs (17:6; 18:24; 19:2; cf. 16:6; 20:4).

The immediate question has to do with which period of time during the first century supplies the most probable setting for this persecution. While the early church was almost from the beginning at odds with its pagan environment (they disapproved of the Gentiles’ manner of life, 1 Pet 4:3; recognized an authority greater than the emperor; and held frequent meetings that were misunderstood by the rulers), the first outbreak of persecution by the Roman government was under Nero in A.D. 64.⁹⁰ This organized retaliation was apparently confined to the city of Rome and therefore distinct from the universal persecution envisioned in Revelation. It was not until the time of Domitian that active persecution again broke out. Behind many of Domitian’s religious charges lay the desire to get rid of those he thought to be politically dangerous. Dio Cassius reports that Domitian had his cousin Flavius Clemens executed and his niece Domitilla banished to the island of Pontia on the charge of “atheism.”⁹¹ Clement of Rome, a contemporary of Domitian, speaks of “the sudden and repeated calamities and adversities which have befallen us,”⁹² which agrees with what we know of Domitian⁹³ from later writers who spoke of his persecution of Christians.⁹⁴ Although the evidence for widespread persecution under Domitian is not especially strong,⁹⁵ there is no other period in the first century in which it would be more likely. Beckwith notes that the book reflects a stage in the development of emperor worship that had not been reached at an earlier date and concludes that “the place then which the persecutions occupy in the motives and prophecies of the apocalyptist seems clearly to point to the time of Domitian.”⁹⁶

Other arguments that may be marshaled to support a Domitianic date include: (1) the particular form of the Nero myth that underlies chapters 13 and 17 could not have developed and been generally accepted until near the end of the century, (2) the spiritual decline at Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea

would require an extended period of time, (3) the existence of a distinct heretical sect with the well-known title, the Nicolaitans, presupposes some distance in time from the apostolic epistles (in which they are not even hinted at), (4) the absence of any reference to the pioneer work of Paul in Asia Minor is more understandable with the passage of time, (5) the probable use of Matthew (and perhaps Luke) would argue a date later than 80 to 85 if the common dating is accepted, (6) the church at Smyrna may not have existed until after A.D. 60-64,⁹⁷ and (7) Rev 3:17 describes the church at Laodicea as rich although the city was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60-61.

The only other major claim for the date of origin of Revelation is during the close or slightly after the reign of Nero. Smalley, for instance, argues an early date, concluding that Revelation was written shortly before the fall of Jerusalem to Titus in A.D. 70.⁹⁸ Specifically, John “wrote the book in the middle months of A.D. 70 under Vespasian, and showed his readers, in the face of a Jerusalem about to fall, the vision of *new* Jerusalem.”⁹⁹ The evidence in support of an early date, however, is less than persuasive. It is argued, for instance, that the instructions in 11:1-2 to measure the temple assume that the literal temple in Jerusalem was still standing, and therefore they must have been given prior to A.D. 70. The reference, however, is symbolic. Zahn holds that by designating Jerusalem “Sodom” (in 11:8) the author indicates that the city had already fallen.¹⁰⁰ Some who choose to interpret the unit nonallegorically resort to a theory of sources to evade the implications for an early date. Guthrie mentions that Clement of Rome speaks of the temple in the present tense, and no one would conclude from this that his writing must be dated before A.D. 70.¹⁰¹

A second argument for the early date comes from the interpretation of the number 666 (13:18) as a cryptic reference to Nero (cf. comm. on 13:18 for a discussion of this problem). When Nero(n) Caesar is transcribed in Hebrew letters (rather than Latin or Greek), the numerical value comes to 666. This identification, according to Zahn, was first suggested by Fritzsche in 1831.¹⁰² At least Irenaeus in the third century, when discussing the various conjectures known to him, did not even mention Nero as a possibility.¹⁰³ The tentative nature of this interpretation offers no substantial ground for determining date of composition.

The interpretation of the seven heads of the beast set forth in 17:10-11 is also presented as favoring the early date. Here again the divergence of opinion regarding this figure precludes the advisability of attempting to build a chronology on it. The five kings who “have fallen” (if they are to be taken literally; cf. comm. on 17:10) would probably be Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) through Nero (A.D. 54-68). But who is the one who is? If the three minor claimants who ruled in 68 and 69 are to be counted, Galba becomes the ruler at the time of composition of Revelation. But this would make Vitellius the dreaded eighth who “belongs to the seven” (v. 11), the beast of the Apocalypse! On the other hand, if the three are skipped and Vespasian is counted as the sixth, then Domitian would be the eighth. Since the seven heads are also seven hills (17:9) and the eighth is one of the seven (17:11), it is probably unwise to base a literal computation on what appears to be a highly symbolic figure.

Swete draws attention to the fact that the Cambridge trio (Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort) were unanimous in assigning the Apocalypse to the reign of Nero or the years immediately following.¹⁰⁴ Westcott argued an early date on the basis of the Greek, which is rather uncouth in comparison with the Fourth Gospel and displays an earlier point in the development of the author’s thought.¹⁰⁵ Hort holds that the language about Rome, the empire, and the beast fits the last days of Nero and the time immediately following. “The book breathes the atmosphere of a time of wild commotion” that fits only the anarchy of the earlier time.¹⁰⁶ Swete notes that in the partition of the NT between the three, the Apocalypse was “not finally assigned” and thus their published works contain only incidental references to the question of its date.¹⁰⁷ (p. ciii). Acknowledging that “such a threefold cord of scholarly opinion is not quickly broken,”¹⁰⁸ he concludes that he is “unable to see that the historical situation presupposed by the Apocalypse contradicts the testimony of Irenaeus which assigns the vision to the end of the reign of Domitian.”¹⁰⁹ Very few contemporary writers would argue against his conclusion.

IV. CIRCULATION AND RECEPTION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Perhaps more than any other NT book, the Apocalypse enjoyed wide distribution and early recognition.¹¹⁰ Addressed to seven specific churches in Asia Minor, each of which may have served as a circulation center for the surrounding area, it would within a brief period of time have been read throughout the entire province. Since its message centered on that difficult period into which the church universal was about to enter, it would quickly spread beyond the borders of proconsular Asia and be read by believers in every part of the empire.

Opinion differs as to whether traces of the Apocalypse are to be found in the Apostolic Fathers. A number of apparent parallels may be cited from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, such as reference to the coming great tribulation¹¹¹ and the author being transported by the Spirit.¹¹² There are also a number of common images in the two works (the church as a woman, her enemy as a beast, the apostles as part of a spiritual building, etc.).¹¹³ While such parallels may indicate nothing more than that both books drew from a common apocalyptic tradition, the possibility that Hermas may have known the Apocalypse is by no means precluded. The parallels in *Barnabas*¹¹⁴ and Ignatius¹¹⁵ are incidental rather than substantive and offer no solid base for literary dependence.

According to Andreas in the prologue to his commentary on Revelation (sixth century), Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the early years of the second century, knew the book and accepted it as inspired.¹¹⁶ Justin Martyr, who lived and taught at Ephesus shortly after his conversion about A.D. 130, wrote that “a certain man among us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, prophesied in a revelation made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would spend a thousand years in Jerusalem.”¹¹⁷ Another witness from the geographical area to which the Apocalypse was

first sent was Melito, bishop of Sardis, who in about A.D. 175 wrote a work on Revelation, the title of which is preserved by Eusebius.^{[118](#)}

Irenaeus (born in Asia Minor, probably at Smyrna), bishop of Lyons in South Gaul, quotes frequently from the Apocalypse in his major work, *Against Heresies* (written in the last decade of the second century). He speaks of “all the genuine and ancient copies” of the Revelation of John,^{[119](#)} thus indicating its early circulation. In an epistle to the believers in Asia and Phrygia, the churches of Lyons and Vienne (A.D. 177) make several references to the Apocalypse (12:1; 14:4; 19:9; 22:11), one of which is introduced by the NT formula for citing Scripture.^{[120](#)}

That the Apocalypse was included in the Muratorian Canon (the earliest extant list of NT writings) indicates its circulation and acceptance as canonical in Rome by the end of the second century. Hippolytus, the most important third-century theologian of the Roman church, quotes it repeatedly, considering its author to be “the apostle and disciple of the Lord.” In Carthage (the “daughter of the Roman church”) the Apocalypse was accepted as authoritative by the end of the second century. Tertullian, the great Carthaginian apologist for Christianity, quotes extensively from Revelation (citations from eighteen of its twenty-two chapters) in the first years of the third century.^{[121](#)} About the same time, Clement of Alexandria accepted the book as apostolic Scripture,^{[122](#)} as did his younger contemporary Origen.^{[123](#)} In western Syria, Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, made use of “testimony from the Revelation of John” in his treatise “Against the Heresy of Hermogenes.”^{[124](#)} Additional references are available, but these will demonstrate that by the close of the second century the Apocalypse had circulated throughout the empire and was widely accepted both as Scripture and as the product of the apostle John.

Some attention, however, should be given to the opposition that arose against Revelation. Marcion rejected it on the grounds of its Jewish character. Later in the second century, the Alogi, a group of anti-Montanists in Asia Minor, rejected the Apocalypse on the basis of its unedifying symbolism and because they held that it contained errors of fact (e.g., no church existed at Thyatira at that time). Gaius, a zealous anti-Montanist in Rome, rejected the book, holding it to be the work of a certain heretic Cerinthus, who conceived of the millennium in terms of sensual gratification.^{[125](#)} The writing of Gaius was convincingly countered by the

great Hippolytus, and from the early years of the third century the Apocalypse was uniformly accepted in the West. Only Jerome seems to have expressed certain doubts.^{[126](#)} It was in the East that the Apocalypse encountered sustained opposition. In order to refute the millennial position of Nepos (an Egyptian bishop), Dionysius of Alexandria examined the book critically and came to the conclusion that, although inspired, the Apocalypse could not have been written by the apostle John.^{[127](#)} Rejection of apostolic authorship led to severe questions about canonicity. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century, was apparently influenced by the work of Dionysius and suggested that the book was written by a John the Elder of whom Papias spoke.^{[128](#)} Others in the East who questioned the work include Cyril of Jerusalem (315-86), Chrysostom (347-407), and Theodoret (386-457). It was not included among the canonical books at the Council of Laodicea (ca. 360)^{[129](#)} and was subsequently omitted from the Peshitta, the official Bible in Syriac-speaking Christian lands in the fifth century.

In evaluating the opposition to Revelation, one should keep in mind the rise of Montanism, which found in the work support for its apocalyptic extremism. Prior to any universally accepted and authoritative canon individual scholars felt free to undermine the heretical movement by denying to it the one NT book that seemed to lend it some legitimacy. The age of persecution had passed without the major prophecies of Revelation being fulfilled, so questions naturally arose in the popular mind concerning the validity of the book. It is worth noting that those who opposed Revelation did not appeal to the testimony of early history.

In the West from the second century on the Apocalypse had won wide acceptance. In time the East began to reverse its earlier negative position. In the fourth century Athanasius in Alexandria endorsed it without hesitation. The Third Council of Carthage (397) listed the Apocalypse as canonical and appropriate for public reading in services. When the decrees of Laodicea and Carthage were ratified at the Third Council of Constantinople (680), the Apocalypse received formal acceptance as NT scripture in the eastern church. This favorable opinion was due in part to the first Greek commentaries on Revelation, which appeared about the sixth century.^{[130](#)}

V. APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

It is not surprising that Revelation with its visions and elaborate symbolism has been interpreted in widely differing ways. We may assume that its original readers understood its central message without undue difficulty. However, with the passing of that generation and the apparent failure of the book's eschatological promises to find fulfillment, confusion began to set in. Early writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus were chiliasts. ¹³¹ They held that the Apocalypse foretold a literal millennial kingdom on earth to be followed by a general resurrection, judgment, and a renewal of heaven and earth. Late in the third century Victorinus introduced both the Nero Redivivus theory and the idea of recapitulation in which the bowls parallel the trumpets instead of following in a continuous series.

In the Alexandrian church a spiritualizing approach was developing, in part because of the influence of Greek thought, the fact that centuries had passed without the establishment of the awaited kingdom, and in reaction to the excessive chiliasm of the Montanist movement. Origen played a major role in the rise of an allegorical method of exegesis. The mysteries of the Apocalypse can be learned only by going beyond the literal and historical to the spiritual. The spiritualizing method was greatly advanced by the work of Tyconius, who interpreted nothing by the historical setting or events of the first century. Augustine followed Tyconius in his capitulation to a totally mystical exegesis. ¹³² For the next thousand years this allegorical approach was normative for the interpretation of Revelation. Andreas followed Origen in finding a threefold sense in Scripture (i.e., literal, figurative, and spiritual) and making the spiritual predominant. Primasius, a sixth-century North African bishop, wrote a commentary on Revelation in which he drew heavily upon Tyconius and Augustine. His general method was to discover the abstract or universal that was represented by the particulars in the text.

A new departure was taken in the twelfth century by Joachim of Floris. ¹³³ Since the rise of the allegorical approach it had been generally thought that the millennial reign had begun with the historic Christ.

Joachim divided world history into three periods and held that the millennium (which corresponded to the third period, that of the Holy Spirit) was still in the future. He viewed the coming age as one of perfected monasticism that would restore the corrupt Church to its primitive purity. Joachim was loyal to the Church and its hierarchy, but his followers were quick to identify the Pope as the beast and papal Rome as the woman astride the scarlet beast. This antipapal interpretation was later taken over by the Reformation movement and continued for several centuries.¹³⁴

A new approach to the predictions of Revelation appeared with the writings of Nicolas of Lyra (a Parisian theologian who died in 1340). Abandoning the theory of recapitulation, he held that Revelation contained the prediction of a continuous series of events from the apostolic age all the way to the consummation. This approach was destined to be followed by many in the following years.

Over against these last two approaches a method of interpretation was developing in which renewed attention was given to the circumstances of the writer's own day in an attempt to arrive at a proper understanding of the book. Late in the sixteenth century the Spanish Jesuit, Ribeira, proposed that the Apocalyptist foresaw only the near future and the last things, the intervening period not being in view. While it is not incorrect to call Ribeira a futurist, the title should not be allowed to obscure the fact that he paid a great deal of attention to the historical basis of Revelation. Another Spanish Jesuit, Alcasar (died 1614), was the first to interpret the entire premillennial part of Revelation (chaps. 4 — 19) as falling totally within the age of the Apocalyptist and the centuries immediately following. Chapters 4 — 11 and 12 — 19 refer respectively to the church's conflict with Judaism and with paganism;¹³⁵ chapters 20 — 22 describe her present triumph, which began with Constantine. Alcasar was a thoroughgoing "preterist."

This return to the age of the author for a proper understanding of the book of Revelation is characteristic of most contemporary interpreters. Late in the eighteenth century Eichhorn suggested that the Apocalypse should be taken as a great dramatic poem portraying the progress of the Christian faith. In Germany special attention has been given to the identification of sources. Revelation is seen as a composite made up primarily of Jewish apocalyptic literature and adapted for reading in Christian congregations.

In this brief summary we have already touched upon what have become in our day four basic interpretive approaches to Revelation.¹³⁶ Almost all

expositors of the book may be placed without significant reservations into one of the four categories. The essential lines of interpretation are as follows.

The preterist, or contemporary-historical (*zeitgeschichtlich*), interpretation understands the Apocalypse from the standpoint of its first-century historical setting.¹³⁷ The church, threatened by the growing demands of emperor worship, is entering into a period in which its faith is to be severely tested. Persecution will increase, but those who endure will share in the final victory of God over the demonic powers that control and direct the totalitarian state. The great merit of the preterist approach is that it understands and interprets the plight of the first-century church in terms of the crisis that had developed at that particular time. By not relegating the book to some future period the encouragements to the church as well as the warnings to “those who dwell upon the earth” are taken with immediate seriousness. Preterists hold that the major prophecies of the book were fulfilled either in the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) or the fall of Rome (A.D. 476).

Charles notes that although the “real historical horizons of the book were early lost,” the approach was not driven from the field until the rise of the spiritualizing method in Alexandria. It remained lost to use until its revival by scholars in the seventeenth century.¹³⁸ The major problem with the preterist position is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved. It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign of God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so hopelessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray.

A second approach is commonly called the historicist view. While the preterist placed the book entirely within the period in which it was written, the historicist interpreted it as a forecast of the course of history leading up to his own time. Of little significance to its initial readers, the Apocalypse was held to sketch the history of western Europe through the various popes, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and individual leaders such as Charlemagne and Mussolini. The subjectivity of this approach is underscored by the fact that no essential agreement can be found between the major proponents of the system. Harrison adds that “It is antecedently

doubtful that the Spirit of God would be concerned to inform the apostolic church with a rather detailed picture of events lying beyond their own time and having only a remote bearing on the consummation of the age.”¹³⁹

The futurist, or eschatological, view is prominent among writers who find in Revelation a major emphasis on the final victory of God over the forces of evil. Many futurists (especially dispensationalists) regard everything from Rev 4:1 on as belonging to a period of time yet future. Kuyper insists that Revelation has nothing to do with the history of the world prior to the eve of the parousia. He writes that “the only proper conclusion is ... that we are still in the normal period of history, and that the events which form the prophetic content of the Apocalypse shall only come to pass, when the end of the world is at hand.”¹⁴⁰ The letters to the seven churches are often held to represent the successive ages of church history that lead up to the rapture of the church in 4:1 (symbolized by the transport of the Seer that follows the heavenly summons, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this”).¹⁴¹ The major weakness with this position is that it leaves the book without any particular significance for those to whom it is addressed. It would be little comfort for a first-century believer facing persecution to learn that at some point in the far distant future Christ would return and punish the enemy. There are, of course, many futurists who do not hold to this interpretation of the early chapters of the book. They believe that Rev 4:1 represents no more than a change in the Seer’s perspective from earth to a position within the throne room of heaven. The seals represent events that are characteristic of all of history, and until they are removed the scroll of destiny (revealing the consummation) is not opened. This approach is still futurist because the central focus of the book is eschatological and belongs to the final period of history. It avoids the excessive literalism that often accompanies the dispensational approach.

A fourth method of interpretation is the idealist or timeless symbolic. Its proponents hold that Revelation is not to be taken in reference to any specific events but as an expression of those basic principles on which God acts throughout history. More than a century ago Milligan wrote, “We are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church.”¹⁴² The Apocalypse is thus a theological poem setting forth the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. It is a

“philosophy of history wherein Christian forces are continuously meeting and conquering the demonic forces of evil.”¹⁴³ The idealist approach continues the allegorical interpretation that dominated exegesis throughout the medieval period and still finds favor with those inclined to minimize the historical character of the coming consummation. It is supported by the obvious fact that Revelation employs symbol as its major literary device. Its weakness lies in the fact that it denies to the book any specific historical fulfillment. From the idealist’s point of view the symbols portray an ever present conflict: there exists no necessary consummation of the historical process.

From this brief survey it is readily apparent that each approach has some important contribution to a full understanding of Revelation and that no single approach is sufficient in itself. It is vitally important to see with the preterist that the book must be interpreted in light of the immediate historical crisis in which the first-century church found itself. The author employs a literary genre that grew out of his own cultural and linguistic milieu. His figures of speech and imagery are to be interpreted in the context of his own historical setting. They are not esoteric and enigmatic references to some future culture totally foreign to first-century readers (e.g., hydrogen bombs, satellite television, and the European Common Market). With the historicist it is important to notice that the philosophy of history revealed in the Apocalypse has found specific fulfillment in all the major crises of human history up to the present day. With the futurist we must agree that the central message of the book is eschatological, and to whatever extent the End has been anticipated in the course of history, it yet remains as the one great climactic point toward which all history moves. This age will come to an end. Satan and his hosts will be destroyed and the righteous will be vindicated. These are historical events that will take place in time. And they are future. With the idealist one must agree that the events of history give expression to basic underlying principles. God is at work behind the scenes to bring to pass his sovereign intention for the human race. To whatever extent the idealist rules out a consummation, it is difficult to see from history alone any cause for optimism. It is the end that gives meaning to the process.

It is interesting to note that these varying approaches are, to a considerable extent, an accident of history. The author himself could without contradiction be preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist. He wrote

out of his own immediate situation, his prophecies would have a historical fulfillment, he anticipated a future consummation, and he revealed principles that operated beneath the course of history. The interpretive problem grows out of the fact that the End did not arrive on schedule. Beckwith raises the question of how to deal with the many predictions of the book that were not fulfilled. Emperor worship with its hostility to the church passed away, and Christianity became the recognized religion of the state. Beckwith solves the problem by holding that while the truth of prophecy is eternal, its form is transitory. Thus he confidently believes in the final realization of the divine ideal but does not “look for anything like a literal fulfillment of predictions shaped by the facts and conditions of a transient period of history.” [144](#)

The problem with this solution is that the readers are asked to commit themselves to the essential truthfulness of a message that in its specific presentation may bear no resemblance to what actually will occur. It will be better to hold that the predictions of John, while expressed in terms reflecting his own culture, will find their final and complete fulfillment in the last days of history. Although John saw the Roman Empire as the great beast that threatened the extinction of the church, there will be in the last days an eschatological beast who will sustain the same relationship with the church of the great tribulation. It is this eschatological beast, portrayed in type by Rome, that the Apocalypse describes. Otto Piper notes that many modern interpreters overlook the distinction between the historical fulfillment of prophecy and its eschatological fulfillment. [145](#) The pattern of imperceptible transition from type to antitype was already established by the Olivet Discourse, in which the fall of Jerusalem becomes in its complete fulfillment the end of the age.

VI. THE LANGUAGE OF REVELATION

The extent to which the great cataclysmic events of Revelation are to be taken symbolically rather than literally will be determined by the interpreter's view of the nature of apocalyptic language. The position of this commentary is that the descriptions themselves are not John's creative attempt to portray eschatological truth in apocalyptic terminology but the faithful transmission of what he actually saw in authentic vision (1:11). If what he wrote was the product of his own literary genius, we would have to ask in what form the visions themselves were communicated to him. Would they simply be theological insights about the future? It seems more reasonable to accept the Apocalypse on its own terms and understand John as the channel through whom God revealed "what must soon take place" (1:1). After all, his commission was, "Write, therefore, what you have *seen*" (1:19). That the visions draw upon John's extensive exposure to the prophetic literature of the OT as interpreted within the apocalyptic milieu of his day does not imply that their origin is best explained as the Seer's attempt to articulate in the available terminology his best thoughts about the future. Doubtless John would interpret the visions in the light of his own historical situation. Rome would be the beast, and the provincial priesthood that enforced the imperial cult would be the false prophet. What he could not know from his vantage point was that the dissolution of the Roman Empire was but a model of the ultimate collapse of all worldly opposition to the kingdom of God. The task of the contemporary interpreter is to read the symbols in the vocabulary of the first century and then to interpret them for the twentieth-century church in terms of their final and complete fulfillment.

VII. STRUCTURE

The twenty-seventh edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek text divides the text of Revelation into 102 separate units each of which describes a scene, presents a vision, or records a statement. No particular problem exists in identifying the units and supplying a descriptive phrase for each. It is when scholars set out to organize the smaller units into larger blocks in an attempt to discover the underlying plan that widely differing schemes begin to appear. The basic structural question is whether John intended his readers to understand the visions recorded in his work in a straightforward chronological sense or whether some form of recapitulation is involved. R. H. Charles is usually cited as the major proponent of the continuous approach. He holds that apart from the Prologue and Epilogue the book falls naturally into seven parts in which the events described in the visions are in strict chronological order.¹⁴⁶

The continuous chronological approach is not accepted by the majority of contemporary writers. Farrer, for instance, writes, "There is not a line in the book which promises us (for example) a continuous exposition of predicted events in historical order."¹⁴⁷ His own position is that the book has the form of a half-week (corresponding to the terrible half-week of Daniel) embracing four lesser weeks, themselves also halved. The sequence is a sequence of topics (the patience of the saints, the reign of Antichrist, and the victory of God) that, although not adhering to a continuous time-scheme, attach to three periods of genuine historical order.¹⁴⁸ Others find in Revelation a seven-act play,¹⁴⁹ a poem that follows no logical plan but builds up the impression of inevitable judgment,¹⁵⁰ a composition structured around the theme of a holy war,¹⁵¹ a book of seven groups of seven visions each,¹⁵² or a work built upon an underlying liturgical pattern.¹⁵³ Kraft, however, believes that the author did not have any specific outline in mind.¹⁵⁴

This rather complete lack of consensus about the structure of Revelation should caution the reader about accepting any one approach as definitive.

The outline followed in this commentary represents an attempt to organize the book on the basis of its literary structure alone. Units that seem to go together are placed together without any particular thought as to whether this agrees or not with some predetermined theory of recapitulation, the millennial question, or any other interpretive concern. Had the author intended a precise chronology of the last days, he undoubtedly would have made that plain. If he had wanted us to understand that each item in any one of the numbered series of plagues had its parallel in the other two, he could have made them match more exactly. At times John moves ahead quickly to the eternal state in order to encourage the redeemed with a vision of the bliss that awaits them. At other times he returns to the past to interpret the source of the hostility being experienced by the church in the present time. He is bound by neither time nor space as he moves with sovereign freedom to guarantee the final destruction of all evil and the vindication of those who follow the Lamb. The Apocalypse is a broad canvas upon which the Seer paints without restrictions the ultimate triumph of God over evil.¹⁵⁵

There is progress in the book, but it is a progress that moves the reader to a fuller experience of the divine plan for final victory rather than a progress that ticks off the minutes on an eschatological clock. Each new vision intensifies the realization of coming judgment. Like a mounting storm at sea each new crest of the wave moves history closer to its final destiny. The numbered plagues reveal this intensification.¹⁵⁶ The seals allow the scroll to be opened and in the process anticipate its contents. The trumpets announce that divine retribution has arrived. The bowls are the pouring out of God's wrath.¹⁵⁷ The outline followed in this commentary does not claim to answer many of the questions that can be raised about exact sequence. It reflects, rather, the literary structure of the book. That is not to say that we cannot anticipate in a general way the course of events that will bring an end to history and usher in eternity. We know that the persecuted church will witness the victorious return of Christ and share in his subsequent reign. We also know that the forces of evil will be totally defeated, and Satan and his hordes will forever be destroyed. This sequence, however, belongs to the interpretation of the book and has not been incorporated into the outline, which is descriptive only.

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Text, Exposition, and Notes

I. PROLOGUE (1:1-20)

A. SUPERScription (1:1-3)

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw — that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

The book begins with a statement of the origin and transmission of God's revelation through Jesus Christ and an angel to John, who in turn is to make it known to others. Vv. 1-3 form an introduction or prologue to the entire book. They tell how and for what purpose the revelation was given, and then pronounce a blessing on both reader and obedient listener. The earliest manuscripts of Revelation carried the simple title, "The Apocalypse of John." Later manuscripts modified and expanded the title in various ways. The Textus Receptus has, "The Apocalypse of John the theologian."¹⁵⁸ There is no compelling reason to believe that the prologue is the work of some later redactor.¹⁵⁹ It was written by the author himself, probably after having completed the rest of the book.

1 The work designates itself as "the revelation of Jesus Christ." It is an apocalypse¹⁶⁰ or unveiling. Had God not taken the initiative, the human mind could never have understood the real forces at work in the world. Nor could anyone have known how it would all turn out. The term "revelation" (as used here) is not a literary classification but an indication of the nature and purpose of the book. Modern scholarship has appropriated the term "apocalyptic" to describe a specific body of literature widely diffused in Judaism from about 200 B.C. until A.D. 100 or a bit later. This literature is pseudonymous, pseudo-predictive (the writer placed himself at some point in the past and by means of symbols rewrote history under the guise of

prophecy), and pessimistic.¹⁶¹ It deals with the final catastrophic period of world history when God, after mortal combat with the powers of evil, emerges victorious. It is clear that Revelation has much in common with such Jewish apocalypses as *1 Enoch* and *2 Esdras*. However, that it is not apocalyptic as opposed to prophetic is established by v. 3, which promises a blessing to those who hear “the words of this prophecy” (cf. Rev 22:7, 10, 18, 19).

The work is a revelation mediated by Jesus Christ rather than a revelation of Christ himself. The following clauses in v. 1 indicate that God gave it to him for the purpose of showing to his servants “what must soon take place.” Although Hort argues that in the NT both verb and noun are used for “the unveiling of the hidden Christ to man,”¹⁶² he goes on to say that “the revealing of Jesus Christ would be at the same time and for that reason a revealing of things shortly to come to pass.”¹⁶³ Christ is the revealer, not in the sense that he accompanies John on his visionary experiences (angels play this role), but because he alone is worthy to open the scroll of destiny (Rev 5:5, 7) and disclose its contents (Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12; 8:1).

The full designation, “Jesus Christ,” is found three times in Rev 1:1-5 but nowhere else in the book. It is appropriate in the elevated style of the prologue. Throughout the rest of the book the simple name “Jesus” is used (11 times).

God is the source of all revelation. He is, as Daniel declared to Nebuchadnezzar, the one who reveals mysteries and makes known what is going to happen (Dan 2:28, 29, 45; cf. Amos 3:7). In Revelation this disclosure is mediated by Jesus Christ. (In the Fourth Gospel the role of taking the things of God and showing them to people is often assigned to Christ: John 1:18; 5:19-23; 12:49; 17:8; cf. Matt 11:27.) The express purpose of God in giving the revelation is to “show his servants what must soon take place.” History is not a haphazard sequence of unrelated events but a divinely decreed ordering of that which must take place. It is a logical and moral necessity arising from the nature of God and the revelation of his purpose in creation and redemption.

John writes that the events that constitute the revelation must “soon take place.”¹⁶⁴ That almost 2,000 years of church history have passed and the end has not yet come poses a problem for some. One solution is to understand “soon” in the sense of suddenly, or without delay once the appointed time arrives. Another approach is to interpret it in terms of the

certainty of the events in question. The suggestion that John may be employing the formula of 2 Pet 3:8 (“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years”) involves the Seer in a verbal scam. Others believe that the coming crisis was not the consummation of history but the persecution of the church.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, that did take place before long. Yet another approach is that for the early Christians the end of the present world-order had already begun with the resurrection of Jesus and would be consummated with his universal recognition — an event John believed to be imminent.¹⁶⁶ While it is certainly true that in one sense the kingdom of God is a present reality, that still does not answer the problem of the extended delay in the final consummation.

The most satisfying solution is to take the expression “must soon take place” in a straightforward sense, remembering that in the prophetic outlook the end is always imminent.¹⁶⁷ Time as chronological sequence is of secondary concern in prophecy. This perspective is common to the entire NT. Jesus taught that God would vindicate his elect without delay (Luke 18:8), and Paul wrote to the Romans that God would “soon” crush Satan under their feet (Rom 16:20).¹⁶⁸

The servants who are to receive the revelation are primarily the Christian prophets (in the sense of Amos 3:7, “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets”; cf. Rev 10:7; 11:-18),¹⁶⁹ although the term as used elsewhere in the book includes all believers (Rev 7:3; 19:5; 22:3).

The revelation is said to be made known by an angel sent to John. If “He,” the subject of the verb, is Christ, then there is an angel who acts as an intermediary between Christ and John. It would undoubtedly be the angel who appears again in chapter 22 to rebuke John for falling at his feet to worship. (In Rev 22:16 Jesus says, “I Jesus have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches”). In this case there would be four stages in the transmission: God to Christ, Christ to his angel, the angel to John, and John to his servants.¹⁷⁰ It is possible although less likely that “made known” is parallel to “gave” in the previous sentence, which would make God the subject of both clauses. In that case, the term “angel” would have the general meaning of messenger (as in 1:20; 2:1, 8; etc.) and refer to Christ himself. As mediator of the revelation, Christ would be performing the function of an angel in the general sense of messenger.¹⁷¹

The revelation is said to be “signified” (AV) to John. The Greek verb (*semaino*) carries the idea of figurative representation. Strictly speaking, it means to make known by some sort of sign.¹⁷² Thus it is admirably suited to the symbolic character of the book. This should warn the reader not to expect a literal presentation of future history, but a symbolic portrayal of that which must yet take place. It is important for an adequate understanding of Revelation to remember that God is communicating his message by means of visions that are symbolic rather than literal. What they portray exists in actuality, but the vision itself is simply the medium used by God to transmit that reality.¹⁷³

2 John is further designated as one “who testifies to everything he saw — that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁴ The reference is to the revelation given by God and testified to by Christ.¹⁷⁵ It is also possible that the writer is following his customary mode of making a general term (in this case, “word of God”) more specific by adding another phrase for clarification (i.e., the “testimony of Jesus Christ”). In either case, the final clause of the verse (“everything he saw” is brought forward in the NIV) is appositional and limits the scope of both. The message of God attested by Jesus consists of everything that John saw in his vision. Although the Greek verb in the first clause is in the aorist tense (*emartyresen*), the present tense translation in English (“testifies”) is appropriate since the prologue was probably composed after John had written down the visionary experiences described in the book. It is unnecessary to conjecture some prior incident when John may have testified to the word of God with the result that he was banished to Patmos.

3 A blessing is pronounced on the person who will read “the words of this prophecy” to the church and upon those who will hear it and take to heart what it says. In John’s day the vast majority of people could not read and therefore learned aurally. The responsibility of those who heard it read in church is clear from the final instructions in 22:18-19. The beatitude in 1:3 is the first of seven beatitudes in Revelation. (The others are found in 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14.) It virtually reproduces the words of Jesus in Luke 11:28, “Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” The public reading of Scripture was taken over from Jewish practice (Neh 8:2; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15; cf. Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).¹⁷⁶ At first the reader was probably someone chosen from the congregation who

had acquired some proficiency in the art. Later the office of reader became an official position in the church.¹⁷⁷

That the congregation was to “take to heart” the things written in the prophecy indicates that the work was considered to be moral instruction, not simply prediction. John viewed his work as prophetic literature on a par with the prophetic books of the OT and possessing an authority that required the obedient response of all believers.¹⁷⁸ Although the beatitude is certainly true in a general sense, here it takes on special significance in view of the fact that “the time is near.” The Greek *kairos* (“time”) was commonly used in an eschatological sense to indicate a time of crisis or a decisive moment. The statement seems to have come from the standard Jewish messianic expectations of the day. In Mark 13 Jesus warned his disciples that many would come in his name claiming to be the promised Messiah (v. 5). A bit later in the chapter he spoke of the time of his return, telling them to be on guard because they did not know when that time (*kairos*) would come.¹⁷⁹ The critical moment for the fulfillment of all that John had seen in his visions had drawn near. Hence the urgency of hearing and obeying the words of the prophecy.

B. SALUTATION AND DOXOLOGY (1:4-8)

4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

*7 Look, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.
So shall it be! Amen.*

8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega, ” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty. ”

The book of Revelation now takes on the form of a letter that begins with a normal salutation in 1:4 and continues through the benediction of 22:21.^{[180](#)} It differs from other letters in that the initial vision (1:9-20) is followed by seven rather stylized letters to specific churches in the Roman province of Asia (2:1-3:22). That each of these seven letters is intended for the moral and spiritual progress of all seven churches, follows from the repeated exhortation to each, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22: note the plural, “churches”). Apart from the prologue (1:1-3) Revelation is an epistle, so the usual format (From A To B — Greetings) is followed.

The salutation itself is unusual in that after beginning in a normal fashion it highlights the role of Christ as faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and sovereign over the kings of the earth. This christological emphasis

anticipates the centrality of the Lamb in the chapters to follow. In vv. 5b-6 the salutation verges into a doxology honoring the one who has set us free from sin and made us priests to serve his God and Father. Since redemption inevitably points forward to its final state (as well as backward to its source), we hear the announcement of the Redeemer's glorious return. Then in v. 8 God himself speaks, reminding us of his eternal existence.

4 The author refers to himself simply as John. His close relationship with the seven churches and his intimate knowledge of their affairs make it unnecessary to add any identifying phrase. The authority with which he writes indicates his role as a leader in the Asian church.

The letter is addressed to "the seven churches in the province of Asia." In the NT, Asia normally refers to the Roman province that occupied the entire western portion of Asia Minor stretching inland to the Anatolian plateau. It is the area represented by the ancient kingdom of Pergamum, which in 133 B.C. fell to the Romans. It is not quite certain why Revelation was addressed to seven churches, and, more specifically, to these seven churches. There were other churches in Asia (Troas, Acts 20:5ff.; Colossae, Col 1:2; Hierapolis, Col 4:13) that were of equal importance. Ramsay has argued that the Asian church had gradually evolved into an organization of seven groups and that at the center of each stood one of the seven churches to which John writes.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, the seven cities were located "on the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Province."¹⁸² Others feel that the number seven was chosen intentionally because it represents completeness or perfection. In Judaism seven had special significance because of the Sabbath (the seventh day), the sabbatical year (Exod 23:10-11), and the Year of Jubilee (the year of release after seven sabbatical years; cf. Lev 25:8-17, 29-31). It is also possible that these particular seven were chosen because of some specific relationship to emperor worship.

The salutation combines a religious variation of the normal Hellenistic greeting¹⁸³ and the customary Hebrew *shalôm*. This dual salutation is found in all the Pauline letters (with "mercy" added in 1 Tim 1:2 and 2 Tim 1:2). Grace is the divine favor showed to the human race, and peace is that state of spiritual well-being that follows as a result. Metzger calls attention to the fact that grace and peace always stand in that order and observes that "it is because of God's grace that his people can enjoy peace."¹⁸⁴ More than a casual greeting, it bestows what it proclaims.

Grace and peace proceed from a threefold source. First mentioned is the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” This paraphrase of the divine name (YHWH) stems from Exod 3:14-15 and calls attention to the fact that all time is embraced within God’s eternal presence.¹⁸⁵ While it contains grammatical difficulties,¹⁸⁶ it does not merit Farrer’s verdict of being “the most tortured piece of Greek [the] book contains.”¹⁸⁷ In the Greek world, similar titles for the gods are found. In the song of the doves at Dodona we read of “Zeus who was, Zeus who is, and Zeus who will be.”¹⁸⁸ Since the finite cannot conceive of the eternal in other than temporal terms, John paraphrases the divine name in such a way as to remind his readers that God is eternally existent, without beginning or end. Such a reminder would be especially appropriate at a time when the church stood under the shadow of impending persecution. An uncertain future calls for One who by virtue of his eternal existence exercises sovereign control over the course of history. Indeed, so important is this theological reminder that the salutation-turned-doxology concludes by repeating this same word, as a word spoken by God himself to his people (v. 8).

The invocation of grace and peace also comes from the “seven spirits before [God’s] throne.” From the perspective of a fully developed trinitarian theology it is tempting to interpret the seven spirits as the one Holy Spirit represented under the symbolism of a sevenfold or complete manifestation of his being. The source would be the LXX rendering of Isa 11:2.¹⁸⁹ This interpretation goes back at least to Victorinus of Pettau in the late third century, and is still widely accepted.¹⁹⁰ The primary argument is that it would be improper to bracket anyone less than deity with the Father (v. 4a) and the Son (v. 5), especially since in this context all three are given as the source of grace and peace. The argument loses force, however, in view of such passages as Luke 9:26, which speaks of the return of the Son “when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels,” and 1 Tim 5:21, in which Paul charges obedience “in the presence of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels.”¹⁹¹

Other interpreters understand the designation as a reference to the seven archangels of Jewish tradition. In *1 Enoch* 20:1-8 they are listed as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqâêl, Gabriel, and Remiel (cf. Tob 12:15; 2 Esdr 4:1; Dan 10:13). But this would represent a strange intrusion of Jewish tradition into Christian thought (cf. also Rev 8:2).¹⁹²

Reference to the seven spirits of God is found in three other places in Revelation. To the angel of the church in Sardis John is told to write, “These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1). Since in the address of each of the seven letters the exalted Christ is designated in terms taken from the initial vision (1:12-16), we might hope to find some help by turning to that vision. In 1:16 we learn that there are seven stars, which are held in the right hand of the “someone ‘like a son of man’ ” (v. 13), and in 1:20 that these seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The seven stars are mentioned again in 3:1 in conjunction with “the seven spirits of God.” Only if the “and” in this verse is taken as epexegetic rather than copulative would the seven spirits be identified with the seven angels, but this is highly unlikely.

The other two references to the seven spirits of God are found in the throne-room vision of chapters 4 and 5. In 4:5 they are identified as “seven lamps” that blaze before the throne and in 5:6 as “seven eyes” of the Lamb. The background for this imagery seems to be Zech 4:2b, 10b, where “seven lights” are “the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth” (cf. “sent out into all the earth” in 5:6). But since John is never in bondage to the source of his symbolism but “with sovereign freedom he bends and reshapes it to serve his special purpose,”¹⁹³ little help would come from a careful exegesis of the OT passage.

Thus a survey of the four places in Revelation where the seven spirits of God are mentioned fails to provide sufficient information to arrive with any certainty at an understanding of this enigmatic phrase. Although only a conjecture, it would seem that “the seven spirits before [God’s] throne” are best understood as part of a heavenly entourage that has a special ministry in connection with the Lamb.¹⁹⁴

5 Not only does grace and peace proceed from the eternal God and the seven spirits before the throne, but from Jesus Christ as well. The latter is designated by the threefold title “faithful witness,” “firstborn from the dead,” and “ruler of the kings of the earth.”¹⁹⁵ The doxology that immediately follows (vv. 5b-6) indicates that the order of mention in no way subordinates the Son to the seven spirits.

The first element in the title assigned to Jesus indicates that he is “the faithful witness.”¹⁹⁶ This designation applies in the first place to his role in mediating the revelation he received from God (Rev 1:1; the “testimony for the churches” referred to in 22:16). But it also refers to the larger purpose of

his life as the one who bore witness to the truth from God (John 3:32-33; 18:37) with special emphasis on his death that followed as a result. The Greek word for witness (*martyr*) has come over into English as “martyr,” one who suffers death for allegiance to a cause. Throughout Revelation the word is associated with the penalty of death that results from a firm and constant witness (cf. 2:13; 11:3; 17:6).¹⁹⁷ To the Asian Christians about to enter into a time of persecution, Jesus is presented as the faithful witness. He is the model of how to stand firm and never compromise the truth of God (cf. 1 Tim 6:13).

Secondly, Jesus is “the firstborn from the dead.” This title is also found in Col 1:18, where Christ is declared sovereign over the church by virtue of his resurrection from the dead. Lightfoot points out that the two main ideas in the designation are priority and sovereignty and that in messianic contexts the latter predominates.¹⁹⁸ The messianic interpretation stems from Ps 89:27, which says of David (and extends to his descendants culminating in Jesus the Messiah), “I will also appoint him my firstborn.” If faithful witnessing should result in a martyr’s death, the believer is to remember that Jesus, the ideal martyr, is the firstborn from the dead. As the risen Christ now exercises sovereign control, so also will the faithful share in his reign (Rev 20:4-6).

Ps 89:27 is the source of the third element in the title as well. As firstborn from the dead, Jesus becomes “the most exalted of the kings of the earth.” The expression looks forward to his open manifestation as King of kings (Rev 17:14; 19:16). What the devil offered in return for worship (“all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor,” Matt 4:8) Jesus achieved through faithful obedience that led to death. Vindicated by the resurrection, he is, at the consummation, to be universally acknowledged as supreme ruler (cf. Phil 2:10-11). The threefold title is intended to encourage and sustain believers about to enter a time of severe persecution for their faith in Jesus. It reminds them that Christ has gone before and opened the way through death to victory.

5b-6 The reference to Christ in turn gives rise to the first of a number of doxologies (4:11; 5:9, 12-13; 7:10; etc.). That this first doxology is addressed to Christ alone has significant theo/christological implications. The redemptive work of the Son is central to the eschatological drama about to open. He is the one “who loves us and has freed¹⁹⁹ us from our sins.” The change of tense between the two participles (*agaponti*, present;

lysanti, aorist) is instructive, although it should not be pressed. Christ's love for us is a continuing reality that in point of time expressed itself in the redemptive act of Calvary. This release was purchased by the blood of Christ. Translations that follow the TR and read "washed" rather than "loosed" were probably affected by the Greek preposition normally translated "in." Here, however, it is used in the Hebraic sense of denoting a price, thus, "by." John's interest at this point is not in the washing away of "our sins," but in Christ's death freeing us from their bondage and misery. The ransom paid to redeem the faithful was the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (cf. 5:9).

By means of his death Jesus constituted his followers a kingdom.²⁰⁰ On Mt. Sinai God had promised that if the emerging Jewish nation would obey his voice and keep his commandments, he would make them "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6; cf. Isa 61:6). The early church understood itself to be in the true succession of Israel and thus the inheritors of all the blessings promised to their spiritual predecessors (1 Pet 2:5, 9). Corporately they are a "kingdom" (stressing their royal standing in connection with the exaltation of Christ as ruler of all earthly kings), and individually they are "priests"²⁰¹ (emphasizing their role in serving God as a result of Christ's sacrificial death).

The doxology concludes with the ascription to Christ of glory and dominion forever and ever.²⁰² In this context, "glory" is praise and honor, and "dominion" connotes power and might. The two are likewise joined in the doxology to God and the Lamb in Rev 5:13. The statement is both a confident assertion about the exalted Christ and an exhortation to regard him correspondingly. "Amen" transliterates the Hebrew word meaning "so let it be."²⁰³

7 The focus of vv. 5b-6 on the redemptive work of Christ leads naturally to the expectation of the glorious day when he will return in triumph and bring history to a close. In Daniel's vision of the four beasts, the prophet saw one like a son of man coming "with the clouds of heaven" (Dan 7:13). Zechariah prophesied that on the day of the Lord the inhabitants of Jerusalem would "look on the one they have pierced" and "mourn for him" (Zech 12:10). These two prophetic motifs are joined by John and adapted to describe the impending advent of the victorious Christ and the response of a hostile world to the revelation of his universal sovereignty.²⁰⁴ The event is so immediate and certain that John can announce, "Look, he is coming" (cf.

3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). Note that, like the man-figure of Dan 7:13, he comes *with* the clouds rather than on or in them.²⁰⁵ Thus the clouds are probably not to be taken as his means of transportation (as in Ps 104:3). Hort suggests that the rather unusual phrase means that “he compels all the clouds into his retinue.”²⁰⁶ In any case, the cloud in Hebrew thought is commonly associated with the divine presence (Exod 13:21; 16:10; cf. Matt 17:5; Acts 1:9).

When he comes, his sovereignty will be openly manifested to all, for “every eye will see him.” The following clause (“even those who pierced him”) is parenthetical. The Fourth Gospel indicates that the piercing of Jesus’ side by the Roman soldier fulfilled the scripture, “They will look on the one they have pierced” (John 19:37 quoting Zech 12:10).²⁰⁷ The reference in Revelation should not be limited to that incident or, as in Zech 12:10, to the tribes of Israel, but extends to all those of every age whose careless indifference to Jesus is typified in the act of piercing. At his coming all the tribes of earth (not the twelve tribes of Israel but the non-Christian world represented in terms of ethnic divisions) will mourn for him. The mourning of Zech 12:10-12 was that of repentance, but the mourning of Revelation is the remorse accompanying the disclosure of divine judgment at the coming of Christ (cf. 16:9, 11, 21).²⁰⁸

The thrust of the verse is that at the imminent return of Christ unbelievers will mourn the judgment that results from their having rejected him. The final “So shall it be! Amen” combines the Greek and Hebrew forms of affirmation (cf. “grace and peace” in 1:4). It is an expression of vigorous approval.

8 As the divine response to what has been said about Christ and his relationship to believers and the unbelieving world, God himself now speaks. Only here and in 21:5ff. does God speak. He declares that he is “the Alpha and the Omega” (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). In 21:6 the same title is expanded and interpreted by the parallel expression, “the Beginning and the End.”²⁰⁹ Alpha and Omega represent the Hebrew *Aleph* and *Tau*, which were regarded not simply as the first and last letters of the alphabet, but as including all the letters in between. Hence, the title sets forth God as the sovereign Lord over everything that takes place in the entire course of human history. Knox translates, “I am Alpha, I am Omega, the beginning of all things and their end.”²¹⁰ By means of these descriptive titles God is not revealing his eternity for the theological edification of

believers, but stressing his timeless sovereignty for the encouragement of Asian Christians who are facing persecution for their faith.

As sovereign Lord he is “the Almighty.”²¹¹ Although the title occurs extensively throughout the Greek OT, it is found only twelve times in the NT, and nine of these occurrences are in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). *Pantokratàr* is a regular LXX rendering of “Yahweh Sebaoth” and is the Seer’s favorite title for God.²¹² Like the other titles in the verse it is intended to encourage and support believers in a time of crisis. The reference is more to God’s supremacy over all things²¹³ than to the related idea of divine omnipotence. The latter portion of the verse is not spoken by God but about him. The use of the threefold title in 1:4 and the third person in “and [he] was” supports this position.

What strikes the reader as unusual in this salutation-turned-doxology (vv. 4-8) is that what begins as a normal greeting is immediately transformed into a lyrical hymn of praise to Christ. While God the Father is first to be mentioned, the emphasis quickly shifts to the redemptive work of the Son. He is singled out as the one whose love purchased freedom from sin. He is the one who by his death and resurrection has equipped us to serve the Father. It is to him that glory and power are ascribed. He is the one who will come on clouds of glory, and the entire human race will witness that triumphal return. God himself, the eternally existent one, indicates his approval of the praise and adoration directed to the Son. So the salutation/doxology prepares the reader for the exalted vision about to occur.

C. INAUGURAL VISION AND COMMISSION TO WRITE (1:9-20)

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Verses 9-20 record John's vision of the exalted Christ and his commission to write to the seven churches what he is about to see. John finds himself exiled to the island of Patmos and is in the Spirit on the Lord's day when suddenly he hears a trumpetlike voice behind him telling him to write on a scroll all he is about to experience and send it to seven churches in Asia. Turning, he sees seven golden lampstands and standing among them one like a son of man. The resplendent figure with face shining like the noonday sun is dressed in priestly garments. His snowy-white hair, blazing eyes, bronze-like feet and resonant voice cause John to fall at his feet as though dead. The visionary figure identifies himself, counsels John not to be afraid, and commissions him to write down the visions. The vision ends with an interpretive clue — the seven stars are seven "angels," and the seven lampstands are seven churches.

9 Both Isaiah and Ezekiel began their ministry with a great vision of the glory of God (Isa 6; Ezek 1). John now proceeds to do something very similar, in language very reminiscent of Daniel's similar experience in Daniel 10, indicating his own sense of prophetic calling to pass on to the churches this "revelation of Christ." After the direct statement by God in the preceding verse, John once again identifies himself.²¹⁴ He writes to the churches as one who has paid the price of exile for his faithfulness in proclaiming the word of God. He can fully understand the difficulty in which they find themselves in that he is a participant with them (*synkoinonos*) in the tribulation that accompanies the Christian faith. "Brother" was a common designation among believers and reflects the close relationship they experienced as members of the same religious body. Commitment to a common goal had removed the artificial barriers of position and status.

Their common lot is described as "suffering and kingdom and patient endurance ... in Jesus."²¹⁵ "Suffering" refers to the difficulties and afflictions of everyday life that result from faithfulness to Christian principles (John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble"; 2 Tim 3:12, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"; cf. Acts 14:22) but it also extends to include that final period of intense affliction which precedes the establishment of the millennial kingdom.²¹⁶

With suffering, John joins kingdom and patience. "Kingdom" refers to the coming period of messianic blessedness, and "patience" is the active

endurance required of the faithful. The order of the three is instructive. Since the present is a time of suffering and the kingdom a period of future blessedness, believers must during the interim period exercise that kind of patient endurance which was exemplified by Jesus.²¹⁷

The place of John's exile was Patmos, a small, rocky island (approximately ten miles long and five miles wide) in the Aegean Sea some forty miles west-southwest of Miletus. Its rugged terrain enters the imagery of the Apocalypse in its emphasis on rocks and mountains (6:15-16; 16:20). In addition to its significance for navigation between Ephesus and Rome, it may have served as a penal settlement to which the Roman authorities sent offenders.²¹⁸ John says that he was on the isle of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."²¹⁹ Apparently the Asian authorities had interpreted his preaching as seditious and removed him from the mainland in an attempt to inhibit the growth of the early church. Tertullian's statement about John's being exiled to Patmos by Domitian "after suffering no hurt from being plunged in boiling oil"²²⁰ is legendary at best. The suggestion that he went to Patmos for the purpose of preaching is unlikely. In Rev 1:2 "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" described the content of the Apocalypse. Here the phrase refers more broadly to the content of John's preaching. The message originated with God and was testified to by Jesus.

10 John records that he was "in the Spirit" on the day of his revelation. This expression refers to a state of spiritual exaltation best described as a trance.²²¹ Berkeley translates, "I became Spirit-possessed." Peter at Joppa (Acts 10:10; 11:5) and Paul at Jerusalem (Acts 22:17; cf. 2 Cor 12:2-4) had similar ecstatic experiences. Caird suggests as a stimulus for John's vision Domitian's edict that insisted on the worship of the reigning emperor. John saw in it "the emergence of a new totalitarianism which Christians were bound to resist, and which would therefore result in war to the death between church and state."²²² Or perhaps it was simply that the messianic era had dawned in which it was to be expected that "young men will see visions" and "old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). Following the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 John continues "in the Spirit" for subsequent visions (cf. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).

The vision takes place "on the Lord's day." Some have interpreted this as a reference to "the day of Yahweh." That is, John is carried forward by the Spirit to the day of consummation when Christ is unveiled and the

judgment of God falls on the human race. It is more probable that this is the first mention in Christian literature of the Lord's day as a technical term for the first day of the week.²²³ It is the Lord's day because on the first day of the week Christ rose victorious from the grave. As paganism had set aside a day on which to honor their emperor (*Sebaste*), so Christians chose the first day of each week to honor Christ (*kyriake*). The Lord's day should be understood over against the emperor's day.

In this state of existential openness to the Spirit of God, John hears a loud voice behind him. There is no possibility of misunderstanding the command because the voice is as clear and unmistakable as the sound of a trumpet.²²⁴ Since Christ's voice is later said to be "like the sound of rushing waters" (1:15), some have held that the voice in v. 10 must have been that of an angel. In the verses that follow (vv. 17-19), however, it is Christ who commands John to write, and it is therefore natural to assume that it is also he who speaks in vv. 10 and 11.

11 The voice like a trumpet instructs John to commit to writing what he is about to see.²²⁵ The completed scroll is then to be sent to the seven churches. Ramsay's suggestion that the seven cities named by John were chosen because they were the distribution centers for the seven postal districts of west-central Asia Minor²²⁶ is attractive and quite plausible. The cities were located roughly thirty to fifty miles apart along a circular road that went north to Pergamum, turned southeast to Laodicea, and returned full circle to Ephesus through the valley of the Maeander. The seven letters written to the seven churches (chaps. 2 and 3) should not be taken as a group of covering letters, each one to be read only at the appropriate location. The entire scroll including all seven letters was to be read at each church. That there were seven letters (rather than six or eight) may stem from the fact that that was the number of postal districts on the circular route. At the same time, however, seven is a decidedly symbolic number. It stands for completeness and is especially appropriate for the Apocalypse. The order in which the churches are addressed is strictly geographical. They do not portray seven successive periods of church history. Although the letters are written to real churches of the first century, they are relevant to the church universal, for the strengths and weaknesses of the seven are characteristic of individual churches throughout history.

12-13 Upon hearing the loud voice, John turned to see the one who was speaking to him.²²⁷ There in the midst of seven golden lampstands²²⁸ was

someone “like a son of man.” Exod 25:31-37 records the instructions given to Moses for making the seven-branched lampstand of pure gold (cf. Zech 4:2). In John’s vision, however, there are seven separate lampstands, perhaps like those placed before the inner sanctuary by Solomon when he dedicated the temple (1 Kgs 8:49). From Rev 1:20 we learn that the lampstands signify the seven churches to whom the letters are addressed. The purpose of the church is to bear the light of the divine presence in a darkened world (Matt 5:14-16). Failing this, its reason for existence has disappeared (cf. Rev 2:5).

In the midst of the lampstands was someone “like a son of man.” The background of the phrase is Dan 7:13, which describes the presentation to the Ancient of Days of “one like a son of man” who had come with the clouds of heaven. Commentators differ on what the designation intends. Swete holds that it means “a human being,”²²⁹ while Charles takes it as a technical term in apocalyptic for “like an angel” (1.27).²³⁰ In either case, the One who speaks is none other than the exalted Christ, for in subsequent verses (17-18) he identifies himself in terms of preexistence, death, and resurrection. The description that follows draws heavily upon Dan 7:9 and Dan 10:5.

Some writers hold that in the introductory verses of Revelation Jesus is presented in the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. As recipient of God’s revelation in v. 1 he is a prophet. As “ruler of the kings of the earth” in v. 5 he is king. And the high-priestly garments of v. 13 present him as priest (cf. Exod 28:4; 29:5).²³¹ The Greek word translated “a robe reaching down to his feet” (*poderes*) occurs only here in the NT. It is found seven times in the LXX, and in every case but one it refers to the attire of the high priest. The sash of the priest was made of fine twined linen and embroidered with needlework (Exod 39:29), while the sash that gathered together the long robe of the exalted Christ (it probably came down diagonally from one shoulder to the waist)²³² was of gold. Josephus speaks of the priest’s girdle as being interwoven with gold.²³³ This, plus the fact that high girding (“around his chest”) denotes the dignity of an important office, suggests that this part of the description is intended to set forth the high-priestly function of Christ.

14 The description of the celestial visitor continues with statements about his hair, eyes, feet, and voice.²³⁴ Caird wisely cautions against overinterpretation, noting that to track down the source of each descriptive

phrase and compile a catalogue would be “to unweave the rainbow.” John uses his allusions “for their evocative and emotive power.... His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing ... to call forth from his readers the same response of overwhelming and annihilating wonder which he experienced in his prophetic trance”²³⁵ — as did Daniel before him (Dan 7:7, 10).

The expression “his head and hair” should be translated “his head, that is, his hair.”²³⁶ In Dan 7:9 the Ancient of Days is described as having hair “white like wool” and clothing “white as snow.” With minor modification (the hair of Christ is both “white like wool” and “as white as snow”;²³⁷ cf. Isa 1:18) this description is transferred in Revelation to the exalted Christ. The ascription of the titles and attributes of God to Christ is an indication of the exalted Christology of the Apocalypse. Ancient expositors attempted to find in the reference to white hair an allusion to the eternal preexistence of the Son. This was not intended. The hoary head was worthy of honor and conveyed the idea of wisdom and dignity (Lev 19:32; Prov 16:31). Continuing with the description, we learn that his eyes “were like blazing fire” (cf. Dan 10:6), an item repeated in the letter to Thyatira (2:18) as well as in the account of the victorious return of the conquering Messiah (19:12). It expresses the penetrating insight of the one who is sovereign, not only over the seven churches but over the entire course of history as well.

15 Below the long robe the feet of Christ appeared like “bronze.” The etymology of this Greek word (which occurs nowhere in the literature apart from Revelation) is difficult²³⁸ but best understood as an alloy of gold or fine brass. Considerable textual uncertainty exists in the companion phrase. The NIV follows the most commonly accepted reading and translates, “like bronze glowing in a furnace.”²³⁹ A slightly different, but reasonable, reconstruction reads, “like bronze taken out of a heated furnace.”²⁴⁰ In any case, the shining, bronzelike feet portray strength and stability. The voice of Christ is said to be “like the sound of rushing waters,” suggesting the awe-inspiring power of a great waterfall. The same description is used of the voice of God in Ezek 43:2 and also of the great multitude in Rev 19:6 (cf. 14:2).

16 In his right hand Christ holds²⁴¹ seven stars (cf. 2:1). Four verses later we are told that “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches” (1:20). The number of stars is determined quite simply by the number of

churches to which the Apocalypse is being sent. There is no need to search for a mythological or astrological background such as Pleiades (the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione, placed by Zeus among the stars) or the seven planets (sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn).²⁴² That Christ has the full complement of stars in his right hand indicates his sovereign control over the churches.²⁴³ It may also imply protection (John 10:28: “no one can snatch them out of my hand”).

A sharp, double-edged sword proceeds from the mouth of Christ.²⁴⁴ In the letter to the church at Pergamum, Christ warns that unless they repent he will come and fight against them with the “sword of [his] mouth” (2:16; see comm. on 2:12). Chapter 19 pictures the return of Christ from whose mouth comes a sharp sword (19:15, 21). The sword in these vignettes symbolizes the irresistible power of divine judgment.²⁴⁵ The authoritative word of Christ is to be understood over against the fraudulent demands of the imperial cult.²⁴⁶ It is the word of Christ that will ultimately prevail.

John’s account of the inaugural vision now reaches its high point. The countenance of the exalted Christ is described as being “like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” The Greek term (*opsis*) occurs but three times in the NT. It may mean “face” as in John 11:44, or “[outward] appearance” as in John 7:24. In the context of Rev 1:13-16 its primary reference is to the face, but it should not be limited to that alone. There was a brilliance about Christ that surrounded his entire person. Once before, on the Mount of Transfiguration, John beheld the Lord when “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matt 17:2; cf. Exod 34:29; Judg 5:31; Matt 13:43).

17 John’s response to the vision was to fall at the feet of Christ as though dead. Similar responses are found in Josh 5:14; Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17; 10:15; Matt 17:6; Acts 26:14; and *1 Enoch* 14:14. But to call the response “stereotyped behaviour in such apocalyptic trances”²⁴⁷ would incorrectly imply that John was playing out a role rather than experiencing a supernatural phenomenon of such magnitude that to stand as an equal would be tantamount to blasphemy. It could even lead to death (cf. the OT belief that for sinful man to see God was to die; Exod 19:21; 33:20; Judg 6:22-23).

Christ now lays his right hand on John and speaks a word of strong assurance (cf. Dan 10:10). That Christ is described in the previous verse as holding seven stars in the same right hand should cause no problem. The

entire account is visionary and symbolic, and as such should not be expected to conform to literalistic requirements. The laying on of the right hand communicated power and blessing. It is a commissioning hand that restores John's confidence and prepares him to hear the words of consolation and command.

The celestial visitor speaks, and his very words remind the prostrate Seer of earlier days when as Jesus of Nazareth this one had shared his earthly ministry with the twelve. More than once John had heard the familiar "Do not be afraid," for example, when Jesus approached the disciples walking on the water (Matt 14:27) and when they had fallen on their faces having heard the voice of God from heaven (Matt 17:7). There is no cause for fear because he who speaks is "the First and the Last."²⁴⁸ This title is essentially the same as the divine self-designation in 1:8, "the Alpha and the Omega." In 22:13 both titles are joined by a third, "the Beginning and the End." In Isa. 44:6 God declares, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (cf. Isa 48:12). The title emphasizes the absolute sovereignty of God. Thus, in Revelation, the words "Do not be afraid" come from a sovereign being. Even death holds no terror because he is the Living One who has conquered death and holds it in his power (v. 18).

18 The idea involved in the title "the First and the Last"²⁴⁹ is expanded exegetically by, "I am the Living One."²⁵⁰ The designation is based on OT references to "the living God" (Josh 3:10; Ps 42:2; 84:3; etc.) and is used freely in the NT (Matt 16:16; Acts 14:15; Rom 9:26; etc.). It declares that in his essential nature Christ possesses life and therefore is to be understood in sharp contrast to the dead (or inanimate) gods of paganism. Even though he experienced death in the course of his earthly ministry, he is alive forever.²⁵¹ He has in his possession "the keys of death and Hades."²⁵² This grants him power and authority over their domain (cf. Matt 16:19). According to Jewish literature, power over these keys belongs to God alone.²⁵³ That they now are in the possession of Christ is evidence of the high Christology of the Apocalypse.

19 The initial command to write what is about to be seen (v. 11) is repeated and expanded. Many commentators find a threefold division of the verse interpreting "what you have seen" as a reference to the vision of the Son of man (in the verses immediately preceding), "what is now" as referring to the present condition of the church in chapters 2 and 3, and "what will take place later" in reference to the visions beginning with

chapter 4 and continuing to the end of the book.²⁵⁴ The proper division, however, is twofold, not three.²⁵⁵ The first statement (“Write, therefore, what you have seen”) is the essential unit and parallels the earlier command in v. 11 (“Write on a scroll what you see”). The two relative clauses²⁵⁶ refer to the visions to be unfolded in the coming chapters. They are exegetical and make more specific what John is to write. So translate, “Write, therefore, the things you are about to see, that is, both what now is and what lies yet in the future.”²⁵⁷ This relationship between present and future underlies the entire Apocalypse. It recognizes that the great throne-room drama of chapters 4 and 5, the vision of the woman giving birth to the man-child in chapter 12, and much of chapter 17 belong in the past and the present as well as the future. The Apocalypse is an unveiling both of the great principles at work in the world at the present time and of the final eschatological conclusion to which they point. Moffatt is right in holding that “the contents of the vision ... consist of what is and what is to be.”²⁵⁸

20 The punctuation of the ASV connects the first half of v. 20 with the preceding verse, making the mystery of the seven stars part of the command to write. The RSV (and many others) places a full stop at the end of v. 19 and begins v. 20, “As for the mystery of the seven stars.” In Dan 2:47 Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that Daniel’s God is a “revealer of mysteries.” It is in this same sense of the “inner meaning of a symbolic vision”²⁵⁹ that Christ now supplies the interpretation of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The lampstands are the churches. In v. 13 we learned that Christ stands among (AV, “in the midst of”) his churches. Facing persecution in a hostile environment, they are to realize his abiding presence. The seven stars are said to be the angels of the seven churches. Many explanations have been proposed for the angels. If they are human beings (Matt 11:10 and other verses would allow this), they could be prominent officials of the local congregations or delegates sent to Patmos to be entrusted with the letters. The use of “angel” in the book of Revelation (it occurs some 60 times) favors identifying the angels as heavenly beings. They could be guardian angels (cf. Dan 10:13, 20-21; Matt 18:10; Acts 12:15) or perhaps heavenly counterparts that came to be identified with the church.²⁶⁰ The most satisfactory answer, however, is that the angel of the church was a way of personifying the prevailing spirit of the church.²⁶¹ This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that all seven letters are addressed

to separate angels, a strange phenomenon if they refer to anything but the church since the contents are obviously intended for the congregation as a whole.

With the awesome vision and his own commission John is now prepared to write what he has seen. Caught up in the Spirit on the Lord's day John encountered the risen and glorified Christ, who personally commissioned him to write to the seven churches. He was to share with them not only this initial vision of the one "like a son of man" but also the subsequent visions that would reveal what was about to take place.

II. LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (2:1-3:22)

The letters to the seven churches of Asia (chaps. 2 and 3) form a distinct unit in the book of Revelation. That they are integrally related to the vision in chapter 1 is indicated by the fact that in the introduction to each letter the writer (Christ) identifies himself by means of a descriptive phrase taken from the vision and appropriate for the specific church. To the angel of the church in Ephesus the message comes from the one who “holds the seven stars in his right hand” and “walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1; cf. 1:12, 16). To Smyrna he writes as “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (2:8; cf. 1:17, 18). To Pergamum he is the one who “has the sharp, double-edged sword” (2:12; cf. 1:16).²⁶² Charles understands this phenomenon as the result of the author’s reediting an earlier set of his letters dealing with the spiritual conditions of the churches so as to relate them to the impending crisis. Part of the process consisted in bringing the original titles into closer conformity with the divine titles of Christ in 1:13-18.²⁶³ The plausibility of this conjecture rests on one’s larger understanding of the nature and purpose of the letters themselves.

The older view is that the letters existed independently of the rest of the book. Charles maintains that they were originally sent to the various churches separately at a time prior to the fundamental antagonism that developed between Christianity and the imperial cult. The allusion in 3:10 to universal persecution, therefore, would belong to the period of later redaction.²⁶⁴

Most contemporary commentators understand the letters as an integral part of the Apocalypse, but differ as to their nature and purpose. Dispensational writers take them as real letters to historical churches, but also as a preview of church history in its downward course toward Laodicean lukewarmness. Walvoord says that to interpret such a remarkable progression as pure accident would be incredible. “The order of the messages to the churches seems to be divinely selected to give prophetically the main movement of history.”²⁶⁵ Richardson, on the other hand, maintains that this idea is “based on pure fancy” and argues that God is in control of

history, moving it toward ultimate victory through the agency of the church.²⁶⁶

It has often been noted that what we have are not true letters, but “messages,”²⁶⁷ “special words,”²⁶⁸ or “proclamations.”²⁶⁹ They form a sequel to chapter 1 and are part of a common epistle sent to all seven. Feuillet suggests that a greater emphasis should be placed on their being oracles. Christ comes to inspect his churches, and issues words of warning and notes of encouragement. The utterances, says Feuillet, resemble the prophetic oracles of the OT more than the epistles of the NT.²⁷⁰ In any case, the messages are a vital part of the Apocalypse as a whole and are intended for the exhortation and edification of the church universal. Each oracle contains the challenge, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (the plural is significant!).

The symmetry of the seven letters has long interested scholars. Each letter is prefaced by a charge to write to the angel of that specific church. This is followed by an identification of the author in descriptive phrases taken from the vision in chapter 1. The body of each letter is composed of an acknowledgment of the church’s positive achievements (except in Laodicea and, perhaps, in Sardis), followed by words of encouragement, censure, counsel, or warning. Only Smyrna and Philadelphia escape some note of censure. The letters close with an exhortation to hear and a promise to those who overcome.²⁷¹ The orderliness and symmetry of the seven letters betray a purpose that goes beyond ethical instruction to seven particular churches in the Roman province of Asia. The entire sequence is a literary composition designed to impress upon the church universal the necessity of patient endurance in the period of impending persecution. It is this motif that binds the oracles to all that follows in the subsequent chapters. In the final conflict between Christ and Caesar, believers will need to hold fast to their confession of faith and stand ready for whatever sacrifice may be required. Bruce writes that the letters give a vivid impression of Christian life in Asia at a time when “pressure is being brought to bear on the Christians to be less unyielding in their negative attitude to such socially approved activities as emperor worship and the like.”²⁷²

A. EPHESUS (2:1-7)

1 “To the *angel* of the church in Ephesus write:

These *are* the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand *and* walks *among* the seven golden lampstands: 2 *I know* your deeds, your hard work *and* your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be *apostles* but *are* not, *and have found* them false. 3 You have persevered *and* have endured hardships for my name, *and* have not grown weary.

4 Yet *I hold* this *against* you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have *fallen!* Repent *and* do the things you did *at* first. If you do not repent, *I* will come to you *and* remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this *in* your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which *I also* hate.

7 He who has *an ear*, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, *I* will give the right to *eat from* the tree of *life*, which *is* in the paradise of God.

The first letter is directed to the angel of the church in Ephesus. In it the church is praised for its orthodoxy, chided for its failure to love, and challenged to repent and return to its original high ground. The “angel” of the church is not its guardian angel or the ruling official of the congregation but its prevailing spirit.^{[273](#)}

It is appropriate that the first letter should be sent to Ephesus. It was the most important city of proconsular Asia. Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean Sea,^{[274](#)} it flourished as an important commercial and export center for Asia. The traveler from Rome landing at Ephesus would proceed up a magnificent avenue thirty-five feet wide and lined with columns that led from the harbor to the center of the city. Ephesus was part of the kingdom of Pergamum, which Attalus III bequeathed to Rome in 133 B.C. By NT times it had grown to more than a

quarter of a million in population. Its commercial importance was heightened by the fact that three great trade routes converged at the city (from the Euphrates by way of Colossae, from Galatia through Sardis, and from the Maeander valley²⁷⁵ to the south and east).

Although Ephesus was not the titular capital of Asia (Pergamum retained this honor), it was a city of great political importance. As a free city it had been granted by Rome the right of self-government. It also served as an assize city in which the Roman governor on a regular schedule tried important cases and dispensed justice. It boasted a major stadium, marketplace, and theater. The latter was built on the west slope of Mt. Pion overlooking the harbor, and seated some 25,000 persons.

The imperial cult was not neglected in Ephesus. Temples were built to the emperors Claudius, Hadrian, and Severus. The major religious attraction, however, was the Temple of Artemis (Diana in Latin), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. About four times the size of the Parthenon, it was adorned by the work of many great artists. After a devastating fire in 356 B.C. that destroyed the first temple, it was rebuilt, with Dinocrates (who later built Alexandria) as architect. Pliny the elder²⁷⁶ gives the dimensions of the temple as 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and sixty feet high. He also notes that the 127 pillars were of Parian marble, with thirty-six of them overlaid with gold and jewels.²⁷⁷ Artemis herself was originally an Anatolian fertility goddess, but under the influence of Greek culture she had become the focus of an extensive religious cult.

The Christian faith came to Ephesus perhaps with Aquila and Priscilla about A.D. 52 when Paul left them there en route from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey the apostle remained in Ephesus for more than two years (Acts 19:8, 10), and some time later Timothy ministered there (1 Tim 1:3). It was the apostle John, however, who is most closely associated with the city.

1 The letter to Ephesus comes from the One who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. From 1:20 we learned that the lampstands are churches and the stars their angels (personifications of the prevailing spirit). The two participles are instructive: Christ holds the angels (they are in his control) and *walks* among the lampstands (he is present in their midst and aware of their activities). In the context of the seven letters his presence is better interpreted in terms of inspection and resulting knowledge than in

relationship to the fundamental theme of the Holiness Code, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev 26:12).

2 As one who walks in the midst of the churches, Christ is able to say, “I know your deeds” (cf. 2:9; 3:1, 8, 15).²⁷⁸ The deeds Christ knows are not so much separate acts as they are an overall manner of life. The two nouns that follow (hard work and perseverance)²⁷⁹ give the active and passive sides of this lifestyle. The Ephesians had toiled to the point of exhaustion²⁸⁰ and borne patiently the hostility of a society at odds with their goals and efforts (cf. the problems of Paul in Ephesus with disbelieving Jews, the seven sons of Sceva, and the mob aroused by Demetrius the silversmith; Acts 19:8-40). Much of the church’s trouble, however, stemmed from people who tried to place themselves within the believing community. These Christ labels “wicked men,” people who called themselves apostles but were found to be false.²⁸¹ The importance of Ephesus in the ancient world and its crucial location on the trade route between Rome and the East made it susceptible to itinerant frauds. The problem was especially acute in predominantly Gentile areas, where recent converts were less apt to be schooled in OT backgrounds and could easily misunderstand Christian terminology. The false apostles mentioned have been variously identified as Judaizers from Jerusalem (as in 2 Cor 11:13-23), Nicolaitans (v. 6), or any self-styled apostles who claimed a position over that of the local elders. Jesus warned his own followers of false prophets who come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves (Matt 7:15). Paul had told the Ephesian elders in his farewell, “After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:29), and the message to the Ephesian church in Revelation confirms the accuracy of his prediction. The context suggests that the self-appointed apostles were antinomians rather than legalists. The necessity of testing doctrine and advice was widely recognized in the early church (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Cor 14:29; 1 John 4:1). Jesus provided the very simple and pragmatic, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt 7:20). In the Didache the test for a true prophet is that “he have the behavior of the Lord.”²⁸² The Ephesians heeded this advice, tested those who called themselves apostles, and found them not simply self-deceived, but deceivers.²⁸³ They were liars because when tested they could not measure up to their pretensions.

3 Verse 3 brings to a close the sentence (in Greek) that began with v. 1. Its content is somewhat repetitive, although it does add “for my name” (i.e.,

“for me” in the sense of for the advancement of all that gives expression to my character) and “have not grown weary” (“without quitting,” NLT). The church is again commended for its patience, its willingness to put up with hardships,²⁸⁴ and its dedicated labor (the Greek perfect may suggest some specific work in the recent history of the church).

4 Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It seems probable that desire for sound teaching and the resulting forthright action taken to exclude all impostors had created a climate of suspicion in which love within the believing community could no longer exist.²⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the history of the Christian church has all too many instances of “unholy zeal in the pursuit of ‘truth.’”²⁸⁶ Good works and pure doctrine are not adequate substitutes for that rich relationship of mutual love shared by those who have experienced for the first time the redemptive love of God. The Ephesian church had forsaken its first love. The expression includes both love of God and love of humanity at large, but here it seems to refer mainly to the love that the Ephesian converts had for one another (as in 2 John 5).²⁸⁷ Jer 2:2 is instructive. God speaks through the prophet to apostate Israel, “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert” (cf. Judg 2:7, 10-11; Hos 2:14-16). A cooling of personal love for God inevitably results in the loss of harmonious relationships within the body of believers. Jesus had made it clear that “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Love for other believers was the distinctive badge of Christian discipleship,²⁸⁸ but at Ephesus hatred of heresy and extensive involvement in the works appropriate to faith had allowed the first fresh glow of love for God and one another to fade.²⁸⁹

5 The church is called upon to remember the earlier days in which love abounded in the congregation. Memory can be a powerful force in effecting a return to a more satisfying relationship (when the prodigal son in Luke 15:17-18 “came to his senses” he remembered that his father’s hired men had more than enough to eat while he was starving). First love is pictured as a height from which the church had fallen. The present imperative, “remember,” stands in contrast to the aorist imperative, “repent,” and suggests a continuing attitude over against a decisive break. Bear in mind the loving relationships you once enjoyed and make a clean break with your present manner of life! The “things [they] did at first” were those that resulted from their initial response of love. The love that John requires is

not an “undiscriminating amiability,” ²⁹⁰ but an attitude toward the brethren that expresses itself in loving acts.²⁹¹ Repentance is an active step.²⁹² It is a radical redirection of one’s entire life. If the church does not repent, Christ will come and remove their lampstand from its place. The reference is not so much to the parousia as it is to an immediate visitation²⁹³ for preliminary judgment. Christ, after all, walks among his churches (2:1). Without love the congregation ceases to be a church.²⁹⁴ Its lampstand is removed. From the prologue to Ignatius’s *Epistle to the Ephesians* (also 1.1) we learn that the church at Ephesus heeded the warning. One ought not to soften the warning out of theological concern for doctrines appropriate to other settings.

6 The reprimand for having left their first love is followed by commendation for hating, as Christ does, the practices of the Nicolaitans. This heretical group is mentioned both here and in the letter to Pergamum (2:15). The mention of eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality in the letter to Thyatira (2:20-21) as well as in the letter to Pergamum (2:14, where this is connected with the teaching of Balaam and closely related to the teaching of the Nicolaitans)²⁹⁵ indicates that all three of the churches were in some way affected by the sect.²⁹⁶ Broadly speaking, they had worked out a compromise with the pagan society in which they lived.²⁹⁷ But this compromise violated the requirements of the apostolic decree in which Gentiles entering the fellowship should abstain from “food sacrificed to idols ... and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29; cf. v. 20).

Early tradition identifies the Nicolaitans with Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch who was appointed one of the first seven deacons in the church (Acts 6:5).²⁹⁸ There is no particular reason, however, why this connection needs to be made. If Eusebius is correct that the sect lasted only “a very short time,”²⁹⁹ it may be that the only information the patristic writers had was the book of Revelation itself. In any case, their claim to practice idolatry and immorality under the banner of spiritual liberty was soundly rejected by the Ephesian congregation. The church shared Christ’s own hatred of evil when it refused to tolerate any compromise with paganism.

7 The exhortation to hear³⁰⁰ what the Spirit says introduces a promise in the first three letters and follows a promise in the last four. There is no apparent reason for this variation in format.³⁰¹ The Spirit which speaks to

the churches is probably “the prophetic Spirit sent by Christ to illumine His followers,”³⁰² or Christ’s own spirit.³⁰³

He promises the overcomer the privilege of eating from the tree of life in the paradise of God. Just as the opening description of Christ in each case echoes the vision in 1:13-16, so this and many of the “overcomer’s promises” anticipate the eschatological visions later in the book. The overcomers in Revelation are not those who have conquered an earthly foe by force, but those who have remained faithful to Christ to the very end. The victory they achieve is analogous to the victory of Christ on the cross.³⁰⁴

Genesis speaks of a tree of life in the garden of Eden (2:9) that, following the sin of Adam and Eve, was guarded by a flaming sword lest they eat of its fruit and acquire immortality (Gen 3:22-24). It is appropriate that at the end of time the faithful be allowed access to this symbolic source of eternal life. In apocalyptic thought the tree of life exists as a reward for the righteous following judgment.³⁰⁵ Prov 3:18 says that wisdom is “a tree of life to those who embrace her.” In Rev 22:2 the tree of life produces its perennial fruit in the heavenly Jerusalem. Paradise was originally a Persian word for pleasure garden. In later Judaism it was used to portray the abode of the righteous dead. The paradise of God in Revelation symbolizes the eschatological state in which God and people are restored to that perfect fellowship which existed before the entrance of sin into the world.

B. SMYRNA (2:8-11)

8 “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty — yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. to Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

The second letter is addressed to the church in Smyrna (modern Izmir), the only one of the seven cities still in existence, although the small town of Bergama still stands on the plain below the acropolis of Pergamum. Christ reminds them that he is aware of their suffering, forewarns them of coming persecution, and encourages them to remain faithful even to death. Smyrna lay about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus on the east shore of the Aegean Sea. Its excellent harbor was sufficiently narrow at the mouth that it could be closed for protection in time of war. An important road extended eastward from Smyrna over which the produce of the rich valley of the Hermus moved. In exports, Smyrna was second only to Ephesus.

Smyrna was a proud and beautiful city. Three to four hundred years after it had been destroyed by Alyattes, king of Lydia, it was rebuilt in 290 B.C. by Lysimachus and Antigonos as a model city. It boasted a famous stadium, library, and public theater (the largest in Asia). It claimed to be the birthplace of the great epic poet Homer. A famous thoroughfare called the Street of Gold curved around Mt. Pagus (which rose over 500 feet from the harbor) like a necklace on the statue of a goddess. At either end was a

temple, one to a local variety of Cybele, known as Sipylene Mother (a patron divinity), and the other to Zeus. The acropolis on Mt. Pagus was called the crown or garland of Smyrna. In NT times the population may have been about 200,000. Coins describe the city as “First of Asia in beauty and size.”

Smyrna sustained a special relationship to Rome and the imperial cult. During the period when Rome was engaged in a struggle for supremacy against the Carthaginian empire (roughly 265-146 B.C.) Smyrna had placed itself squarely on the side of the Romans, and in 195 B.C. it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of *Dea Roma*. Later, in 23 BC, Smyrna won permission (over ten other Asian cities) to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius.³⁰⁶ This strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population that was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was that of the elderly Polycarp, the “twelfth martyr in Smyrna,” who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned.

We do not know when the church was first founded at Smyrna, but it is reasonable to suppose that it could have been during the time Paul lived in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 19:26).³⁰⁷ From Ignatius’s letter to Smyrna (early second century A.D.) we learn that the church was already well organized, with a bishop (Polycarp), elders, and deacons.³⁰⁸

8 In the salutation of each of the seven letters, Christ identifies himself by means of some part of the description in the initial vision (1:13-16). There is normally a certain appropriateness between the identifying characteristic and the church that is addressed. The church at Smyrna was a persecuted church, so the letter comes from the sovereign One (“the First and the Last”; cf. discussion on 1:17), who died and came to life again.³⁰⁹ As he was victorious over death, so they, too, can face martyrdom knowing that faithfulness is rewarded with eternal life.

9 The church at Smyrna is reminded that its afflictions³¹⁰ and stark poverty³¹¹ have not gone unnoticed by the Lord of the church universal. He is fully aware of the pressures brought upon the faithful. The linking of affliction and poverty suggests a close connection between the two.³¹² In an antagonistic environment it would be difficult for the Christian to make a

living, and thus many were economically destitute. They may also have been the victims of mob violence and looting (cf. Heb 10:34). Their poverty, however, was a material poverty: spiritually they were rich (note the contrast with the Laodicean church, which claimed to be rich but was poor; 3:17). James wrote to a similar group, indicating that “God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith” (Jas 2:5; cf. Matt 6:20; 2 Cor 6:10).³¹³

Christ is also aware of the slanderous accusations directed against the believers by the Jewish population at Smyrna.³¹⁴ The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* documents this hostility most clearly. After the venerable Polycarp confessed that he was a Christian, “the multitude of heathen and Jews living in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable wrath.”³¹⁵ They then joined (although it was the Sabbath) with the mob in gathering wood to burn Polycarp alive.³¹⁶ Jewish hostility to Christians seems to have stemmed both from their conviction that to worship a Galilean peasant who had died a criminal’s death would be blasphemy and the apparent success of the Christians in evangelizing Godfearers and even some from within Judaism.³¹⁷ Antagonism against believers would lead Jews to become informers for the Roman overlords. In a city like Smyrna with its strong ties to Rome it would be a fairly simple matter to incite the authorities to action.

The Jews who blasphemed, however, were not real Jews. This should be taken in the sense of Rom 2:28-29, where Paul says that “a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly ... [but] ... a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly.”³¹⁸ Farrer remarks, “Whereas the Ephesian angel is troubled by self-styled apostles, the Smyrnaean is troubled by self-styled Israelites.”³¹⁹ Like the Jews of John 8:31-47 who claimed to be descendants of Abraham, they were, instead, of their father the devil. The hostile Jews of Smyrna were, in fact, “a synagogue of Satan” (the latter term is Hebrew and means “adversary” ; its Greek equivalent means “slanderer” or “false accuser”). Regardless of their national descent, they had become, by their bitter opposition to the church and its message, a synagogue carrying out the activities of God’s supreme adversary, Satan.³²⁰

10 The church is told not to be afraid of what they are about to suffer.³²¹ Jesus had counseled his disciples not to fear those who could kill the body but not the soul (Matt 10:28), and Paul had warned that the godly would be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12). Yet as the time approached, believers needed to be

admonished lest the threat of martyrdom would cause the fainthearted to relinquish their hold on Christ. They must recognize that while the persecution would be carried out by Roman authorities, it was in reality the devil himself who was responsible for their plight. He is the one who would try their faith through imprisonment and tribulation.³²² Most commentators note that in the ancient world prison was a place where the accused awaited execution. Acts 16:23 and 2 Cor 11:23 would suggest that it also served as a place of temporary confinement and punishment.

Believers at Smyrna (or at least some of them) are to suffer persecution for ten days (or “within ten days”).³²³ Opinions vary about the time intended. Most view the ten days as a round number indicating a short period of time, but others hold it to be a prolonged but definitely limited period.³²⁴ The latter interpretation is more in keeping with the seriousness of the impending crisis.³²⁵ The church is to continue faithful even though it may lead to death (cf. Rev 12:11; Heb 12:4). The reward for faithfulness is the crown of life, that is, the crown that is life itself. It is not the royal crown (the *diadēma*) that is promised, but the wreath or garland (the *stephanos*) that was awarded to the victor at the games. Its value lay not in itself but in what it symbolized. According to Pausanias, Smyrna was famous for its games (6.14.3). With others, Bruce thinks that the imagery is suggested by the circle of colonnaded buildings on the crest of Mt. Pagos called the crown of Smyrna.³²⁶

11 The call to hear what the Spirit says to the churches is repeated (cf. comm. on 2:7). Overcomers are promised that they will not in any way (strong double negative in Greek) be hurt by the second death.³²⁷ In Rev 20:14 it is identified as the lake of fire, and in 21:8 as the final lot of “the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile,” etc. Over the faithful, who share in the first resurrection, it has no power (20:6).

C. PERGAMUM (2:12-17)

12 *“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

13 *I know where you live — where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city — where Satan lives.*

14 *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. 15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore!*

Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*

The road north from Smyrna follows the coastline some forty miles and then turns inland in a northeasterly direction up the valley of the Caicus River. About ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea stands the impressive capital city of Pergamum.^{[328](#)} In the letter to Pergamum Christ commends their faithfulness to his name even when Antipas was martyred, but rebukes them for allowing in their midst false teachers who had encouraged them to accommodate themselves to the prevailing culture. If they overcome they will be invited to the messianic banquet, but if they fail to repent Christ will come and fight against them.

Pliny called Pergamum “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.”^{[329](#)} Built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet in height, it dominated the

surrounding valley of the Caicus. Its very name in Greek (*Pergamon*) means “citadel.” Although the site appears to have been inhabited from prehistoric times, its rise to prominence came in the third century B.C. when it became the capital of the Attalids. Under Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) Pergamum became “the finest flower of Hellenic civilization.”³³⁰ It boasted a library of more than 200,000 volumes. Legend has it that parchment was invented there when the supply of papyrus from Egypt was cut off in reprisal for Eumenes’s attempt to lure a famous librarian by the name of Aristophanes away from Alexandria.³³¹ Until Attalus III bequeathed his kingdom to Rome in 133 B.C. the Pergamene kings continued as enthusiastic patrons of Hellenistic culture.

The most spectacular aspect of this remarkable city was the upper terrace of the citadel with its sacred and royal buildings. Of these, the most remarkable was the great altar of Zeus that jutted out near the top of the mountain. A famous frieze around the base of the altar³³² depicts the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of earth (symbolizing the triumph of civilization over barbarism). It commemorates the victory of Attalus I (the first ruler in Asia to refuse tribute to the plundering Gauls) over the Galatians. Religion flourished in Pergamum. It was a center of worship for four of the most important pagan cults of the day — Zeus, Athene (the patron goddess), Dionysos, and Asklepios (who was designated *Sōtēr*, Savior).³³³ The shrine of Asklepios, the god of healing (also known as “the Pergamene god”), attracted people from all over the world.³³⁴ Galen, one of the most famous physicians of the ancient world, was a native of Pergamum and studied there.

12 Of greatest import for the Christians living in Pergamum was the fact that it was the official center in Asia for the imperial cult. It was the first city of Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living ruler. In 29 B.C. Augustus granted permission for a temple to be erected in Pergamum to “the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma.”³³⁵ Of all the seven cities, Pergamum was the one in which the church was most liable to clash with the imperial cult. To the church Christ writes as the one who has “the sharp, double-edged sword.” In the context of life in a provincial capital where the proconsul was granted the “right of the sword” (*ius gladii*), the power to execute at will, the sovereign Christ with the two-

edged sword would remind the threatened congregation that ultimate power over life and death belongs to God.³³⁶

13 The letter to Pergamum begins with an acknowledgment of the difficulty of living in an environment so distinctly pagan and a commendation for the church's faithful witness in the face of severe opposition. The risen Christ knows³³⁷ where they live (*katoikeis* suggests permanent residence): it is "where Satan sits enthroned" (Moffatt, *The NT:A New Translation*). Many suggestions have been put forward to explain the phrase, "where Satan has his throne." Frequent mention is made of the great thronelike altar to Zeus that overlooked the city from the citadel.³³⁸ Others take the phrase to refer to the cult of Asklepios, who was designated Savior and whose symbol was the serpent (this would obviously remind Christians of Satan; cf. 12:9; 20:2).³³⁹ Wood notes that as the traveler approached Pergamum by the ancient road from the south, the actual shape of the city-hill would appear as a giant throne towering above the plain.³⁴⁰ The expression is best understood, however, in connection with the prominence of Pergamum as the official cult center of emperor worship in Asia. In addition to the erection of a temple to Augustus in 29 B.C., a second temple was built in the time of Trajan when the city acquired the title "twice *neōkoros* (temple warden)." It was here that Satan had established his official seat or chair of state.³⁴¹ As Rome had become the center of Satan's activity in the West (cf. 13:2; 16:10), so Pergamum had become his "throne" in the East.

In these adverse conditions the church at Pergamum had remained true to the name of Christ. They had not denied their faith by yielding to the pressure of burning incense to the emperor and declaring "Caesar is Lord." Not even in the days of Antipas,³⁴² who was put to death in their city, did they renounce their faith. Little is known of this early martyr³⁴³ apart from this reference in Revelation. The name is found in a third-century inscription of Pergamum,³⁴⁴ and he is mentioned by Tertullian.³⁴⁵ The legend appears in later hagiographers (Simon Metaphrastes, the Bollandists) that he was slowly roasted to death in a brazen bowl during the reign of Domitian. His name (abridged from Antipater) has mistakenly been taken to mean "against all," and the idea that he gained the name by his heroic stand against the forces of evil is unfounded.³⁴⁶ What is noteworthy is that he is given the Lord's own title from Rev 1:5 — "faithful witness." Later martyrs

in Pergamum are identified as Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike.³⁴⁷ The verse concludes with a repeated emphasis on Pergamum as the place “where Satan lives.” A contrast is intended with the first clause (“where you live”) — both the believers and their ultimate adversary live in the same locality. Little wonder that martyrdom begins in Pergamum.

14 Although the church at Pergamum had remained faithful in the midst of severe opposition (even when Antipas was martyred), they were guilty of allowing within their number³⁴⁸ some who held the teaching of Balaam. It is clear from the context that this refers not to a body of doctrine,³⁴⁹ but to Balaam’s activity in advising the Midianite women how to beguile the Israelites into acting treacherously against the Lord. Num 25: Iff. reports that the Israelite men “began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women,” who in turn were successful in getting them to worship their gods and take part in their sacred meals. Although there is no mention of Balaam at this point, we learn in Num 31:16 of his role in Israel’s apostasy (the Midianite women “followed Balaam’s advice”).³⁵⁰ Thus Balaam became a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise with worldly ideologies. At Pergamum, where Satan sat enthroned, some within the church had decided that accommodation was the wisest policy. They taught the way of compromise. Caird explains the action of this group by saying that “the sum total of the Nicolaitans’ offence, then, is that they took a laxer attitude than John to pagan society and religion.”³⁵¹ He conjectures that they may have been a group who honestly believed that it was possible without disloyalty to maintain a peaceful coexistence with Rome. “The very plausibility of the case explains the violent and abusive language John uses to refute it.”³⁵² While not denying that the compromisers were able to rationalize their position (perhaps along the lines Caird suggests), it is doubtful that the risen Christ (not John) would need to resort to “violent and abusive language” to refute heresy.

“Food sacrificed to idols” probably refers to meat that was eaten at pagan feasts rather than that sold in the open market after having been offered to idols. “Sexual immorality” should also be understood literally as part of the pagan festivities. Some writers take both expressions metaphorically as referring to idolatrous practice in general and religious infidelity.

15 The construction of v. 15 is not altogether clear. “Likewise” refers to the preceding verse and indicates a comparison between the situation at

Pergamum and that of Israel being led astray by the cunning of Balaam.³⁵³ “You also” emphasizes this comparison.³⁵⁴ If the first four words are to be taken as a unit, it follows that the Nicolaitans are essentially the same group as the Balaamites.³⁵⁵ Both describe an antinomian group that had accommodated itself to the religious and social requirements of the pagan society in which they lived.³⁵⁶

16 The indifference of the church at Pergamum to the presence of Nicolaitans is a matter of considerable concern. John is uncompromising in his position.³⁵⁷ Unless the church repents, Christ will come and fight against them with the sword of his mouth. Only a portion of the church has fallen prey to the pernicious doctrine of the Balaamites, but all are guilty of not taking action against their presence. The fault of Pergamum is the opposite of Ephesus, where the heretics were rooted out but love was missing (2:2, 4). The “coming” of Christ should be understood as a coming in judgment. From the perspective of the first century it could also be the second or final coming of Christ (cf. 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).

17 To the faithful at Pergamum the risen Lord promises some hidden manna and a white stone inscribed with a new name known only to the recipient. Manna was the food supernaturally supplied to the Israelites during their sojourn from Egypt to Canaan. The idea of hidden manna reflects a Jewish tradition that the pot of manna that was placed in the ark for a memorial to future generations (Exod 16:32-34; cf. Heb 9:4) was taken by Jeremiah at the time of the destruction of Solomon’s temple (sixth century B.C.) and hidden underground in Mt. Nebo (2 Mace 2:4-7). There it was to remain until the coming of the Messiah when Jeremiah would reappear and return the ark and its contents to the new messianic temple in Jerusalem. Charles³⁵⁸ takes a different view — that the reference is to a treasury of manna (cf. Ps 78:25, “the bread of angels”) that was to descend from heaven during the messianic kingdom to feed the blessed.³⁵⁹ Since John is never limited by his sources, there is no reason to exclude either as a possible source. In the context of the letter to Pergamum it alludes to the proper and heavenly food of spiritual Israel in contrast to the unclean food supplied by the Balaamites. While the promise is primarily eschatological, it is not without immediate application for a persecuted people.³⁶⁰

There are perhaps a dozen or more plausible interpretations of the “white stone.”³⁶¹ Ancient jurors signified innocence by casting a white pebble into

an urn. There existed a Thracian custom of marking every good day by a white stone.³⁶² It could have been an amulet or charm to ward off evil. According to popular superstition mysterious powers were associated with the name of a god. According to rabbinic lore precious stones fell from heaven with the manna. Reference could be to a stone in the breastplate of the high priest (or perhaps to the Urim, Exod 28:30). In the context of a messianic feast (the “hidden manna”) it seems best to take the white stone as a *tessera* that served as a token for admission to the banquet. These little tablets of wood, metal, or stone were used in ancient times for many purposes. They were distributed to the poor in Rome by the emperors to insure a regular supply of corn,³⁶³ given to the victor at games and to gladiators who had won the admiration of the public and had been allowed to retire from further combat.

The stone awarded to the overcomers at Pergamum was white in that it symbolized the triumph of their faith. Commentators are divided on the identity of the “new name.” It is normally held to be the name of Christ by those who interpret the white stone as a magical charm. It is thought that secret knowledge of a god’s name (note: “known only to him who receives it”) gave special power over the deity. Exactly in what sense the name of Christ could be considered secret, or “new,” for that matter, is not explained. The new name is more likely to be the name of the one who overcomes. No one else can know the transforming experience of fidelity in trial and the joy of entrance to the great marriage supper of the Lamb. The overcomer’s name is new (*kainos*) in quality; it is appropriate to the New Age.

D. THYATIRA (2:18-29)

18 *“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:*

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. 24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come.

26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —

27 ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ —

just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Christ commends the church at Thyatira for their life of active service but holds against them the fact that they tolerate the prophetess Jezebel whose

influence has led them into an unholy alliance with the doctrines and practices of their pagan neighbors. She will be dealt with most severely, and the church will learn from experience that God inevitably repays on the basis of what one has done. Concerning the letter to Thyatira, Hemer writes, “The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important, and least remarkable of the cities.”³⁶⁴ The difficulty in interpreting the letter grows out of its numerous references to details of daily life that have become obscured with the passing of time and the lack of archaeological evidence that would reveal its past.

Following the overland route from Pergamum to Sardis, travelers would head eastward along the south bank of the Caicus River, turn southward over a low-lying range of hills, and descend into the broad and fertile valley of the Lycus. Their journey of about forty miles would take them just across the Mysian border to the city of Thyatira situated on the south bank of the Lycus in the long north-south valley that connected the Caicus and Hermus valleys. Thyatira was founded³⁶⁵ by Seleucus I as a military outpost to guard one of the approaches to his empire. Since it possessed no natural fortifications, it would draw heavily upon the spirit of its soldier-citizens to make up for its vulnerability. In 190 B.C. the city fell to the Romans and became first part of the kingdom of Pergamum and then part of the Province of Asia.

With the coming of stable conditions under Roman rule, Thyatira was destined for growth and prosperity as a center for manufacturing and marketing. An outstanding characteristic of Thyatira was the large number of trade guilds that flourished there. Ramsay notes that inscriptions, although not especially numerous, mention “woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths.”³⁶⁶ In Acts 16:14ff. we meet “a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira,”³⁶⁷ who also had a house at Philippi. It would appear that Thyatira’s market extended across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia. Since the trade guilds were inseparably intertwined with local religious observances, they posed a special problem for the economic well-being of Christians. The divine guardian of the city was the god Tyrimnos³⁶⁸ (identified with the Greek sun-god Apollo), who would be conceived of as the patron of the guilds and therefore honored in their festivities.

18 The writer of the letter to Thyatira describes himself as “the Son of God.” Only here in the book of Revelation is this title found (although it is implied in many other places; e.g., 2:27; 3:5). Since Ps 2:9 is quoted later in the letter (v. 27), it may be that Ps 2:7 (“the LORD... said to me, ‘You are my Son’ ”) suggested its use here. In any case, it stands in strong contrast to the local cultic worship of Apollo Tyrimnos, which was merged with that of the emperor (identified as Apollo incarnate) so that both were acclaimed as sons of Zeus. Thus it is not the emperor or the guardian deity of Thyatira, but the resurrected Christ, who is the true son of God. He is described as having eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze. Both descriptions are taken from the initial vision of chapter I (vv. 14-15). In Daniel’s great vision of the last days (chaps. 10-12) the celestial being appearing to him has “eyes like flaming torches” and “legs like the gleam of burnished bronze” (Dan 10:6). The blazing eyes suggest the penetrating power of Christ’s ability to see through the seductive arguments of Jezebel and those who were being led astray by her pernicious teaching. Feet (or legs; cf. on 1:15) like burnished bronze³⁶⁹ convey the idea of strength and splendor.³⁷⁰

19 The glorified Christ is well aware of the deeds that characterize the Thyatiran church. They are listed as love, faith, service, and perseverance.³⁷¹ The first two identify the motive forces of Christian activity,³⁷² and the other two, the results that follow. While the love of the Ephesian church had decreased (2:4), the practical expression of love at Thyatira had grown (“you are now doing more than you did at first”). This rather liberal praise is explained by Swete as a preface for the blame that is to follow.³⁷³

20 Major attention is given to the self-styled prophetess Jezebel (vv. 20-24), whose seductive teachings had led some of the believers at Thyatira into fatal compromise with the secular environment. The choice of the epithet, Jezebel, and references to sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols indicate a first-century parallel with the wicked queen of Ahab who fostered in Israel the idolatrous worship of the Canaanite Baal (1 Kgs 16:29ff.; 2 Kgs 9:30ff.).³⁷⁴ In a city whose economic life was dominated by trade guilds in which pagan religious practices had become the criteria for membership, Christian converts would be faced with the problem of compromising their stand at least enough to allow participation in a common meal dedicated to some pagan deity. To reject this

accommodation could mean social isolation and economic hardship. With her Nicolaitan orientation the prophetess could suggest that since “an idol is nothing at all” (1 Cor 8:4), believers need not undergo the privation that would follow from an unwillingness to go along with the simple requirements of the trade guild. Christ, however, speaks with great severity about any such compromise. Since they were unwilling to repent, Jezebel and her adulterous associates are to suffer greatly (v. 22) and her children are to be struck dead (v. 23).³⁷⁵

Several identifications for Jezebel have been proposed. Some have suggested Lydia, the seller of purple from Thyatira, who was converted to the Christian faith at Philippi (Acts 16:14-15). While as a business woman she may have faced some of the same problems to which Jezebel encouraged an antinomian response, there is no substantial reason why we should identify the two. Schürer advanced the view that she may have been the Sibyl Sam-bathe, whose sanctuary was outside the walls of the city and apparently in existence at the time of Revelation.³⁷⁶ This view is unlikely in that it is doubtful that the religious syncretism of the day could have infected the church to the point that a Sibylline priestess could also function so effectively within the church itself. The opportunity for repentance (v. 21) suggests someone from within the church who had gone astray rather than a female fortune teller from the pagan world.

One variant reading translates “your wife Jezebel,”³⁷⁷ which would make her the wife of the bishop or leader of the church at Thyatira. As the variant is improbable, so also is the identification. The Thyatiran Jezebel is probably some prominent woman within the church who, like her OT counterpart, was influencing the people of God to forsake loyalty to God by promoting a tolerance toward and involvement in pagan practices. This extended to sexual immorality and participation in the religious feasts connected with membership in trade guilds. Jezebel “symbolizes the corrosive powers of false religion among the people of God.”³⁷⁸

It is questionable whether her teaching was in any sense formal. It may only have taken the form of popular persuasion built upon unexamined assumptions. In any case, it had seduced a considerable number of believers into a fatal compromise with paganism. While at Pergamum antinomianism had made its way into the church and affected some (2:14), at Thyatira it was aggressively promoted by a prominent woman claiming the gift of divine prophecy. Since the eating of “food sacrificed to idols” is

undoubtedly intended in a literal sense, it is best to take “sexual immorality” in the same way.³⁷⁹ Pagan feasts often led to sexual promiscuity.

21 Participation in the guild-feast with its penchant for licentiousness would involve the believer in yet another kind of immorality. The concept of religious infidelity under the figure of harlotry is common in the OT. “Do not rejoice, O Israel ... for you have played the harlot against your God” (Hos 9:1, NKJ ; cf. Jer 3:6; Ezek 23:19; etc.). The fornication of which Jezebel was not willing to repent was her adulterous alliance with the pagan environment. She had been given time (perhaps by the Seer) to repent, but had refused.

22 Severe punishment is about to be meted out³⁸⁰ to Jezebel and her adulterous associates. She is to be cast onto a bed, and they will suffer intensely. The bed is not a “funeral-bier”³⁸¹ or a dining-couch of the guild-feasts,³⁸² but a bed of sickness and pain.³⁸³ Disease as a punishment for sin was an accepted view. Paul wrote that participation in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner was the reason why many of the Corinthians were weak and ill and some had died (1 Cor 11:27-29). The parallel structure of the two main clauses sets “bed”³⁸⁴ over against “intense suffering” (*thlipsin megalēn*). Jezebel’s associates in adultery were all those she had led astray within the church. It appears that her time for repentance had passed (v. 21) but that “*they* [still had the opportunity to] repent of her ways” (italics added).³⁸⁵

23 The promise of certain punishment continues. Jezebel’s “children” are not the literal offspring of her adulteries³⁸⁶ or a second generation of heretics,³⁸⁷ but those who have so unreservedly embraced the antinomian doctrines of their spiritual mother that they are best described as younger members of her family. The killing of Jezebel’s children may reflect the bloody occasion when the rulers of Samaria murdered the seventy sons of Ahab and sent their heads to Jezreel in baskets (2 Kgs 10:1-11). If a distinction is to be drawn between the children of Jezebel and “those who commit adultery with her” (v. 22), the latter would be those who “flirt with her teaching” and the former, “the totally converted.”³⁸⁸

The persuasive logic of the compromisers had confused many in the church at Thyatira, but imminent punishment would demonstrate that the one who searches the “hearts and minds”³⁸⁹ of people had found them

guilty. Each is to receive “according to [his or her] deeds.” Through the prophet Jeremiah, God expressed in the clearest of terms the principle of divine judgment: “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve” (Jer 17:10). It is restated both by Jesus (“the Son of Man ... will reward each person according to what he has done,” Matt 16:27) and by Paul (“God will give to each person according to what he has done,” Rom 2:6).³⁹⁰

24-25 On those in Thyatira who have not been led astray by the Jezebel party, Christ lays no additional burden³⁹¹ “except that you hold on to what you have until I come” (Phillips). To combine the two verses in this way answers the question, What burden? which would go unanswered if v. 25 is separated and introduces a new idea. Those who have remained faithful at Thyatira are described as not having learned “Satan’s so-called deep secrets.” This phrase is normally taken in one of two ways. Some feel that it is no more than “a sarcastic reversal of their main slogan.”³⁹² Claiming to know the deep secrets of God, they are told that the “deep secrets” they claim to know are really the deep secrets of Satan.³⁹³

It is more likely, however, that knowing Satan’s “deep secrets” is a reference to the view that in order to appreciate fully the grace of God one must first plumb the depths of evil. Later gnosticism boasted that it was precisely by entering into the stronghold of Satan that believers could learn the limits of his power and emerge victorious. On the basis that a believer’s spirituality is unaffected by what is done with the body, Jezebel could argue that the Thyatiran Christians ought to take part in the pagan guild-feasts (even if they were connected with the deep secrets of Satan) and thus prove how powerless is evil to alter the nature of grace.

26-27 In the first three letters the exhortation “He who has an ear ...” preceded the concluding promise. Beginning with the Thyatiran letter the order is changed and the exhortation follows the promise. Hemer notes two additional changes in the form of the letter: (1) only here is the final promise made dependent on a double condition, and (2) only here and at Pergamum (2:17) are two apparently distinct promises made to the victor, each separately introduced by “I will give.”³⁹⁴ Authority over the nations and “the morning star” are promised to the overcomer, that is,³⁹⁵ the one who does the will of Christ until the end.³⁹⁶ It is by faithful allegiance to the

cause of Christ that believers overcome in the hostile environment of pagan values and practices.

Verses 26b-27 are a free rendering of Ps 2:8-9, which had been interpreted messianically as early as the first century B.C. The Psalms of Solomon (written probably between 70 and 40 B.C.) say of the son of David who is to rule over Israel, "He shall destroy the pride of the sinners as a potter's vessel. With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance" (Pss. Sol. 17:23-24). It was a regular feature of Jewish eschatology that the followers of the Messiah would share in his final rule. This feature carried over into Christian thought (1 Cor 6:3; Rev 5:10).

Christ promises the overcomers that they will rule the nations with an iron scepter. The verb means "to shepherd"³⁹⁷ and should be taken in the sense of wielding the shepherd's staff or club (the "iron scepter" may have been an oak club capped with iron) to ward off the attacks of marauding beasts. In Rev 12:5 and 19:15 the prerogative of ruling (shepherding) the nations belongs to the conquering Christ. A share in this rule is promised to the overcomers in Thyatira. The description of this rule as the shattering of the potter's vessel speaks of the absolute power of the victorious Christ and his followers over the rebellious nations. The concluding clause of the verse picks up from v. 26. Christ will give authority to the overcomer just as he has received it from his Father.³⁹⁸ It reflects the messianic "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" of Ps 2:7.

28 In addition to authority over the nations the overcomer is promised the morning star. No completely satisfactory answer for this symbol has yet been offered. Among the many suggestions one finds (1) an allusion to Lucifer of Isa 14:12, (2) Christ himself (cf. 22:16), (3) a reference to Dan 12:3 and the immortality of the righteous, (4) the dawn of eternal life, (5) a literal reference to the planet Venus, and (6) the Holy Spirit. Hemer suggests rather tentatively that the author's mind may have passed from Ps 2:7-9 to Num 24:17 (the rod or scepter in each passage symbolizes authority) with its mention of a star, which then suggested the "morning star," a local concept whose significance has now been forgotten.³⁹⁹

29 Once again the exhortation to hear what the Spirit says to the churches is repeated (cf. 2:7, 11, 17). This same emphasis on hearing and doing also marks the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The wise build against the coming storm of judgment by hearing and doing (Matt 7:24-25).

E. SARDIS (3:1-6)

1 *“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for 1 have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The church at Sardis was considered to be alive and well, but actually it was on the point of death. Christ admonishes the congregation to wake up to their perilous condition and take steps to restore their former vitality. Otherwise he will visit them unexpectedly in judgment. Those who overcome will have their names in the book of life and stand approved before God

In the sixth century B.C. Sardis was one of the most powerful cities of the ancient world. Yet by the Roman period it had declined to the point that Ramsay could describe it as “a relic of the period of barbaric warfare, which lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions.”⁴⁰⁰ It was located some fifty miles east of Ephesus on a northern spur of Mt. Tmolus overlooking the broad and fertile plain of the Hermus. The acropolis, with its nearly perpendicular rock walls rising 1,500 feet above the lower valley (on all but the south side), was essentially

inaccessible and provided a natural citadel.⁴⁰¹ As Sardis grew, it became necessary to develop a lower city to the north and west of the acropolis on the banks of the Pactolus, a southern tributary of the Hermus. Excavations in the lower city have unearthed a Roman theater and stadium as well as an exceptionally large (160 by 300 feet) temple dedicated to Artemis. Its seventy-eight Ionic columns (of which two are still standing) are each fifty-eight feet in height. Built on the sixth-century-B.C. foundations of an ancient temple constructed by Croesus, it was destroyed in 499 B.C. and reconstructed but never completely finished in the time of Alexander the Great. It was dedicated to a local Asiatic goddess usually referred to as Cybele, who was identified with the Greek Artemis. This patron deity was believed to possess the special power of restoring the dead to life.

Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, the most obstinate of the foreign powers encountered by the Greeks during their early colonization in Asia Minor. In 546 B.C. it fell to Cyrus and became the seat of the Persian governor. Later it became part of the Seleucid kingdom, then passed to Pergamum, and subsequently to Rome (133 B.C.). In A.D. 17 Sardis suffered a catastrophic earthquake,⁴⁰² but it was rebuilt with considerable help from the emperor Tiberius (10,000,000 *sesterces* — about a million dollars — and five years of tax remission.⁴⁰³ Nine years later (in A.D. 26) it competed with ten other Asian cities for the privilege of building an imperial temple, but it lost out to Smyrna, which stressed its practical services to Rome.⁴⁰⁴ Situated at the western end of a famous highway from Susa through Asia Minor, Sardis was a city of wealth and fame. Under Croesus gold was taken from the Pactolus. Jewelry found in the local cemeteries indicates great prosperity. It was at Sardis that gold and silver coins were first struck. It claimed to be the first to discover the art of dyeing wool.

The church at Sardis comes under the most severe denunciation of the seven. Apparently untroubled by heresy and free from outside opposition, it had so completely come to terms with its pagan environment that although it retained the outward appearance of life, it was spiritually dead. Like the fig tree of Mark 11:20 it had leaves but no fruit.⁴⁰⁵

1 The letter to Sardis comes from the one who holds “the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” We are reminded that the letter to Ephesus came from the one who “holds the seven stars in his right hand” (2:1)⁴⁰⁶ The seven stars are identified in 1:20 as the angels of the seven churches, but the

seven spirits of God are enigmatic at best. Perhaps Ramsay is right in his opinion that they “must certainly be taken as a symbolic or allegorical way of expressing the full range of exercise of the Divine power in the seven churches,”⁴⁰⁷ although from 1:4 it would seem that the figure represents some part of a heavenly entourage that has a special ministry in connection with the Lamb.⁴⁰⁸

Christ knows their deeds, and there is little to commend. Although they have the reputation of being alive, they are in fact dead. Subsequent verses indicate that while the entire church had not fallen into a state of complete spiritual death (vv. 4-5), the majority had so fully compromised with the pagan environment that the church was Christian in name only (i.e., “nominally” Christian). Like the prodigal son of whom the father said, “This son of mine was dead” (Luke 15:24), only by repentance and return could life be restored (cf. Eph 5:14).

2 The first of five imperatives in vv. 2 and 3⁴⁰⁹ is joined to a participle and should be translated “be watchful” rather than “wake up” (as in the translations by Moffatt, Beck, and others). The exhortations to watchfulness would carry special weight in Sardis because twice in its history the acropolis had fallen to the enemy due to a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders. In 549 B.C. Cyrus captured the acropolis by deploying a climber to work his way up a crevice on one of the nearly perpendicular walls of the mountain fortress.⁴¹⁰ Late in the third century the city was again captured in the same way. A Cretan by the name of Lagoras discovered a vulnerable point and with a band of fifteen men made a daring ascent, opened the gates from within, and allowed the armies of Antiochus the Great to overpower the rebel Archaeus (216 B.C.). As in history, so in life, to consider oneself secure and fail to remain alert is to court disaster.⁴¹¹

Although the church at Sardis was dead (v. 1), some things still remained (although on the verge of dying). Rather than attempting to distinguish what was in fact dead and what could still be saved, it is better to take the two statements as paradoxical. Although Sardis could be pronounced dead, it still had the possibility of restoration to life. The city is to “strengthen⁴¹² that which still remains though it is at the point of death” (Weymouth). Christ, who knows their deeds (v. 1), has not found any of them⁴¹³ carried out fully. Like the unfinished temple of Artemis, the works of the church constantly fell short of completion. They lacked the appropriate motivation

and spiritual orientation, without which all external activity is morally impotent. The believers at Sardis had established a name for themselves in the eyes of the community, but in God's sight (i.e., from God's point of view) their works had not measured up.

3 The church is called upon to bear in mind (present imperative) what⁴¹⁴ they had received and heard. The change in tense between "have received" (perfect) and "heard" (aorist) is instructive. Members of the church had received the faith as an abiding trust at the moment faith came by hearing. Christ calls on them to remember what they had been taught.⁴¹⁵

Like the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and (later) Laodicea, Sardis is told to repent (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:19). Behm writes that "the urgent call for conversion in the epistles of Rev ... is based on the prospect of the imminent end" and summons the churches "from sin and weakness, to the renewal of their former state of life."⁴¹⁶ If the church does not wake up to its perilous position, Christ will "come like a thief" (i.e., unexpectedly) and visit them in judgment.⁴¹⁷ In other NT passages where the coming of Christ (or the day of the Lord) is said to be like a thief in the night (Matt 24:42-44; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10), the second advent is in view. Here, however, some historical visitation must be in mind since the eschatological coming is not dependent on repentance in Sardis.⁴¹⁸ When that visitation comes, it will be swift and unexpected (they will not know "at what time" he will come).⁴¹⁹

4 Although the majority of the church had become thoroughly secularized, there were a few people⁴²⁰ who had "not soiled their clothes."⁴²¹ It is often noted that since the manufacture and dyeing of woolen goods was a principal trade in Sardis, an allusion to soiled clothes would be immediately recognized. It is unlikely, however, that anything more than a general reference to the danger of contaminating the Christian witness by accommodation to the prevailing standards of a pagan city is in mind.⁴²²

The promise to the undefiled minority is that they will walk with Christ, "dressed in white." While this could suggest a reference to Enoch, who "walked with God" (Gen 5:22, 24), it is more likely an allusion to the itinerant ministry of Jesus in Galilee (cf. John 6:66). In Revelation 7 the great multitude wearing white robes (vv. 9-10) is led by the Lamb to springs of living water (v. 17), and in chapter 14 the 144,000 "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (v. 4). In the context of the following verse (5), where

those dressed in white do not have their names blotted out of the book of life, it would appear that walking “in white” is a way of describing those who are justified.⁴²³ Other possible references are to purity, festivity, resurrection bodies, or the Roman custom of wearing white on the day of triumph.⁴²⁴ Here, as elsewhere, the author is not limited to our knowledge of possible sources. While background is helpful, it does not determine how a figure must be used or what it may subsequently mean. The faithful at Sardis walk with Christ, dressed in white, “for they are worthy.” They themselves have done nothing to merit their exalted position, but are worthy in the sense that they have withstood the pressure to apostatize and hence have done nothing that would result in forfeiting their position.

5 To the overcomers a threefold promise is given: (1) they will be dressed in white, (2) their names will not be blotted out of the book of life, and (3) Christ will acknowledge them before God and his angels. White garments (or robes)⁴²⁵ are mentioned seven times in Revelation, but no distinctive pattern is established. The Laodiceans are counseled to buy them to cover their shameful nakedness (3:18). The martyrs awaiting vindication are given white robes (6:11). In the heavenly throne room the twenty-four elders are dressed in white (4:4), and before the Lamb stands a great multitude wearing white robes that have been washed in his blood (7:9, 13). The armies of heaven who appear with the warrior Messiah are “dressed in fine linen, white and clean” (19:14). It would seem, therefore, that the white garments promised to the overcomer here represent an attire appropriate to the heavenly state.⁴²⁶ Since they are made white by being washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), the figure is highly appropriate to portray justification.

The second promise is that the overcomer’s name will not be blotted out of the book of life. The idea of a divine ledger is first mentioned in the OT in Exod 32:32-33, where Moses prays that if God will not forgive the sin of his people, he himself wants to be blotted out “of the book you have written” (cf. Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1). Thus, in the OT, the book of life was a register of all those who held citizenship in the theocratic community of Israel.⁴²⁷ The idea was common in the secular world as well. “When a criminal’s name was removed from the civic register of an Asiatic town, he lost his citizenship.”⁴²⁸ Walvoord is troubled lest someone interpret the concept of being blotted out of the book of life as indicating the possibility of people losing their salvation. Consequently, he suggests that (1) there is

no explicit statement that anybody will, in fact, have his name blotted out, or (2) the book of life lists the entire human race and individuals who do not accept Christ are blotted out.⁴²⁹ Caird, on the other hand, suggests that John believes in a “conditional predestination” in which the decrees of God wait on the acceptance or rejection of each individual.⁴³⁰ It is hermeneutically unsound to base theological doctrine solely on either parables or apocalyptic imagery. Better to allow the text, even when theologically awkward, to present its own picture.

Finally, to the overcomer Christ promises that he will acknowledge his name before his Father and the angels. This is a clear reflection of Matt 10:32 (cf. Luke 12:8; Mark 8:38/Luke 9:26), “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.” Faithfulness in trial now is to be rewarded beyond measure in the life to come.

6 See commentary on 2:7.

F. PHILADELPHIA (3:7-13)

7 “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars — I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The letter to Philadelphia contains no note of disapproval or reproach. Although the believers may have been excommunicated from the local synagogue, Christ has placed before them an open door into the messianic kingdom. They have remained faithful, and those who are not really Jews will be forced to come and acknowledge that God loves the Christian community. Because of their patient endurance God will keep them from the coming time of trial, and as overcomers they will take their place in the temple of God sealed with his name.

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir)⁴³¹ lies at the eastern end of a broad valley that, passing through Sardis (some thirty miles west-northwest), leads down to the Aegean Sea near Smyrna. Its location commanded high ground on the south side of the river Cogamis, a tributary of the Hermus. This strategic location at the juncture of trade routes leading to Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia (the imperial post route from Rome via Troas passed through Philadelphia and continued eastward to the high central plateau) had helped it earn the title “gateway to the East” and made it a city of commercial importance. The great volcanic plain to the north (*katakekaumenē*, the burnt land) was fertile and well suited to growing grapes. With an economy based on agriculture and industry, Philadelphia enjoyed considerable prosperity. Its one major drawback was that it was subject to earthquakes. The devastating earthquake of A.D. 17 that leveled twelve cities of Asia overnight⁴³² had been particularly severe on Philadelphia, perhaps because it was nearer the fault line and also suffered a long series of tremors that followed. With the defeat of Antiochus IV at Magnesia in 190 B.C. Lydia passed to Pergamene control. Although Philadelphia is the most recently established of the seven cities of the Apocalypse, there is some confusion as to whether Eumenes II, king of Pergamum, or his younger brother Attalus II Philadelphus, who reigned from 159 to 138 B.C., founded the city.⁴³³ What is certain is that its name commemorates the loyalty and devotion of Attalus II to his brother (this is what earned him the epithet Philadelphus, “lover of his brother”). Hemer calls attention to two incidents of special note: (1) a false rumor of Eumenes’s assassination led Attalus to accept the crown, which he then relinquished when his brother returned from Greece, and (2) Attalus’s resistance to Roman encouragement to overthrow his brother and become king.⁴³⁴ The city was probably founded between 189 B.C. when the region came under the control of Eumenes and 138 B.C. when Attalus died, although without doubt it was built on the site of some earlier settlement. In its development under Pergamene rule Philadelphia was intended to serve as a “missionary city” to bring Greek culture to the recently annexed area of Lydia and Phrygia. Ramsay indicates the success achieved by noting that before A.D. 19 the Lydian tongue had been replaced by Greek as the only language of the country.⁴³⁵

Following the great earthquake of A.D. 17 it took the name of Neocaesarea for a time in appreciation for the imperial help received for

rebuilding. At a later date, under Vespasian (A.D. 69-79), the name Flavia began to appear on coins. Philadelphia was remarkable for its many temples and religious festivals. For this reason, in the fifth century A.D. it was called “little Athens.” Because it was located in a vine-growing district, the worship of Dionysus was its chief pagan cult. After Tiberius’s help, it founded a cult of Germanicus, the adopted son and heir of the emperor. Between A.D. 211 and 217 a provincial temple to the imperial cult was built, and Philadelphia was honored with the title *Neocoros*, warden of the temple.

Attention has often been called to the similarities between the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Kiddle, for example, points out that both are designed to strengthen the faithful and, in fact, point by point cover the same ground.⁴³⁶ They are the two churches that receive unqualified praise from the Lord.

7 Apparently all suitable phrases from the vision of chapter 1 have been used up,⁴³⁷ so from other sources the speaker identifies himself as the true Messiah who controls access to the eternal kingdom. While the NIV uses “holy and true” to describe the risen Christ, a more literal translation of the Greek text is “the Holy One, the True One” (*ho hagios, ho alēthinos*). In Jewish culture the Holy One was a familiar title for God (e.g., Isa 40:25; Hab 3:3; Mark 1:24; John 6:69; *1 Clem.* 23:5). Here it is joined with “the True One” and applied to Christ. In Rev 6:10 they are combined to further describe God just addressed as “Sovereign Lord.” If “true” is taken in the classical sense of “genuine,” it may be used in 3:7 to refute those Jews of Philadelphia who would claim that Christ was a false Messiah.⁴³⁸ If it is taken in the OT sense of “faithful,”⁴³⁹ it could serve to remind the believers at Philadelphia that not only has Christ been set apart (the root meaning of *hagios*) to carry out his messianic task, but that he can be counted on to carry it to completion.⁴⁴⁰

Christ is next described as having “the key⁴⁴¹ of David,”⁴⁴² a metaphorical expression indicating complete control over the royal household. Specifically, in view of the following clauses, it means the undisputed authority to admit or exclude from the New Jerusalem. The background is the oracle against Shebna, Hezekiah’s major-domo (Isa 22:15-25), who was to be removed from office and replaced with Eliakim. Concerning the new chief steward the text says, “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and

what he shuts no one can open” (Isa 22:22; cf. Job 12:14b). The language of Isaiah is used to present Christ as the Davidic Messiah with absolute power to control entrance to the heavenly kingdom. It may be an intentional contrast with the practice of the local synagogue in excommunicating Christian Jews.

8 A preliminary problem in v. 8 is the punctuation of the first clauses. The ASV considers “Behold, I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut” parenthetical. Commentators who follow this punctuation take the following conjunction (*hoti*) as declarative and the remainder of the verse as detailing the “deeds” that Christ knows. If a major stop occurs after “deeds,” then the conjunction is better translated “because” and supplies the reason for the open door being placed before the church. The NIV takes the first four words as a complete sentence and after the somewhat parenthetical statement repeats “I know” from the first sentence and carries on “that you have little strength” (see NRSV for a similar construction). This is the most satisfying solution to the syntactical problem.

Most of the discussion centers on the meaning of the open door. The more common interpretation is that it denotes a great opportunity for missionary activity. Paul uses the metaphor in this way. He writes to the Corinthians of his plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, “because a great door for effective work has opened to me” (1 Cor 16:9; cf. 2 Cor 2:12; Col 4:3). Ramsay explains the expression in terms of Philadelphia’s geographic position at the eastern end of the valley leading up onto the great central plain. As the “keeper of the gateway to the plateau,” it had been given a unique opportunity to carry the gospel to the cities of Phrygia⁴⁴³

A different interpretation, however, fits the context better. The preceding verse spoke of a messianic kingdom whose access was under the absolute control of Christ. He is the one who possesses the key and can open and shut at will. Now in v. 8 he reminds the Christians at Philadelphia who may have been excommunicated from the local synagogue (v. 9) that he has placed before them an open door into the eternal kingdom, and no one can shut it. Roloff writes that “Jesus has opened the door to the kingdom of God to this church.”⁴⁴⁴ No matter if the door to the synagogue has been closed, the door into the messianic kingdom remains open.⁴⁴⁵

Christ recognizes that although they have but little strength (it was probably a fairly small congregation and they had not made a major impact upon the city), they have faithfully kept his word and not denied his

name.⁴⁴⁶ The two aorist verbs point to a particular period of trial in the past. In the remainder of the letter we will learn the threefold reward for faithfulness: vindication before their foes (v. 9), deliverance in the final period of testing (v. 10), and security in the coming age (v. 11).

9 Verse 9 takes us to the heart of a serious conflict between church and synagogue in Philadelphia. The Jewish population was convinced that by national identity and religious heritage they were the people of God. Not so, claimed the Christians. Had not Paul, alluding to Deut 30:6, taught that “a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly.... A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly: and circumcision is circumcision of the heart” (Rom 2:28-29)? It was the church that could now be called “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), for the Jewish nation had forfeited that privilege by disbelief.⁴⁴⁷ Members of the local synagogue may claim to be Jews, but the very claim constitutes them liars. By their slander and persecution of Christians they have shown themselves to be the “synagogue of Satan.”⁴⁴⁸ Jesus had said to hostile and unbelieving Jews, “You belong to your father, the devil” (John 8:44), and later in Revelation Satan is labeled “the accuser of our brothers” (12:10). Little wonder that their synagogue was called “the synagogue of Satan” (cf. Rev 2:9; also 2 Cor 11:14-15).

As in the preceding verse, the syntax of v. 9 is somewhat awkward. The initial clause in Greek may be expanded to read, “I give [to you those] of the synagogue of Satan.” The NIV translates, “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan,” so as to parallel the later “I will make them to come and fall down at your feet.” The intervening phrases describe those persons as falsely claiming to be Jews. The major question is whether they are “given” in the sense of becoming converts to the Christian faith or “given” in the sense that they will finally come to understand that “you [the church] are my beloved people” (NEB). The first alternative supports the interpretation of the open door (v. 8) as a missionary opportunity, but we have already shown that to be less probable. Once again, an eschatological interpretation is to be preferred. Isa 60:14 represents the postexilic confidence that with the restoration of Israel the nations would come to honor and serve the people of God (“the sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you”). The nations will bring their wealth to Israel, become their servants, and acknowledge their God (Isa 45:14; cf. Isa 2:3; 49:23; Zech 8:20ff.). Now, in what Moffatt calls “the grim irony of providence,”⁴⁴⁹ what the Jews fondly expected from the Gentiles, they themselves will

be forced to render to the Christians. They will play the role of the heathen and acknowledge that the church is the true Israel of God.⁴⁵⁰

Caird takes issue with commentators who hold that John envisages here, not the conversion, but the ultimate humiliation of the Jews. He reasons that “we should not submit to this gloomier interpretation” because (1) postexilic Judaism looked for a reversal in world affairs that would include the redemption of Gentile nations, and (2) John had boundless confidence in the power of Christ.⁴⁵¹ But Christ’s words in v. 9 certainly do not demand a cringing response from conquered foes. To come and worship is simply an Oriental metaphor that in this context involves no more than the acknowledgment that the church is the object of Christ’s love and that with his return their faith in him will be vindicated.

10 Because the believers at Philadelphia had kept “Christ’s command to endure patiently for His sake,”⁴⁵² he will keep them from the hour of trial that is going to come⁴⁵³ upon the whole world. The major question is whether Christ is promising deliverance from the period of trial or safekeeping through the trial. The preposition “from” (Gk., ἐκ) is inconclusive. Walvoord holds that “if this promise has any bearing on the question of pretribulationism, however, what is said emphasizes deliverance from rather than deliverance through” and “implies the rapture of the church before the time of trouble referred to as the great tribulation.”⁴⁵⁴ The thrust of the verse is against this interpretation. It is precisely because the church was faithful to Christ in time of trial that he in turn will be faithful to them in the time of their great trial. The promise is consistent with the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). It is their preservation in trial that is taught. That the martyrs of 6:9-11 are told to wait for vindication until their full number would be killed indicates that the issue is not physical protection. The spiritual protection of the church is presented elsewhere in Revelation under such figures as sealing (7: Iff.) and flight to the wilderness (12:6).

The hour of trial is that period of testing and tribulation which precedes the establishment of the eternal kingdom. It is mentioned in such passages as Dan 12:2, Mark 13:19, and 2 Thess 2:1-12. It is the three and a half years of rule by Antichrist in Rev 13:5-10. In fact, all the judgments from 6:1 on relate to this final hour of trial. It is during this period that Christ will reward the faithfulness of the Philadelphian church by standing by to ward

off all the demonic assaults of Satan. The text indicates that the hour of trial comes upon the “whole world” to test “those who live on the earth.” In the other places in Revelation where the latter phrase occurs (6: 10; 8:13; 11:10 [twice]; 13:8, 14; 17:8) the enemies of the church are always in mind.⁴⁵⁵ The hour of trial is directed toward the entire non-Christian world, but the believer will be kept from it, not by some previous appearance of Christ to remove the church bodily from the world, but by the spiritual protection he provides against the forces of evil.⁴⁵⁶

11 The “coming” of Christ to Ephesus (2:5), Pergamum (2:16), and Sardis (3:3) posed a threat to each church. At Ephesus the lampstand would be removed unless they repented; at Pergamum Christ would fight against them with the sword of his mouth; at Sardis he would come like a thief. The “coming” to Philadelphia, however, is eschatological. It will end their time of trial and establish them as permanent citizens of the eternal kingdom. Verse 11 presupposes the continuance of the church until the second advent.⁴⁵⁷ The promise is not that Christ’s coming will take place quickly whenever it happens, but that it will take place without delay. It is to be taken in the sense of 1:1, “what must soon take place” (cf. 2:16; 22:7, 12, 20). Since the end is not far off, they are to hold on to what they have (faith in Christ and obedience to his word; cf. v. 8) so that no one will take their crown. The crown was the wreath awarded to the winner of an athletic contest (cf. 1 Cor 9:25; 2 Tim 4:8). The metaphor would be especially appropriate in this letter in that Philadelphia was known for its games and festivals.⁴⁵⁸

12 To the overcomers (those who hold on to what they have, v. 11) is given the promise of being made pillars in the temple of God. The metaphor is found elsewhere in the NT (James, Peter, and John were “reputed to be pillars,” Gal 2:9; the church is “the pillar and foundation of the truth,” 1 Tim 3:15) and is current in most languages. It conveys the idea of stability and permanence. This latter aspect is emphasized in the following clause, “Never again will he leave it.” To a city that had experienced devastating earthquakes that caused people to flee into the countryside and establish temporary dwellings, the promise of permanence within the New Jerusalem would have a special meaning. Various sources for the figure of the pillar have been suggested. Some refer to the custom in which the provincial priest of the imperial cult erected in the temple area at the close of his tenure of office his statue inscribed with his name.⁴⁵⁹ Others suggest the

two pillars in Solomon's temple that bore personal names (Jakin and Boaz, 1 Kgs 7:21), the colonnades of the Artemisium at Ephesus, or the occasional sculpturing of pillars in human shapes. Probably no single allusion is intended. If the Isaiah passage (22:15-25) is still in mind (from v. 7), the stability of the pillar may be in contrast to Eliakim, who was fastened like a peg in a firm place (v. 23) to bear the whole weight of his father's house (v. 24) yet in time would give way (v. 25).⁴⁶⁰

A further promise to the overcomers is that Christ will write on them⁴⁶¹ the name of his God, the name of God's city, and his own new name. The impact of the threefold inscription is to show that the faithful belong to God, hold citizenship in the New Jerusalem, and are in a special way related to Christ. Aaron, the high priest, wore on his forehead a golden plate with the engraving "HOLY TO THE LORD" (Exod 28:36-38). In Rev 7:3 the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads, which according to 14:1 takes the form of the name of the Lamb and of his Father written on their foreheads (cf. 22:4). The name of the city of God indicates citizenship in the heavenly commonwealth (cf. Gal 4:26; Phil 3:20). Christ's own new name symbolizes the full revelation of his character, which awaits the second advent (cf. 19:12). It is not hidden at the present time because of some primitive superstition that if known could be used to his disadvantage,⁴⁶² but reflects the current inability of the human race to grasp the full theological significance of the incarnation. While it is interesting that Philadelphia twice adopted a new name (Neo-caesarea, out of gratitude to Tiberius for his help in rebuilding after the great earthquake, and, later, Flavia, the family name of Vespasian), it adds little to our understanding of the verse.

13 Once again we hear the exhortation, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The message to each church is at the same time a message to all churches.

G. LAODICEA (3:14-22)

14 *“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:*

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ”

The church at Laodicea posed a special problem. Their self-confidence had blinded them to the fact that in reality they were “poor, blind and naked.” Assurance that they had it all together had resulted in a lukewarmness that made Christ want to spit them out of his mouth. They were counseled to buy from him spiritual wealth, the white robes of righteousness and clear vision into spiritual matters. He stands at the heart’s door of each believer and knocks, requesting permission to enter and share the blessings and joy of personal fellowship. Christ promises to each overcomer the privilege of sitting with him on his throne.

Laodicea (modern Eski-hisar, “the old fortress”) was located in the Lycus valley in southwest Phrygia at the juncture of two important imperial trade routes⁴⁶³ — one leading east from Ephesus and the Aegean coast following the Maeander and then via the gentle ascent of the Lycus to the Anatolian plateau, and the other from the provincial capital at Pergamum south to the Mediterranean at Attaleia. Five of the seven cities to which John wrote lay in order along this latter road (Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and, some forty miles on to the southeast, Laodicea). Its sister cities were Hierapolis, six miles to the north across the Lycus River, and Colossae, ten miles on up the Lycus glen.⁴⁶⁴ To the south lay mountains that rise to over 8,000 feet. The city occupied an almost square plateau several hundred feet high some two miles south of the river. It was founded about the middle of the third century B.C. by Antiochus II to command the gateway to Phrygia and settled with Syrians and Jews brought from Babylonia.⁴⁶⁵ Antiochus named the city after his wife (and sister?) Laodice.

In Roman times Laodicea became the wealthiest city in Phrygia. The fertile ground of the Lycus valley provided good grazing for sheep. By careful breeding a soft, glossy black wool had been produced that was much in demand and brought fame to the region.⁴⁶⁶ Among the various garments woven in Laodicea was a tunic called the *trimita*. So widely known was this tunic that at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 Laodicea was called Trimitaria.⁴⁶⁷ Agricultural and commercial prosperity brought banking industry to Laodicea. Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher of the last days of the Republic, wrote of cashing his treasury bills of exchange there.⁴⁶⁸ The most striking indication of the city’s wealth is that following the devastating earthquake of A.D. 60⁴⁶⁹ the city was rebuilt without financial aid from Rome. Tacitus wrote, “Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.”⁴⁷⁰

Laodicea was widely known for its medical school, established in connection with the temple of Men Carou⁴⁷¹ thirteen miles to the north and west. It boasted such famous teachers as Zeuxis and Alexander Philalethes (who appear on coinage). Ramsay notes that the Laodicean physicians followed the teaching of Herophilos (330-250 B.C.) who, on the principle that compound diseases require compound medicines, began a strange system of heterogeneous mixtures.⁴⁷² Two of the most famous were an

ointment from spice nard for the ears, and an eye-salve made from “Phrygian powder” mixed with oil.⁴⁷³

Laodicea’s major weakness was its lack of an adequate and convenient source for water. Its location had been determined by the road system rather than by natural resources. Thus water had to be brought in from springs near Denizli (six miles to the south) through a system of stone pipes approximately three feet in diameter. Such an aqueduct could easily be cut off, leaving the city helpless, especially in the dry season when the Lycus could dry up.⁴⁷⁴

A large number of Jews had emigrated to the area, so many, in fact, that the rabbis spoke bitterly of those who sought the wines and baths of Phrygia. From the amount of gold seized as contraband following an embargo on the export of currency by Flaccus, governor of Asia (62 B.C.), Barclay estimated that there were at least 7,500 adult male Jews in Laodicea and the surrounding district.⁴⁷⁵ Laodicea was the center of the imperial cult and later received the Temple-Wardenship under Commodus (A.D. 180-191). The church was probably founded during the time Paul spent at Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10), perhaps by Epaphras (Col 4:12). There is no evidence that Paul visited the church, although he wrote them a letter (Col 4:16) that was subsequently lost.

14 The One who writes to the angel of the church in Laodicea identifies himself as “the Amen.” The title is unique and perhaps reflects Isa 65:16, which speaks of “the God of Amen.”⁴⁷⁶ In the OT and Judaism “Amen” is primarily the acknowledgment of that which is valid and binding.⁴⁷⁷ As a personal designation it would indicate the one in whom perfect conformity to reality is exemplified.⁴⁷⁸ The suggestion that “Amen” is appropriate as a liturgical conclusion to the seven letters is beside the point. What the title means is further expressed by the following appositional phrase, “the faithful and true witness.” It presents the trustworthiness of Christ in sharp contrast to the unfaithfulness of the Laodicean church.⁴⁷⁹ The final designation, “the ruler (*archē*) of God’s creation,” is undoubtedly linked to Paul’s great christological passage in Col 1:15ff., where Christ is designated “the beginning” (*archē*; v. 18) and “the firstborn over all creation” (v. 15). The close geographical proximity of the two cities and Paul’s instructions to Colossae that they exchange letters make it all but certain that the writer of Revelation knew the Colossian epistle.⁴⁸⁰ Although Wisdom’s declaration

in Prov 8:22, “The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old,” is often mentioned as a background for the NT use of the expression, as applied to Christ it carries the idea of “the uncreated principle of creation, from whom it took its origin.” ⁴⁸¹ The Arian meaning, “the first thing created,” is at variance with the Colossian passage that declares that “by him and for him” *all* things were created (Col 1:16). This self-designation is the most explicit allusion in the Apocalypse to the preexistence of Christ.

15-16 Once again we hear the familiar “I know your deeds” (cf. 2:2, 19; 3:1, 8). Their “deeds” show them to be neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm. Consequently Christ is about to spit (Spanish, *vomitar*) them out of his mouth. This rather vivid portrayal has long been interpreted against the local background. Six miles north across the Lycus was the city of Hierapolis, famous for its hot springs that, rising within the city, flowed across a wide plateau and spilled over a broad escarpment directly opposite Laodicea. The cliff was some 300 feet high and about a mile wide. Covered with a white encrustation of calcium carbonate, it formed a spectacular natural phenomenon. As the hot, mineral-laden water traveled across the plateau, it gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge.⁴⁸² Blaiklock is representative of those who see this as the background for picturing the lukewarmness of the Laodicean church and Christ’s reaction to it. Expecting an affirmative response, he asks, “Did the eyes of listeners seek through door and window the distant view of the lime and sulphur encrusted cliffs under Hierapolis, where the plumes of steam told of hot pools and sickly insipid water seeping over the slimy rock, water rough with alum which the unsuspecting visitor drank only to spit upon the ground?” and adds, “Such was their Christianity.”⁴⁸³

In an important article, Rudwick and Green argue that the adjectives “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm” are not to be taken as describing the spiritual fervor (or lack of it) of people.⁴⁸⁴ The contrast is between the hot medicinal waters of Hierapolis and the cold, pure waters of Colossae. Thus the church in Laodicea “was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick. It was totally ineffective, and thus distasteful to its Lord.”⁴⁸⁵ On this interpretation the church is not being called to task for its spiritual temperature but for the barrenness of its works.⁴⁸⁶ Among the several advantages of this interpretation is the fact that it is no longer necessary to wonder why Christ would prefer the church

to be “cold” rather than “lukewarm.”⁴⁸⁷ It should be noted that although the Lord was about to spit⁴⁸⁸ them out of his mouth, there was yet opportunity to repent (vv. 18-20).

17 Verse 17 explains why their works were offensive to God. Secure in their affluence, they were unaware that in reality they were wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.⁴⁸⁹ The material wealth of Laodicea is well established. The huge sums taken from Asian cities by Roman officials during the Mithridatic period and following indicate enormous wealth.⁴⁹⁰ The Zenonid family (private citizens of Laodicea) is a remarkable example of the power of individual wealth.⁴⁹¹ The “wealth” claimed by the Laodicean church was not only material but spiritual as well. Their pretentious claim was not only that they were rich but that they had achieved it on their own. And beyond that, they had need of nothing. Like the farmer in Jesus’ parable who counseled his soul to eat, drink, and be merry for he had laid up many good things for many years to come (Luke 12:19), the Laodiceans felt they were secure in their spiritual attainment. But the truth was that *they* (the Greek pronoun is emphatic) were the ones who were poor, blind, and naked. It is frequently noted that Laodicea prided itself on three things: financial wealth, an extensive textile industry, and a popular eye salve that was exported around the world. It is hard not to see here and in the following verse a direct allusion to Laodicea’s banking establishments, medical school, and textile industry. The adjectives “wretched” (elsewhere in the NT only in Rom 7:24) and “pitiful” are coordinate with the other three (one article governs all five) and present five aspects of one and the same condition. And saddest of all, they did not realize their wretched condition. According to Philo, “The witless are all paupers.”⁴⁹²

18 A tone of “sustained irony”⁴⁹³ runs through vv. 17 and 18. The smug satisfaction of the Laodiceans is countered with the advice that they make some purchases in those specific areas in which they are confident that no need exists. Since they are in fact “poor” (v. 17), they need to buy from Christ (the prepositional phrase “from me” is emphatic) “gold refined in the fire” so that they may become genuinely rich. The gold is spiritual wealth that has passed through the refiner’s fire and has been found to be totally trustworthy.⁴⁹⁴ The Laodiceans need white clothes as well in order to cover the shame of their nakedness. A contrast with the black woolen fabric for

which the city was famous could be intended, but the figure of white clothes as symbolic of righteousness is so widely used in Revelation (3:4, 5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14) that no local allusion is necessary. In the biblical world nakedness was a symbol of judgment and humiliation. Isaiah walked naked for three and a half years as a sign that Assyria would lead captive the Egyptian and Ethiopian exiles, “stripped and barefoot ... with buttocks bared” (Isa 20:1-4; cf. 2 Sam 10:4; Ezek 16:37-39). At the same time, to receive fine clothing was an indication of honor (cf. Joseph being honored by Pharaoh in Gen 41:42 and Mordecai by Ahasuerus in Esth 6:6-11). Thus in God’s sight (certainly not their own!) the Laodiceans were walking about spiritually naked, not understanding their humiliation and needing the white robes of righteousness that could be purchased at no cost (cf. Isa 55:1) except the acknowledgment of their shameful condition. The immediate cause of their problem was spiritual blindness. Laodicea was known for its famous medical school (established, according to the Greek geographer Strabo, in his own time, in connection with the temple of Mēn Carou; 12.8.20) and exported a “Phrygian powder” widely used as an eye salve.⁴⁹⁵ Confident of their clear vision into spiritual matters, the Laodiceans needed, as it were, their own eye salve to restore sight.⁴⁹⁶ We are reminded of Jesus’ dictum, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (John 9:39). Jesus now says, Recognize your blindness or there is no hope of healing.

19 Ramsay considers 3:19-22 as an epilogue to all seven letters rather than the concluding portion of the letter to Laodicea. He argues that (1) since the seven letters are a single literary unit they call for an epilogue, (2) it would be inconsistent to join Laodicea (sharply condemned) with courageous Philadelphia as the two churches singled out as loved by Christ, and (3) at this point clear references to Laodicea cease.⁴⁹⁷ Hemer answers the first two points almost in passing and then spends considerable time showing that both v. 20 and v. 21 are to be understood against the local background of Laodicea.⁴⁹⁸ Few have followed Ramsay in separating vv. 19-22 from the Laodicean letter. The rather stereotyped and continually repeated pattern of the seven letters calls for the promise (cf. 2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26; 3:5, 12) and the exhortation (cf. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13) in the letter to Laodicea as well.

The syntax of the Greek sentence places emphasis both on ego (“I”) and *hosous* (“as many as” — inclusive, without exception).⁴⁹⁹ One might

loosely paraphrase, “Now my practice is that all those I love, I also correct and discipline.” The principle of reproof and discipline as an expression of love is found in Prov 3:11-12, “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (cf. also Ps. Sol. 10:1-3; 14:1; Heb 12:5-6). Of note is the fact that the LXX word for love (*agapan*) has been changed in the Laodicean letter (to *philein*).⁵⁰⁰ This unexpected show of personal affection ⁵⁰¹ has seemed strange to some but not to those who recognize that God’s stern hatred of evil is a necessary part of his love for people.⁵⁰² It takes the form of rebuke⁵⁰³ and discipline.⁵⁰⁴ The idea of divine discipline runs throughout Scripture (Ps 94:12; Job 5:17; 1 Cor 11:32; Heb 12:7-8). “It is the fact of life that the best athlete and the finest scholar receive the hardest and the most demanding training.”⁵⁰⁵

The advice to the Laodiceans, therefore, is that they repent (in one decisive act: aorist imperative) and make it their practice to continue to live zealously for the Lord (present imperative).⁵⁰⁶ This is the fourth direct call to repentance in the seven letters (cf. 2:5, 16; 3:3; reference to repentance at Thyatira is indirect, 2:21-22).

20 Verse 20 is often quoted as an invitation and promise to the person outside the community of faith. That it may be pressed into the service of evangelism in this way is obvious. Compared with other world religions the seeking God of the Judeo-Christian heritage is perhaps its major uniqueness. In the context of the Laodicean letter, however, it is self-deluded members of the church who are being addressed. To the *church* Christ says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.” In their blind self-sufficiency they had, as it were, excommunicated the risen Lord from their congregation. In an act of unbelievable condescension he requests permission to enter and reestablish fellowship.

Two principal interpretations of v. 20 exist: (1) that it represents a call to the individual for present fellowship, and (2) that it is eschatological and speaks of the imminent return of Christ. The latter interprets the verse in conjunction with the reward promised the overcomer in v. 21 (an eschatological scene, to be sure), while the former ties it in with the call to repentance in v. 19.⁵⁰⁷ In that the phrase “he/him that overcomes” serves as a semi-technical term that leads to the close of each letter (cf. 2:7, lib, 17b, 26; 3:5, 12) and because v. 20 provides a strong positive motivation for the

repentance demanded in the previous verse, it seems best to interpret the saying as personal and present rather than ecclesiastical and eschatological.

As in Holman Hunt's famous picture (*The Light of the World*), Christ is outside the door and knocking.⁵⁰⁸ The invitation is addressed to each individual in the congregation: "if anyone hears ... and opens." The response of Christ to the opened door is that he enters and joins in table fellowship. In Oriental lands the sharing of a common meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship. As such it became a common symbol of the intimacy to be enjoyed in the coming messianic kingdom. Enoch portrays the future blessedness of the elect, saying, "And with that Son of Man shall they eat and lie down and rise up for ever and ever" (*I Enoch* 62:14). In Luke 22:30 Jesus tells his disciples that they are to eat and drink at his table in the kingdom (cf. Matt 26:29; Rev 19:9). Whether eucharistic associations are intended or not,⁵⁰⁹ it is hard not to see in the picture at least an anticipation of the future messianic kingdom. All present fellowship with God is a foretaste of eternal felicity.

21 The promise of sitting with Christ on his throne is wholly eschatological. Jesus had promised his disciples that in the coming age when the Son of man would sit on his glorious throne, they also (those who had followed him) would sit on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). But now the faithful are promised that they will sit with him on his throne (which is also the Father's throne, 22:1). The martyrs in 6:10 cried out for vindication. It is to be fully realized when the overcomers take their place beside the Lamb on his throne. Their victory and consequent exaltation follow the pattern of the victory of Christ, who also overcame and sat down with his Father on the heavenly throne.⁵¹⁰ Paul, as well, had promised, "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Tim 2:12).

22 Here for the seventh and last time we hear the exhortation to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. We are reminded that the messages to the seven historic churches in Asia are at the same time a composite word to the church universal throughout time. Walvoord calls it a "comprehensive warning" in which the dangers of losing our first love (Ephesus), fear of suffering (Smyrna), doctrinal compromise (Pergamum), moral compromise (Thyatira), spiritual deadness (Sardis), failure to hold on (Philadelphia), and lukewarmness (Laodicea) are brought home with amazing relevance for the contemporary church.⁵¹¹

III. ADORATION IN THE COURT OF HEAVEN (4:1-5:14)

The letters to the seven churches are now complete. Christians of Asia Minor are to receive personal correspondence from the risen and glorified Lord of the church. While correction and commendation have varied with the different congregations, the challenge to overcome goes out to all (2:7, 11, 17, 27; 3:5, 12, 21), for all are about to enter that period of intensified conflict which immediately precedes the return of Christ. It is announced by the angel in 12:12 with the grim words, “Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” For consolation and courage in the coming tribulation (cf. 2:10; 3:10; 7:13) John is now swept up in the Spirit to the very door of heaven. There he beholds a vision of a sovereign God in full command of the course of human affairs as they move swiftly to their denouement. On the plane of history the church appears unable to resist the might of hostile worldly powers, but the course of history is not determined by political power but by God enthroned and active. At his appointed time the scroll of destiny is to be handed to the Lamb, who himself will open the seals, bring history to a close, and usher in the eternal state. The great throne-room vision of chapters 4 and 5 serves to remind believers living in the shadow of impending persecution that an omnipotent and omniscient God is still in control. This vision, it should be emphasized, must be understood as in close relationship to the preceding letters to the churches, offering encouragement for their present and future struggle with the Empire,^{[512](#)} but also reminding them that they, too, are under his sovereignty.

A. WORSHIP OF GOD AS CREATOR (4:1-11)

1 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this. " 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. 4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. 6 Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back, The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. 8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they Mover stop saying:

*"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come. "*

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

11 *“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being. ”*

The throne-room vision (chaps. 4 and 5) follows the earlier vision (1:12ff.) apparently without delay.⁵¹³ There is no way of knowing for sure just when and how John recorded his visionary experiences. Since the vision moves on naturally to the breaking of the seals and ultimately to the unveiling of the close of history, it is best to understand chapters 4 and 5 as referring essentially to a time yet future. While God is eternally adored in heaven, the book of Revelation reveals those specific events with which history is brought to a close.

The first part of the vision (chap. 4) has as its central focus the heavenly throne on which is seated one who, in keeping with Jewish tradition, is not described apart from the splendor that surrounds him. Around this throne are twenty-four other thrones on which are seated twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold. Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and peals of thunder. Before the throne stand the seven spirits of God. A sea of glass stretching out before the throne adds to the scene of grandeur. Four living creatures serve as worship leaders and proclaim the holiness of God, the eternal one. The elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and lay their crowns before him praising and exalting him as Creator of all that exists. For John to be granted such a vision of the heavenly scene was a remarkable gift to the lonely Seer on Patmos. A vision of the adoring hosts in heaven and their joyous acknowledgment of his role as sovereign creator prepared John to serve as a faithful messenger of all that he was about to see in subsequent visions. Nowhere in the literature of heavenly visions will one find a more inspiring presentation of the God who reigns supreme over all.

1 The vision begins with John seeing a door standing⁵¹⁴ open in the vault of heaven.⁵¹⁵ In Ezekiel the prophet reports, “The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (Ezek 1:1). Whether John goes through the door into heaven or only to the door to look within is not certain. The door may suggest that the vision was limited to John alone. In any case, we must

remember that we are dealing with symbolism and guard against the tendency to read into the text more than is there.⁵¹⁶ The voice, which in chapter 1 commanded John to write (1:10), now bids him to come to the door of heaven. That Christ would invite John to a scene in which he as the Lamb is an integral part is a problem only for those who approach the Apocalypse without a sympathetic imagination. John is about to see “what must take place after this.” This definitely assigns the content of the following chapters to a period of time yet future (although embedded in the material are sections that refer to times already past, e.g., 12:1-6). In 1:19 Christ had commanded John to write “what will take place later”; now he will show him those things. Since events on earth have their origin in heaven, the heavenly ascent is not unexpected. A true insight into history is gained only when we view all things from the vantage point of the heavenly throne.

2 It would appear that the Seer had returned to a normal state of consciousness (since “At once I was in the Spirit” suggests a new departure), yet the preceding verse, with its door standing open in heaven and voice like a trumpet, is most certainly part of a visionary experience. What we have, then, is a continuation of the ecstatic state. Ezek 11:1, 5 is parallel: the prophet is first carried away to the east gate by the Spirit, and then the Spirit of the Lord falls upon him to prophesy. Moffatt speaks of a “fresh wave of ecstasy” that catches up the Seer.⁵¹⁷

The idea of prophetic rapture is widespread in Jewish literature. Micaiah told the king of Israel, “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left” (1 Kgs 22:19). Amos reports that God does nothing “without revealing his plans to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). John views himself as a prophet (1:3), and being “in the Spirit” (the Holy Spirit; not his human spirit) is an appropriate state for what he is about to experience. That John does not record a physical relocation from earth to heaven suggests that we are to understand the heavenly ascent in a spiritual sense.⁵¹⁸ There is no basis for discovering a rapture of the church at this point.⁵¹⁹

The first thing that John sees in heaven is a throne.⁵²⁰ The throne as a symbol occurs more than forty times in Revelation. Three out of four times that it occurs in the NT it is found in Revelation. It symbolizes the absolute sovereignty of God. The one upon the throne is “the Lord God Almighty” (4:8), before whom the twenty-four elders fall down and worship (4:10) and

all creation joins in a doxology of praise and honor (5:13). The throne of God is often referred to in Jewish literature. “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted” is the testimony of Isaiah (6:1), and the Psalmist sings, “God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne” (Ps 47:8). This scene of heaven opened and God upon the throne is said to have been the inspiration for Handel’s *Messiah*.

3 John is careful not to try to depict the one seated upon the throne of heaven⁵²¹ in any sort of human form. Rather, God is portrayed as the brilliance of light reflected from precious stones.⁵²² The Psalmist spoke of God as one who covered himself “in light as with a garment” (Ps 104:2), and Paul described the Lord as dwelling “in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16). The source of the description is the vision of Ezekiel 1 in which the throne appears like sapphire surrounded by a rainbow (1:26-28).

Identification of the three stones (jasper, carnelian, and emerald) is somewhat uncertain. Since modern jasper is opaque, many interpret the ancient stone as a translucent rock crystal (in 21:11 it is said to be “clear as crystal”), perhaps a diamond. The carnelian (sardius) was a blood-red stone named after Sardis, near where it was found. If the rainbow that surrounded the throne was a halo, then the emerald is usually pictured as green; otherwise it is a colorless crystal that refracts a rainbow of prismatic colors. These three stones held an honorable place in antiquity. They are mentioned by Plato as representative of precious stones.⁵²³ Of the king of Tyre it is written, “Every precious stone was your covering, carnelian ... emerald ... and jasper” (Ezek 28:13, NRSV). They are among the twelve precious stones that adorned the breastplate of the high priest (Exod 28:17-20).

Various meanings have been attached to the different stones. Jasper has been associated with such qualities as majesty, holiness, or purity. Carnelian has been interpreted in connection with wrath or judgment, and the emerald with mercy. The rainbow reminds us of God’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9 :16-17).⁵²⁴ Rather than assigning specific qualities to each of the gems it is better to take them as part of the overall portrayal. They describe in symbolic form the majesty of God, resplendent and clothed in unapproachable light. As in the parables of Jesus, many of the details are merely descriptive and not intended to carry a special significance of their own.

4 Around the throne of God are twenty-four thrones occupied by twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold. Throughout the book they are pictured as falling down before God in worship (5:14; 11:16; 19:4). Twice one of their number acts as a spokesman or interpreter (5:5; 7:13). On one occasion they join the four living creatures in presenting the prayers of the saints to God (5:8). Adoration and praise are continually on their lips (4:11; 5:9-10; 11:17-18; 19:4).

The identity of the twenty-four elders has been widely discussed. Commentators who tend to find the source of John's imagery in the astro-mythological tradition of Eastern polytheism take the elders to be a Judaic counterpart of the twenty-four star-gods of the Babylonian pantheon.⁵²⁵ Others interpret them as symbolic of the twenty-four courses of Aaronic priests (1 Chron 24:5), who in heaven render to God that perfect worship of which the priestly worship on earth is but an imperfect copy. A great many writers interpret the twenty-four elders as symbolic of the church in its totality ⁵²⁶ — a combination of the twelve patriarchs and the twelve apostles⁵²⁷ — but this seems unlikely in that their song of praise (5:9-10) definitely sets them apart from those who were purchased by the blood of Christ (most certainly the church!).⁵²⁸ Since no exact counterparts are to be located in Jewish literature, it seems best to take the twenty-four elders as an exalted angelic order who serve and adore God as the heavenly counterpart to the twenty-four priestly and twenty-four Levitical orders (1 Chron 24:4; 25:9-13).⁵²⁹ Their function is both royal and sacerdotal, and may be judicial as well (cf. 20:4). Their white garments speak of holiness, and their golden crowns of royalty.⁵³⁰

5 The lightnings and thunders that proceed out of the throne (the “rumblings” are essentially the same as the “thunders”) are symbolic of the awesome power and majesty of God. They remind the reader of the great theophany of Sinai when God descended in fire and smoke heralded by thunder and lightning (Exod 19:16ff.). This association would remind the churches that the unapproachable and transcendent God of the heavenly vision is at the same time the God who redeemed a slave people, Israel, as a people for his name. Frequently in the OT God disclosed himself in the dramatic activity of nature.⁵³¹ In Revelation the symbols of thunder and lightning are always connected with a temple scene and mark an event of unusual import. In 8:5 they follow the breaking of the seventh seal, in

11:19, the blowing of the seventh trumpet, and in 16:18, the pouring out of the seventh bowl of wrath. The seven lamps⁵³² of fire that burn before the throne are interpreted by the Seer as the seven Spirits of God. In 1:4 we tentatively identified the seven Spirits as angelic beings rather than the Holy Spirit in his sevenfold activity (cf. Isa 11:2).

6 Stretching out before the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass. Unlike the semi-opaque glass of antiquity, it was clear as crystal. Many connect this with the Jewish idea of a celestial sea. In Gen 1:7 God divided the waters that were under the firmament (the heavenly expanse) from the waters that were above the firmament. In 2 *Enoch* 3:3 the prophet sees in the first heaven “a very great sea, greater than the earthly sea.” Apparently God’s throne rested on these waters: Ps 104:3 speaks of God laying the beams of his chambers thereon. Some writers compare the idea with the Assyrian myth of the creation of the gods by the union of the celestial waters (masculine) and the earthly waters (feminine). The text, however, speaks only of “what looked like a sea of glass.” We are intended to understand it as a visual phenomenon that adds to the awesome splendor of the throne-room scene. Its crystal surface stretches out before the throne, reflecting the flashing, many-colored light from the throne, furnishing a surface for the activity around the throne, and creating for the Seer an unspeakably heightened sense of the transcendence and majesty of God.

If we are to find a source for the “sea of glass,” we should probably turn to the great throne-chariot vision of Ezekiel 1 (a primary source for Rev 4-5). Over the heads of the cherubim spread out “what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome” (Ezek 1:22). Above this shining firmament was the throne. In Job 37:18 the sky is pictured as “hard as a mirror of cast bronze.”⁵³³ The sea of glass is part of the larger scene and, apart from heightening the sense of God’s separateness from his creatures, has no special significance.⁵³⁴

In addition to the twenty-four elders, “in the center, around the throne, were four living creatures.”⁵³⁵ The exact location of “in the center” is a bit uncertain, but it apparently means “in the immediate vicinity.” Thus they surround the throne as an inner circle.⁵³⁶ This position is appropriate to their function as leaders in worship (cf. 4:9-10; 5:14). The four living creatures of John’s vision are related to the cherubim of Ezekiel 1, although several differences should be noted. In Ezekiel each of the four has four faces (vv. 6, 10), four wings (v. 6) instead of six as in Rev 4:8, and the rims

of the wheels with which they are associated, not their bodies as in Rev 4:6, are full of eyes (Ezek 1:18). The four living creatures of Revelation also suggest the seraphim of Isa 6:2-3 who lifted up their voices in praise, singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty” (cf. the six wings of v. 2 with Rev 4:8).⁵³⁷ We have here a good example of John’s freedom to transform the images of his sources, blend them, and so create new images.

Like the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures have been variously interpreted. Lenski says that one writer lists twenty-one efforts at a solution, to which he then adds another equally unacceptable.⁵³⁸ Beckwith is undoubtedly right in his judgment that “the figures which throng the court of heaven are the traditional orders of heavenly beings.”⁵³⁹ A consistent interpretation of the entire throne-room vision requires us to understand the living creatures as an exalted order of angelic beings who, as the immediate guardians of the throne, lead the heavenly hosts in worship and adoration of God. It is possible that they also represent the entire animate creation. That they are covered with eyes, in front and in back (cf. v. 8: “all around, even under his wings”) speaks of alertness and knowledge. Nothing escapes their notice.

7 While each of Ezekiel’s cherubim had four faces (lion on the right, ox on the left, man in front, and eagle behind; cf. Ezek 1:6, 10), only one of John’s creatures has a face⁵⁴⁰ — the other three have the form of a lion, an ox, and an eagle.⁵⁴¹ Swete writes that “the four forms suggest whatever is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in animate Nature.”⁵⁴² It does not follow, however, that the living creatures are a personification of divine immanence in nature. We are dealing with angelic beings. Hendriksen⁵⁴³ interprets them as having the strength of a lion (cf. Ps 103:20), the ability to serve of an ox (cf. Heb 1:14), the intelligence of a man (cf. Luke 15:10), and the swiftness (to serve) of an eagle (cf. Dan 9:21). All attempts to equate the living creatures with the four Gospels (e.g., John the lion, Luke the calf [ox], Matthew the man, and Mark the eagle; cf. Irenaeus about A.D. 170) are groundless.⁵⁴⁴

8 Like the seraphim of Isa 6:2 each of the four living creatures had six wings. The wings may suggest swiftness to carry out the will of God. In Ps18:10 God is pictured as riding upon a cherub, and the parallel clause adds, “He soared on the wings of the wind.” In Ezekiel 10 the chariot-throne of God is carried by the cherubim, who “spread their wings to rise

from the ground” (v. 16). The description of the eyes as being “around and within,” taken literally, is awkward. The NIV’s “all around, even under his wings” is probably right. The living creatures had eyes all around their bodies and on the underside of their wings.⁵⁴⁵ Here as elsewhere we are dealing with visions that were meant to stir the imagination, not yield to the drawing board.

Day and night without ceasing the four living creatures lift their praise to God. Continuous adoration is a common feature in apocalyptic descriptions of heaven. *1 Enoch* 39:12 pictures sleepless angels standing before God and extolling his greatness (cf. *T. Levi* 3:8; *2 Enoch* 21:1). Like the seraphim of Isaiah 6 they sing “Holy, holy, holy,”⁵⁴⁶ but their praise is here directed to those attributes of God that are central to the Apocalypse — his holiness, power, and eternity.⁵⁴⁷ To acknowledge God as holy is to declare his complete separateness from all created beings.

Praise of his holiness leads to an affirmation of his omnipotence: he is the Almighty.⁵⁴⁸ To churches about to enter a period of severe testing and persecution a declaration of God’s unlimited might would bring strength and encouragement. During his earthly ministry Jesus had said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The protection Christ offers is not physical but spiritual (cf. Matt 10:28). Nothing lies beyond his control, for he is *all-mighty*.

Beyond this, his holiness and omnipotence stretch from eternity to eternity: he is the One “who was, and is, and is to come” (cf. comm. on 1:4). The truth that finds expression in this phrase — an expansion of God’s “I AM WHO I AM” in Exod 3:14 — is repeated in the following verses, where God is twice designated the one “who lives for ever and ever” (vv. 9-10).

9-10 As often as the living creatures give glory and honor to God (cf. 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4), the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before the throne, casting down their crowns and joining in adoration of the One who lives forever and ever.⁵⁴⁹ To fall down is a proper response to the majesty of God: to worship is appropriate for his eternal being.⁵⁵⁰ The word “worship” originally involved the idea of prostrating oneself before deity to kiss his feet or the hem of his garment. As an act of reverence and respect it was not uncommon in the East.⁵⁵¹ In casting down their crowns before the throne the elders acknowledge that their authority is a delegated authority.⁵⁵² The

honor given them is freely returned to the One who alone is worthy of universal honor.

11 The praise of the elders differs from that of the living creatures in that it is addressed directly to God⁵⁵³ and is based on his work in creation rather than his divine attributes. Here is direct refutation of the dualistic idea that God as spirit would not himself be involved in a material creation. Lilje notes that the first words of the hymn⁵⁵⁴ are taken from the political language of the day: “You are worthy” greeted the entrance of the emperor in triumphal procession, and “our Lord and God” was introduced into the cult of emperor worship by Domitian.⁵⁵⁵ For the Christian only the One who sits on the heavenly throne is worthy: the claims of all others are blasphemous. The earlier doxology (4:8) ascribed glory and honor to God. To this the elders now add “power.” He is worthy because in accordance with his will all things “were created and have their being.” The unusual Greek construction translates literally, “they were and they were created.” This suggests that all things that are, existed first in the eternal will of God and through his will came into actual being at his appointed time.⁵⁵⁶

Thus John begins his unfolding of what he saw that was soon to take place by taking his beleaguered (and not always faithful) readers of chapters 2 and 3 into the throne room of the eternal God. But no picture of God himself was given; rather, John described the awesome splendor and majesty that surround God. The picture is intensely evocative — of God’s greatness and sovereignty; the only proper response, as one finds in heaven itself, is obeisance and worship. Surely the intent of this is to remind those who are about to suffer that God is nonetheless sovereign Lord of the universe.

But not all has been said. The picture is awesome, and God is wholly other and transcendent. All of this could have been written by any other Jew. But John is a Christian Jew, and there is a divine response to that transcendence — to be found in the slain Lamb of the next vision.

B. WORSHIP OF THE LAMB WHO ALONE IS WORTHY TO OPEN THE SCROLL (5:1-14)

1 Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" 3 But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. 4 I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals. "

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. "

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They

encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they sang:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

14 The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

In chapter 5 the focus moves from God, enthroned in heaven and surrounded by adoring and worshiping elders and living creatures, to the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll of destiny. The worship of God for his role in creation gives way to the worship of the Lamb for his work of redemption. John weeps, for no one can be found anywhere who is entitled by virtue of moral excellence to break the seals and unroll the scroll. One of the elders counsels John not to weep because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has triumphed over sin and death and is therefore qualified to open the scroll. Turning, John sees not a Lion but a Lamb bearing the telltale marks of slaughter. The Lamb's seven horns speak of perfect power and his seven eyes of unlimited wisdom and penetrating insight. As he takes the scroll from the hand of the One on the throne, the elders and living creatures prostrate themselves before him, praising him in song for his redemptive death and the universal consequences it effected. Countless angels join in joyous praise to the Lamb. Nowhere else in the literature of worship will one find a scene of such unrestrained praise and adoration.

1 On the right hand of the One seated on the throne is a scroll⁵⁵⁷ of unparalleled significance. Filled to overflowing and sealed with seven seals to insure the secrecy of its decrees, it contains the full account of what God in his sovereign will has determined as the destiny of the world.⁵⁵⁸ Once again the background is Ezekiel, where in chapter 2 a book of lamentations with words written “on both sides” is handed to the prophet (v. 10). The idea of a heavenly book containing the future course of history is reflected

in such passages as Ps 139:16, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” In Jewish apocalyptic we read of “heavenly tablets” that contain “all the deeds of men ... that will be upon the earth to the remotest generations” (1 *Enoch* 81:1-2; cf. also 47:3; 106:19; 107:1).⁵⁵⁹ According to Roman law certain documents were required to be sealed by seven witnesses,⁵⁶⁰ although the idea of seven seals as used here is undoubtedly governed by the symbolic use of the number seven in Revelation and signifies the absolute inviolability of the scroll. In Dan 8:26 the prophet is told, “seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future” (cf. Isa 29:11). When the time has fully come, the seals will be removed and history will move swiftly to its consummation.

Some scholars have suggested that the scroll of destiny was in the form of a book rather than a papyrus roll. The argument is based primarily on the fact that Greek text says it was held *upon (epi)* the right hand of God rather than *in (en)* his hand. That the expression is no more than an idiom is seen in 20:1, where an angel comes down from heaven with a key and a great chain *upon (epi)* his hand. By altering the punctuation and following an inferior text, some interpreters read “a book written within, and sealed without with seven seals,”⁵⁶¹ but this amounts to saying the obvious; where else would a book be written, or sealed, for that matter? Admittedly the scroll is arranged in an unusual way, because as each seal is broken a portion of its content is enacted. We would not expect, however, that all the details of a vision conform to normal expectations. That the scroll is also written on the back⁵⁶² indicates how extensive and comprehensive are the decrees of God.

2 There now appears upon the scene a mighty angel (Gabriel?) who calls for someone who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals. A loud voice is needed because the challenge is sent out to the far reaches of creation. We will meet this angelic herald again in 10:1, where he stands astride the sea and shouts out as a lion roaring, and in 18:21, where he casts a boulder the size of a large millstone into the sea — symbolic of the overthrow of Roman might. Since these are the great proclamations of God, the voice of a mighty angel is required. The call is for someone who is worthy⁵⁶³ to perform the supreme service of bringing history to its foreordained consummation. God himself does not perform this task but calls for a mediator. Opening the scroll is mentioned before loosening the

seals not because the seals are placed at intervals within the scroll but because the content of the scroll is of first importance.⁵⁶⁴

3 The challenge has gone out to all those dwelling throughout the entire creation, and no one is able to accept it. The tripartite division of the universe (heaven, earth, under the earth) is also found in Phil 2:10 — incidentally, in a scene of universal adoration of Christ — and probably stems from the second commandment, which forbids making an idol in the form of anything that is “in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Exod 20:4). As used here it stresses the universality of the proclamation rather than some particular cosmology. It seems somewhat artificial to make the phrases refer sequentially to angels, living people, and departed spirits as if when each declines the challenge, hope gradually disappears.⁵⁶⁵ In any case, no one is found able to open the book or to look into its contents.

4 It appears that the promise of 4:1 (“Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this”) is about to be thwarted. Unless the seals are broken and the scroll of destiny unrolled, God’s plan for the universe will be frustrated. Hence the Seer⁵⁶⁶ breaks out in unrestrained weeping.⁵⁶⁷ All suggestions that John wept out of disappointment for his own sake are unworthy of the Seer. He wept at the prospect of an indefinite postponement of God’s final and decisive action. The universe itself was morally incapable of effecting its own destiny.⁵⁶⁸

5 One of the elders steps forward and tells the Seer not to weep. The scroll will not remain unopened, for there is One who has triumphed and is therefore worthy to break the seals.⁵⁶⁹ He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David. Both of the titles ascribed to Jesus are taken from the common stock of Jewish messianism. The first is from Gen 49:9-10, where in Jacob’s final blessing on his twelve sons Judah is called a “lion’s cub” and is promised that the scepter shall not depart from him “until he comes to whom it belongs” (or “until Shiloh come”; ASV). That these verses were interpreted messianically in the first century B.C. is seen in the *T. Judah* 24:5 (“Then shall the scepter of my kingdom shine forth; and from your root shall arise a stem”).⁵⁷⁰ The second title is an allusion to Isa 11:1 (“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse”; cf. also v. 10), which looks forward to an ideal king of the line of David who will judge with

righteousness and usher in an era of peace. Isa 11:1 is quoted as messianic in Rom 15:12.⁵⁷¹

That it is “one of the elders” who addresses John is of no particular significance. He appears again, as an interpreter, in 7:13. John is not to weep, for Christ has conquered once and for all.⁵⁷² Paradoxically, this decisive victory over Satan and death was accomplished on the cross. He conquered by an act of total self-sacrifice. The result is that he alone is worthy to open the scroll of destiny both to reveal and to carry out the final dissolution of all forces set in opposition to the eternal kingdom of God.

6 John now looks to the center of the celestial scene and beholds, not a Lion, but a Lamb! A Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, bearing the wounds of sacrificial slaughter, yet standing in readiness for action. In one brilliant stroke John portrays the central theme of NT revelation — victory through sacrifice. “The Lion is the Lamb: the ultimate power of God (“Lion”) is manifest on the Cross (“Lamb”).”⁵⁷³

Only in the writings of John is Jesus called the Lamb (cf., however, 1 Pet 1:19). In John 1:29 the Baptist declares, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” In Revelation the title is used of Jesus twenty-eight times.⁵⁷⁴ It is common to trace the source of John’s imagery to Isa 53:7, “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Others find the background in the theme of the paschal Lamb that plays such an important part in John’s passion narrative.⁵⁷⁵ While it is true that a slaughtered lamb obviously connoted sacrifice, the lamb in John’s vision is now standing upright, having “seven horns and seven eyes” — symbols of perfect power and wisdom. The Lamb of Revelation is the “Lord of lords, and King of kings,” who wages a victorious warfare against the beast and his confederates (17:12-14) and before whose wrath the inhabitants of earth call upon the rocks and mountains to fall on them (6:15-17).

The concept of a lamb with seven horns comes directly from the apocalyptic tradition.⁵⁷⁶ In *1 Enoch* 90:9 the Maccabees are symbolized as “horned lambs.” It is a *lamb* in the *Testament of Joseph* that destroys the enemies of Israel (19:8-9). In *1 Enoch* 90:37 this military leader is portrayed as a “white bull ... with large horns.” Rather than symbolizing innocent submission, the Lamb in Revelation is a “mystic, apocalyptic designation (or title) of the glorified Christ, enthroned with God and

destined to be victorious over all the opposing forces in the universe, both human and demonic.”⁵⁷⁷

Any attempt to visualize a seven-horned, seven-eyed lamb in a literal fashion should remind us of the symbolic nature of John’s visions. The throne-room scene is not a graphic description of heaven but a symbolic representation of the decrees of God concerning the final stages of human history. The seven horns of the Lamb symbolize his irresistible might.⁵⁷⁸ His seven eyes speak of that completeness of vision which leads to perfect knowledge.⁵⁷⁹ The eyes are further identified as “the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”⁵⁸⁰ In 4:5 the seven spirits of God were seven lamps blazing before the throne, but here, as the eyes of the Lamb, they have a mission to carry out on earth.

The Lamb is standing in the center of the angelic beings who surround the throne. This interpretation of “in the center of the throne” is supported by the use of the same phrase in 4:6, which places the four living creatures there as well. Some take the expression to represent a Hebrew idiom and accordingly place the Lamb between the living creatures and the elders. The use of the Greek perfects (“having taken his stand” and “having been slain”) emphasizes the lasting benefits of his sacrificial death and resurrection.

7 The verb tenses serve to dramatize the action of the Lamb as he steps forward and takes⁵⁸¹ the scroll: “He came” (aorist) and now “he has taken” (perfect) the scroll from the right hand of the One who sat on the throne. The advance of the Lamb is no argument for placing him between the living creatures and the elders in the preceding verse. He could step to the throne from its immediate vicinity as well. This is not to be taken as the coronation of the risen Christ (as in Heb 2:8-9), but as symbolizing an event yet to take place at the end of time.

8 With the handing of the scroll to the Lamb we enter into one of the greatest scenes of universal adoration anywhere recorded. The living creatures and the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before the Lamb with harps and golden bowls of incense, ready to sing of his infinite worth as revealed in his great act of redemptive self-sacrifice. It is assumed that he has taken his place upon the throne of God. Since the function of the living creatures is not priestly, it may be best to take the harps and bowls as applying only to the elders. The harp (or lyre) was the traditional instrument used in the singing of the Psalms. “Praise the LORD with the harp; make

music to him on the ten-stringed lyre” (Ps 33:2). Despised on earth, the prayers of the saints are now brought before God in golden bowls.⁵⁸² The golden bowls are full of incense symbolizing the prayers of the saints.⁵⁸³ The use of incense was a normal feature in Hebrew ritual (Deut 33:10). As used here it⁵⁸⁴ is symbolic of the prayers of the saints (cf. Ps 141:2, “May my prayer be set before you like incense”). Because of the prominent role played by incense in pagan worship, it is unlikely that the image is taken from that source.

The idea of angels acting as intermediaries and presenting the prayers of saints to God is common in later Jewish thought. In Tob 12:15 an angel says, “I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels, who present the prayers of the saints, and who go in and out before the glory of the Holy One.” In 3 *Baruch* 11 it is Michael the Archangel who descends to the fifth heaven to receive the prayers of people. It was the increasing emphasis in Jewish thought on the transcendence of God that made such intermediaries appropriate. In Revelation the twenty-four elders perform this function.

9 In chapter 4 the twenty-four elders praised the worthiness of God for his work in creation (v. 11). In chapter 5 they direct their praise to the Lamb for his work of redemption.⁵⁸⁵ In both cases “You are worthy” is the *vere dignus* with which the emperor’s arrival was celebrated. The idea of a *new* song grows out of the use of the expression in the Psalms; for example, 98:1, “Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things” (cf. 33:3; 40:3; 96: 1; etc.). Every new act of mercy calls forth a new song of gratitude and praise. In the midst of a prophetic passage (Isa 42:5-17) that extols the glorious victory of the One who “created the heavens and stretched them out” (v. 5; cf. Rev 4:11), we find the admonition, “Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth” (v. 10). The song to the Lamb is a new song because the covenant established through his death is a new covenant. It is not simply new in point of time, but more important, it is new and distinctive in quality.⁵⁸⁶

The Lamb is worthy to open the book for three reasons: he was slain (a historical fact), he purchased people for God (the interpretation of that fact), and he made them to be a kingdom and priests (the result of the fact). That the same ascription of worth is directed both to the One upon the throne (4:11) and to the Lamb (5:9) indicates the exalted Christology of the Apocalypse.

The worthiness of the Lamb does not at this point stem from his essential being, but from his great act of redemption. He is worthy precisely because he was slain.⁵⁸⁷ His sacrificial death was the means whereby he purchased people for God. This interpretation is one with that of the other writers of the NT. During his earthly ministry Jesus taught that the Son of man had come to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). In 1 Cor 6:20 Paul reminds the believers that they were “bought at a price.”⁵⁸⁸ In our verse “with your blood” denotes the price.

The idea that the *elders* were the ones purchased by Christ’s death stems from inferior variants that make the text read, “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed *us* to God ... and hast made *us* unto our God kings and priests: and *we* shall reign on the earth” (AV, italics added).⁵⁸⁹ The most accurate texts omit the first italicized pronoun and read “them” and “they” for the other two (cf. NRSV margin).

Those who are purchased are from every tribe, language, people, and nation. It is fruitless to attempt a distinction between these terms as ethnic, linguistic, political, and so on. The Seer is stressing the universal nature of the church and for this purpose piles up phrases for their rhetorical impact.⁵⁹⁰ In contrast with the exclusivism of Judaism that prided itself on having been chosen out from among the nations, the church was genuinely ecumenical, recognizing no national, political, cultural, or racial boundaries.

10 What was promised to the Israelites at Sinai (“You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” Exod 19:6) is fulfilled in the establishment of the church through the death of Christ. Corporately believers are a kingdom, and individually they are priests to God (cf. comm. on 1:6). This motif occurs three times in Revelation (1:6; 5:10; 20:6) and suggests to some that it may have been derived from a primitive hymn.⁵⁹¹ Both of the terms are active in meaning: as a *kingdom* “they will reign,” and as *priests* they “serve.” By his death Jesus established his church “a Kingdom of Priests in the service of our God” (TCNT).

Textual evidence is rather evenly divided between “they reign” (ASV) and “they will reign” (NIV), although the latter is favored both by the Nestle text (27th ed.) and the UBS text (3rd ed.). It seems unlikely that John is here referring to a present spiritual reign of believers.⁵⁹² The hymn of praise is not a cryptic reference to Christians as the true kings in spite of the apparent rule of the Caesars. The promise is that the church is to share in

the eschatological reign of Christ and all that it will involve (2:26-27; 20:4; 22:5).

11-12 The adoration of the Lamb moves out in ever widening circles. Now it is the innumerable host of angels who lift their voices in a great doxology of praise.⁵⁹³ Their number (“thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand”) is not to be taken arithmetically but as an apocalyptic symbol for a countless multitude.⁵⁹⁴ Angels were held to be so numerous as to be beyond human calculation. The second part of the expression is neither an anticlimax nor what remained even after the greatest number in antiquity was multiplied by itself.⁵⁹⁵ The background is Dan 7:10, which speaks of “thousands upon thousands ... ten thousand times ten thousand” who stood before the Ancient of Days to minister to him.⁵⁹⁶

The adoration of the angels may be more of a chanted response than a hymn that is sung.⁵⁹⁷ Corresponding to their position outside the inner circles of the cherubim and the elders, the angels do not address the Lamb directly. Their sevenfold ascription of praise is in the third person and antiphonal to the elders’ hymn of redemption.⁵⁹⁸ One is reminded of the opening verses of David’s farewell prayer in 1 Chron 29:10-19. Power, wealth, wisdom, and strength are not benefits that the Lamb is about to receive but qualities he possesses and for which he is worthy to be praised. The last three (honor, glory, and praise) are more closely related to the response of people and angels. Elsewhere in the NT each of the qualities mentioned is ascribed to Christ: power and wisdom, 1 Cor 1:24; wealth, 2 Cor 8:9; Eph 3:8; strength, Luke 11:22; honor, Phil 2:11; glory, John 1:14; praise, Rom 15:29.⁵⁹⁹

13 In vv. 9 and 10 the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders raised their voices in praise of the redemptive work of the Lamb. This is followed (in vv. 11 and 12) by an innumerable host of angels praising the worthiness of the Lamb. The climax of the scene is reached in v. 13, where all creation gives praise, honor, glory, and power to God and to the Lamb. John hears the roar of the adulation as it rises to heaven. It is the adoration of the entire created world. The universality of Christ’s great redemptive work calls for a universal response. The created order is specified as that which is in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and on the sea.⁶⁰⁰ The added phrase “and all that is in them” stresses that no living creature failed to join

in the great and final hymn of praise (cf. Phil 2:9-11). The doxology is fourfold, repeating three elements of the previous seven (v. 12), but exchanging “might” (*kratos*; NRSV: the NIV translates “power”) for “power” (*dynamis*).⁶⁰¹ It may be that the fourfold ascription corresponds to the fourfold division of creation. The praise of the entire created order is addressed to the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Throughout the Apocalypse the two are regularly joined. In 22:1 the water of life flows “from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (cf. 6:16; 17:10).

14 The four living creatures were the first to offer their praise in the throne-room vision of chapters 4 and 5; it is appropriate that they should also be the ones to bring the vision to its close. If the verb “said” is an iterative imperfect, then the four living creatures cry “Amen” after each of the seven attributes of v. 12 and the four of v. 13. As the cherubim say “Amen,” the elders fall down in worship.⁶⁰²

Chapter 5 has revealed a central truth that governs the entire book of Revelation. By his sacrificial death the Lamb has taken control of the course of history and guaranteed its future. He alone was worthy to break the seals and open the scroll of destiny. The hosts of heaven break out in jubilant song honoring the redemptive work of the Lion who is the Lamb. His triumphant sacrifice has transformed men and women from every part of the universe into priests in the service of God. Countless angels circle his throne and declare his power and praise. This vision of the grandeur of the triumphant Lamb prepares John to share with his readers the more solemn aspects of the judgments that lie in the future. A vivid portrayal of the one who has won the crucial battle against sin supplies the confidence that in the troubled times to come there remains a hope that is steadfast and sure.

IV THE SEVEN SEALS (6:1 — 8:1)

The vision of the glorified Son of man in chapter 1 led to the writing of the seven letters to the churches (chaps. 2-3). Similarly the throne-room vision of chapters 4 and 5 sets the stage for the opening of the scroll with its sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls (chaps. 6-16). The dramatic portrayal of God's righteous judgment is now under way. It should be noted that the scroll is not actually opened until all seven seals are removed. So in a sense, the content of the scroll begins with chapter 8 and the sounding of the seven trumpets. On the other hand, as each seal is removed we are introduced to a series of preliminary judgments representing forces operative throughout history by means of which the redemptive and judicial purposes of God are being carried out prior to the end.

A. FIRST FOUR SEALS: THE FOUR HORSEMEN (6:1-8)

1 I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” 2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

5 When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. 6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” 8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

The seven seals of chapter 6 divide into two groups of four and three (a pattern that is continued in the trumpets (chaps. 8-9) and in the bowls (chap. 16). The “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (the first four seals) are among the more widely recognized symbols of the book of Revelation and have had a long and checkered history of interpretation. Most likely in the overall scheme they represent forces of God operating in judgment throughout history.⁶⁰³ The imagery comes from Zechariah’s visions of the

variously colored horses in 1:8-17 and 6:1-8. As usual, John modifies his sources with great freedom. In Zechariah the colors (red, sorrel, white, black, and dappled gray) appear to have no special significance. In Revelation they correspond to the character of the rider and symbolize conquest (white), bloodshed (red), scarcity (black), and death (pale, livid). In Zechariah they are sent out to patrol the earth, while in Revelation their release brings disasters to the earth.⁶⁰⁴

It should be noted that although the form of John's vision is related to Zechariah, the subject matter corresponds to the eschatological discourse of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Luke records wars and tumults, nation rising against nation, great earthquakes, famines, pestilences, great signs from heaven, and persecution (Luke 21:9ff.; cf. Mark 13:7ff. and Matt 24:6ff.).⁶⁰⁵ By combining earthquakes and the cosmic disturbances, the seven woes of Luke are included within the six seals of Revelation. In Jewish thought the "age to come" would be preceded by a period of unprecedented woe. "These are the beginning of birth pains," Jesus said, "the end is still to come" (Mark 13:7-8).

The scenes depicted by the seals (except the fifth, vv. 9-11) are seen as taking place on the earth. They are not a kind of heavenly counterpart.

1 It is the Lamb himself who opens the first seal. He alone is worthy to set into motion those events that will bring about the culmination of human history. One of the living creatures calls out with a voice like thunder for the first of the four apocalyptic horsemen to ride forth. Translations that read "Come and see" are the result of copyists who understood the command as an invitation to the Seer.⁶⁰⁶

2 John looks, and behold, a white horse! Mounted on the horse is a rider with a bow and a crown who rides out as a conqueror bent on conquest. The question of the identity of the white horse and rider has been extensively discussed by commentators. One of two answers is usually given. An interpretation that goes back at least to Irenaeus (late 2nd cent.) identifies the rider with Christ and the white horse with the victorious progress of the gospel. The primary support for this view comes from 19:11, where we again meet a white horse and rider. That the rider in chapter 19 is the Christ follows from v. 13, where he is named "The Word of God," and from v. 16, where on his robe and on his thigh is written "KINGS OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." The argument for identifying the present white horse rider with Christ runs as follows: Should not the Apocalypse be allowed to

explain its own symbolism? The rider is mounted on a white horse (the color of righteousness) and goes forth to conquer (cf. 5:5, “The Lion of the tribe of Judah ... has triumphed”).⁶⁰⁷ In Mark 13:10 the universal proclamation of the gospel seems to precede the beginning of travail — at least it is one of the events that take place before the end (cf. Matt 24:14). Hence its appearance as one of the seals is not at all unexpected. Furthermore, no calamities follow after the white horse, as in the three other cases.⁶⁰⁸

The arguments against Christ as the rider of the white horse, however, are of sufficient strength to make the identification unlikely. A comparison of chapters 6 and 19 shows that the two riders have little in common beyond the fact that they are both mounted on white horses. In 6:2 the rider wears a victor’s wreath and carries a bow; in 19:11ff. he is crowned with “many crowns”⁶⁰⁹ and armed with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth. The context of 6:2 is one of conquest, while that of 19:11ff. is righteous retribution.

Another difficulty is that the identification brackets the proclamation of the gospel with a series of devastating calamities following one another as the inevitable results of human sinfulness (war, scarcity, death).⁶¹⁰ There is also the confusion involved in the Lamb’s opening the seals while at the same time being the one who rides forth when the first seal is broken. A final and fatal objection is the repeated use of “there was given,” which normally in Revelation refers to “the divine permission granted to evil powers to carry out their nefarious work.”⁶¹¹

The other prominent interpretation of the white horse and rider is that they symbolize the spirit of conquest and militarism.⁶¹² In the OT the bow was a symbol of military power. God told the prophet Hosea that he would “break Israel’s bow in the valley of Jezreel” (Hos 1:5). The warriors of Babylon will be captured and “their bows will be broken” (Jer 51:56). The crown is a symbol of victory.⁶¹³

Some writers see in the bow a veiled reference to a much-feared invasion from beyond the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire. The Parthians were the most famous archers of antiquity (and white horses were their trademark), and in A.D. 62 Vologeses had won an unprecedented victory over a Roman army. This had unnerved the West and led them to fear an all-

out invasion. While this may be a secondary reference, John has in mind military conquest in general.⁶¹⁴

3-4 The Lamb now opens the second seal, and the second living creature summons the next apocalyptic horseman to ride forth. Out comes a fiery red horse whose rider is given a large sword and the power to take peace from the earth, allowing people to slay one another. The color of the second horse⁶¹⁵ corresponds to the mission of its rider and symbolizes slaughter and bloodshed. If the first seal suggested invasion from without, the second seal may refer to internal strife.⁶¹⁶ The sword that was given to the rider was the Roman short sword appropriate to this sort of internecine warfare.⁶¹⁷ His mission is to remove peace from the earth and allow people to turn their destructive instincts upon one another.⁶¹⁸ It recalls Paul's words in 2 Thess 2:6ff. concerning the removal of that which restrains and the resultant lawlessness. Typical of the Jewish view of the end times is Zechariah 14, which pictures the final warfare leading to the universal reign of God. Verse 13 reads, "On that day men will be stricken by the LORD with great panic. Each man will seize the hand of another, and they will attack each other." Isaiah says that God will stir up the Egyptians, and they will fight "brother ... against brother, neighbor against neighbor" (19:2).⁶¹⁹

The mission of the red horse would be quickly understood in John's day, well acquainted as it was with rebellion and civil disorder. In a single year, A.D. 68-69, Rome had been ruled by four different emperors. It is reported that in the thirty-year period prior to the reign of Herod the Great (67-37 B.C.), more than one hundred thousand insurgents died in revolutions and rebellions in Palestine alone.⁶²⁰ Anarchy and bloodshed are harbingers of the end.

5-6 With the opening of the third seal by the Lamb and at the command of the third living creature, there comes forth a black horse whose rider holds a pair of scales in his hand. A voice from the center of the throne room announces famine prices for wheat and barley, and warns against hurting the oil and wine. The balance indicates a time of scarcity when the basic commodities of life are measured out at greatly inflated prices. In portraying the siege of Jerusalem, God told Ezekiel that its inhabitants would "eat rationed food in anxiety and drink rationed water in despair" (Ezek 4:16; cf. Lev 26:26). The denarius was a Roman silver coin equivalent to the daily wage of a working man (cf. Matt 20:2). For a day's

work a man could buy only enough wheat for himself or enough of the less nutritious barley for three. The price appears to be ten to twelve times what it should have been.⁶²¹

The most common interpretation of the black horse and rider is that they symbolize famine. Famine is implied by the balance and the exorbitant prices. It was a normal result of warfare in ancient times when invading armies lived off the lands they were conquering. The warning against hurting the oil and wine sets limits to the destruction about to be carried out by the horseman. Since the roots of the olive and vine go deeper, they would not be affected by a limited drought that would all but destroy the grain. This interpretation is in harmony with the increasing intensity of the three cycles of judgment. The fourth seal affects “a fourth of the earth” (6:8), the trumpets destroy a third (8:7, 8, 10, 12), and the destruction by the bowls is complete and final (16:1ff.).

The warning about the oil and wine has been variously interpreted. Some feel that it was added to underscore the social inequity existing in a time of scarcity. It is the poor, not the rich, who suffer.⁶²² But in that case it would also be difficult to understand why the Lamb — the voice “among the four living creatures” (v. 6; cf. 5:6) — would issue an order favoring the rich and aggravating the plight of the poor. Others see in the oil and wine a reference to the sacrament (cf. Jas 5:14) and understand the clause to promise that believers will not suffer from the famine.⁶²³ It is simpler to take the phrase as indicating a natural limitation to the famine.

Commentators who hold that much of John’s imagery grows out of his contemporary culture usually mention the decree of Domitian in A.D. 92 to destroy half the vineyards throughout the provinces. The order met such resistance that it was rescinded. John is portrayed as an ascetic, who was displeased and therefore predicted an evil time when people would have oil and wine in abundance but lack bread.⁶²⁴

7-8 When the Lamb opens the fourth seal the fourth living creature calls, and there comes forth a horse the color of a corpse.⁶²⁵ His rider is Death, and following along behind is his inseparable companion Hades (cf. 1:18, 20; 13:14). Power is given to them over a fourth part of the earth. This expression does not indicate a geographical area but sets forth in a quantitative sense the limitations placed upon their murderous activity. They bring about the death of one-fourth of humankind. The four specific ways in which they kill are based on the “four dreadful judgments” of Ezek

14:21 — sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague.⁶²⁶ No significance should be attached to the fact that John here chooses a different word for sword than he used in 6:4. The two are frequently used as synonyms in the Septuagint.⁶²⁷ It may be that this fourfold plague represents an intensification of that which is represented by the first three seals. Death by wild beasts would be expected in a land decimated by war and famine.

The overlapping of v. 8 with the judgments of the first three seals leads Charles to judge the text corrupt. He shortens it considerably by dropping the clauses that refer to Hades and the four instrumentalities of death.⁶²⁸ One writer takes the second sentence of v. 8 as a separate paragraph that refers to all four seals. In this way it becomes the Seer's own interpretation of the riders.⁶²⁹

Reviewing the various interpretations assigned to the Four Horsemen tends to rob the contemporary reader of the dramatic nature of the vision itself. It is good to place oneself back in one of the seven churches and listen to the visions as they are being read. Instead of discussing the probable significance of each of the four colored horses those first listeners would undoubtedly have recoiled in terror as war, bloodshed, famine, and death galloped furiously across the stage of their imagination. Visions at best are to be experienced rather than analyzed. Those who approach Revelation with a sympathetic imagination are most apt to understand its true meaning.

B. FIFTH SEAL: CRY OF THE MARTYRS (6:9-11)

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. 10 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

The seven seals divide into two groups of four and three. Now that the four horsemen have ridden forth, the scene changes. The opening of the fifth seal reveals an altar in heaven under which are the souls of the faithful martyrs. If the first four seals portrayed the troubled times of the approaching consummation, the fifth supplies an interpretation of Christian martyrdom. The martyrs (who have undergone suffering and tribulation) ask the crucial question, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (v. 10). The clear answer is that it will get worse before it gets better. In God's own time he will pour out his wrath on the unbelieving, who will call frantically on the mountains and rocks to hide them. The day of God's (and the Lamb's) wrath will come and the unanswerable question is, "Who can stand?" (v. 17).

9 The idea of heaven as the temple of God is common in Jewish thought. "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab 2:20; cf. Ps 18:6; *T. Levi* 18:6). It is probably unnecessary to conjecture whether the altar is the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense. The theme of sacrifice would suggest the former, but the prayers that rise (v. 10) seem to indicate the latter. There is no reason why in John's vision the two should not blend together as one.

In OT ritual sacrifice the blood of the bullock was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Lev 4:7; Exod 29:12). This blood contained the life, or soul, of the flesh (Lev 17:11). That the souls of the martyrs were “under the altar” is a way of saying that their untimely deaths on earth are from God’s perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven. Paul viewed his coming death as a drink offering to be poured out (2 Tim 4:6; cf. Phil 2:17). A somewhat parallel idea in rabbinic writing — that “the souls of the righteous are kept under the throne of glory”⁶³⁰ — may suggest the idea of martyrs as having reached a place of safety.

The martyrs had given up their lives because of the word of God and the testimony they had borne.⁶³¹ Their testimony was not primarily their witness about Jesus but the witness that they had received from him (cf. 12:17; 20:4).⁶³² Instead of being coordinate, the second phrase (“the testimony they had maintained”) may serve to make the first (“the word of God”) more specific.⁶³³ Those who died, therefore, are those who gave their lives in faithfulness to God as revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Note that John knows nothing of a “rapture” of the church by which Christians are spared the tribulation that normally accompanies a godly life (cf. 2 Tim 3:12). They “ascend to heaven through suffering and death, as Jesus did: they are not taken to heaven to escape the sufferings of earth.”⁶³⁴

10 From beneath the altar there rises a plea for vindication. With a loud voice the martyrs cry out, “How long, Sovereign Lord,⁶³⁵ holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Some writers emphasize what appears to be a marked contrast between this prayer and that of Stephen the first martyr, whose last words were a request that those who were stoning him not be held responsible for their act (Acts 7:60). Had not Jesus himself prayed at Calvary, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)?⁶³⁶ But before we conclude that the cry of the martyrs for vindication is sub-Christ, certain other considerations should be taken into account. The idea of divine vindication of the people of God is common throughout the OT. Ps 79:10 reads, “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.” This request does not rise from a personal desire for revenge, but out of concern for the reputation of God. It is unlike the attitude of the Jewish writer of the *Assumption of Moses*, who promised the

saints that they would look down from on high and rejoice that their enemies were in Gehenna (10:10). It certainly has none of the vindictiveness of Tertullian (the early third-century apologist), who writes of how he will laugh and exult at the last judgment as he sees the proud monarchs groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness, and the magistrates liquefying in fiercer flames than they ever kindled against the Christians.⁶³⁷

One interesting suggestion is that the martyrs' cry should be interpreted against the background of Hebrew jurisprudence in which a plaintiff must plead his own case. Condemned in a human court, the decision stands unless reversed by a higher court. The real point at issue is not the relation of the martyrs to their accusers, but the validity of their faith.⁶³⁸

God is appealed to as one who is "holy and true." Totally separate from all evil, he will vindicate with integrity those who have given their lives for the cause of righteousness.⁶³⁹ Through centuries of oppression the cry, How long? has constantly risen to heaven. "How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?" asks the Psalmist (94:3). "How long, O LORD, must I call for help," asks the prophet, "but you do not listen?" (Hab 1:2). Vindication, not bitter revenge, is the theme.

"The inhabitants of the earth" is a semitechnical designation for the human race in its hostility to God.⁶⁴⁰ In 11:10 they are those who rejoice over the death of the two witnesses. In chapter 13 they are pictured as worshiping the beast (vv. 8, 12), and in chapter 17 as intoxicated with the wine of the great prostitute's adulteries (v. 2). Their names are not written in the book of life (17:8), and they are subject to the coming hour of trial (3:10; 8:13).

11 To each of the martyrs was given a white robe. Some writers understand this as a reference to spiritual or glorified bodies that are given to the martyrs ahead of time as a token of special honor.⁶⁴¹ It is thought to have developed from God's wrapping himself in light as with a garment (cf. Ps 104:2). Apocalyptists spoke of the resurrection bodies of the righteous as "garments of glory" (1 *Enoch* 62:16; 2 *Enoch* 22:8), which were "stored up on high in the seventh heaven" (*Asc. Isa.* 4:16). Paul's reference to "a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands," which will clothe the believer at death (2 Cor 5:1ff.), is thought to be analogous (cf. also 1 Cor 15:35ff.; Phil 3:21).

In the book of Revelation, however, white robes are symbols of blessedness and purity. The redeemed throng before the throne in 7:9 are

arrayed in white robes. They have come out of the great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (7:13-14; cf. 22:14). The church at Laodicea is counseled to buy gold, white clothes,⁶⁴² and eye salve (3:18), a strange suggestion if white robes are glorified bodies.

The martyrs are told to wait a little longer until their number is completed. The victims of Nero's persecution⁶⁴³ are about to be joined by those who will give their lives rather than pay homage to Domitian as divine. The charge is not to control their impatience but to rest in the enjoyment of their blessedness. There are others who are yet to join their number. Jewish thought portrayed God as governing the world according to a predetermined time schedule (cf. 2 Bar. 23:4-5; 2 Esdr 4:35-37) in which the end would not come until the full number of the righteous were offered (1 *Enoch* 47:4; 2 Esdr 2:41).⁶⁴⁴ Those to be killed are their fellow servants, even their brothers and sisters. The verse does not distinguish two separate groups.

C. SIXTH SEAL: THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE (6:12-17)

12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, 13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. 14 The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Verses 12-17 come in response to the question of the martyrs under the altar in the fifth seal ("How long ... until you avenge our blood?"). The answer is not given in terms of days, months, or years but conveys the certainty that their deaths will be vindicated. Great cosmic disturbances will come to pass and secular society, responsible for the lives of believers, will come to understand that God has already set into motion that chain of events by which his wrath will be fully carried out.

12-14 With the opening of the sixth seal the great cosmic disturbances that are to herald the last days begin. For a people who held that the well-ordered movements of heavenly bodies were a token of God's providential control, the breakdown of this order would be a grim announcement that the end of the world was at hand. The details in this dramatic description of a universe in turmoil are drawn from the common stock of current apocalypticism. ⁶⁴⁵ They are not to be taken with complete literalness. ⁶⁴⁶ Those who first read John's description would not have bothered to debate whether or not the details were to be taken literally. They were part of a

well-established tradition that went back through contemporary apocalyptic literature to the earlier prophetic portrayals of the day of the Lord.⁶⁴⁷

The earthquake was a regular feature of divine visitation. When God descended on Sinai, “the whole mountain trembled violently” (Exod 19:18). Isaiah prophesies that people will hide in caves from the terror of the Lord “when he rises to shake the earth” (Isa 2:19). “In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth,” writes Haggai (2:6).⁶⁴⁸ This great earthquake is to be accompanied by the sun turning black like sackcloth made of goat hair⁶⁴⁹ and the whole moon turning blood red.⁶⁵⁰ In a passage quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost as partially fulfilled at that time (Acts 2:20), the prophet Joel says of the coming great and terrible day of the Lord, “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood.”⁶⁵¹ The stars of heaven are pictured as falling to the earth like unripe figs in a winter gale.⁶⁵² Isaiah spoke of the starry host falling like withered leaves from the vine (Isa 34:4). It is one of the signs that immediately precede the coming of the Son of man (Matt 13:25-26). The falling of stars upon the earth could mean but one thing to the ancient — the end had come. The sky will recede like an unrolled papyrus scroll that, should it break in the middle, would roll quickly back on either side.⁶⁵³ The removing of every mountain and island from its place has no parallel in apocalyptic writing. It may have been suggested by Nah 1:5 (“the hills melt away”) or Jer 4:24 (“the mountains ... were quaking; all the hills were swaying”).

We need not expect that these cataclysmic events will take place in a completely literal sense, although whatever they depict is sufficient to drive people in terror to the mountains, where they plead for death rather than face the wrath of the Lamb (vv. 15-17) — an unlikely consequence if they symbolize no more than social and political upheavals. Elsewhere in Revelation people are pictured as so adamant in pursuing their own goals that neither demonic plague (9:20) nor scorching heat is sufficient to make them repent. Nothing short of the awesome dissolution of the world itself will strike terror to the heart of people in the last days.

15-17 For the enemies of righteousness the day of the Lord will be a day of terror. Isaiah writes that “every man’s heart will melt ... they will writhe like a woman in labor” (Isa 13:7-8). “Who can stand when he appears?” asks Malachi; “for he will be like a refiner’s fire” (Mal 3:2). John pictures

the people of earth fleeing to the mountains and crying for death rather than standing before the judgment of God and the wrath of the Lamb.⁶⁵⁴

In listing the various groups that seek refuge in that great day of wrath, it is not John's intention to cover the entire range of human society but to emphasize that those who might normally have reason to feel secure will be utterly undone.⁶⁵⁵ The kings of the earth are those in positions of ultimate governmental authority. The princes are next in rank. The generals are military authorities at whose word the Roman armies advanced into battle.⁶⁵⁶ In that day the proud monarchs as well as the hardened military will flee in terror. The security of the rich and the mighty will be shattered, and all alike will panic in wild confusion.

John's graphic portrayal reflects Isaiah's description of the day of the Lord as a time when people will seek refuge in the caves of the rocks from dread of the Lord (Isa 2:10, 19, 21). From the day when Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of God (Gen 3:8), the guilty conscience has made people fugitives from God. But now there is no longer a place to hide. God will confront in judgment all those who have rebelled against his sovereign authority. People's terrified appeal for the mountains and rocks to fall on them reflects Hos 10:8 ("They will say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'"), a verse applied by Jesus to the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 22:30). Better death by a crushing avalanche than face the wrath of the Lamb.⁶⁵⁷

The wrath of God is a fundamental theme in NT teaching. It is both a present reality (Rom 1:18) and an eschatological event (Rev 19:15). It is neither personal vindictiveness nor an impersonal process of retribution that works itself out in the course of history.⁶⁵⁸ It is rather the "response of [God's] holiness to persistent and impenitent wickedness."⁶⁵⁹ The wrath of the Lamb, however, is an unusual and dramatic expression. Only once in the Gospels is the word for wrath used of Jesus (Mark 3:5). Yet if Christ as the Lamb in Revelation is primarily messianic rather than sacrificial (cf. comm. on 5:6), the element of paradox is not as pronounced as it is usually thought to be.⁶⁶⁰

The prophet Joel described the day of the Lord as "great [and] dreadful" (Joel 2:11; cf. v. 31). It is a day of wrath and retribution (Zeph 1:14-18). According to those attempting to escape the presence of God and the Lamb, this day of wrath has come.⁶⁶¹ Their rhetorical question "Who can stand?"

echoes Nah 1:6 (“Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger?” — cf. Mal 3:2). The announcement of the end need not be understood as the mistaken opinion of terrified humankind. The beginning of the end has arrived, and the plagues of 8:7-9:21 and 16:2-21 follow upon the actual opening of the seven-sealed scroll.

So the stage is set. Six of the seven seals have been opened, and John’s readers have learned of the “Four Horsemen” who leave a trail of death and destruction across the panorama of history. They have heard the agonizing plea of the martyrs for judgment on their oppressors and the vindication of their faithfulness that led to death. You may be sure that God will act. The universe itself will be subject to violent convulsions, and the unbelieving world will do their best to escape the wrath of the Lamb. So fierce will be that wrath that the question must be asked, “Who can stand?” (v. 17). The answer is that they, the martyrs and all they represent, will come through victorious. The “Four Horsemen” portray the sad history of our planet — conquest, war, famine, and death. As followers of the slain Lamb, God’s people suffer persecution and martyrdom. Their cry for vindication leads to the fundamental theological point of revelation — that God will vindicate himself by vindicating his people. The faithful are to live with the assurance that God is in command of his universe. At the moment it may appear that the forces of evil have gained the edge, but the one who defeated those very forces by means of his sacrificial death on the cross will return at the end of time to claim his own people and destroy forever all that stands in opposition.

INTERLUDE: VISIONS OF SECURITY AND SALVATION (7:1-17)

Chapter 7 comes as a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh seals — a stylistic feature repeated in the trumpet sequence (10:1-11:13) but not with the bowls (cf. 16:12-21). It also serves as a dramatic interlude⁶⁶² that delays for a brief moment the disclosure of that which is to take place when the seventh and final seal is removed from the scroll of destiny. The chapter consists of two visions — one, the sealing of the 144,000, and the other, the blessedness of the great multitude before the heavenly throne. A great deal has been written about the identity of the 144,000 as well as the relationship between the two visions. The position taken in the following pages is that in both visions the church is in view, but from two vantage points. Prior to the trumpet judgments the last generation of believers is sealed so as to be saved from the destruction coming upon the earth and to be brought safely into the heavenly kingdom.⁶⁶³ The second vision is anticipatory of the eternal blessedness of all believers when in the presence of God they realize the rewards of faithful endurance. The visions contrast the security and blessedness that await the faithful with the panic of a pagan world fleeing from judgment. In a sense it answers the question just posed, “Who can stand?” (6:17).

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

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God. " 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. 5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, 6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, 7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

1 John sees four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of destruction.⁶⁶⁴ In apocalyptic thought the forces of nature are often pictured as under the charge of angels. Later in Revelation we are introduced to "the angel in charge of the waters" (16:5) and the angel "who had charge of the fire" (14:18).⁶⁶⁵ The four angels are pictured as standing at the four corners of the earth. This does not require that we understand first-century cosmology as believing in a square (or rectangular?) world. It is quite possible that the ancients conceived of the earth as a round disk. When Isaiah foretells the return of the remnant from "the four corners of the earth" (Isa 11:12, NKJ), he uses the expression in much the same way as we would today.

The four winds as destructive agents of God are a regular feature in apocalyptic. The harmful winds were not those that blew straight from the four quarters (N S E W) but those that blew diagonally (cf. *1 Enoch* 76; cf. 34:3).⁶⁶⁶ In Dan 7:2 the four winds of heaven churn up the great sea, and the four great beasts come forth on their mission of destruction. In Jer 49:36ff. the four winds carry out the fierce anger of Yahweh upon Elam. According to the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-John* (xv), four great winds will sweep the face of the earth and cleanse it from sin. In our text the winds are held in check by the four angels until the servants of God are sealed. They are not to blow upon the earth or sea or *against* any tree.⁶⁶⁷ Trees are especially vulnerable to high winds and, caught in the maelstrom of a devastating storm, could picture the precarious nature of life on the face of the earth.⁶⁶⁸ The Greek text may be translated “lest a wind keep on blowing,” indicating that the winds of destruction have already begun to mount.⁶⁶⁹ In a semiarid land where vegetation withered easily, the sirocco — a hot wind from the southeast — came to play a part in the presentation of final destruction. Hosea speaks of the hot east wind as the “wind from the LORD ... blowing in from the desert,” drying up springs and wells (13:15; cf. Zech 9:14; Isa 40:7, 24).⁶⁷⁰ That these winds are never referred to subsequently in Revelation is one argument for the position that 7:1-8 represents an earlier source that John incorporated into his apocalypse. It is supported by the notion that a Christian writer in identifying the church as the true Israel would probably not bother to list a detailed division of the twelve tribes (as in vv. 5-8). Thus some writers hold that John has borrowed a Jewish apocalyptic source in which the people of Israel are protected from some calamity by receiving the seal of God upon their foreheads, and has reapplied the material to the church as it enters the period of final turmoil upon the earth.⁶⁷¹ The problem with this hypothesis is that John said he saw the four angels holding back the winds of destruction, he saw the angel come from the east with the seal of God, and he *heard* the number to be sealed. Unless one views Revelation essentially as a literary work by John based upon his theological insight about the end of the world, then it would appear that the most reasonable way to understand active verbs like “see” and “hear” is to take them at face value.

2-3 Another angel enters the vision, coming up from the east and calling to the four restraining angels to hold back destruction until the servants of God are sealed. This reference to the east may be no more than a

picturesque detail, although some see in it a reminiscence of Ezek 43:4, where the glory of the Lord enters by the gate facing east. Others find an indirect reference to the Nativity story and the Wise Men who came from the east (Matt 2:1).⁶⁷² In any case, it is appropriate that the angel who seals the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel should come from the direction of Palestine.

The seal that the angel brings is probably a signet ring like that used by Oriental kings to authenticate and protect official documents.⁶⁷³ From 14:1 we will learn that the mark it leaves on the forehead is “his name [the Lamb’s] and his Father’s name” (cf. 22:4). The followers of the beast also have a mark (16:2; 19:20) — the beast’s name (14:11) or the number of his name (13:17) — on their right hand or on their forehead (13:16; 14:9; 20:4 [Greek] says forehead *and* hand). The sealing of God’s servants is based on Ezekiel 9, where God instructs a man with an inkhorn to place an X⁶⁷⁴ on the forehead of all those who are deeply troubled over the sins of Jerusalem in order to protect them from the judgment coming upon the city. The seal should not be interpreted in a sacramental sense as referring to baptism.⁶⁷⁵ Its primary purpose is to insure protection for the believers in the coming judgments.⁶⁷⁶ The seal of God in 2 Tim 2:19 is “the Lord knows those who are his.” Ownership entails protection.

It is the seal of the *living* God that the angel brings. This designation is frequent in the OT. Upon crossing the Jordan, Joshua tells the people that “the living God” is among them (Josh 3:10). Hezekiah calls upon God to deliver Israel out of the hands of Sennacherib, who sent his messenger “to insult the living God” (2 Kgs 19:4, 16). The title is appropriate wherever God is about to intervene on behalf of his people. It contrasts the one true and eternal God with all the false and idolatrous gods of heathendom.

The servants of God are not a select group singled out from among the rest to receive the seal of God. They are the full number of faithful believers alive when that event takes place. The angel’s reference to them as “servants of our God” implies that human beings and angels are fellow servants in the service of God (cf. 19:10; 22:9).

4-8 No description of the sealing follows. John does not see but hears the number of those who have been sealed — 144,000 out of every tribe of Israel. The identity of this group has been extensively discussed. A few commentators interpret the 144,000 as a literal reference to the nation Israel.⁶⁷⁷ But this interpretation seriously complicates the book of

Revelation by bringing in racial distinctions that no longer exist in the NT purview. It disregards the historical fact that ten of the twelve tribes disappeared in Assyria, and the remaining two lost their separate identity when Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70.

The number is obviously symbolic.⁶⁷⁸ Twelve (the number of tribes) is both squared and multiplied by a thousand — a twofold way of emphasizing completeness. It refers to that generation of faithful believers about to enter the final turbulent period that will mark the end of human history.⁶⁷⁹ That there are 144,000 (12,000 from each tribe of Israel) is a symbolic way of stressing that the church is the eschatological people of God who have taken up Israel's inheritance. Their being sealed does not protect them from physical death but insures entrance into the heavenly kingdom. It indicates that they will remain faithful in the coming persecution.

The idea of the church as the new Israel appears to have grown out of Jesus' promise to his disciples that they would one day "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). Paul writes that the believer in Christ is the true Jew (Rom 2:29), and he refers to the church as "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16). James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1) when writing to the Christians scattered throughout the Roman world. Peter speaks of believers as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9), phrases taken directly from the OT (Isa 43:20; Exod 19:6) and reapplied to the NT church.

Some commentators would restrict the 144,000 to that portion of the entire church which in the last days is marked out for martyrdom. The martyrs under the fifth seal cried out for vindication and were told to rest a little while until the full number of their fellow servants should be killed (6:9-11).⁶⁸⁰ This interpretation is supported by reference to the prophetic role of the two witnesses in chapter 11 and the 144,000 in chapter 14 who are "purchased from among men, to be the first-fruits unto God" (14:4).

The arguments for identifying the 144,000 with a select group of martyrs, however, is far from conclusive.⁶⁸¹ The detailed listing of the twelve tribes as well as the symbolism of the number emphasizes the idea of completeness. Twelve times 1,000 come from each tribe: no one is excluded. Further, there seems to be no place in Revelation for any believer

who will not face martyrdom in the last days (cf. 13:15, “cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed”).⁶⁸²

Several irregularities appear in the listing of the twelve tribes. The first is that Judah rather than Reuben (Jacob’s oldest son) heads the list. The reason for this change is obvious. Christ belonged to the tribe of Judah (Heb 7:14; cf. Gen 49:10). Giving this priority to Judah would be perfectly natural for a Christian writer. The second is the inclusion of both Manasseh and Joseph, since Manasseh (as well as his brother Ephraim, who does not occur in this list) is included in Joseph. The answer to this peculiarity is perhaps bound up with yet another — the omission of Dan.

Some have suggested that *Dan* was inadvertently copied as *Man*, which was later taken as an abbreviation for Manasseh.⁶⁸³ This would solve both problems. Unfortunately, it is only conjecture unsupported by any solid evidence. Apparently Dan was omitted because of an early connection with idolatry. When the tribe of Dan migrated to the north and settled in Laish, they set up for themselves the graven image (Judg 18:30). Later Dan became one of the two great shrines in the northern kingdom (1 Kgs 12:29). In the Testament of *Dan* (5:6) Satan is said to be the prince of the tribe. Irenaeus, writing in the latter part of the second century, noted that the omission of Dan was due to a tradition that the Antichrist was to come from that tribe.⁶⁸⁴ This apparently rested on rabbinic interpretations of such passages as Gen 49:17 and Jer 8:16. Whatever the precise reason for omitting Dan, the inclusion of Manasseh was undoubtedly to bring the total number back to twelve.

There seems to be no particular reason for the order in which the tribes are given.⁶⁸⁵ The sequence should not be surprising in that the tribes are listed in some eighteen different orders in the OT, none of which agrees with the order in Revelation. By placing vv. 5c-6 after v. 8, one writer organized the list into the sons of Leah, Rachel, Zilpah (Leah’s maid), and Bilhah (Rachel’s maid).⁶⁸⁶ However that may be, the various irregularities of the list do not affect the interpretation of the passage. The 144,000 are faithful believers about to enter the period of final testing.

B. Bliss of the Redeemed in Heaven (7:9-17)

9 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.
10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb. ”

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

“Amen!

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen! ”

13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes — who are they, and where did they come from?”

14 I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple;

and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

16 Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;

he will lead them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. ”

The second vision of chapter 7 stands in marked contrast to the first. Instead of 144,000 there appears a great multitude that no one can number. Rather than being sealed for the impending persecution, they are said to have “come out of the great tribulation” (v. 14). No longer on earth, they crowd the throne room of heaven wearing victors’ robes and bearing the emblem of festive joy.⁶⁸⁷ The new vision anticipates a glorious day yet future when those who are to pass through the final persecution will enter the blessedness of the eternal state. The innumerable multitude includes far more than the 144,000 of the previous vision. All the faithful of every age are there. Some have been called upon to give their lives as martyrs. All have been prepared to pay the price of fidelity. They cry out in a loud voice declaring that it is to God and to the Lamb that they owe their salvation. The heavenly entourage (angels, elders, and living creatures) fall before the throne and worship God. “Who are these dressed in white robes and from where did they come?” asks one of the elders. Answering his own question he identifies the innumerable multitude as those who have come out of the great tribulation and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They stand before God in the righteousness of Christ. God blesses them with protection and freedom from want. The Lamb leads them to springs of joy, and the tears of earth’s sorrows are wiped away by God himself.

The purpose of the vision is to grant a glimpse of eternal blessedness to those about to enter the world’s darkest hour. For a brief period John is privileged to look beyond this age to the hour of ultimate triumph. The entire scene is not unlike the Transfiguration in which Jesus revealed his coming glory to disciples who had only recently learned of the suffering that lay ahead for the Son of man (Mark 8:32; 9:2-8). Without doubt it is one of the most exalted portrayals of the heavenly state to be found anywhere in Scripture. There are no less than three paeans of praise, and the lyric prose of vv. 15-17 is charged with a spiritual excitement that has caused the faithful of all ages to yearn for that final redemption.

9-10 The vision begins with a great throng standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. The elders, living creatures, and angels of chapters 4 and 5 are now joined with so vast a multitude of redeemed that to number them would be impossible. In every direction they stretch out as far as the eye can see. As God promised Abraham, they are in number as the stars of

heaven (Gen 15:5) and the sand of the sea (Gen 32:12). The universality of the multitude is stressed by the fourfold division into nations, tribes, peoples, and languages.⁶⁸⁸ Their robes of white symbolize not only the victory of faith but the righteousness of Christ. Verse 14 specifically says that the robes are white by virtue of being washed in the blood of the Lamb. Victory by sacrifice is a recurring motif in Revelation (cf. 5:9, 12). The palm branches are appropriate in this scene of festive joy. Those who went out to meet Jesus as he rode toward Jerusalem on the day of the triumphal entry carried palm branches and cried out “Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13).⁶⁸⁹

With a single voice the great multitude cries out, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”⁶⁹⁰ This salvation is more than their victorious passage through hardship and suffering. It is deliverance from everything that stands over against the blessedness portrayed in vv. 15-17. It is salvation from sin and all its dire consequences.⁶⁹¹ The great multitude joyfully acknowledges that their deliverance rests on the sovereign will of God and the redemptive activity of the Lamb. Weymouth translates, “To our God ... and to the Lamb, we owe our salvation!”

11-12 The thousands upon thousands of angels that surround the throne (5:11) respond to the jubilant cry of the saints by falling prostrate before God and offering to him a sevenfold doxology of praise. The redemption of the human race, that ultimate purpose of God in creation, has at last been realized. If there is “rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10), how unbelievably great will be the joyful adoration of the heavenly host when *all* the redeemed stand before their God! We need not inquire into the relative positions of the angels and the saints around the throne. Visions are not for diagramming but for insight into truths that lie beyond the ken of human intelligence.

The two “Amens” are liturgical, prefacing and concluding the angelic doxology.⁶⁹² The repetition of the article before each attribute (in the Greek text; as in 4:11) tends to heighten its meaning. For instance, it is not simply *a* blessing that the angelic hosts have in mind, but the blessing (AV).⁶⁹³ Six of the seven attributes occur in an earlier doxology (5:12) but in a totally different order.⁶⁹⁴ Glory is the radiance of the divine Person. In this context wisdom is the divine knowledge God exhibited in his plan of redemption

(cf. Eph 3:10). Thanks is the appropriate response for salvation, and honor its public acknowledgment. If power is God's ability to act, strength is his redemptive presence in the events of history. This ascription of praise is apparently directed both to God and the Lamb, although the latter is not specifically mentioned here (cf. vv. 12, 14, 17).

13-14 One of the elders, anticipating the question that John is about to ask, inquires rhetorically, "These in white robes — who are they, and where did they come from?" Prompted by the Seer, he answers that they are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The question and answer format is often used in prophetic literature for introducing the explanation of a vision. Following Zechariah's vision of the golden lampstand and the two olive trees, an angel poses the question, "Do you not know what these are?" (4:5). When the prophet admits his lack of understanding, the angel proceeds to explain the visions.⁶⁹⁵ John's mode of address to the angel ("My lord," NEB, Knox)⁶⁹⁶ is in keeping with the reverence he shows for angelic beings elsewhere in the book (cf. 19:10; 22:8-9). In itself it does not necessarily imply a supernatural person. It may be only an expression of courtesy such as Mary used to the gardener on Easter morning (John 20:15). "You know" (the personal pronoun is emphatic) expresses John's lack of understanding and his confidence in the ability of his interpreter.

The white-robed multitude are those who have come out of the great tribulation. Charles interprets the scene as one in which martyrs are *still* arriving from the great persecution.⁶⁹⁷ The larger context favors a point in time when the complete number of the redeemed stand before God and the blessings of the eternal state are about to be realized.

The use of the definite article in the phrase "the great tribulation" indicates that the angel is referring primarily to that final series of woes which will immediately precede the end. It is the hour of trial that is to come upon the whole world (3:10). It is not "the awesome totality of tribulation which from century to century has been the experience of the people of God"⁶⁹⁸ nor does it correspond to "the entire history of the church — past, present, and future."⁶⁹⁹ It is that specific period of distress and cruel persecution which will take place prior to the return of Christ. Prophesied by Daniel (12:1) and reflected on the screen of history at the fall of Jerusalem (Mark 13:19 and parallels), it finds its fulfillment in that final

persecution which supplies the full complement of Christian martyrs (6:11). John views the entire company of faithful believers in the light of the 144,000 who have just come through the final period of testing. Not all are martyrs. There is no mention here of being slain (as in 6:9) or beheaded (as in 20:4) for the testimony they bore. Their robes are white by virtue of the redemptive death of the Lamb. Their rewards are those of all the faithful. Persecution has always been the lot of those who follow the Lamb (John 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12). The intensity of the final conflict of righteousness and evil will rise to such a pitch as to become *the great tribulation*.

The multitude before the throne have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The tense of both verbs (aorist) indicates once-for-all actions that took place in the past.⁷⁰⁰ The cleansing effect of the blood of Christ is also pictured in such verses as Heb 9:24 (“the blood of Christ ... [will] cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death”) and 1 John 1:7 (“the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin”). The background may be Exodus 19, where the children of Israel wash their garments in readiness for the descent of Jehovah upon Mt. Sinai (Exod 19:10, 14). The prophet Isaiah compares the righteous acts of Israel to “filthy rags” (64:6; cf. Zech 3:3-5), but elsewhere promises that “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18). The idea of making robes white by washing them in blood⁷⁰¹ is a striking paradox. It is the sacrifice of the Lamb upon the cross that supplies white garments for the saints. Their act of washing the robes is not a meritorious work but a way of portraying faith.

15 It is because they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ that the multitude is able to stand before the throne of God. There they serve him day and night.⁷⁰² “Day and night” is an idiom meaning unceasingly or without pause.⁷⁰³ The temple in which the faithful serve is not to be thought of as a building in heaven. In John’s vision heaven itself is the sanctuary: within, all God’s children are worshiping priests (1:6; 5:10).⁷⁰⁴ Their service is not the ritual performance of Levitical priests but a spiritual worship of adoration and praise (cf. 22:3-5). The same verb is used of Anna the prophetess, who “never left the temple but *worshipped* night and day, fasting and praying.”⁷⁰⁵ The shift to the future tense in vv. 15c-17 does not intend to separate in time the arrival of the redeemed and their heavenly reward. Once they have been clothed in white and are before the throne, the blessings of heaven are theirs without delay. Both time and space are finite

categories that blend together in the visionary experience. From the throne room in heaven is projected a description of life upon the new earth (21:3).

The promise that God will spread his tent over them would evoke memories of the tabernacle in the wilderness (Lev 26, etc.), the pillar of cloud and of fire (Exod 13:21-22), and the Shekinah glory (the radiance of God's presence in the midst of his people; cf. Exod 40:34-38; also 2 Chron 7:1-3). For the tent to be over his people is a way of saying that the immediate presence of God will shelter and protect them from all that would harm (Isa 4:5-6). It is the fulfillment of the OT promise that God will dwell in the midst of his people (Ezek 37:27; Zech 2:10). The RSV translates, "He who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence," that is, "will make his Shekinah to dwell with them".⁷⁰⁶

16-17 The eternal blessedness of the redeemed is pictured in phrases drawn for the most part from Isaiah's description of the exiles returning from Babylon (Isa 49:10). The promise that they will neither hunger nor thirst would be especially meaningful in an ancient land where both were constant threats. Yet the promise goes beyond physical privation. It points to that ultimate satisfaction of the soul's deepest longing for spiritual wholeness. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," said Jesus, "for they will be filled" (Matt 5:6). And again, "He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35; cf. 4:14; 7:37). In the age to come neither sun nor scorching east wind will strike the redeemed.⁷⁰⁷ They are sheltered from all discomfort by the presence of God.

The idea of the Lamb as the shepherd of God's flock is an intriguing exchange of roles.⁷⁰⁸ Elsewhere in the writings of John, Christ is pictured as the good shepherd (John 10:1-30; 21:15-17; cf. 1 John 3:16 with John 10:11).⁷⁰⁹ The metaphor builds on the OT picture of God as the shepherd of Israel. Such passages as Ps 23:1 ("The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want") and Isa 40:11 ("He tends his flock like a shepherd") speak of the gentle care and daily provision of the ancient shepherd. God through Ezekiel tells of a coming shepherd — "my servant David" — who is to tend his flock (Ezek 34:23). Christ is this promised good shepherd.

Elsewhere in Revelation, the shepherding activity of the Lamb is of a radically different sort. He is to rule (shepherd)⁷¹⁰ the nations with an iron scepter (12:5; 19:15). In 2:27 the overcomers at Thyatira are promised a

share in this rule. With an iron scepter they will shepherd the nations; they will “dash them to pieces like pottery.”⁷¹¹

The Lamb as heavenly shepherd leads his flock to the wellspring of life and wipes away the last trace of earthly sorrow. “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed,” sang Moses and the children of Israel (Exod 15:13). “Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness,” prayed the Psalmist (Ps 5:8). As God has led in the past, so will he lead in the future. He directs the heavenly multitude to the fountain and source of life - that is, to the immediate presence of God. The inverted syntax of the expression in Greek lays emphasis on the word “life.”⁷¹² The Psalmist says that people will drink from the river of God’s delights, for with him is the fountain of life (Ps 36:8-9). The same concept lies behind Jesus’ promise that “whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14; cf. 7:38; and the “inexhaustible fountain of righteousness” in *I Enoch* 48:1). As in the preceding verse, the figure points beyond itself to that ultimate satisfaction of people’s spiritual longings. As a fresh-water spring in a semiarid land would be to a shepherd and his thirsty flock, so will be the eternal presence of God to redeemed humanity in their longing for spiritual wholeness.

The tears that God wipes away are not the tears of grief over a wasted life. Rather, like the tears of a child brought suddenly from sorrow to delight, they linger rather ridiculously on the faces of the redeemed.⁷¹³

Some interpreters have suggested that John, by the use of this hymn, is indoctrinating prospective martyrs for their coming ordeal.⁷¹⁴ While a glimpse into the bliss of heaven would certainly encourage Christians caught in a hostile world, to interpret the vision as premeditated indoctrination scarcely does credit to the integrity of the Seer.



Following the interlude of chapter 7 in which John sees the church on earth protected by the seal of God and the church in heaven triumphant and praising God, action resumes and John records the opening of the seventh seal by the Lamb. While one might expect some great and concluding

scene, there follows rather a dramatic half hour of silence. Then an angel offers up incense to God along with the prayers of the saints and casts the burning embers down upon the earth. The seven trumpet-angels raise their instruments in preparation to sound another series of seven judgments.

Many suggestions have been offered to explain the relationship between the three major series of judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls). One solution would be a strictly chronological arrangement, with each new series evolving from the seventh element of the previous series.⁷¹⁵ While it is true that from a literary perspective the seven trumpets seem to be an expansion of the seventh seal and the seven bowls a development of the seventh trumpet, the idea of the three series presenting a precise sequence of future events runs into considerable trouble when attention is given to the details of the book. Even when it is granted that the Revelation contains certain proleptic visions for the purpose of encouragement, the remainder of the book does not leave the impression of an orderly and temporally sequential development.

Most of the other solutions involve some sort of recapitulation, an approach that goes back to at least Victorinus of Pettau in the third century.⁷¹⁶ While there is obviously a rather close similarity between the first four items in both the trumpets and the seals there are also significant differences when all the elements are compared.⁷¹⁷

The position maintained in the following discussion is that the visions of John neither follow in a strict chronological sequence nor do they systematically recapitulate one another. While there is a rather clearly discernible literary development,⁷¹⁸ it is not intended to represent a corresponding *chronological* development.⁷¹⁹ All three series cover the same period of travail with which human history is brought to its consummation. In that sense they cover the same period of time. Yet the individual plagues in each series are not intended to correspond with those in the other two. While the first four units in the trumpets and bowls affect earth, sea, land waters, and the heavens (8:7-12 and 16:2-8) in the same order, there are a number of differences. The major point is that the intensity of the plagues increases in each series.⁷²⁰ The seals affect “a fourth of the earth” (6:8), and the trumpets “a third of the earth” (8:7, 8, 11, 12), while the bowls complete the wrath of God (16:17). The relationship of the three series is best understood as a spiral of increasing severity. Each series deals with the tumultuous time just before the end, but as we move

from seals to trumpets to bowls we are aware of the ever increasing tempo and severity of the plagues. The literary structure is not difficult to discern (the trumpets are an expansion of the seventh seal and the bowls an expansion of the seventh trumpet), but the interpretive relationship calls for an imagination freed from the prosaic mentality of the Western world and more open to the possibility of understanding that comes from insight rather than logic. All attempts to press the material into well-defined patterns⁷²¹ leave the impression that John was more interested in producing a work of literary subtlety than sharing with his fellow believers the awe-inspiring visions that God had dramatically revealed to him.

One of the more helpful suggestions is to view John as a guide in an art gallery who has his students stand back to absorb a general impression (the sevenfold visions) and then move up to study the details (the unnumbered visions).⁷²² Upon entering the Sistine Chapel one is staggered by its immensity and glory. Only after some time has passed is the viewer ready for a more detailed analysis of some of the specific items. An abstract painting resists all attempts to explain systematically why certain colors and lines appear as they do. The Apocalypse is the work of a creative artist and must not be pressed into a clearly defined plan.⁷²³

D. SEVENTH SEAL: A DRAMATIC PAUSE (8:1)

1 When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

1 When the seventh seal is opened, a great hush settles over the worshipping hosts of heaven. For a period of about half an hour there is breathless silence as all await the judgments of the scroll now unsealed. Kiddle judges it a “brilliant device for deepening the suspense.”⁷²⁴ It is similar to the restraining of the four winds of destruction (7:1-3) and the sealing up of the utterance of the seven thunders (10:4).

The silence is neither a symbol of eternal rest⁷²⁵ nor a necessary precaution so God can hear the prayers of the suffering saints.⁷²⁶ It is a dramatic pause that makes even more impressive the judgments about to fall upon the earth.⁷²⁷ We are reminded of the prophetic injunction, “The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab 2:20; cf. Zeph 1:7-8; Zech 2:13).⁷²⁸ Although thirty minutes is a relatively short period, it would be an impressive break in such a rapidly moving drama. Apparently the angelic activity of vv. 2-5 takes place during this interval of silence. Trumpets are given to the seven angels before the throne. An angel standing over the altar mingles incense with the prayers of the saints,⁷²⁹ and taking fire from the golden altar fills his censer and casts it upon the earth. The intensity of the scene is heightened incredibly by the complete absence of any sound.

V. THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:2-11:19)

A. PREPARATION (8:2-5)

2 And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

3 Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. 4 The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. 5 Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

2 As before, the new series begins with John indicating that he is about to describe what he saw (cf. 4:1; 5: 1). The use of the definite article (“*the* seven angels”) indicates that the angels to whom the seven trumpets were given constitute a specific group. Raphael identifies himself to Tobit as “one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One” (Tob 12:15). In I *Enoch* 20:2-8 the names of these seven archangels are listed as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqâêl, Gabriel, and Remiel.⁷³⁰ The Angels of the Presence (a designation that goes back to Isa 63:9) are mentioned repeatedly in the book of Jubilees (1:27, 29; 2:1-2, 18; 15:27; 31:14). “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God,” declares the angel to Zechariah (Luke 1:19).

Whatever the connection may be between the seven trumpet-angels of John's vision and the seven archangels of Jewish apocalyptic, their role in the book of Revelation is to announce a series of plagues that is to fall upon the earth and its inhabitants. It is possible that they are also the seven angels who later pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God (15:1, 6-8; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9).

That this is the first mention of the seven angels⁷³¹ does not mean that they have only recently entered the throne room to take their place among the other groups already there. As the drama progresses, details that were earlier passed by are gradually brought to light. To stand before God is to maintain oneself in readiness for service.⁷³²

The action begins with the giving of seven trumpets to the seven angels standing before God. In the OT the trumpet was used extensively for a variety of purposes. In Numbers 10 Moses was instructed to make two trumpets of silver. They were used to call the people together (v. 3), to move the tribes on their journey (vv. 5-6), to sound the alarm in time of war (v. 9), and to celebrate days of sacred feasts (v. 10). Seven priests with trumpets led the armies of Israel around the city of Jericho (Josh 6).⁷³³ The Jewish New Year (Tishri 1) is called “a day for you to blow the trumpets” (Num 29:1; also Lev 23:24). The trumpet was regularly used at the coronation of kings (1 Kgs 1:34, 39; 2 Kgs 9:13).

The trumpets in Revelation, however, are eschatological trumpets. They herald the day of God’s wrath. Zeph 1:14-16 describes the great day of the Lord as “a day of wrath ... a day of distress and anguish ... a day of trumpet and battle cry.” In 2 Esdr 6:23 the sounding of a trumpet announces the day of judgment, striking sudden terror to the hearts of people. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (31) the trumpet heralds the coming of the Elect One to burn the wicked (cf. Sib. Or. 4:174). John’s trumpet-angels call forth four great calamities upon the physical universe (8:7-12), two demonic plagues upon unrepentant humankind (9:1-21), and the great proclamation that this world has fallen to the sovereignty of God (11:15ff.).

3 The scene depicted in vv. 3-5 as a prelude to the seven trumpet-plagues is somewhat similar to the earlier vision of the twenty-four elders with golden bowls of incense (5:8) that preceded the opening of the seven seals. The angel who performs the priestly functions is not identified. He is called “another angel” in order to distinguish him from the seven angels of v. 2 who are about to sound their trumpets and initiate the next series of plagues. It is unlikely that the angel is to be taken as representative of Christ in his intercessory work as high priest.⁷³⁴ Would the central figure of Revelation be introduced into the text with such an indefinite title? In 7:2 it is “another angel” who seals the servants of God against the coming persecution.

The angel comes and stands at the altar.⁷³⁵ A few commentators hold that this altar is to be distinguished from the golden altar mentioned later in the

verse. The angel is pictured as offering the prayers of the saints in much the same way as the priests in the temple at Jerusalem would daily take hot coals from the altar of sacrifice and carry them into the holy place to the golden altar of incense (cf. Luke 1:9). It is more likely that only one altar is in view, the golden altar of incense (Exod 30:1-10; 2 Kgs 6:22; Heb 9:4).⁷³⁶

In the angel's hand is a golden censer or fire pan. The censers of the tabernacle were made of brass (Exod 27:3), while those of Solomon's temple were of gold (1 Kgs 7:50).⁷³⁷ Although the word John uses for censer elsewhere means frankincense,⁷³⁸ the adjective "golden" indicates that he had the implement in mind rather than that which was placed in it.

To the angel is given much incense "that he should add it unto the prayers of all the saints" (ASV). The clause has been variously understood, but the major options are two. Either the incense is mingled with the prayers of the saints or the incense is the prayers. The majority of commentators and English translations favor the former alternative. The RSV translates, "and [the angel] was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints ... and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints."

⁷³⁹ It is preferable, however, to follow the second option, which is to take the dative case in vv. 3 and 4 (translated by the preposition "with") as equivalent to the Hebrew *le* of definition and to translate, "he was given much incense to offer, consisting of the prayers of all the saints."⁷⁴⁰ This interpretation harmonizes with 5:8, where the bowls of incense are definitely identified with the prayers of the saints.

In either case the role of the angel does not consist in making the prayers of the saints acceptable to God. The mediatorial role of angels that is so prevalent in Jewish apocalyptic does not find a place in NT theology.⁷⁴¹ At best the angel of 8:3-5 is a heavenly priest who presents the prayers of all the saints (not only those of the martyrs in 6:10) before God. That the altar is "before the throne" is another example of the ease with which otherwise separate elements may be conjoined in a vision.

4 When incense is added to the hot coals, a cloud of fragrant smoke rises from the altar as a symbol of divine acceptance. Paul writes to the Ephesians that Christ loved them and gave himself for them as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2). The scene in heaven suggests that there is something sacrificial about genuine prayer. Both the believer and his prayer enter the presence of God by way of the altar.

5 The scene of intercession now becomes one of judgment. The angel priest takes⁷⁴² the censer, fills it with fire from the altar, and hurls it on the earth.⁷⁴³ The action is somewhat parallel to that of Ezekiel's vision in which a man clothed in linen fills his hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatters them over the city (Ezek 10:2-7). The prayers of the saints play an essential part in bringing the judgment of God upon the earth and its inhabitants. The martyrs' plea in 6: 10 ("How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?") is here answered in part.

That God is about to answer the prayers of the saints is indicated by the thunders, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and earthquake that follow.⁷⁴⁴ Like the theophany at Sinai the world trembles before the presence of God (Exod 19:16ff.).

B. FIRST FOUR TRUMPETS (8:6-12)

6 *Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.*

7 *The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.*

8 *The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, 9 a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.*

10 *The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water — 11 the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.*

12 *The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.*

Verse 6 returns to the action of v. 2 and leads on to the seven trumpet-plagues that follow. These plagues neither recapitulate each of the seal judgments, nor do they follow the seals in a strictly chronological sense.⁷⁴⁵ They do cover the same period of final travail but from a different perspective. The sixth seal found people fleeing to the mountains and calling for sanctuary against the wrath of the Lamb (6:15-17). The tribulation of this period is now portrayed in a more advanced fashion. While the first four seals depicted judgments that are the inevitable

consequences of human sinfulness, the trumpets reveal the active involvement of God in bringing punishment upon a wicked world.

The church is not in view in the judgments that follow. Its lot in this turbulent period is dealt with in chapters 11 — 13. While it cannot but be affected by the first four plagues, it is kept from the demonic assaults that follow.⁷⁴⁶

The trumpet-plagues are directed against a world adamant in its hostility toward God. As the intensity of the judgments increases, so also does the vehemence with which people refuse to repent (9:20-21; 16:9, 11, 21). But the trumpet judgments are not final. They affect a significant proportion but not all of the earth (one-third occurs twelve times in vv. 7-12). Their purpose is not so much retribution as it is to lead people to repentance. Like the watchman and his trumpet in Ezekiel 33, they warn the people of impending danger.

The division of the seven trumpets into groups of four and three (or 4, 2, and 1) is like that of the seals. As the first four trumpet-plagues are directed toward the world of nature (8:7-13), so the four horsemen (6:1-9) relate to events that take place on earth. The fifth and sixth of both series are separated from the last by a parenthesis (chap. 7 and 10:1-11:13). In the trumpet sequence there is an increase in severity over the seals.⁷⁴⁷ The trumpets go beyond the seals in their more detailed portrayal of the judgment of God on evil. It would be unwise to force the trumpet scenes into some sort of consistent pattern with the preceding series. John writes in the exalted idiom of an ecstatic experience.⁷⁴⁸ To worry about the prohibition in 9:4 against hurting the grass, when in 8:7 the green grass was already burned up, or to question how a great star could fall from heaven in 8:10 when the stars had already fallen in 6:12, would be to misunderstand the literary genre in which the Apocalypse is written. As plagues preceded the release of the children of Israel from their Egyptian masters, so plagues will precede the Exodus of the church from hostile political powers.⁷⁴⁹ They are the prelude to that great and final Exodus in which the church is taken out of the world and enters into the eternal presence of God. Constant allusion throughout this section to the Egyptian plagues is a way of emphasizing that in the last days God will again bring punishment upon those hostile powers that oppress his people. We are dealing here with that montage of divine judgments upon a recalcitrant world which leads to the return of Jesus Christ as sovereign Lord.

6⁷⁵⁰ The seven who were given the seven trumpets get ready to blow them. We do not know what is involved in the angels preparing themselves (*hētoimasan autous*) to sound, but it probably means no more than that they raised their instruments in readiness to sound. This action would heighten the sense of expectancy.

7 With the sounding of the first trumpet⁷⁵¹ the second major series of calamities begins. The first angel sounds his trumpet, and the response is hail and fire mixed with blood.⁷⁵² The imagery comes primarily from the seventh Egyptian plague (Exod 9:13-35). When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, God sent thunder, hail, and lightning that “flashed down to the ground” (Exod 9:23). The reference to blood probably comes from Joel’s prophecy of the last days (Joel 2:31; cf. Acts 2:19).⁷⁵³ The blood refers to the awesome color of the storm rather than the fire and destruction that the lightning would cause.⁷⁵⁴ The syntax of the verse suggests that the blood-red storm appeared in heaven before it was cast upon the earth. In the Talmud (*Hag.* 12b) the sixth heaven is pictured as a storehouse of hail, storm, and noxious vapors, maintained within gates of fire. The *Sibylline Oracles* speak of a rain of fire and blood as one of the signs of the end (5:377-78).

Great devastation follows in the wake of the storm. A third of the surface of the earth is consumed by fire. In Zech 13:8-9 two-thirds of the people of the land are to die and one-third are to be brought through the refiner’s fire. In our text it is one-third of the land and its vegetation that is devastated by fire.⁷⁵⁵ The fraction, if taken literally (esp. in the next plague), borders on absurdity. It indicates in a general sense that although God is bringing punishment upon the earth, it is not as yet complete and final.⁷⁵⁶ The purpose of the visitation is to warn people of the full wrath of God yet to fall, and in so doing to bring them to repentance. It fulfills Jesus’ prophecy that in the last days there will be signs in the heavens, distress upon the earth, and people fainting from terror of what is about to come upon the world (Luke 21:25-26).

The reference to the burning of a third of the trees and all the green grass completes the description of the holocaust that followed the first trumpet blast.⁷⁵⁷ The trees that are destroyed are probably to be taken as fruit trees,⁷⁵⁸ which were so important to the maintenance of life in Palestine. “Green grass” should be taken to mean “all vegetation.”⁷⁵⁹ Although the

plague is directed primarily against nature, it seriously affects the human race as well. The trees and vegetation that are burned are within the third of the land surface devastated by fire. The verse is not at variance with 9:4, which prohibits hurting the grass.

8-9 As the first plague scorched a third of the land, the second brings destruction to a third of the sea. With the sounding of the second trumpet something like a huge mountain on fire is thrown into the sea. A third of the sea becomes blood, with the result that a third of the marine life dies and a third of the shipping is destroyed. This death and destruction takes place within the third part of the sea affected by the fiery mass.

In many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the source of John's imagery. Some find the raw material for this particular plague in the volcanic action of the area.⁷⁶⁰ Less than twenty years before John wrote the Apocalypse, Vesuvius had erupted and destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum. This catastrophe was widely known and variously interpreted.⁷⁶¹ Among the volcanic islands of the Aegean, Thera was especially notable. The Greek geographer Strabo reports the formation of a new island as the result of an eruption in 196 B.C. (1.3.16).

Others look to Jewish apocalyptic for the source of the imagery. *1 Enoch* 18:13 speaks of "seven stars like great burning mountains," and Sib. Or. 5:158 tells of a "great star from heaven" that fell into the divine sea.⁷⁶² It is well to remember that a visionary experience may take elements from several sources and blend them together into a totally new figure. Like the figures in a dream, the sources are not controlled by considerations of time or location. Although the visions are in essential continuity with the totality of John's experiences (physical, psychic, and spiritual), their ultimate cause is God and not a decision on the part of the Seer to compose a dramatic presentation of the last days. They are visions that he saw.⁷⁶³

The mention of fire in each of the first three trumpet-plagues corresponds to the action of the angel-priest of v. 5 who filled his censer with fire from the altar and hurled it on the earth. First there is a violent electrical storm that sets the earth ablaze (v. 7), then a great fiery mass is thrown into the sea (v. 8), and finally a burning star falls on the inland waters (v. 10). In this second plague the blazing mountain turns the waters of the sea into blood. Here we are reminded of the first Egyptian plague, in which the rivers were turned to blood, killing the fish and making the water undrinkable (Exod 7:20-21). The plague in Revelation is not to be understood as widespread

pollution from volcanic action. Not only did creatures of the sea die, but shipping was destroyed as well. It represents an eschatological judgment that goes beyond any explanation in terms of natural phenomena. Again the judgment is partial. It affects but one-third of the sea, its life and commerce. The purpose is to warn and lead to repentance.

10-11 The third plague consists of a burning star that falls from the sky on the inland waters, turning them bitter and causing the death of many people. This contamination of the fresh water supply recalls the first Egyptian plague in which the water was turned to blood (Exod 7:20). The burning star that falls from the sky may be a great meteorite set afire as it plunges through the earth's atmosphere.⁷⁶⁴ Like the blood-red storm and the burning mountain, it is a symbol of divine visitation. God is moving in judgment, and people must repent or bear the full fury of his coming wrath. Some writers note a similar phenomenon in Persian eschatology, but a real parallel is highly doubtful.⁷⁶⁵

The star falls on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water.⁷⁶⁶ It is possible that John may be revealing divine displeasure against the rather widespread worship of supernatural spirits thought to be associated with rivers and springs.⁷⁶⁷ Like the other plagues, however, it is directed primarily against the world of nature. Only indirectly does it affect people or the spirit world.

The star is named for the effect it has on the water. It is called Wormwood after the strong bitter taste of the plant of that name. In the OT wormwood was used as a symbol of bitterness and sorrow. Proverbs warns against the strange woman whose lips drop honey but in the end is "bitter as wormwood" (Prov 5:3-4, NKJ). The writer of Lamentations prays, "Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall!" (Lam 3:19, NKJ). Because Israel has forsaken God, he will "feed them ... with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink" (Jer 9:15, NKJ; cf. Jer 23:15).⁷⁶⁸

When the great star blazing like a torch fell on the rivers and springs of water, they became as bitter as wormwood. It is the reverse of the miracle at Marah where Moses cast a tree into the bitter waters and they were made sweet (Exod 15:25). Although wormwood itself is not poisonous, its bitter taste suggests death.⁷⁶⁹ What John is saying is that a portion of the inland waters were contaminated by a spectacular act of God and many people died as a result of drinking the water. Repetition of the fractional one-third

indicates as before the restricted scope of the judgment. “Many people” rather than “a third of the people” is no more than a stylistic alteration.

12 When the fourth angel sounded his trumpet, a third of the sun, moon, and stars were struck with a blow⁷⁷⁰ that darkened them for a third of the day and the night. The first part of the verse, when interpreted in parallel with the other plagues, seems to indicate a decrease in the intensity of available light as a result of a third of the luminaries being darkened. The last two phrases, however, indicate the total absence of light for a third part of both day and night. This absolute darkness would be far more terrifying than a partial eclipse. The scene recalls the ninth Egyptian plague with its thick darkness that spread over the land for a period of three days (Exod 10:21-23).

Darkness as a symbol of judgment runs throughout the OT. The prophet Amos spoke of the day of the Lord as a day of darkness rather than light (Amos 5:18). For Joel it will be a “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness” (Joel 2:2). Jesus, quoting Isaiah, says that in the day of the Lord “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Mark 13:24; cf. Isa 13:10). The fourth trumpet-plague is a fulfillment of these prophecies.

In the NT darkness is often connected with the demonic. Unbelieving Israel is to be cast outside into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12). In 2 Cor 6:14-15 light and darkness stand parallel to Christ and Belial. According to Col 1:13 the saints are those who have been rescued from the dominion of darkness (cf. Col 2:13-15). The darkness of the fourth plague anticipates the transition from divine warnings to demonic woes. It previews that ultimate excommunication of unrepentant people to the punishment prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41).

C. EAGLE'S WARNING (8:13)

13 As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels! "

Once again John calls attention to the fact that in his vision he is watching something take place. Verse 13 serves as a transition between the four plagues brought by God upon nature to lead humankind to repentance and the subsequent demonic woes in which people will be directly subjected to the forces of the Abyss. Previous plagues have been called forth by angelic beings, but those that follow are announced quite appropriately by a bird of prey⁷⁷¹ hovering overhead.

13 The majority of commentators understand the bird to be an eagle, which figure suggests such qualities as strength and swiftness.⁷⁷² In 2 Baruch an eagle is commissioned to fly without tarrying to the Jews exiled in Babylon and deliver an account of the author's vision (2 Bar. 77:17-26). 2 Esdras records a vision of a three-headed eagle with twelve wings that reigned over all the earth (11-12). Others understand the bird to be a vulture,⁷⁷³ which in this context would symbolize impending doom. Habakkuk described the invading Chaldeans as vultures swooping to devour (Hab 1:8). In either case it is the predatory nature of the bird that is in view. In 19:17-18 the birds of prey (those "flying in midair"; cf. 8:13) are gathered to eat the flesh of kings and all people.

The eagle/vulture hovers in midair so as to be seen by all, and cries out in a loud voice⁷⁷⁴ so that none will fail to hear, "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth." While in chapter 18 the exclamation "Woe" is twice repeated for emphasis on each of three occasions (18:10, 16, 19), here it occurs three times to correspond to the three last trumpets. These final

plagues are not to fall upon the church but upon a pagan and wicked world.⁷⁷⁵ Unlike the first four trumpets, which affected the source of people's life, the last three fall upon people themselves.

The first two Woes follow immediately in chapter 9. They are the fifth and sixth trumpet-plagues. The third Woe is postponed by two major visions in 10:1-11:13. But even then when the last trumpet sounds (11:14-15), we do not immediately learn of the nature of the third Woe. Instead there is a scene of heavenly adulation (11:15-19). For this reason some think that the third Woe is the descent of Satan in 12:7ff. In 12:12 a great voice from heaven says, "Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." Others take the bowl judgments of chapter 16 to be the third Woe. This, however, would separate in kind the first two (demonic assaults) from the third (judgments of God).

D. FIFTH TRUMPET (FIRST WOE): DEMONIC LOCUSTS (9:1-12)

1 The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. 2 When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. 3 And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. 6 During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

7 The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. 8 Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. 9 They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. 10 They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. 11 They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon.

12 The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

John required but six verses to set forth the first four trumpet-plagues (8:7-12). But now he is about to devote over three times that space to the next two plagues. This added emphasis corresponds to the seriousness of the calamities that follow. People who earlier were merely discomforted by

judgments upon the world of nature are now directly subjected to torments that arise from the underworld. The first Woe (9:1-12) is a horde of demonic locusts that emerges from the Abyss and spreads out over the land to torment everyone not marked with the seal of the living God. The pain and distress are so great that although people seek death they are unable to find it. The second Woe (9:13-19) is a demonic cavalry of some two hundred million mounted troops who, astride their fire-breathing steeds, sweep over the land, killing a third of its inhabitants. Both trumpets introduce us to grotesque creatures whose appearance corresponds to their evil origin. Even these two plagues, horrible and destructive as they are, fail to deter the survivors from continuing their worship of demons. Unrestrained by the plagues, they continue their practice of idolatry, bloodshed, sorcery, sexual immorality, and theft.

1 When the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, John saw a star that had just fallen⁷⁷⁶ from the sky to the earth. The star in 8:10 that fell from the sky and contaminated the waters was a mass of molten material. This star, however, represents a person, for he receives a key (v. 1) and with it opens the shaft of the Abyss (v. 2). In Isa 14:12 the king of Babylon is portrayed as a day star fallen from heaven. *1 Enoch* 21:6 depicts the fallen angels as “stars of heaven which have transgressed the commandment of the Lord.” In the NT Jesus told the seventy-two as they returned from their preaching mission that he had seen “Satan fall like lightning [a blazing comet?] from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Jewish thought readily symbolized living beings as stars. Many expositors take the next step and concede that in Jewish thought the stars were held to be celestial spirits possessing conscious personalities. The usual passages cited in support of this position are Judg 5:20 (“From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera”) and Job 38:7 (“while the morning stars sang together”). In that both verses occur in poetic sections it would seem unwise to press upon them such a literal interpretation. Elsewhere Israel is sternly warned against worshiping stellar deities (Deut 4:19; Jer 7:18).

The one symbolized by the star has been variously identified.⁷⁷⁷ Some, interpreting the phrase “that had *fallen*” in a theological sense, take the star to be a fallen angel. This is strengthened by reference to the nefarious nature of his activity (unlocking the shaft of the Abyss and releasing its demonic hordes). Perhaps he is one of the stars swept down to earth by the tail of the great red dragon (12:4).⁷⁷⁸ It is more likely, however, that the

star-angel is simply one of the many divine agents who throughout the book of Revelation are pictured as carrying out the will of God.⁷⁷⁹ Furthermore, his role is essentially no different from that of the fifth trumpet-angel at whose call the action begins. He is probably the same angel who in 20:1 comes down out of heaven with the key of the Abyss.⁷⁸⁰

2 The key that is given to the angel unlocks the shaft leading down into a subterranean chasm called the Abyss. When the shaft⁷⁸¹ is opened, out pour great clouds of smoke. From the smoke come evil spirits who have been imprisoned in the Abyss. Their mission is to torment all people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. While there is no specific indication in Revelation that the Abyss is a place of torment, the rising smoke would normally be thought of as coming from fires below. According to Enoch the final prison of the fallen angels was the Abyss, a horrible place with “great descending columns of fire” (*1 Enoch* 21:7; cf. 18:11).⁷⁸² Of the nine NT references to the Abyss, seven are found in Revelation. It is inhabited by the “scorpion centaurs” of chapter 9, their demonic prince (9:11), and the beast of the Abyss (11:7; 17:8). It is also the place of Satan’s imprisonment during the thousand-year period following the return of Christ (20:1-3). Luke 8:31 reflects the fear of the evil spirits lest they be sent to this terrible place. In Rom 10:7 it appears to be the place of the dead, although in the NT this is usually designated as Hades (Acts 2:27).⁷⁸³

The dense clouds of smoke that rise up out of the Abyss recall the scene of God’s descent upon Mt. Sinai. Exod 19:18 says that the smoke of the mountain billowed up “like smoke from a furnace.”⁷⁸⁴ As the smoke rises, it blots out the sun and darkens the atmosphere of the earth.⁷⁸⁵ Joel 2:10 tells of a plague of locusts that darkened the sun and the moon. In Rev 8:12 the luminaries were darkened by a direct act of God; here the darkening is brought about by the tremendous quantity of smoke that pours up out of the Abyss. It is unwise to conjecture some specific meaning for each detail of the vision.⁷⁸⁶ It is better to allow the text to speak for itself. Usually visions of this sort have cumulative, overall effect, so that the parts make up the whole, which has meaning, but they themselves do not carry specific meaning. While the Apocalypse uses metaphorical and figurative language with great freedom, it is not an allegory that must be decoded before it will yield its meaning. The experience itself is often “what it means.” To

demystify the existential is more often than not to remove it from the only setting in which it can be “understood.”

3 Out of the billowing smoke come a great horde of locustlike creatures (which will be described in greater detail in vv. 7-10).⁷⁸⁷ Behind this picture are two scenes from the OT. Exod 10:1-20 tells of the plague of locusts that devoured all vegetation throughout the land of Egypt. Joel 1:2-2:11 interprets the devastation of Israel by locusts as a portent of the destruction that will come with the day of the Lord (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11). Throughout the OT the locust is a symbol of destruction (Deut 28:42; 1 Kgs 8:37; Ps 78:46). Bred in the desert, they invade cultivated areas in search of food. They may travel in a column a hundred feet deep and up to four miles in length, leaving the land stripped bare of all vegetation.⁷⁸⁸ The cloud of smoke is not the swarm of locusts, for the locusts come out of the smoke.⁷⁸⁹

To the locusts is given a scorpionlike power to torment those who dwell upon the earth. Their poisonous strike does not kill but causes people such torment that they seek death (vv. 5-6). The scorpion was well known in Palestine. A lobsterlike vermin some four or five inches long, it had a claw on the end of the tail that secreted a poison when it struck.⁷⁹⁰ Hiding under stones or in the chinks of a wall by day, it would move out at night to feed on small, living animals. It should be noted that the demonic locusts of the first Woe have the power rather than the appearance of scorpions.

4 The locusts are told not to harm the vegetation of earth but only⁷⁹¹ those who do not have the seal of God. We are not told who it is that issues the prohibition. The use of the passive voice in speaking of the release (v. 1, “was given”), the empowering (v. 3, “were given power”), and the limiting (v. 5, “they were not given power to kill”) of the locusts suggests that this plague, even though demonic, is under the sovereign control of God (especially since they are not permitted to harm God’s people!). Throughout the Apocalypse he is the “Lord God Almighty” (4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 21:22).

In the Egyptian plague (as well as in Joel) the fields and trees were laid bare by the swarming locusts (Exod 10:15; Joel 2:3). The locusts of John’s vision have a different mission. Their destructive power is not directed against the grass, the green herbs, or the leaves of trees, but against wicked people. Of all those upon the earth during this perilous time only the Christians will escape the demonic assault, for they alone have “the seal of God on their foreheads” (cf. 7:1-8).⁷⁹² As the children of Israel were

protected from the plagues that fell upon the Egyptians,⁷⁹³ so also will the Israel of God now constituted by Christ and the Spirit escape the torments that are to arise from the Abyss. God is in control, and precisely because his people are “sealed” — they belong to him — they do not experience the wrath of God.

5 The mission of the demonic locusts is to inflict suffering upon the wicked. They are not to kill but to torment.⁷⁹⁴ Their torment is limited to a period of five months. This period has been variously explained. It may have been determined by the life cycle of the locust, which is of five months’ duration.⁷⁹⁵ It corresponds as well to the dry season (spring through late summer) in which the danger of a locust invasion is always present.⁷⁹⁶ Whatever the source of the number, it represents a limited period of time (not necessarily a short period of time) during which people in torment may yet turn from their wickedness and repent (cf. vv. 20-21). The plague is not an act of wanton cruelty but a stark indication that wickedness cannot continue indefinitely without divine requital.

6 Speaking as a prophet, John foretells that in those days people will actively seek release from torment through death yet find that it is impossible to die.⁷⁹⁷ Job’s remarks about the miserable and bitter longing for death that seems never to come (Job 3:20-22) are rhetorical rather than descriptive of a scene such as portrayed here. In the eschatological plague it will not be despondency but actual pain that drives people earnestly to desire death.⁷⁹⁸ It is ironic that in that day death, which the wicked inflicted upon Christian martyrs, will be eagerly desired, yet people will find that it “keeps running from them.”⁷⁹⁹ What a dramatic contrast to Paul’s desire “to depart and be with Christ” (Phil 1:23). For one, death leads to eternal blessing; for the other, it is an “escape” from torment on earth to torture in the lake of fire!

7 Up to this point we have learned of the origin and mission of the demonic locusts. Now John describes them. Long-haired, horse-shaped, flying locusts with scorpion tails and golden crowns above human faces marred by lions’ teeth, they have to be reckoned among the more bizarre creatures in the Apocalypse. The total impact is one of unnatural and awesome cruelty. It will be well to exercise considerable reserve in treating the details that make up the larger picture.⁸⁰⁰ The locusts are said to look like horses prepared for battle. John would have us understand that the

locusts are of considerable size. Otherwise the description of hair, face, teeth, and the like would tend toward the comic. The Seer draws from Joel's account of swarming locusts who appear as horses (Joel 2:4) and whose sound is like the noise of chariots in battle or the raging fury of a prairie fire (Joel 2:5). The details of the description, however, are largely his own. Most commentators note the similarity between the head of the locust and that of the horse. An Arabian proverb is often quoted to the effect that the locust has a head like a horse, a breast like a lion, feet like a camel, body like a serpent, and antennae like the hair of a maiden. This likeness accounts for the word for locust in German (Heupferd, hay-horse) and in Italian (*cavalletta*, little horse). That they were prepared for war may indicate either the eagerness with which they sprang forth to inflict punishment or the protective armament described in v. 9. That verse does not specifically say that they were wearing golden crowns, but the symbolism is the same — they possessed the power to carry through their mission to a victorious end.⁸⁰¹ The faces of the locusts were as human faces. When John looked directly into the face of the advancing horde, he did not see the rather torpid expression of the animal world but the highly intelligent cunning and cruelty of demonic beings. Human and bestial qualities are combined in a figure both unnatural and diabolical.

8 The locusts were covered with long, flowing hair. When they opened their jaws they revealed the teeth of lions. It is doubtful that the mention of hair has any reference to the two relatively short organs of sensation that protrude from the head of the locust (called antennae). Less likely is any reference to the long hair of the Parthian warriors, which would stream out behind them as they rode into battle. If we need a point of contact, it would probably be the hair on the legs or bodies of the locusts, which in flight would emphasize the speed with which they carry forth their mission. The idea that it symbolizes seductiveness ignores the overall grotesque appearance of the locust.⁸⁰²

In Joel 1:6 the invading nation is pictured as having the teeth of a lion and the fangs of a lioness. In John's vision the teeth emphasize the fierceness of the locusts. Yet they do not tear apart their victims as would the lion. Their torment is inflicted by scorpionlike tails (v. 10).

9 The locusts were protected with breastplates of iron, indicating that there was no possible way of striking back in a vulnerable spot. The scaly

exterior of the locust resembled a coat of mail.⁸⁰³ In flight they sounded like a great phalanx of horses and chariots rushing into war.⁸⁰⁴

10 Once again John points out the scorpionlike tails of the locusts and their ability to inflict pain for five months (cf. vv. 3, 5). More significant than the awesome appearance of the locusts is their power to punish. The shift to the present tense (*echousin*; cf. verbs in vv. 7-9; the NIV maintains the past tense) adds to the vividness of the description. The locusts have tails like scorpions. The description is not parallel with 9:19, where the horses' tails are like serpents and have heads. As the scorpion holds its prey with its claws and kills with a venomous tail, so the apocalyptic locusts possess an agonizing sting.⁸⁰⁵ They do not kill but torment. Their purpose is to bring people to repentance (vv. 20-21).

Some commentators interpret the plague as a condition of sinful life rather than an eschatological event.⁸⁰⁶ While the major motifs of the consummation are reflected many times throughout history,⁸⁰⁷ the visions of John have as their primary focus the ultimate conflict of God and Satan that brings history to its close.

11 The advancing army of locusts have as their king⁸⁰⁸ the angel of the Abyss. This angel is not the fallen star of v. 1 who unlocks the Abyss. Nor is he the archangel Uriel, who according to *1 Enoch* 20:2 has authority over Tartarus.⁸⁰⁹ These are messengers of God, not leaders of the opposition. Since the term is nowhere specifically identified, we should probably understand the designation "king" as no more than a detail in the larger scene of organized assault. It is unlikely that Satan would be introduced into the visions at this point in such an indefinite manner (cf. chap. 12).

The name of the king of the Abyss is in Hebrew, Abaddon. In the OT Abaddon refers to destruction (Job 31:12) or the place of destruction.⁸¹⁰ The personification of destruction in Job 28:22 could give rise quite naturally to the idea of a prince of the underworld, appropriately named Abaddon.⁸¹¹ In case the reader did not grasp the significance of the Hebrew name, John adds its Greek equivalent — Apollyon, Destroyer.⁸¹² Many commentators feel that the verse contains a derogatory reference to the Greek god Apollo and those emperors who claimed a special relationship to him. To name the king of the underworld Apollyon would be a cryptic way of saying that an emperor such as Domitian who liked to be regarded as Apollo incarnate was in reality a manifestation of the powers of the

underworld. As early as the fifth century B.C., the Greeks had derived the name of Apollo from the same Greek verb as the root of Apollyon.⁸¹³ The allusion is strengthened by the observation that the locust was one of the symbols of the god Apollo.⁸¹⁴

12 Lest the reader think that with the release of the demonic locusts the plagues have somehow been exhausted, John now announces that only the first Woe is past. There are yet two to come. Phillips's translation catches the vividness of the scene, "The first disaster is now past, but I see two more approaching." As the end draws near, there is a marked increase in the intensity and severity of the trumpet-plagues.

There can be no specific answer to the question of exactly who or what is symbolized by the plague of locusts. To say that the first Woe is "a vivid picture of moral and spiritual decay which brings torment to the souls of men"⁸¹⁵ may well be part of it. But it doesn't do full justice to John's vision of the period immediately before the end when the wicked will be subjected to a time of unprecedented demonic torment! Exactly what this will involve and how it will take place will remain unknown until disclosed by history itself.⁸¹⁶

E. SIXTH TRUMPET (SECOND WOE): FIENDISH CAVALRY (9:13-21)

13 The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. 14 It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates. ” 15 And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.

17 The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. 18 A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. 19 The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.

20 The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood — idols that cannot see or hear or walk. 21 Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

The intensity of the trumpet sequence continues to mount. From plagues of hail, and fire mixed with blood that scorched the earth (8:7), a burning mountain that fell into sea turning it to blood and leaving death in its wake (8:8), a blazing star from heaven falling into inland waters and causing bitterness and death (8:10-11), and a darkening of the sun and moon that plunged the world into darkness (8:12), we move to a swarm of demonic locusts released from the netherworld to torment unbelievers (9:1-11). The sixth trumpet-plague (the second Woe) is even worse. Now demonic

cavalry, two hundred million strong, come charging across the scene of history. From their lionlike heads come fire, smoke, and sulfur, and with their tails they inflict lethal damage. A third of the unbelieving world falls before their murderous assault. Those who remain do not repent of their idolatry and immoral lifestyle but continue their idolatrous worship of gods made by their own hands.

Nowhere will you find a more accurate picture of sinful humanity pressed to the extreme. One would think that the terrors of God's wrath would bring rebels to their knees. Not so. Past the point of no return, they respond to greater punishment with increased rebellion. Such is sinful nature untouched and unmoved by the mercies of God.

13-14 When the sixth angel sounds his trumpet, a voice is heard from the golden altar commanding the release of the four angels of destruction who have been temporarily restrained at the eastern boundary of the empire. The voice could be that of the angel-priest of 8:3-5 who presented the prayers of the saints to God upon the golden altar. Or it could be the prayers themselves with their unified concern⁸¹⁷ for vindication (cf. 6:9). In either case John is recalling the fundamental truth that the prayers of God's people play an active role in the eschatological drama. The voice does not come from the horns or corners of the altar but from the altar itself.⁸¹⁸ This same personification occurs in 16:7, where the altar declares the judgments of God to be true and righteous. That it is "before God" is a reminder that divine retribution is a personal act of the One whose sovereignty and love have been rejected by the unbeliever.

Only here does one of the trumpet-angels become involved in the event that he heralds. Having sounded the trumpet, the sixth angel is now to unleash the four angels of destruction. Attempts to identify the four angels⁸¹⁹ with any definiteness have not been successful. Apparently they are not mentioned elsewhere in apocalyptic writings. A few commentators suggest a connection with the four restraining angels of 7:1. This earlier group, however, was stationed at the four corners of the world (rather than being bound at the Euphrates, 9:14) and held back the winds of destruction (rather than being released to bring about destruction, 9:15).⁸²⁰ One probable source could be the familiar apocalyptic tradition in which four destructive powers are connected with the four quarters of the earth.⁸²¹ In our immediate text the four angels appear to be in charge of the limitless horde of demonic horsemen who ride across the pagan world spreading

terror and death. They correspond to the king of the locusts in 9:11, and like him they seem to disappear into the demonic forces they release.

When God made a covenant with Abram, he promised him and his seed the land that stretched from the Nile to the Euphrates⁸²² (Gen 15:18; cf. Deut 11:24; Josh 1:4). The Euphrates marked the boundary between Israel and her chief enemies. In Isa 8:5-8 the invading armies of Assyria are pictured as a mighty flood in which the great river overflows its banks and sweeps over Judah. The Euphrates was also the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, and the mention of invading horsemen from that quarter would immediately suggest the much-feared Parthian warriors.⁸²³ But John at this point is recounting a vision given to him in the Spirit, not describing a Parthian invasion. While his imagery is freely drawn from sources both secular and sacred, he weaves the various components into an eschatological tapestry uniquely his own. The 200,000,000 demonic horsemen and their plague of death is an eschatological event of fantastic proportions.

15 The four angels are loosed for the purpose of killing a third of the world's population. The torment of the first Woe gives way to the widespread massacre of the second. Under the fourth seal a fourth part of the human race was put to death (6:8). Now a third are to be killed by the demonic cavalry as it sweeps across the land. As in the previous Woe, so also here, believers are to be spared (9:4, 20-21). The assault is directed against those who elsewhere are called "the inhabitants of the earth," a standard designation of people in their hostility to God.⁸²⁴ Ladd draws attention to an important distinction between John's version and similar expectations of prophets and apocalyptists: "The latter always envision the foreign invasion as an attack against the people of God by pagan hosts while John sees it as a divine judgment upon a corrupt civilization."⁸²⁵

The four angels are said to have been kept ready for this specific moment.⁸²⁶ The use of the perfect tense⁸²⁷ strengthens the idea of their existing in a state of readiness. In apocalyptic thought God has fixed the exact time for every event (cf. *1 Enoch* 92:2). The use of a single article for all four time designations tends to focus attention upon the specific moment of God's appointment. The ascending order (hour, day, month, year) is of no particular significance. At the exact moment decreed by God the angels of destruction and their demonic horde will be released upon the human race.

All the forces of history are under the sovereign control of God. He is the Almighty One (1:8; 4:8; 11:7; 19:15; etc.).

16 Quite abruptly we learn of an unbelievably large cavalry force about to invade the land. The number that John hears — who could count such a throng! — is “two myriads of myriads,” twice 10,000 x 10,000. Attempts to reduce this expression to arithmetic miss the point. A “double myriad of myriads” is an indefinite number of incalculable immensity.⁸²⁸ John’s eschatological steeds breathe out fire and sulfur and have serpentlike tails with lethal heads (vv. 18-19). They spread out as far as the eye can see. Who could escape the onslaught of such a gigantic force! The specter of a huge hostile cavalry had always been a source of terror for the Jewish people. In the *Assumption of Moses* we read of a king from the east (Nebuchadnezzar) who comes against them and whose “cavalry shall cover their land” (3:2). The Parthian threat would intensify this fear. Thus the figure of a great army of horsemen riding in from beyond their boundaries supplies the vivid imagery for John’s second Woe. Once again the impact of the vision is diminished by speculative attempts to provide theological equivalents for specific items.⁸²⁹ Better to experience the vision as a whole than to trivialize it by excessive interpretation of details.

17 Only here in the book of Revelation does John specifically indicate that his revelations are being mediated to him in a vision.⁸³⁰ The expression (“in my vision”) is not a “superfluous addition”⁸³¹ but an indication that his descriptions are apt to be highly symbolic in nature.

While it is possible to understand the verse as indicating that both the riders and their mounts wore breastplates,⁸³² it is better to limit the armor to the riders alone. The breastplates were of red, blue, and yellow to match the fire, smoke, and sulfur that was coming out of the mouths of the horses. It is difficult to determine whether the breastplates were of three colors each or whether each breastplate was of a single color (some red, some blue, some yellow). In either case the overall impression would be the same. Swete apparently feels that the breastplates were actually made of fire.⁸³³ While the Greek text would allow this, it seems unnecessarily literal. The NKJ translation describes the colors of the breastplates as “fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow.” Hyacinth normally referred to the deep blue color of the jacinth, but here it probably indicates the “dusky blue colour as of sulphurous smoke.”⁸³⁴

It should be noted that the riders play no active part in carrying out the plague. This is accomplished by the horses. Their description in the following verses is grotesque, to say the least.⁸³⁵ Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the horses is their lions' heads (cf. the lions' teeth of the locusts in the preceding vision, 9:8), which symbolizes cruelty and destruction. From their mouths proceed fire, smoke, and sulfur. This feature argues their demonic origin. It does not symbolize the tanks, cannons, and battleships of modern warfare.⁸³⁶ The plague anticipates the eternal torment that awaits the devil (20:10), his demonic cohorts (19:20), and all who bear the mark of the beast (14:10). Fire-breathing monsters were common in mythology.⁸³⁷ John's source is probably Leviathan, the sea monster of Job 41 ("Firebrands stream from his mouth.... Smoke pours from his nostrils," vv. 19-20). The cavalry as a whole recall Habakkuk's description of the Chaldeans, who were to invade Judah with horses swifter than leopards and fiercer than wolves (Hab 1:8).

18 The fire, smoke, and sulfur are intended to be taken as three separate plagues. The result is that a third part of humankind is killed. The scene is reminiscent of the burning sulfur that fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah in divine judgment (Gen 19:24; cf. Jude 7). The first Woe brought torment; the second brings death.

19 The power of the horses to kill lies entirely in their mouths. Like the locusts, however, they have the power to hurt,⁸³⁸ and this power is in their tails. The tails are like snakes and have heads. Many suggestions have been offered for this unusual feature. In the great altar of Zeus at Pergamum the legs of the giants were in the form of snakes. In ancient myth the *amphisbaena* had a serpent's head at either end.⁸³⁹ Some see a reference to the Parthian practice of shooting arrows behind them in flight. Others refer to the horsetails formerly carried by the Turkish pashas as symbols of authority.⁸⁴⁰

It is impossible to say what prompted this particular feature in John's vision. Even if the source could be isolated, it would not necessarily throw much light on the interpretation, for John develops his imagery along lines uniquely his own. That the horses had tails like snakes is perhaps another way of emphasizing the demonic origin of the horses. In 12:9 the devil is designated "that ancient serpent," and throughout antiquity snakes and demons were closely associated.

It may be that this vision is linked with Ezekiel's prophecy of the invasion of Israel by Gog (Ezek 38-39). Coming after Israel had been punished and restored, the invasion symbolized the immense reserve power of evil in view of which there can be no security until the final victory of God. John adapts the Gog tradition to show that the demonic army from beyond the Euphrates is necessary precisely because the Roman world has tried to find security in that which is not God.⁸⁴¹ Whatever inference may be drawn from the description, John's concern at the moment is to relate an eschatological vision that portrays a plague of death brought upon people by fire-breathing monsters from the underworld.

20 Those who were not killed by the plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur repented not⁸⁴² of their idolatry (v. 20) or the conduct that accompanied it (v. 21).⁸⁴³ Once the heart is set in its hostility toward God not even the scourge of death will lead people to repentance. The "work of their hands" that people choose to worship rather than God are the idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood.⁸⁴⁴ The folly of idolatry is a common theme in Jewish literature.⁸⁴⁵ Gods of wood and stone "cannot see or hear or eat or smell" (Deut 4:28). They have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear, and feet but do not walk (Ps 115:5-7; cf. Ps 135:15ff.; Dan 5:23). At the same time heathen idolatry was considered to be worship rendered to demons. Jubilees speaks of the people of Ur being assisted by malignant spirits in making graven images and unclean *simulacra* (Jub. 11:4). In following after strange gods the Israelites had "sacrificed to demons" (Deut 32:17). In the NT Paul writes that the Gentiles sacrifice "to demons, not to God" (1 Cor 10:20). Although one-third of humankind is massacred by the demonic cavalry, those that remain continue to worship the very malignant forces that are bringing about their destruction. Such is the delusion of sin.

21 Closely associated with idolatry are the heathen practices of murder, magic arts, sexual immorality, and theft. Three of the four are fundamental vices prohibited in the Ten Commandments (sixth, seventh, and eighth; Exod 20:3-17). They occur elsewhere in the NT in various orders (Rom 13:9; Luke 18:20). Magic arts⁸⁴⁶ refers to witchcraft and the use of magic potions that were a part of heathen idolatry. It is listed by Paul as one of the works of the flesh (Gal 5:20), and later in Revelation it proves to be the method by which Rome deceives the nations (18:23). In Rev 22:15 those who practice magic arts are bracketed with the sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters, and liars as having no part in the New Jerusalem (cf.

21:8). When people turn from the knowledge of God, the path leads downward to idolatry and immorality (cf. Rom 1:18-32). Although clearly and unmistakably warned by God, unbelievers persist in their error and sin.

The two demonic woes of chapter 9 are passed. God has meted out punishment on those who do not bear the seal of God on their foreheads. It is important to remember that God's own people are protected during this time from the plagues that fall on the rest of the human race (v. 4). Believers will endure the tribulation that comes from a world controlled by a different set of values, but they will never be touched by the wrath of God. Their protection is not physical but spiritual. Locusts from the Abyss will be unable to harm them, and the life-destroying cavalry will sweep by, leaving them intact. This message that in the end God will vindicate his cause and judge the enemies of righteousness would bring hope and encouragement to the Christian community, faced by the distressing prospect of impending persecution.

INTERLUDE: VISIONS OF THE PROPHETIC ROLE (10:1-11:14)

The three sevenfold visions of Revelation are the seals (chap. 6), the trumpets (chaps. 8-9), and the bowls (chap. 16). Between the sixth and seventh seal there was an interlude consisting of two visions — the sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8) and the heavenly multitude (7:9-17). The seventh seal was followed by a second sevenfold vision, that of the trumpets. With the close of chapter 9 six of the seven trumpets have sounded. Once again we encounter an interlude of two related visions — the angel with the little book (10:1-11) and the two witnesses (11:1-13). These interludes are not so much pauses in a sequence of events as they are literary devices by which the church is instructed concerning its role and destiny during the final period of world history.⁸⁴⁷ There will be no corresponding interlude between the sixth and seventh bowl judgments (the final series yet to come) because at that time all warning and preliminary judgment will be over. When the bowls of divine wrath are poured out, the consummation moves quickly to its climax.

Each numbered series moves us closer to the end; not because it follows the preceding series in sequence but because it heightens and intensifies the final and climactic confrontation of God and the forces of evil. Detailed outlines of Revelation sacrifice the existential heartbeat of the Apocalypse in an unfortunate attempt to intellectualize that which belongs primarily to the realm of experience.⁸⁴⁸

1. The Mighty Angel and the Little Scroll (10:1-11)

1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. 2 He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, 3 and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. 4 And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down. "

5 Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. 6 And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! 7 But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. "

8 Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. "

9 So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey." 10 I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. 11 Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings. "

In the first of the two visions that make up the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet John encounters an angel coming down out of heaven robed in a cloud, with a rainbow around his head. His face glows with light,

and his legs like pillars of fire are planted solidly, one on land and the other on the sea. With a voice like the roar of a lion he shouts, and the seven thunders respond. John is about to write down what the thunders said when he is ordered by a voice from heaven to seal up their message. Then the mighty angels lift his hand to heaven and solemnly swear that there will be no more delay but that with the sounding of the seventh trumpet the redemptive purpose of God in history will be brought to its completion. John is told to take the little scroll that lay open on the hand of the angel and eat it. In his mouth it will be as sweet as honey, but once eaten it will turn his stomach sour.

The vision differs from the earlier numbered vision because John himself becomes involved in the action. The dramatic appearance of the resplendent angel would provide encouragement for the church about to enter a final period of hostility from the unbelieving world. The scroll is sweet because there will be no delay before the seventh angel blows his trumpet and the mystery of God is accomplished, but turns the stomach sour because of the persecution that must still be faced.

1 From the beginning of chapter 4 through the end of chapter 9 John has watched the visions unfold from his position in heaven. Now he is back on earth, for the angel of light comes down from heaven (v. 1), and it is from heaven that the voice is heard (vv. 4, 8). The angel is called “another mighty angel.” The expression does not intend to compare this angel with the trumpet-angel of 9:13. It means simply “another angel, a mighty one” (cf. 6:4). Three of the angels we meet in Revelation are called mighty angels. Because the mighty angel of 5:2 speaks with a loud voice (cf. 10:3) and is connected with the opening of the book of destiny (cf. 10:2), it is quite possible that he is also the one who appears here in chapter 10.⁸⁴⁹

Some commentators have taken the mighty angel to be Christ.⁸⁵⁰ The phrases by which he is described are elsewhere used of deity. He is robed in a cloud (cf. Ps 104:3), there is a rainbow above his head (cf. Rev 4:3), his face is like the sun (cf. Rev 1:16), and his legs are like fiery pillars (cf. Exod 13:21-22). This identification is rejected by most scholars because in the Apocalypse Christ never elsewhere appears as an angel. In v. 6 the angel supports his declaration of no more delay by taking an oath — highly inappropriate for Christ. Others, arguing on the basis of a rather clear parallel with Dan 12:7, take the angel to be Gabriel (cf. Dan 8:16).⁸⁵¹

John views the angel as he descends from heaven to earth.⁸⁵² Coming directly from the presence of God, he arrives on a mission of crucial significance for the persecuted church. Like the son of man in Dan 7:13, he is robed in a cloud. This feature has eschatological significance in Scripture. In Matt 24:30, for example, the Son of man is to come “on the clouds of the sky.”⁸⁵³ There is a rainbow above the angel’s head. One cannot help but notice the similarities between John’s description of the angel and that of Yahweh in Ezek 1:26-28. However, there the radiance around him appeared like a rainbow (Ezek 1:28), while in Revelation the bow is above⁸⁵⁴ the head of the angel like a many-colored turban.⁸⁵⁵ Some interpret the rainbow as the natural result of light from the angel’s face refracted by the cloud in which he was arrayed. Like the face of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:2), the face of the angel shone like the sun.

His legs appeared like fiery pillars.⁸⁵⁶ Since the theme of the Exodus is always in the background of this central section of Revelation, it is quite possible that the angel’s legs would recall the pillar of fire and cloud that gave both protection (Exod 14:19, 24) and guidance (Exod 13:21-22) to the children of Israel in their wilderness journey. The description of the angel fits his message: the bow recalls God’s promise through Noah, the pillar of fire God’s presence in the wilderness, and the scroll the tablets of stone.⁸⁵⁷

2 In the hand of the angel is a little scroll.⁸⁵⁸ Unlike the great scroll of chapter 5 that was fastened with seven seals, this scroll lies open in the hand of the angel.⁸⁵⁹ The scene that follows recalls Ezek 2:8 — 3:3 in which the scroll of lamentations was spread out before the prophet with the command that he should eat it. Although related to the Ezekiel passage, John’s vision nevertheless develops along its own lines. The contents of the little scroll will be discussed at vv. 9-10.

Some writers assume that the little scroll of chapter 10 is the same as the scroll of chapter 5. It is argued that there is a clear literary link between the two passages and that both scrolls have the same OT source. The mighty angel is identified with the angel in 1:1 (cf. 22:16) who received the scroll from the Lamb and now gives it to John, who takes and eats it.⁸⁶⁰ On the other hand, the little scroll is designated by the diminutive *biblaridion* (10:2, 9, 10) rather than the normal *biblion* (as in 5:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9); it lies “open in [the] hand” of the mighty angel (10:2) rather than closed and sealed in the right hand of God (5:1, 7); and it is not introduced in 10:2 with

the definite article. Later (in the comm. on vv. 9-10) we will maintain that the second vision of the interlude (11:1-13) constitutes the contents of the little scroll. That being so, the two scrolls of Revelation can not be the same. The scroll of destiny begins with the seals and continues to the end of the Apocalypse. Within that larger scope the little scroll deals with the lot of God's people during the final days prior to the end.

As the angel descends to earth, he plants his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land. Such a stance is most appropriate in view of the colossal size of the angel.⁸⁶¹ It could also symbolize his authority over the earth in its entirety.⁸⁶² The visual impact is that of an enormous and resplendent angel descending from heaven and standing astride both sea and land. This dramatic appearance of an authoritative figure from heaven stands in marked contrast to the immediately preceding tableau of humanity's rebellious idolatry and immorality (9:20-21).

3 The voice of the angel is commensurate with his gigantic size. He gives a loud shout like the roar of a lion. Hos11:10 speaks of Yahweh roaring like a lion (cf. Amos 3:8), and 2 Esdras of the lion "roused from the wood and roaring" who is identified as the Messiah (12:31-32). That the Greek verb (*mykatai*), obscure in the NIV's "like the roar of a lion," is commonly used to denote the mooing of cattle⁸⁶³ suggests that the angel's voice had a deep resonance that would demand the attention of those who heard. The voice of the angel calls forth a response from the seven thunders.⁸⁶⁴ Elsewhere in Revelation thunder is associated with divine retribution. In 8:5 it follows the casting of fire on the earth. In 11:19 it is associated with the seventh trumpet-plague, and in 16:18 it is connected with the final bowl of God's wrath. Here as well it forebodes the coming peril of divine retribution.

The use of the definite article ("*the* seven thunders")⁸⁶⁵ indicates that the image was familiar to John's readers. Many commentators see a connection with Psalm 29, in which the thunderstorm is interpreted as "the voice of the LORD," the phrase being repeated seven times as the idea is developed.⁸⁶⁶ Note that the thunders speak articulately. John is about to write down what they said when he is prevented by a voice from heaven. Verses 3 and 4 have been interpreted in the light of 2 Cor 12:4 (which speaks of being caught up to paradise and hearing inexpressible things a person is not permitted to tell). In that case the content of the seven thunders would be a vision that John was forbidden to disclose.⁸⁶⁷ But we have no indication that there was

an additional vision. The seven thunders spoke (v. 3), and John is immediately ordered to seal up what they *said*.⁸⁶⁸

4 John is about to write what the seven thunders said when a voice from heaven tells him not to. In his initial encounter with the exalted Christ of the Apocalypse the Seer was to write his visions in a book and send them to the seven churches (1:11). It appears that he had been keeping some sort of record of all that had happened and at this point was about to record the utterances of the seven thunders. The voice from heaven could be that of God or Christ (cf. 14:13; 18:4). In any case a voice from heaven would be a voice of authority (cf. 2 Esdr 6:17).

The instructions to John are that he should seal up what the seven thunders said and not write it down. This prohibition contrasts with 1:19 (“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later”) and 22:10 (“Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book”). Some think that John brings in the voice from heaven to justify his omission of some traditional eschatological material.⁸⁶⁹ If that were the case, it is difficult to understand why he would mention the thunders at all. Others appeal to 2 Cor 12:4 and contest that what the thunders said was too sacred to be shared.⁸⁷⁰ It is more plausible that the seven thunders, like the seals and trumpets, formed another series of warning plagues. The adamant decision of the human race not to repent (9:20-21) would render another series useless. In the verses that immediately follow, an angel under oath will declare that there shall be no further delay (vv. 5-7), so possibly it was too late to record any further warnings.⁸⁷¹

In this context, to seal up means not to disclose. John seals up what the thunders said by not writing them down. What was said is not to be made known to the churches. In Dan 12:4 the prophet is told to “close up and seal⁸⁷² the words of the scroll until the time of the end” (cf. Dan 12:9). In contrast, what the thunders said is never to be revealed.⁸⁷³

5-6 After the brief reference to the seven thunders John’s attention returns to the mighty angel standing over sea and earth. The angel raises his right hand to heaven (the place of God’s abode, Isa 57:15) and solemnly swears that the period of delay is over. With the sounding of the seventh trumpet God’s great purpose in creation and redemption is to be brought to completion.

In the OT the lifting of the hand was part of oath-taking. Abram declined the spoils of battle, saying, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most

High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal” (14:22-23). In the Song of Moses God himself lifts up his hand to heaven in solemn oath to carry out vengeance upon his adversaries (Deut 32:40). It is Dan 12:7, however, that supplies the interpretive background for this section. There the man clothed in linen who is above the waters of the river raises up both hands toward heaven and swears by him who lives forever that the end shall come in a “time, two times, and half a time” (three and a half years) when the power of the holy people has finally been broken. Apocalyptic thought has always been concerned with the question, How long until the End? In Daniel one of the angels addresses the man clothed in linen with the query, “How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?” (Dan 12:6). The martyrs in Rev 6:10 asked, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” The answer of the mighty angel is, “There will be no more delay!” Most early writers interpret this statement as a metaphysical assertion about the end of time as a sequence of events. The translation in the AV (“There shall be time no longer”) reflects this interpretation.⁸⁷⁴ This is not the meaning of “time” (Gk. *chronos*)⁸⁷⁵ here. It would hardly be necessary for an angel to put himself under oath just to make an assertion about the timeless nature of eternity.

The announcement of no further delay would come as welcome news. The martyrs under the altar (6:9-12) had been told to rest a while until the full number of their fellow servants and brothers and sisters should be put to death. The seven thunders would have involved yet another delay had they not been canceled. Now nothing stands in the way of the final dramatic period of human history. From this point forward God will not intervene to give the human race further opportunity to repent. Restraint is to be removed, and the Antichrist is to be revealed (cf. 2 Thess 2:3ff.). The forces of God and Satan will meet in final confrontation. This is the “time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations” foretold by Daniel (12:1) and repeated in the Synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13:19 and parallels). It is the darkness before the dawn — the awesome period of Satan’s wrath (12:12, 17). The appointed delay is over, and the period of the end is irrevocably set into motion.

It is worth noting that the angel describes God as the One who lives forever and ever. This designation is frequent in the Apocalypse (1:18; 4:9-

10; 15:7). It is especially appropriate in the context of impending martyrdom. Soon many believers in the Asian churches will be called upon to sacrifice their lives out of faithfulness to Christ. Only a God who lives beyond the threat of death can promise them life after the sword has taken its toll. God is not only eternal; he is creator of heaven, earth, and sea, and everything therein (cf. Exod 20:11; Neh 9:6; Ps 146:6).⁸⁷⁶ To speak of God as creator underscores his power to accomplish that which he set out to do. For the Seer it means that the One who brought all things into being can carry them through in fulfillment of his redemptive purpose. The end of history, as was the beginning, is under the sovereign control of God.

7 The proclamation of the mighty angel is that there shall be no further delay, but⁸⁷⁷ with the sounding of the seventh trumpet the hidden purpose of God will be accomplished. The NKJ translation, “when he is about to sound,” could be taken to mean that the mystery of God will be completed before the sounding of the seventh trumpet.⁸⁷⁸ What the angel is saying, however, is that within that period of time to be introduced by the seventh trumpet blast the mystery of God will be brought to completion.⁸⁷⁹

A great deal of attention has been given to the meaning of “the mystery of God.” In Col 2:2 the exact phrase is used to refer to Christ, in whom are hidden the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The idea of mystery was important in apocalyptic thought. Mysteries were secrets preserved in heaven and revealed to the enraptured apocalypticist (*1 Enoch* 71:3ff.; also 40:2; 46:2).⁸⁸⁰ An eschatological orientation is always present in the NT use of the word. In Rom 11:25 the final destiny of Israel is a “mystery.” The “mystery” of 1 Cor 15:55 is the change that will overtake the believer at Christ’s return. In 2 Thess 2:7 the “mystery of lawlessness” (RSV) that is at present restrained will soon be fully revealed and at the coming of Christ will be destroyed.

The mystery of God in Rev 10:7 shares this apocalyptic coloring and refers to the purpose of God as revealed in the consummation of human history.⁸⁸¹ In the NT this divine purpose in history is a mystery not because it is an unknown, but because it never would have been known if God had not revealed it. John is saying that with the sounding of the seventh trumpet that which God purposed in creation and made possible through the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10) will be brought to its fulfillment. That this purpose is in fact the kingdom of God is clearly seen in Rev 11:15, where following the seventh trumpet the heavenly voices proclaim, “The kingdom of the

world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” Down through the centuries the church has prayed, “Your kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). Taking his stand between the sixth and seventh trumpets, John declares, There will be no more delay: the time is now!

The drama has now moved to that moment immediately preceding the final scene. From this point on, the Apocalypse becomes a multidimensional presentation of the final triumph of God over evil. Any attempt to arrange the material in a strictly sequential pattern is doomed to failure. From his vantage point on the brink of eternity John unveils the evil forces that operate behind the scenes of history and in the last days will mount a final and furious assault upon the faithful (12:12, 17). As persecution and martyrdom precede the seventh trumpet, the overthrow and destruction of the persecutors (demonic powers as well as their earthly agents) will follow it. The bowls of God’s wrath (16:1-16) are a prelude to the final destruction of all evil and the inauguration of the eternal state.

That God has from the beginning willed the complete and final defeat of evil should come as no surprise. Although the details have not been revealed, the substance has been made known to God’s servants the prophets. There is no reason why this designation should be limited to either OT or NT prophets. ⁸⁸² Seven hundred years before Christ the prophet Amos asserted, “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets” (3:7).⁸⁸³ One purpose has run throughout history, and wherever God has revealed his intentions to humankind it has touched upon the divine promise of ultimate blessing. This is why the hidden purpose of God is said to have been “gospelled”⁸⁸⁴ to the prophets.

8 The voice from heaven that in v. 4 told John to seal up the utterances of the seven thunders speaks once again. This time it tells him to go and take the little scroll that lies open on the hand of the mighty angel. Although the syntax of v. 8 is awkward, the meaning is quite apparent.⁸⁸⁵ That the voice is a voice from heaven underscores the authoritative nature of the command. The Seer would be reluctant to approach a great and glorious angel without specific instructions from One even greater. The scroll in the hand of the angel lies open. In contrast to the seven-sealed scroll of chapter 5 that remained securely fastened until the Lamb broke its seals, the little scroll lay permanently opened⁸⁸⁶ in the hand of the angel. Once again the

angel is described as standing on sea and land. It is not certain whether this thrice-repeated description (vv. 2, 5, 8) indicates some special importance that the Seer attaches to the fact or whether it is no more than rhetorical repetition. The latter is probably the case.

9-10 In obedience to the heavenly voice John goes to the angel and asks for the little scroll. He is told to take it and eat it. It will be sweet as honey in his mouth but will turn his stomach sour. John has now returned to earth, the arena of final conflict.⁸⁸⁷ Upon asking the angel to give him the little scroll, he is told once again to take it. Some commentators see in the specific command to take the scroll the truth that God's revelation must be actively appropriated rather than passively received.⁸⁸⁸ The command, however, is not to snatch the little scroll out of the angel's hand. Asking the angel to give it to him⁸⁸⁹ does not violate his instructions.

The angel repeats the command of the voice from heaven ("Take the scroll") and supplies the additional instruction, "Eat it." The account of the commissioning of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 2:8-3:3) is an obvious parallel. Ezekiel is told to open his mouth and eat what is given to him. A hand appears with a scroll with words of lamentation and mourning written on the front and on the back. Upon eating the scroll Ezekiel finds it to be as sweet as honey in his mouth. We are reminded of the Psalmist's words, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps 119:103). A well-known passage in Jeremiah is similar, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight" (Jer 15:16). The command to devour⁸⁹⁰ the book is not simply a figurative way of saying, Digest it mentally. In John's case it led to a real act (although within a visionary experience), which in turn symbolizes the complete appropriation of prophetic revelation.⁸⁹¹ John is to assimilate the content of the scroll before communicating it to others. Every true prophet of God knows the absolute necessity of this crucial requirement.⁸⁹²

The identity of the little scroll has been extensively discussed. Some take it as the Word of God or the Gospel.⁸⁹³ Others see it as a general message of woe.⁸⁹⁴ Still others find its contents in the first thirteen verses of the following chapter (11:1-13).⁸⁹⁵

The answer to the identity of the little scroll is to a considerable extent tied up with the interpretation of its being sweet as honey in the mouth but turning the stomach sour.⁸⁹⁶ It is usually held to be sweet because it is a

word from God.⁸⁹⁷ Why it turns the stomach sour is less certain. Commentators who do not limit the contents of the little scroll to chapter 11 tend to emphasize the judgment and woe that are to fall on the unbelieving world. It seems more plausible that the little scroll is a message for the believing church and is to be found in the following verses (11:1-13). In the parallel passage in Ezekiel the message of lamentation, mourning, and woe is to be delivered to the rebellious house of Israel (Ezek 3:4ff.). The prophet is not sent to a people of obscure speech and a difficult language (Ezek 3:5, 6). The parallel in John's case would be the church, the new Israel. It is *after* eating the scroll that John is told he must prophesy again, this time concerning⁸⁹⁸ many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings (Rev 10:11). This begins with chapter 12. The sweet scroll that turns the stomach sour is a message for the church. Before the final triumph believers are going to pass through a formidable ordeal. As the great scroll of chapter 5 outlined the destiny of the entire human race, so the little scroll unveils the lot of the faithful in those last days of fierce Satanic opposition. It tells of the two witnesses who, when they have finished their testimony, are destroyed by the beast out of the Abyss (11:7). Like the crucified Lord their dead bodies are exposed for public contempt (11:8). The people of God as they faithfully bear their witness to the world are not delivered "*from* martyrdom and death, but through martyrdom and death to a glorious resurrection."⁸⁹⁹ The prospect of no further delay in the fulfillment of God's eternal purposes is sweet indeed. That it will involve a bitter prelude is hard to swallow.⁹⁰⁰

11 John is now told that he must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. If we are correct in our interpretation of the little scroll as a message to believers about to enter the final period of persecution (11:1-13),⁹⁰¹ then this renewed commission relates to the prophecies following the seventh trumpet in 11:15. The seals of chapter 6 (except the fifth) and the trumpets of chapters 8 and 9 are judgments directed against an ungodly world. After the parenthesis of chapters 10 and 11, which treats the church in the last days, John will turn again to prophesy against society in its hostility toward God.⁹⁰²

The fourfold classification of peoples, nations, languages, and tribes occurs five times in Revelation (cf. comm. on 7:9). Here "tribes" is replaced by "kings," perhaps to suggest that God's word through the prophets takes precedence over the highest rank of human authority. It may be that the seven kings of 17:10 and the ten kings of 17:12 are in the Seer's purview. In

any case, the prophecies deal with people in general without attention to racial, geographic, ethnic, or social distinctions. The only real distinction is between those with the seal of God and those with the mark of the beast.

The commission is introduced rather curiously by the words, “And they say to me (lit.).” If the reference were to the voice from heaven (vv. 4, 8) or the mighty angel (v. 9), we would have expected a singular verb.⁹⁰³ It is best to take the expression as an indefinite plural or the equivalent of the passive “it was said.”

There is a sense of divine compulsion in the charge given to John. He *must*⁹⁰⁴ prophesy again. The prophecy relates to many peoples and nations. It is the final act in the great drama of God’s creative and redemptive activity. The meaning of history comes into sharp focus at the end point in time. John’s mission is to lay bare the forces of the supernatural world that are at work behind the activities of people and nations. His prophecy is the culmination of all previous prophecies in that it leads on to the final destruction of evil and the inauguration of the eternal state.

2. Measuring the Temple (11:1-2)

In turning to the matters in 11:1-14, we come to a passage that is universally recognized as difficult to interpret.⁹⁰⁵ Part of the problem stems from the necessity of having to take a rather clear-cut position on the interpretation of apocalyptic language. While on either extreme are those who interpret it literally⁹⁰⁶ or highly symbolically,⁹⁰⁷ the notes that follow understand the first thirteen verses of chapter 11 to be symbolic of the fate of the witnessing church during its final period of opposition and persecution. They supply the content of the “little scroll” of chapter 10 that was sweet to the taste but made the stomach sour (10:9-10). That the language of prophecy is highly figurative has nothing to do with the reality of the events predicted. Symbolism is not a denial of historicity but a figurative method of communicating reality. Apocalyptic language has as one of its basic characteristics the cryptic and symbolic use of words and phrases.

Many writers believe that this segment (11:1-13) was taken over from a previous source (or sources).⁹⁰⁸ But since we recognize by now that John makes use of his sources with a sort of sovereign freedom, it is far more important to understand what *he* is saying than to attempt a reconstruction of the originals.

1 I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, “Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. 2 But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months.

In between the two major visions that make up the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet we find a brief section in which John is told to measure the temple enclosure but not the outer court. Taking both temple and outer court as representing the church from two different perspectives leads to an understanding that during the difficult period lying immediately

ahead the people of God will be kept safe from demonic assault although they will suffer at the hands of the unbelieving world. This message is especially appropriate in view of the bitter/sweet experience awaiting them (as symbolized by the ministry and fate of the two witnesses in 11:3-14).

1 In the preceding section (10:8-11) John's role as passive spectator gave way to active involvement in his own vision. He took the scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. In the opening verses of chapter 11 his participation continues. He is given a reed like a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God and the altar, and to count those who worship there. Biblical prophets commonly employed symbolic action to dramatize their message. Isaiah walked about stripped and barefoot as a sign of Egypt's impending captivity to Assyria (Isa 20:2-5). Ezekiel dug through a wall and carried out his belongings in the sight of Israel as a symbol of the coming exile (Ezek 12:1-7). In the NT the prophet Agabus tied his feet and hands with Paul's belt to show that the apostle would be bound by the Jews at Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11). The measuring of the temple is a symbolic way of declaring its preservation.⁹⁰⁹ The background is probably Ezekiel 40-42, where the prophet in a vision watches every part of the temple measured with painstaking care.⁹¹⁰ This would be a necessary prerequisite to the restoration of the real temple in Jerusalem.

For John, the temple was not a literal building but "the Christian community who worship God."⁹¹¹ It is the church, the people of God (as in 1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22).⁹¹² Whatever the imagery may have intended if it originally belonged to a Jewish apocalypse, there is little doubt that for John it means that God will give spiritual sanctuary to the faithful believers against the demonic assault of the Antichrist.⁹¹³ The protection of believers (symbolized by the measuring of the temple) was not security against physical suffering and death but against spiritual danger. It corresponds to the sealing of 7:1-8, which did not protect from physical death but insured entrance into the heavenly kingdom (cf. comm. on 7:4-8). Since the altar is linked so closely with those worshiping in the holy place, it should probably be taken as the altar of incense (cf. 8:3). The objection that only the priests were permitted to enter the inner sanctuary, and hence those worshiping could not represent the entire body of the faithful, is countered by the NT teaching that all believers are in fact part of a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10).

To measure the temple John was given a “reed like a measuring rod.” In the Jordan valley grew certain bamboolike canes that were sufficiently long and rigid (cf. Luke 7:24) to be used for measuring.

2 The outer court of the temple⁹¹⁴ was called the court of the Gentiles. While Solomon’s temple had two courtyards (1 Kgs 6:36), the inner court of Herod’s temple was divided into three courts (the court of the women, the court of the Israelites, and the court of the priests). Separating these three from the court of the Gentiles was a barrier with inscriptions threatening death to any Gentile who would pass beyond.⁹¹⁵ Opinion is divided as to what the outer court stands for. One common answer is that it is symbolic of those members of the professing church who, like the followers of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20), have compromised with the world.⁹¹⁶ It is the true church, however — those who refuse the mark of the beast (13:7, 16-17) — who are about to suffer; and not those who have compromised their faith.

It is more probable that the outer court refers to the church viewed from a different perspective.⁹¹⁷ It is to be excluded⁹¹⁸ and not measured; that is, it is to be given over to persecution in the last days. The distinction between the sanctuary and the outer court is a way of pointing out the limitations placed upon pagan hostility.⁹¹⁹ It may physically decimate the witnessing church (in 11:7 the two witnesses are killed), but it cannot touch its real source of life (the witnesses are raised and ascend to heaven; 11:11-12). Since the measuring of the church is a variant of its being sealed and the trampling of the city is the great tribulation, “we have the paradox that, on the one hand, the community will be sheltered and, on the other hand, the unprotected community will be trampled.”⁹²⁰

In John’s imagery the holy city is yet another designation for the church.⁹²¹ The faithful are to be trampled underfoot⁹²² by paganism for a period of forty-two months. The background for this is the prophecy concerning Antiochus Epiphanes in Dan 8:9-14. There the sanctuary is to be trampled underfoot by the little horn for 2,300 days. Then it is to be reconsecrated (Dan 8:14). Likewise the church is to be oppressed and profaned by the beast out of the Abyss (Rev 11:7), but it will not be destroyed. To what extent its victory will be triumph through death or continued existence on earth is not clear. In either case the promise of Jesus

in Matt 16:18 that “the powers of the underworld shall never overthrow [the church]” (Williams) is carried through.

The temporal designation of 42 months (11:2; 13:5) is also given in Revelation as 1,260 days (11:3; 12:6) and “a time, times and half a time” (12:14). Its primary reference is to the period of Jewish suffering under the Syrian despot Antiochus Epiphanes in 167-164 B.C.⁹²³ It became a standard symbol for that limited period of time during which evil would be allowed free rein. It is “the conventional period in apocalyptic literature for the temporary triumph of evil before the end of the age.”⁹²⁴ In Luke 21:24 it is called “the times of the Gentiles.” The repeated use of the various designations in Revelation and the contexts in which they appear serves to point out that the periods of final witness, divine protection, and pagan antagonism are simultaneous.

3. The Two Witnesses (11:3-14)

3 And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. ” 4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 5 If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. 6 These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

7 Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. 8 Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. 9 For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. 10 The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

11 But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here. ” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

13 At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

14 The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.

This particular vision (11:3-14) has long been one of the interpretive cruxes in the Revelation. Nevertheless the possibility for a satisfactory interpretation of the section is not hopeless.

There is little doubt that the witnesses are modeled after Moses and Elijah. In the description that follows (vv. 5-6) they have the power, like Elijah, to consume their enemies with fire (2 Kgs 1:10ff.) and to shut up the sky so that it will not rain (1 Kgs 17:1), and like Moses they can turn the waters into blood (Exod 7:14-18) and strike the earth with every kind of plague (Exod 8:12). Further, it was a common expectation that Elijah and Moses would return before the end of the world. Malachi had prophesied, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes" (Mal 4:5; cf. Mark 9:11 and Matt 11:14). Apparently Deut 18:18 ("I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers") had given rise to a similar expectation regarding Moses (cf. John 6:14; 7:40). It was Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:4). Furthermore, the ascension of the two witnesses into heaven (v. 12) corresponds with 2 Kgs 2:11 (Elijah's transport) and the tradition underlying the pseudepigraphical *Assumption of Moses*.⁹²⁵

But who are these two witnesses, and what do they symbolize in John's vision? Some identify them as two literal prophetic figures who will arise at the end.⁹²⁶ It is more likely, however, that they are not two individuals but a symbol of the witnessing church in the last tumultuous days before the end of the age.⁹²⁷ That the church is presented under the figure of two witnesses stems either from the well-known law in Deut 19:15 that required a second witness for adequate testimony (cf. John 8:17)⁹²⁸ or from the Seer's desire to emphasize the church's "royal and priestly functions" as suggested by the two metaphors in v. 4.⁹²⁹ Some commentators would limit the witnesses to that portion of the church which suffers martyrdom.⁹³⁰

As latter-day prophets the two witnesses wear the rough garb of their ancient predecessors (Zech 13:4). Their message is a call to repentance. Sackcloth was the garment of mourning and penitence. "So put on sackcloth, lament and wail," counseled Jeremiah (4:8). "Woe to you," said Jesus to the cities that had witnessed his miracles and repented not, "if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes" (Matt 11:21).

3 The opening word of v. 3 (“and”) ties that which follows closely to what has just been said. Indeed, it is God, not Christ, who commissions his witnesses to prophesy.⁹³¹ In spite of pagan oppression God will send forth his witnesses. The period of their ministry is the same as that allotted to the trampling of the holy city. Its designation in days rather than months is simply a literary variation (solar months are thirty days in length). It does not intend to teach that witnessing is a day-by-day activity.

4 John now identifies the two witnesses as the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand⁹³² before the Lord of the earth. The background is Zechariah’s vision recorded in chapter 4 of his prophecy. There, a single golden lampstand (Israel?) supports a bowl with seven lamps (“the eyes of the LORD,” v. 10) and is flanked by two olive trees (Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabel, the Jewish governor under the Persian king Darius) that supply it with “golden oil” (v. 12). The angelic interpretation is, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (v. 6). As God’s Spirit works through his chosen leaders, despite all their apparent weaknesses, the temple will be brought to completion.

As usual, John uses his source with considerable freedom.⁹³³ The one lampstand becomes two, and these two in turn are said to be synonymous with the two olive trees. Already in chapter 1 the seven churches (symbolic of the church universal) have been symbolized by seven lampstands. They are the bearers of divine light (cf. Matt 5:15-16). These light bearers are also olive trees in that “the oil of the Spirit ... keeps alive the light of life.”⁹³⁴ By these two metaphors John is emphasizing a truth concerning the church that has always been true but is especially appropriate in times of persecution — that the power and authority for effective witness lie in the Spirit of God.⁹³⁵

5 It is interesting that concern for the protection of the two witnesses (v. 5) comes before a description of their activity (v. 6). The order lends emphasis to the fact that God will most certainly keep his people safe from physical harm until their witness has been completed. They will be protected by supernatural powers for the period of their prophetic activity. The fire that comes from their mouths to destroy the enemy recalls Elijah’s encounters with the emissaries of King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1). Sir 48:1 says that the prophet Elijah “arose like a fire, his word flaring like a torch” (JB). The first two groups of fifty were consumed by fire from heaven at the word of the prophet (vv. 10, 12). While the fire in John’s vision is often

taken figuratively,⁹³⁶ it would be more consistent to maintain a parallel with the literal drought and plagues that follow in the same description. Fire-breathing prophets would not seem strange in the bizarre world of apocalyptic imagery. This, of course, does not deny that the words of a prophet can be like fire (as in Jer 5:14).

6 The witnesses also have the power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time of their prophecy. The background is the drought of Elijah's day (1 Kgs 17:1; Sir 48:3), which, according to Luke 4:25 and Jas 5:17, lasted three and a half years.⁹³⁷ They can also turn water into blood (cf. Exod 7:20) and smite the earth with whatever kind of plague they wish (cf. Exod 8:12).⁹³⁸ The purpose of John's portrayal at this point may be to express "the truth that God's servants in the new dispensation have just as great resources as did Moses and Elijah in the old."⁹³⁹

7 As soon as their ministry has been fulfilled,⁹⁴⁰ the witnesses are no longer protected from physical harm. The beast of the Abyss attacks and kills them.⁹⁴¹ Here for the first time we meet a figure who represents the major antagonist of the church in the last days. In contrast to the Lamb, who bears the marks of slaughter, he is the beast.⁹⁴² His demonic origin and character are portrayed by the fact that he "comes up from the Abyss," the haunt of demons (cf. Luke 8:31). The definite article indicates that he is a well-known figure. It may be a reference to the beast of Dan 7:7ff., who had become a "familiar representation of Antichrist,"⁹⁴³ or it may anticipate the detailed presentation in chapters 13 and 17. At the moment all that John wishes to do is to set forth the death of the witnesses at the hand of the beast. As the little horn of Daniel 7 made war with the saints (v. 21), so the beast of the Abyss overcomes and kills the two witnesses.⁹⁴⁴

The verb "attack" (NKJ, "make war") supports the interpretation of the witnesses as a large group rather than two individuals. The scene is the last epic struggle between the kingdoms of this earth and the witnessing church. The very word "witness"⁹⁴⁵ has the grim flavor of martyrdom. What is true in this last conflict has also been true of the massacres of history "in which brute force has seemed to triumph over truth and righteousness."¹⁰⁰

8 The bodies of the martyred witnesses are left unburied on the broad street of the great city.⁹⁴⁶ From the Eastern point of view, to be deprived of burial was an act of great indignity.⁹⁴⁷ When Tobit learned that one of his countrymen had been strangled and left dead in the marketplace, he jumped

up from a ceremonial meal, went, and took the body to one of the outbuildings until he could bury it after the sun went down (Tob 2:1-7; cf. Jer 8:1-2).

The majority of commentators take “the great city” to be Jerusalem⁹⁴⁸ in spite of the fact that in the seven other references in Revelation (16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21) it consistently refers to Rome.⁹⁴⁹ The identification rests primarily on the last clause of v. 8, which seems to identify the great city as the place where “their Lord was crucified.” The references normally cited to argue that the title had been used of Jerusalem are nonbiblical.⁹⁵⁰ The great city also bore the figurative titles of Sodom and Egypt. But while Isa 1:9-10 and Ezek 16:46-49 are usually cited as places where Jerusalem is called Sodom, in the Isaiah passage it is the Jewish *people* (not the city) who are so designated, and in Ezekiel, Jerusalem is being compared with her sisters, Samaria and Sodom. In neither reference is Jerusalem actually called Sodom, and in the OT it is never designated Egypt.

In view of the consistent use of the term elsewhere in the book as a reference to Rome (as well as such verses as 18:24, “In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints”) it is best to conclude that the witnesses meet their death at the hands of the Antichrist, whose universal dominion was in John’s day epitomized by the power of Rome. The inclusion of a reference to the crucifixion is not to identify a geographical location but to illustrate the response of paganism to righteousness.⁹⁵¹ The great city is “every city and no city. It is civilized man in organized community.”⁹⁵² Spiritually (or allegorically) it is “Sodom and Egypt.” Sodom refers to the depths of moral degradation (cf. Gen 19:4-11), and Egypt is a symbol of oppression and slavery. The great city in which the martyred church lies dead is the world under the wicked and oppressive sway of Antichrist.

9 The dead bodies of the two witnesses are left lying on the streets of the great city, where they are viewed by people of every race and nationality.⁹⁵³ The three and a half days of their public exposure correspond to the 1,260 days of their prophetic activity. In comparison it is a brief period of time. We have already noted (in v. 8) that denial of a proper burial was an act of ignominy⁹⁵⁴ and reflected the scorn of the world for the church that had called them to repentance. The dead bodies of the witnesses are not symbols of a spiritually dead church, but portray the destiny of the faithful

who hold their convictions firm till the end. To Smyrna, John wrote, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10).

10 When the followers of the beast realize that those who have tormented their consciences are dead, they are overjoyed. In effect, a holiday is declared, with merrymaking and the exchange of gifts.⁹⁵⁵ Their torment, consisting of denunciation (v. 3) and physical affliction (vv. 5-6), had lasted for three and a half years, but now it was over and rejoicing was in order.

“The inhabitants of the earth” is another designation for the pagan world as described in the preceding verse.⁹⁵⁶ It supports the interpretation of the great city as the whole earth. God’s truth through the testimony of faithful witnesses has always distressed the consciences of evil men. To Ahab, the prophet Elijah was a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kgs 18:17), Herod feared John the Baptist, yet heard him gladly (Mark 6:20). The world has always shown hostility to the message of God — a truth that ought to give some concern to the contemporary church existing for the most part rather comfortably in a world of increasing wickedness.

The celebration of the earth’s inhabitants over the death of the witnesses is a perverse counterpart to the Jewish feast of Purim — a “day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other ... and gifts to the poor” (Esth 9:19, 22). Some have suggested as another parallel the period between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Of this time Jesus said that the disciples “will weep and mourn while the world rejoices” (John 16:20).⁹⁵⁷

11 The merriment of the world is cut short, for after three and a half days God sends the breath of life⁹⁵⁸ into the dead bodies of the witnesses, who then stand again on their feet. The language of this verse follows the vision recorded in Ezekiel 37 in which God sends the breath of life⁹⁵⁹ into the dry bones, which come to life and stand upon their feet.⁹⁶⁰ The reveling is cut short, and terror strikes the inhabitants of the earth who have just witnessed this remarkable event. Since murder is the last resort, what can be done about those who rise from the dead! The resurrection of the church is a sure indication that God possesses the ultimate authority over life and death.⁹⁶¹

12 The two witnesses are now summoned by a loud voice from heaven and ascend in full view of their startled enemies. They go up “into” (eis) heaven, not merely “to heaven,” in a cloud.⁹⁶² In 2 Kgs 2:11 Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind.⁹⁶³ The voice from heaven is heard by the

two witnesses (and probably everyone else), although some manuscripts read “I heard” and restrict the verb to the Seer.⁹⁶⁴ The triumph of the witnesses is no secret rapture; it is openly visible to all (cf. Matt 24:27; 1 Thess 4:17).⁹⁶⁵

13 As the witnesses are taken up into heaven, a great earthquake levels a portion of the city, killing 7,000 and forcing the rest to acknowledge the transcendent majesty of God. Ezek 38:19-20 predicted a great earthquake that would precede the end. Zechariah says that the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west when God returns to crush his enemies (Zech 14:4). Although the earthquake may symbolize some great upheaval in the social order (cf. Hag 2:6-7), here, as in Rev 6:12, it is part of an apocalyptic vision that portrays in a literal manner the events yet to come. The tenth part of the city that collapsed would be a sizable portion but not enough to disable it. The figure of 7,000 does not seem to have any particular meaning beyond serving to indicate the approximate number of individuals in one-tenth of a good-sized city in John’s day.⁹⁶⁶

Scholars differ in their interpretation of the response of the world to this demonstration of divine power. The text simply says that those who were not killed were terrified and “gave glory to the God of heaven.” Some think that, unlike the survivors of 9:20-21, these turn from their apostasy in true repentance.⁹⁶⁷ It is argued that John was more optimistic about the conversion of the world than he is commonly given credit for. But while universalism is an outcome that few would not favor, it runs counter to the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the serious consequences of spurning the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is not accurate to conclude from these verses that “where retributive punishment had failed to bring men to repentance, the death of the martyrs would succeed”⁹⁶⁸ because it was not the *death* of the martyrs, but their *being brought back to life* that struck terror to the hearts of their enemies and caused them to give glory to God. Rev 13:3-4 specifically says that “the whole world was astonished and followed the beast.... [They] worshiped the dragon ... and they also worshiped the beast.” No indication of universal salvation here!

Kiddle is correct in his view that in that day “the great mass of mankind will have committed the unpardonable crime of deifying evil.” They give glory to God “when they are compelled by overriding terror to recognize that the true Lord is Christ and not Antichrist.”⁹⁶⁹ This falls far short of a redemptive turning to God and praising him for who he is and what he has

done. This scene does not stand in contrast to 6:15-17 in which the inhabitants of the world hid in caves and called on the rocks and mountains to fall on them. The two scenes are parallel. Although the term “God of heaven” is frequent in Jewish writings, it occurs only here and in 16:1 in the NT. The source may be Dan 2:17-19, where the title reflects the majesty and wisdom of God without any specific contrast with the gods of the Chaldeans.

14 Verse 14 stands alone, separated from the second woe by the visions of 10:1 — 11:13, and announcing a third Woe, which is then postponed until a number of subplots have been brought forward.

F. SEVENTH TRUMPET (11:15-19)

15 The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever. ”

16 And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying:

*“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
the One who is and who was,
because you have taken your great power
and have begun to reign.*

*18 The nations were angry;
and your wrath has come.
The time has come for judging the dead,
and for rewarding your servants the prophets
and your saints and those who reverence your name,
both small and great —
and for destroying those who destroy the earth. ”*

19 Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple

*was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning,
rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.*

When the seventh trumpet is blown, we might expect yet another plague but instead we hear voices in heaven declaring the eternal sovereignty of God and his Christ. The twenty-four elders join the celebration falling, before

God in worship and praising him for having taken his great power and begun to reign. The time for rewarding his servants and pouring out his wrath on the destroyers of the earth has come. 11:15-19 is a summary of all that is yet to take place. The declaration of triumph by the heavenly hosts (v. 15) and the anthem of praise by the worshiping elders (vv. 17-18) introduce the great themes of the following chapters. The extensive use of the aorist tense (eleven times) conveys a sense of absolute certainty about the events taking place. There is a common saying, “It’s all over bar the shouting,” and the only difference here is that the shout of victory has already begun.^{[970](#)}

15 We would expect the seventh trumpet blast to be followed by the third Woe (cf. 9:1, 13), but instead we hear voices of a great heavenly host declaring the final triumph of the kingdom of God and the establishment of his eternal reign.

The voices are not those of a glorified church. The expression “Our Lord, and ... his Christ” would not be appropriate for the church because their Lord is the Christ. The voices should not be limited to any particular class of angelic beings (such as the four living creatures of chaps. 4 and 5) but represent the hosts of heaven with the same sort of indefiniteness that we find in 12:10 and 19:16.

The burden of the angelic declaration is that the dominion and rule of this world have been transferred to God and his Christ, who shall reign forever and ever.^{[971](#)} This great eschatological event that establishes once and for all the universal sovereignty of God is a recurring theme in OT prophecy. Daniel predicted the day when the kingdom of God would utterly destroy the kingdoms of this world (Dan 2:31-45, esp. v. 44). The day is coming, said Zechariah, when God will be “king over the whole earth” (Zech 14:9). As the drama of the consummation moves toward the final scene, the hosts of heaven proclaim it *fait accompli*. During his earthly ministry Jesus had resisted the tempting offer of Satan to hand over the kingdoms of this world in exchange for worship (Matt 4:8-9). Now this sovereignty passes to him as a rightful possession in view of the successful completion of his messianic ministry. “Our Lord and ... his Christ” reflects Ps 2:2, which was interpreted messianically by the early church (Acts 4:26-28).^{[972](#)} Although the Son will ultimately be subjected to the Father (1 Cor 15:28), he will nevertheless share the eternal rule of God. The singular (“he will reign”) emphasizes the unity of this joint sovereignty.

16 The twenty-four elders last appeared in 7:11, where they were prostrate before the throne of God in worship and praise. Although normally seated, they are here once again on their faces (cf. 4:10; 5:8, 14; 19:4) and singing a hymn of anticipated victory.⁹⁷³ The elders are an angelic order — the heavenly counterpart to God’s people in all ages (cf. comm. on 4:4).

17 The song of the elders is a hymn of thanksgiving to the One who with a great display of power will enter upon his eternal reign. The event is so certain that throughout this section it is repeatedly spoken of as already having taken place ⁹⁷⁴ “Great power” does not indicate omnipotence as a divine attribute in a general sense, but points to the final conflict in which God overpowers all his enemies. As in 1:8 and 4:8, he is the Lord God Almighty. He is able to accomplish all that in his decrees he has determined to do. In the same two passages, as well as in 1:4, he is the One who is, who was, and who is to come. In the present verse (and in 16:5) the third designation (“is to come”) is omitted⁹⁷⁵ because his coming is no longer seen as future. Already he has come and has begun to reign.

18 The reign of God is established by a great demonstration of divine wrath against the defiant anger of the world (cf. 16:9-11, 21). The eschatological crisis has arrived with its inevitable judgment. As the proclamation of the heavenly host drew upon a messianic interpretation of Psalm 2, so also does the song of the elders. Nations and their rulers plot rebellion against God and his anointed, and he terrifies them with his fury (Ps 2:1-2, 5, 12, GNB). There is an appropriateness in God’s tailoring the punishment to fit the crime.⁹⁷⁶ A final fierce assault upon the power and authority of God is a common apocalyptic theme. The triumph of God’s wrath is pictured in 14:10-11; 16:15-21; and 20:8-9.

In the schedule of God’s redemptive program a decisive point has now been reached. It is a fitting time⁹⁷⁷ for judgment, reward, and destruction. The judgment anticipated by the elders is carried out in the great white throne scene of 20:11-15. It is preceded by resurrection and followed by retribution. If the wrath of God is the judgment of the wicked, the vision of a New Jerusalem (21:9-22:5) with the presence of God its crowning joy (22:4) is the reward of the faithful. Although rewards are all of grace (Rom 4:4), they vary according to what each has done (1 Cor 3:8).

The various classes of the faithful are taken in a number of ways. A reasonable translation would be, “your servants the prophets, and your

saints — those who reverence your name, both small and great.” There are two groups (prophets and saints), who are further described as fearing the name of God. This arrangement holds intact the expression “your servants the prophets” (which occurs again at 10:7) and joins to it a second group (the saints) as in 16:6 (“the blood of your saints and prophets”), 18:24 (order reversed), and 22:9 (“the prophets and ... all who keep the words of this book” — i.e., saints). John holds the prophetic office in highest esteem. One might almost say that in Revelation the prophet has replaced the apostle.⁹⁷⁸ By taking “those who reverence your name” as a further description of the prophets and saints, it is unnecessary to find additional distinctions such as between Jewish and Gentile Christians.⁹⁷⁹ In 19:5 all God’s servants are addressed as “you who fear him, both small and great.” The latter phrase (perhaps from Ps 115:13) is common in Revelation and stresses the all-inclusive nature of the group involved, whether saints (11:18; 19:5) or sinners (13:16; 19:18; 20:12).

The consummation will bring not only reward to the faithful but destruction to the destroyers (cf. 2 Thess 1:6-7). God repays in kind, and for those who wreak havoc on the earth, there is reserved the wrath of a righteous God (cf. Rom 2:5). Those who destroy would be for John the Roman Empire and all who serve its sinister designs. The pagan empire of his day becomes a model for the final assault, which knows no limitations, national or racial.

19 Verse 19 is a response to the hymn of praise in vv. 17 and 18. The ark of the covenant corresponds to the rewarding of the faithful, and the cosmic disturbances to the outpouring of God’s wrath.⁹⁸⁰ The sanctuary that opens to reveal the ark of the covenant is not an earthly temple (as in 11:1) but the sanctuary of God in heaven (cf. 3:12; 7:15; 15:5-8; 21:22). From this most holy place proceed both the promise of covenant love and righteous anger (cf. 16:1). The opening of the temple is of limited duration (cf. 15:5) and serves to reveal a heavenly ark, the symbol of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling his covenant promises. For the days of wrath that lie immediately ahead, believers will need the assurance that God will bring his own safely to their eternal reward.⁹⁸¹

In the OT the ark of the covenant was a symbol of the abiding presence of God. It was undoubtedly destroyed when Nebuzaradan razed Jerusalem and burned the temple (2 Kgs 25:8-10). Yet 2 Mace 2:4-8 records a legend that Jeremiah took the ark (along with the Tent of Meeting and the incense

altar) and hid it in a cave on Mt. Nebo. It was to remain hidden until “God finally gathers his people together and shows mercy to them” (2 Mace 2:7). This reflects the Jewish expectation of the recovery of the ark as an eschatological event with messianic significance. It is unlikely, however, that the heavenly ark of John’s vision is in any sense a fulfillment of this expectation. The entire scene is a gracious reminder that God will faithfully carry out his covenant promises and destroy the enemies of his people.

VI. CONFLICT BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE POWERS OF EVIL (12:1-14:5)

Chapter 12 marks a major division in the book of Revelation. Before the seven last plagues of chapter 16, in which the wrath of God is finished (15:1), John turns aside to explain the underlying cause for the hostility about to break upon the church. During his earthly ministry Jesus had warned, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). It is the age-long conflict between God and Satan that accounts for the persecution the church is to experience. Although the crucial battle was won when Christ arose victorious over death and the grave, the adversary continues his struggle. Cast down from heaven and knowing that his time is short (12:12), Satan turns in rage against the faithful who “obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17). By laying bare the root cause of persecution John would encourage believers to hold fast in the coming tribulation. The death struggle of a defeated foe will bring severe tribulation, but the outcome is certain — God will come in judgment to destroy his enemies (chaps. 15-19) and reward his own (chaps. 20-22).

The stage is thus set for the final confrontation. Chapters 12-14 introduce the actors who play the major roles. Some writers identify the seven main characters as the radiant woman, the dragon, the man-child, Michael, the seed of the woman, and the two beasts.^{[982](#)} Others who organize the chapters around the number “seven” find seven oracles depicting the supernatural conflict between the forces of light and the forces of darkness,^{[983](#)} or seven signs connected with the troubles of the church.^{[984](#)} The chapter consists of three scenes: the woman, the dragon, and the male child (vv. 1-6), Satan defeated and cast out of heaven (vv. 7-12), and the persecution of the woman and her offspring (vv. 13-17). While the third scene is a continuation and expansion of the first, the second scene serves to explain Satan’s violent opposition to the church. Together they reveal to the believing community the ultimate cause for the increased opposition and hostility they will meet in the last days. Beyond that the visions in chapter 12 form the theological heart of the entire book. In Christ God engaged Satan in the ultimate battle of the Holy War. The redemptive triumph of Christ in his death and resurrection was the crucial defeat of Satan and the

forces of evil. Yet for a time the dragon vigorously pursues the people of God. Hence there is great suffering in the final days (which extend from Pentecost to the return of Christ).^{[985](#)}

A. THE WOMAN, DRAGON, AND MALE CHILD (12:1-6)

1 A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2 She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. 3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. 4 His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. 6 The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

1-2 The pageant opens with the display of a wondrous sign in the sky.⁹⁸⁶ A woman appears who is clothed with the sun, crowned with twelve stars, with the moon under her feet. As in 12:3 and 15:1, the word “sign” is to be understood as a great spectacle that points to the consummation (cf. Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19). Elsewhere in Revelation the word is used of the deceptive miracles performed by the representatives of Satan (13:13, 14; 16:14; 19:20). Although the woman gives birth to the Messiah, she is not to be understood as Mary the mother of Jesus⁹⁸⁷ but the messianic community, the ideal Israel.⁹⁸⁸ Zion as the mother of the people of God is a common theme in Jewish writings (Isa 54:1; 2 Esdr 10:7; cf. Gal 4:26). It is out of faithful Israel that the Messiah will come. It should cause no trouble that within the same chapter the woman comes to signify the church (v. 17). The people of God are one throughout all redemptive history. The early church did not view itself as discontinuous with faithful Israel.⁹⁸⁹ As God covers

himself “in light as with a garment” (Ps 104:2), so the woman is clothed with the sun. The world may despise the true Israel and hold it in lowest esteem, but from God’s point of view she is a radiant bride (cf. Jer 2:2). She stands as an obvious contrast to the scarlet whore of chapter 17. The moon beneath her feet (perhaps as a footstool) speaks of dominion, and the crown of twelve stars⁹⁹⁰ depicts royalty.

The radiant woman is about to give birth to a child. She cries out in pain as she is about to deliver.⁹⁹¹ The OT frequently pictured Israel as a woman in travail. Isaiah speaks of Israel in bondage as “a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain” (Isa 26:17; cf. 66:7; Mic 4:10). In John’s vision the woman in travail is “the true Israel in her pre-messianic agony of expectation.”⁹⁹²

3 A second sign now appears in the sky — an enormous red dragon with seven heads. John does not leave us in doubt as to the identity of this monster: he is “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan” (v. 9; cf. 20:2). Ancient mythology is replete with references to dragons. In Canaanitish lore the great monster of the deep was known as Leviathan. Closely associated was Rahab (alias Tiamat?), the female monster of chaos.⁹⁹³ Allusions to these dragons are not uncommon in the OT. More often than not they refer metaphorically to Israel’s enemies. In Ps 74:14 Leviathan is Egypt. In Isaiah 27:1 he is Assyria and Babylon. Elsewhere we read of Pharaoh as the “great monster lying among [his] streams” (Ezek 29:3) and of Behemoth, a great beast whose limbs are like rods of iron (Job 40:18). Against this background the dragon of John’s vision would immediately be understood as the arch-enemy of God and his people.

The red color of the dragon (which may be a part of tradition)⁹⁹⁴ symbolizes the murderous character of Satan. Jesus had told the Jews, “You belong to your father, the devil.... He was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). The several heads of Leviathan are mentioned in Ps 74:14 and attested in Ugaritic texts.⁹⁹⁵ John’s fondness for the number “seven” as a symbol of completeness suggests that the seven heads of the dragon depict the universality of his power. The ten horns recall the fourth beast of Daniel 7, awesome and powerful with its great iron teeth and ten horns (Dan 7:7, 24). That the beast out of the sea has ten horns and seven heads (13:1; cf. 17:12) indicates that Satan’s earthly emissaries are like him in their destructive power. The crowns (diadems) are not wreaths of victory but

*“crowns of arrogated authority.”*⁹⁹⁶ They are Satan’s presumptuous claim of royal power over against the “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” upon whose head are many diadems (19:12, 16).

4 The scene in the sky continues as the dragon gathers a third of the stars with his great tail and hurls them down to the earth. One is reminded of Dan 8:10, where the little horn (Antiochus Epiphanes) casts to the ground some of the stars and tramples them underfoot. The cataclysmic action emphasizes the tremendous size and awesome power of the dragon. That he hurls down a third of the stars indicates no more than that he does so to a very great number. John is not teaching a theology of fallen angels⁹⁹⁷ but reporting a great pageant enacted in the sky.

The dragon stands in readiness before the woman with child so that when the child is born he can devour it. This explains the violent antagonism with which the child of the messianic community was met during the years of his life on earth. It began with the determination of King Herod to murder the Christ-child (Matt 2), continued throughout the dangers and temptations of his earthly life, and culminated in the crucifixion. As Nebuchadrezzar devoured Israel (“he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies,” Jer 51:34), so Satan has determined to devour the child. He has taken his position⁹⁹⁸ and awaits his victim.

5 The radiant woman gives birth to a son, a male child,⁹⁹⁹ who is destined to rule all the nations with an iron scepter.¹⁰⁰⁰ In Psalm 2 the messianic Son is to receive the nations as an inheritance and “rule [“shepherd”; cf. comm. on 7:17] them with an iron scepter” (v. 9). As a shepherd defends his flock against the wild beasts of prey, so Christ will strike the nations that oppress and persecute his church (cf. 19:15; in 2:27 the overcomers at Thyatira are promised a part in this rule).

Without mention of any intervening events John moves directly from the birth of Christ to his ascension. Apparently the essential truths of the vision could best be served by brevity. The significant point is that the evil designs of Satan were foiled by the successful completion of Christ’s messianic ministry, which culminated in his ascension and exaltation (cf. Phil 2:5-11). The child is snatched up to God and his throne.

6 The woman flees into the wilderness to be taken care of there by God for 1,260 days. The flight of the woman may in part reflect the escape of the Palestinian church to Pella at the outbreak of the Jewish war in A.D. 66.¹⁰⁰¹ The intent of the verse, however, is not so much the flight of the church as

the provision of God for her sustenance. To the Jewish people the wilderness spoke of divine provision and intimate fellowship. It was in the wilderness that God had rained down bread from heaven (Exod 16:4ff.) and nourished his people for forty years. Of Israel God said, “I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her” (Hos 2:14; cf. 1 Kgs 17:2-3; 19:3-4). For John’s readers the wilderness in this context would not suggest a desert waste inhabited by evil spirits and unclean beasts, but a place of spiritual refuge. The purpose of the vision is to assure those facing martyrdom that God has prepared for them a place of spiritual refuge and will enable them to stand fast against the devil. The duration of divine nourishment (1,260 days) corresponds to the period of persecution (cf. 11:2; 13:5). The place is one set in readiness¹⁰⁰² by God himself.

B. WAR IN HEAVEN (12:7-12)

7 And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. 8 But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. 9 The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

*10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:
“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of
our God,
and the authority of his Christ.
For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our
God day and night, has been hurled down.
11 They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word
of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
12 Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone
down to you!
He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short. ”*

The Seer now reports a war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon with his angels. This conflict is not a spectacle taking place in the sky (as in vv. 1-6), but a warfare in heaven itself. It is an all-out attempt on the part of Satan to regain his position in the presence of God. It does not refer back to the original expulsion of Satan from heaven (more a product of *Paradise Lost* than Scripture) but is the cosmic prelude to the consummation, an “end-time event.”^{[1003](#)} At the same time it is the heavenly

counterpart to the victory of Christ in his death and resurrection (cf. John 12:31).¹⁰⁰⁴ The triumph of the Messiah (v. 5) is now expressed in terms of the Holy War.

It is helpful to remember that from the very beginning the church was an eschatological community. John knows no “gap” between Christ and the End. His resurrection and the gift of the Spirit are eschatological events. It is the defeat of Satan (whether described in terms of Christ’s redemptive work or the battle in heaven) that explains the intense hostility to be poured out upon the church in the days of final tribulation. It is precisely because Satan has lost the crucial battle that he now launches one last assault on the church. Cast down to earth and knowing that his time is short (v. 12), he turns his fierce anger on the church of John’s day. Details of sequence and time should not be pressed in apocalyptic.¹⁰⁰⁵ The final outpouring of Satanic wrath is the result of his defeat in heavenly battle.

7 The war in heaven is waged between Michael and his angels on the one side and the dragon (Satan) and his angels on the other. According to Jewish thought, Satan was once an angel who attempted to achieve equality with God. Whereupon, according to Enoch, he was cast out of heaven with his angels and flies continuously in the air (2 *Enoch* 29:4-5).¹⁰⁰⁶ The Babylonian account of the expulsion of Ishtar, goddess of the morning star, is parallel. Allusions to this fall may occur in Isa 14:12 (“How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn!”) and 1 Tim 3:6 (“Or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil”).¹⁰⁰⁷ Yet elsewhere Satan is depicted as having access to heaven (Job 1:6-9; 2:1-6; Zech 3:1ff.).¹⁰⁰⁸ This may have led to the expectation of a final celestial battle that would precede the consummation (cf. *Sib. Or.* 3:796-808; also 2 Mace. 5:1-4; Josephus, *Bell.* 6.5).

It is the archangel Michael, not the Messiah, who wars against Satan in this final struggle. In Dan 12:1 Michael is presented as the guardian of Israel who in the last days will deliver them from tribulation (cf. 1 *Enoch* 90:14). Somewhat later he is pictured as “a mediator between God and man” who will “stand up against the kingdom of the enemy” (*T. Dan* 6:2). He is the angelic intercessor who contended with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude 9). It is he who will go forth in victory against Satan and his host. Satan lays claim to the rank of archangel on the basis that he has angels¹⁰⁰⁹ under him who do his bidding.

8 Satan and his forces are defeated in battle and must forfeit their place in heaven. Until this time Satan, in some sense, had a place in heaven. It is the irretrievable loss of any further opportunity to fulfill his wicked plan that sends Satan out in such great anger against the church.

9 The dragon and his angels are hurled down to the earth. It is the beginning of the end. Lilje notes that “what Jesus saw *ahead* in a vision — ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven!’ (Luke 10:18) — is fulfilled in these mighty conflicts at the end of history” (172). The dragon is identified as the ancient serpent (a reference to Gen 3:1ff.), the one who is called the devil or Satan. The word *śāṭān* was not originally a proper name. It simply meant adversary. In Num 22:22 the angel of the Lord who placed himself in Balaam’s path is called *śāṭān*, an adversary (cf. also 1 Sam 29:4; 1 Kgs 5:4; 11:14, 23). In time, however, it became a proper name. Satan is the Adversary, the prosecutor who accuses people before God in the heavenly court. In the prologue to Job, when the sons of God presented themselves before the Lord, Satan was there to accuse Job of honoring God for personal advantage (Job 1:6-11). In the vision of Zechariah (3:1-10) Satan stands at the right hand of Joshua the high priest to level accusation against him.^{[1010](#)}

Satan is also known as the devil, that is, the Slanderer.^{[1011](#)} It is a thin line that divides accusation and slander. He is also the deceiver of the whole world. Later in Revelation (20:8) he comes forth after the thousand years of imprisonment to deceive the nations and lead them to destruction. He put it into the heart of Judas to betray Christ (John 13:2), and was out to undermine the faith of Peter (Luke 22:31). Paul warns of his evil devices (2 Cor 2:11) and says that he deceived Eve by his cunning (2 Cor 11:3; cf. 1 Tim 2:14). His false prophets would “deceive even the elect — if that were possible” (Matt 24:24; cf. Rev 13:11-15). The twin evils of deception and accusation are brought together in the book of *Jubilees* (“Let not the spirit of Beliar rule over them to accuse them before thee, and to ensnare them,” 1:20). It is a momentous event when this prince of evil is defeated in battle and cast forever from the court of heaven.

10 By now the readers of Revelation will be accustomed to the sudden outbursts of praise that meet them in the book.^{[1012](#)} The voice from heaven that John hears is not that of the martyrs of 6:9-11. Their cry for vindication is distinct from the adulation we now hear. The voice could be that of one of the twenty-four elders (note the repeated emphasis on power: 4:11; 7:12;

11:17; 12:10) or of some undesignated heavenly being. The argument that the designation “our brothers” rules out an angel overlooks 19:10, in which an angel declares himself a fellow servant with John and his brothers.

It is unnecessary to determine whether or not vv. 10-12 are to be taken proleptically. From John’s perspective, the great tribulation about to break upon the church was a direct result of the defeat of Satan in heavenly conflict. The salvation, power, and kingdom of God are present realities. Although defeated, Satan is still a powerful foe. It is true that history has shown that “what must soon take place” (1:1) has waited longer to take place than John expected, but the point of the passage is not to establish a chronology but to reveal the supernatural cause behind Satan’s opposition to the church whenever and wherever it occurs. It should be no surprise that as the end draws near, this hostility will increase in intensity.

The phrase “of our God” modifies all three of the preceding nouns. It is not only the sovereign reign of God that has come, but also the deliverance that he effects and the authority by which he rules. Christ the Son shares in this authority ¹⁰¹³ because it is by his death that Satan has been defeated (5:9; 12:11).¹⁰¹⁴ The sovereign rule of God becomes a present reality in that “the accuser¹⁰¹⁵ of our brothers ... has been hurled down.” Satan’s role as the greater accuser, as we have seen, finds classic expression in the book of Job (1:6-12; 2:1-5; cf. *1 Enoch* 40:7). His accusations against the righteous continue night and day. But by virtue of the death of Christ he is unable successfully to lodge a charge against God’s elect (Rom 8:33-34). The accuser is hurled down to earth. Although John depicts the battle between Michael and Satan in military terms, it is essentially a legal battle between opposing counsel in which the loser is disbarred.¹⁰¹⁶

11 Not only does Satan suffer defeat at the hands of the archangel, but he is overcome by faithful believers as well.¹⁰¹⁷ The primary cause¹⁰¹⁸ of their victory is the blood of the Lamb. The great redemptive act that freed them from their sins (1:5) and established their right to reign (5:9) is the basis for their victory. Their share in the conquest stems from the testimony they have faithfully borne (cf. 6:9; 11:7). Their willingness to proclaim the message overcame even the natural fear of death: “In their love of life they shrank not from death” (TCNT).

12 Verse 12 refers back to v. 10 — the heavens¹⁰¹⁹ are to rejoice because the accuser is cast down. The call for rejoicing echoes such exclamations as

Isa 49:13 (“Shout for joy, O heavens”)¹⁰²⁰ and Ps 96:11 (“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad”). Those that dwell in heaven are angelic beings. That they “tabernacle”¹⁰²¹ there does not indicate a temporary residence, but emphasizes the presence of God (cf. 7:15; 21:3). While the casting out of Satan brings rejoicing in heaven, it is cause for woe upon the earth and the sea.¹⁰²² Some writers identify this as the third Woe (see 8:13; 9:12; 11:14). In that the first two Woes are plagues unleashed upon unbelievers while the verses that follow in chapter 12 (vv. 13-17) describe the hostility of Satan toward Christians, it is unlikely that this should be considered the final Woe. The reason for the great wrath of Satan is the relatively short period of time between his defeat in heaven and the final judgment.¹⁰²³ This short (i.e., limited) time is not “the whole course of human history”¹⁰²⁴ but the period of Satan’s final and desperate struggle. It is the time of unprecedented peril into which the church is entering and during which John desires to encourage the believers faithfully to endure.

C. WAR ON EARTH (12:13-17)

13 When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. 15 Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. 16 But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring — those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

13 The narrative, which for a few verses gave way to a hymn of praise (vv. 10-12), is once again resumed. Failing to destroy the child and defeated in heavenly conflict, the dragon now turns with persecuting zeal¹⁰²⁵ against the mother. Verses 13-17 expand v. 6. The woman is the true Israel. Earlier (v. 5) she gave birth to the Messiah; now she shares with her Son the hostility of Satan. On the Damascus road the young rabbi Saul was asked, "Why do you persecute me?" He learned that in persecuting the church he was persecuting Jesus (Acts 9:4-5). From the very first, Christ has been inseparably united with those who have received him by faith (cf. Matt 25:45).

Exodus typology is woven throughout this entire episode. The pursuit of the woman is similar to Pharaoh's pursuit of the children of Israel as they fled from Egypt (Exod 14:8). The two wings of the great eagle that made possible her escape echo the words of God from Sinai, "I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod 19:4). The river of water that flows from the dragon's mouth may reflect Pharaoh's charge to drown

the male children of the Israelites in the Nile (Exod 1:22). The opening of the earth is reminiscent of the destruction of the men of Korah when in the wilderness they were swallowed by the earth and went down alive into Sheol (Num 16:31-33).

The major theme of the paragraph is the persecution of the woman and her seed. It is important to note that the antagonism directed against the church has its origin in the hatred of Satan for Christ. Jesus taught his disciples that they would receive the same hostile treatment from the world that he had received. "They will treat you this way because of my name" (John 15:21).

14 The woman is given the two wings of the great eagle,^{[1026](#)} symbolizing divine deliverance and enablement. In the Song of Moses we read of God finding Jacob in the wilderness and caring for him as an eagle that "stirs up its nest and hovers over its young." It "spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions" (Deut 32:10-11; cf. Exod 19:4). Elsewhere the prophet writes that those who wait upon the Lord "will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles" (Isa 40:31). The wings enable the woman to fly into the desert, a place of spiritual refuge (cf. comm. on 12:6). In time of persecution God protects his own.^{[1027](#)} It is there that the woman is nourished (or perhaps trained) for three and a half years.^{[1028](#)} This period of time corresponds to the forty-two months of Jewish oppression under the Syrian tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes (Dan 7:25).^{[1029](#)} "Out of the serpent's reach" completes the earlier clause, "that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert."

15-16 As the woman flies to the wilderness, the serpent opens its mouth and sends forth a great flood of water to overtake her. The earth comes to her rescue by opening up and swallowing the torrent. The flood is a common metaphor in the OT for overwhelming evil ("The floods of ungodliness," Ps 18:4, NKJ) and tribulation ("When you pass through the waters, I will be with you," Isa 43:2). But Jewish literature supplies no parallels to v. 15. It could refer to some event in the war of A.D. 66-73 that threatened to cut off the escape of the church from Jerusalem, or, less likely, to a literal flood such as the one that prevented the Jews of Gadara from escaping across the Jordan from the Romans in March, A.D. 68.^{[1030](#)} In any case, John is never restricted by the sources for his imagery. Historically the episode could refer to the attempt on the part of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem to stamp out the early church (Acts 8:1-3).^{[1031](#)} Or it could refer to

the river of lies that will threaten even the elect (2 Thess 2:9-11; Rev 13:14; Matt 24:24) in the last days.¹⁰³² This river of deceit (cf. 2:9; 3:9) has as its counterpart the “river of the water of life” that flows bright as crystal from the heavenly throne (22:1).

The opening of the earth to swallow the men of Korah (Num 16:30) may have suggested the imagery of v. 16, but it sheds little light on its meaning.¹⁰³³ Commentators note various references to rivers or streams in Asia that disappear into the earth.¹⁰³⁴ The entire scene illustrates Jesus’ promise that he will build his church and that “the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18). While nature is somehow involved with the consequences of human sin (Rom 8:19-22),¹⁰³⁵ it is unlikely that the present verse is teaching that nature is on God’s side in the moral struggle between right and wrong.

17 Angered by his failure to harm the woman, the dragon goes off “to make war against the rest of her offspring.”¹⁰³⁶ Those who understand the pursuit of the woman by the dragon as Satan’s attempt to destroy the Palestinian church will interpret “the rest of her offspring” to be Gentile believers throughout the empire.¹⁰³⁷ It is more probable that the phrase refers to believers in general as distinguished from the male child of vv. 5 and 13. They are the brothers and sisters of Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; Heb 2:11). The faithful are described as those who “obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” The testimony of Jesus (cf. 1:2, 9; 19:10; 20:4) is not their witness to him,¹⁰³⁸ but the testimony that he bore. It may intend to make more explicit “God’s commandments,” which could be taken in a general sense (as in 1 Cor 7:19).¹⁰³⁹

D. THE BEAST FROM THE SEA (13:1-10)

1 And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. 2 The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. 4 Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

5 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. 6 He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. 7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. 8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast — all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

9 He who has an ear, let him hear.

10 If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go.

If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

The last verse of chapter 12^{[1040](#)} pictured Satan standing by the sea as if to summon his henchmen from its troubled waters. Unable to reach the

woman, he calls upon his wicked cohorts to destroy her offspring. In chapter 13 we are introduced to the two agents through whom Satan carries out his war against believers (see 12:17).¹⁰⁴¹ In the language of apocalyptic they are beasts. The first comes out of the sea, a grotesque, seven-headed monster (one head mutilated by the slash of a sword; 13:3, 12, 14) who combines characteristics of leopard, bear, and lion. The unbelieving world worships both the beast and the dragon who gave him authority. The beast is allowed to blaspheme God and exercise his authority for forty-two months. He is permitted to make war against the saints and conquer them. Those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life worship the beast.

The second beast comes out of the earth. He is less terrifying in appearance but able to deceive people by his power to work miracles. He orders the inhabitants of the earth to set up an image of the first beast and then gives it the power to speak. People are forced to receive the mark of the beast on the right hand and on the forehead, without which no one is allowed to buy or sell. Those who do not worship image of the beast are put to death. The number of the beast is 666. Together with the dragon the two beasts constitute an unholy trinity of malicious evil. The two beasts represent the power of Rome and the willingness of local religious authorities to cooperate in carrying out the sinister plans of Satan himself.

1 The first beast to appear rises up "out of the sea." The order in which the various parts of his body are mentioned (horns, head, body, feet) has led some to find here an eyewitness account of the beast's actual emergence from the waters.¹⁰⁴² The same expression, however, is used of the second beast who comes up "out of the earth." Consistent interpretation would make such an interpretation highly unlikely. John's figure was undoubtedly suggested by Daniel's vision of the four great beasts that came up from the sea (Dan 7:3).¹⁰⁴³ While the sea may suggest the "disturbed and stormy social and political conditions out of which tyrannies commonly arise,"¹⁰⁴⁴ it is doubtful whether the Seer intended to load the term with such theological significance. Yet the ancient world commonly associated the sea with evil,¹⁰⁴⁵ and for the last great enemy of God's people to arise from the reservoir of chaos would be entirely appropriate. In 11:7 and 17:8 the beast is said to come up out of the Abyss. Any contradiction is only apparent: in both cases the reference is to the source of all evil.

The beast has ten horns and seven heads. On the horns are diadems, and on each head is a “blasphemous name.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Extended discussion of the horns and heads will be reserved for chapter 17, where an angel of judgment supplies a detailed interpretation of the beast and his rider. The ten horns are like those of Daniel’s fourth beast (Dan 7:7). There they are the ten kings that rise out of the fourth kingdom.¹⁰⁴⁷ In Revelation 17 the seven heads are also seven kings (17:10). In the present vision we learn only that on each horn there is a diadem, the insignia of royal authority (cf. 19:12). There are a number of suggestions as to why the diadems are placed on the horns rather than on the heads of the beast. The most plausible is that his claim to authority rests on brute force. It is hardly necessary in apocalyptic to shift the diadems to the horns in order to have sufficient room to stamp the heads with blasphemous names.¹⁰⁴⁸ The Seer does not intend us to visualize the beast with such precision.¹⁰⁴⁹ That the horns are mentioned before the heads (elsewhere the order is reversed; 17:3, 7; cf. 12:3) has no special significance. John is given to variation.

That the beast has seven heads stresses its relationship to the seven-headed dragon of 12:3.¹⁰⁵⁰ The power and authority of the beast come from the dragon (13:4). It is unlikely that John arrived at the number seven by adding the total number of heads on Daniel’s four beasts (four beasts, one of which had four heads, for a total of seven). In apocalyptic the number seven carries the idea of completeness. A seven-headed beast would be an appropriate symbol for the ultimate enemy of the believing church. The names of blasphemy upon the seven heads reflect the increasing tendency of the Roman emperors to assume titles of deity. During his lifetime Augustus had allowed his eastern subjects to pay him divine honors, and at his death the Romans proclaimed him *divus* (one like the gods). On his coins Nero was referred to as Savior of the World. The Roman senate regularly declared its deceased emperors divine. Domitian was addressed as *Dominus et Deus noster*, Our Lord and God.¹⁰⁵¹ To all who held a high view of God and his sovereignty such pretentious claims were sheer blasphemy. “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only” (Luke 4:8). For a human being to assume the titles of divinity was arrogant blasphemy.

But who is the beast of John’s vision? From the verses that follow we learn that he possessed the authority of Satan (v. 4), blasphemed the name of God (vv. 5-6), warred victoriously against the saints (v. 7), and received the worship of the pagan world (vv. 4, 8). There is little doubt that for John

the beast was the Roman Empire as persecutor of the church.¹⁰⁵² It comes onto the land from the sea, just as the Roman troops did when they invaded the eastern Mediterranean. The beast is that spirit of imperial power which claims a religious sanction for its gross injustices.¹⁰⁵³ Yet the beast is more than the Roman Empire. John's vision grew out of the details of his own historical situation, but its complete fulfillment awaits the final denouement of human history. The beast has always been, and will be in a final intensified manifestation, the deification of secular authority. It is a "counterfeit power" that is self-centered, behaves as if it were fully autonomous, and demands total allegiance and excessive praise.¹⁰⁵⁴

2 The beast out of the sea combines characteristics of the four beasts of Daniel 7. The prophet saw in succession a winged lion standing upright as a man (7:4), a bear with three ribs between its teeth (7:5), a four-headed leopard with wings (7:6), and a fourth beast, terrible and strong with great iron teeth and many horns (7:7-8). In combining these beasts, which in Daniel represented four historic kingdoms hostile to the people of God (Dan 7:17, 23), John sets forth the Antichrist as the epitome of bestial opposition to the seed of the woman.¹⁰⁵⁵ Some writers see a special significance in each beast: the fierce cruelty of the leopard,¹⁰⁵⁶ the slow, crushing power of the bear, the dreaded roar of the lion.¹⁰⁵⁷ In any case, the main purpose of the Seer is to describe a monster great and terrifying who utters blasphemies against God and persecutes the faithful. It is of crucial importance to note that the beast receives his power, dominion,¹⁰⁵⁸ and authority from the dragon. The tremendous impact of the Roman Empire stemmed from its unholy alliance with Satan himself. Through it Satan would carry out his plan to devastate and devour the church.

It should be noted that the attitude toward the state in Revelation differs decidedly from that reflected in such passages as Rom 13:1-6; 1 Tim 2:1-2; and 1 Pet 2:13-17. This is not because John differed from the other apostles regarding church and state. It is because in the developing historical situation of the first century the existing truce between church and empire had given way to conflict in which an aggressive program of emperor worship was being forced upon the populace, supported by active persecution. In the clash of loyalties between God and emperor, the Christian had no choice but to obey the One who is the source of all

authority.¹⁰⁵⁹ Only when the state continues to act within the limitations of its delegated authority can the believer freely submit to its regulations.

3 One of the beast's seven heads has been dealt a mortal wound¹⁰⁶⁰ (according to 13:14, by a stroke of the sword). But the beast survives the death stroke and draws the whole world after him in amazement. Many commentators take the slaughtered head as standing for one of the Roman emperors. Caligula is a likely candidate in that he was taken with a serious illness and recovered.¹⁰⁶¹ His attempt to set up his statue in the temple could give rise to v. 6 ("He opened his mouth to blaspheme God ... and his dwelling place"), and the many altars erected to him throughout the empire¹⁰⁶² would encourage the kind of universal worship reflected in v. 8 ("All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast"). Most writers, however, who take the slain head as a Roman emperor choose Nero.¹⁰⁶³ This tyrant, who gained the throne by the treachery of a scheming mother (banished by Caligula but brought back by her uncle, Claudius, whom she married and later poisoned), instituted in A.D. 64 a savage persecution of the Christian church. In order to escape the ignominious death prescribed for a public enemy, Nero took his own life in June of 68. So evil was he that many (especially in the eastern provinces) thought his death in a private villa outside Rome could not possibly be true. Although he was given a public funeral, the rumor persisted for a number of years that he had not died but had gone to Parthia where he remained in hiding to return someday at the head of a mighty army to regain his lost dominion. During the next two decades several pretenders arose claiming to be Nero,¹⁰⁶⁴ two of whom were well received in Parthia. By the end of the century the belief that he was still alive had faded. It was replaced with the expectation that he would rise from the dead and return to seize power.

A basic problem with identifying the slain head as Nero (or any specific emperor) is that the text does not say that the *head* was restored. It was the *beast* who recovered from the death stroke upon one of his heads. Later in the same chapter we read of "the *beast* who was wounded by the sword and yet lived" (13:14).¹⁰⁶⁵ The interpretation of the seven heads as seven kings is a development of chapter 17 (note that in 17:19 they are also seven mountains) and does not belong to the immediate vision. Since the beast is the Roman Empire in its persecution of the church, its recovery from a mortal wound could refer to the reestablishment of order under Vespasian

(A.D. 69-79) following the chaotic and bloody revolution that had begun less than two years before with the death of Nero and extended through the abortive reigns of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Or perhaps no historical allusion is intended and the purpose of the figure is to underscore the tremendous vitality of the beast. Though wounded, he returns with increased might. From the beginning of history the pagan state has set itself against the people of God. From the pharaohs of Egypt to the emperors of Rome it had moved steadily forward with determined purpose to devour all who refused it homage. It had survived every assault and recovered from every deadly blow. Little wonder that in the last days the whole world will be drawn after¹⁰⁶⁶ the beast in wonder and amazement.¹⁰⁶⁷

4 The inhabitants of the earth worship not only the beast but the dragon as well — the one who has given his authority to the beast. Deification of secular power is in fact the worship of Satan.¹⁰⁶⁸ The rhetoric of praise ascribed to the beast parodies such OT passages as Exod 15:11 (“Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?” Cf. Mic 7:18; Isa 44:7; Ps 89:8). Who is like the beast and who can make war against him? The power of the parody lies in the fact that the readers know the beast is tethered (a wild cur on a leash!) and that his end is sure. Thus it is only God of whom it can be truly said, “Who is like him? Who can make war against him?” The motivation for worship is not the beast’s moral greatness but the awesome power of his might. The authority he wields is the authority of Satan himself.

5 The beast is allowed to speak arrogantly and blaspheme for a period of forty-two months. Once again the model is the little horn of Daniel 7 with its “mouth that spoke boastfully” (Dan 7:8; cf. 7:20), who is to “speak against the Most High” (Dan 7:25) and “magnify himself above every god, and ... say unheard-of things against the God of gods” (Dan 11:36). The “proud words” spoken by the beast are explained by the phrase that follows (“even blasphemies”)¹⁰⁶⁹ and expanded in v. 6. In addition to a mouth, the beast is given authority. Four times in the Greek text of vv. 5 through 7 we read the passive *edothē* (“was given”), emphasizing the subordinate role of the beast. Although in vv. 2 and 4 it was the dragon who gave power and authority to the beast, John’s readers would understand in these later verses a reference to God, the ultimate source of all power. The reign of the beast is by divine permission. He operates within the limitations determined by God. He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short (12:12).

The time of his blasphemy is forty-two months, the traditional period for religious persecution (cf. comm. on 11:2). The NKJ translation, “to continue for forty-two months,” is weak. During the forty-two months the beast actively carries out the will of the dragon.^{[1070](#)}

6 The beast opens his mouth to blaspheme God. This activity of the Antichrist is clearly portrayed in 2 Thess 2:4: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God ... proclaiming himself to be God.”^{[1071](#)} The blasphemy of Antiochus (Dan 7:25; 11:36) and the use of divine titles by the Roman emperors would for John identify the Antichrist as the one in whom secular authority had assumed the mantle of deity. The expression, “to open the mouth,” is frequently used at the beginning of a prolonged discourse (cf. Matt 5:2; Acts 8:35) and suggests that the blasphemies of the beast against God were sustained.

The relationship among the several clauses in v. 6 is variously understood. If “and” is read as the first word of the last clause,^{[1072](#)} there are three objects of blasphemy: the name of God, his dwelling place, and those that dwell in heaven. It is more likely that the final clause is appositional and develops more specifically what is intended by the previous expression. To slander the name of God is to speak evil of all that he is and stands for. The name sums up the person. His dwelling place is his “tabernacle” (NKJ and others). In 21:3 a loud voice from the throne declares, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.”

Some understand the blaspheming of God’s dwelling place (i.e., his temple) as a reference to Caligula’s attempt to set up his statue in the Holy of Holies,^{[1073](#)} but it is doubtful whether any historical allusion is intended. Those who dwell in heaven are either angelic beings, or, possibly, the church viewed ideally as seated in heavenly places (cf. Eph 2:6; Col 3:1).

7 Having described “the proud words and blasphemies” (v. 5) in the preceding verse, John now goes on to describe his “exercising authority.” The authority is described in two ways: first by his making war against the saints, and second by his demanding universal worship. To the beast was given^{[1074](#)} power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. The first part of v. 7 builds on Dan 7:21. Swete comments that “like the ... loyal defenders of Jerusalem against Antiochus, the citizens of the new Jerusalem must expect to fall before the persecuting Emperor.”^{[1075](#)} Universal authority is given to the beast. It extends over every tribe, people, language, and

nation.¹⁰⁷⁶ Although the saints are to be conquered (i.e., put to death) by the beast, the real victory belongs to them. They are those who are “victorious over the beast” (15:2). In the crucial test of faith they relinquish their lives rather than their confidence in God. In 12:11 we learned that they overcame the accuser by the blood of the Lamb and loved not their lives to death! This is true victory! The twice-repeated “he was given” stresses the subordinate role of the beast. He is the dragon’s instrument for revenge and operates at his bidding. Yet the reference goes beyond the dragon, and we are to understand that even this unholy alliance is under the control of the One in whom resides all authority and might.

8 John now describes the results of the work of the beast to whom such awesome power has been given. The whole world (apart from those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life) will join in worship of the beast. Jesus had foretold the coming of false Christs who with displays of signs and wonders would “deceive even the elect — if that were possible” (Matt 24:24). Once the Roman state had taken on a religious significance it was only natural that it should begin to demand worship. The worship of a satanically inspired perversion of secular authority is the ultimate offense against the one true God. The temptation rejected by Jesus at the outset of his public ministry (Matt 4:8-10) reappears at the end of history in its most persuasive form and gains the allegiance of all but the elect.

The NRSV translation “every one” represents an unexpected change in the Greek text from the plural to the singular.¹⁰⁷⁷ The shift is perhaps intended to emphasize the individual responsibility of each one who worships the beast. They are the ones whose names have not been written in the book of life. The idea of a divine register is found as far back as Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai (Deut 32:32-33). In the NT Paul speaks of his fellow workers as those “whose names are in the book of life” (Phil 4:3). In Revelation the designation occurs six times (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27) and refers to a register of the names of all those who belong to God. Here and in 21:27 the book of life is said to belong to the Lamb. It is through his sacrifice that life is possible (5:9-10).

The “creation of the world” refers to the creation of the visible order. It is mentioned ten times in the NT. Jesus speaks of a kingdom prepared since the creation of the world (Matt 25:34), and Paul of the believers’ election before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4). The problem in the immediate verse is not the meaning of the phrase but its place in the sentence. Was it

the writing of believers' names or the death of the Lamb that dates from the creation of the world? The RSV and many of the newer translations follow the first alternative. The faithful are guarded by their election (the writing of their names in the Lamb's book of life) from being deceived by the pretensions of the Antichrist. This is said to have taken place at the creation of the world. Rev 17:8, a parallel verse, would support this interpretation. However, the premise that John must be absolutely consistent in his literary expression is questionable. There is no particular reason why he should be denied the freedom to use a given phrase in several ways. It is better in this case to follow the order of the Greek syntax and read, "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." ¹⁰⁷⁸ That is, the death of Christ was a redemptive sacrifice decreed in the counsels of eternity. It is worth noting that names may be blotted out of the book of life (3:5); hence having one's name in the register at the beginning of creation would offer something less than complete security in the time of trial.

9-10 The contemporary equivalent of v. 9 would be the military command, "Now hear this!" It occurs in each of the seven letters (2:7, 11, 17, 19; 3:6, 13, 22) and recalls the familiar expression of Jesus, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt 11:15; cf. Mark 4:9). The idiom could point in either direction, but what it primarily does is to alert the reader to the importance of the proverbial statement that follows.

The epigrammatic style of v. 10 has resulted in a number of scribal attempts to clarify the meaning by altering the text.¹⁰⁷⁹ The reading that best accounts for the origin of the others (when translated literally into English) is:

If anyone into captivity, into captivity this one goes.

If anyone by a sword to be killed, this one by a sword to be killed.

Such terseness is not immediately clear, especially to the later reader of Revelation. At issue is, Who is taken captive and killed; and by whom? The NIV correctly interprets the text in context to refer to those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (v. 8). In view of the impending persecution at the hand of the beast it is certain that captivity and death by the sword await those who faithfully follow the Lamb. There is a certain grim reality that lies ahead for believers. They *will* be taken into captivity, and many *will* be put to death by the sword. As their Master met death at

the hands of a hostile secular power, so also they will meet the same fate.¹⁰⁸⁰ This reading of the Greek text stresses the inevitability of persecution and death for the faithful. This appeal to loyal endurance suits the context and tone of the entire Apocalypse and, further, is supported by Jer 15:2 and 43:11.¹⁰⁸¹

Two other less probable readings warrant our attention. One refers both couplets to the persecutors of the church by adding a verb that makes the first line read, “If any person *leads*¹⁰⁸² [a believer] into captivity, into captivity that person [himself/herself] will go.” Thus the verse would be stressing that the enemies of God’s people would be requited for their persecution of believers in the same form they had employed (captivity for captivity, sword for sword).

The other reading is that of the Sinaiticus (followed by the NKJ) — “He who kills with the sword, must be killed with the sword.”¹⁰⁸³ This corresponds to the words of Jesus in Matt 26:52, “All who draw the sword will die by the sword.” The first couplet would teach that the believer must accept what God has ordained, and the second would warn against any attempt on the part of the church to defend itself by the use of force. Barclay writes, “It is an intolerable paradox to defend the gospel of the love of God by using the violence of man.”¹⁰⁸⁴

The conclusion, therefore, is that “there is need for endurance and faith on the part of Christ’s people” (TCNT). When the impending persecution breaks upon the church, believers will need to meet it with steadfast endurance and an unwavering faith. John’s warnings about the perils that faced God’s people served to prepare them for the difficult days that lay ahead. At the close of the age it will be to the church’s advantage to be fully informed of the increased activity of Satan (12:12, 17). The view that God will remove his people from the suffering of those days creates a faulty expectation that will work against their need for “patient endurance and faithfulness.”

E. THE BEAST FROM THE EARTH (13:11-18)

11 Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. 12 He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. 13 And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. 14 Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. 16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

18 This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

We come now to the second vision of chapter 13. In contrast to the first beast who came up out of the sea, this one comes out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but when he spoke he roared like a dragon. By performing great and miraculous signs he set out to deceive the inhabitants of the earth. He set up an image in honor of the first beast and was given the power to bring it to life so it could speak. Everyone was required to receive the mark of this beast or forfeit the right to buy and sell. Those who did not honor the first beast were put to death. His name transferred into numbers is 666.

It is clear that John's vision must first be understood against the sociopolitical situation of his own day. If the first beast was the power of

Rome whose insistence on worshiping the emperor was beginning to threaten the early church, the second beast most certainly represents the imperial priesthood that assisted Rome in propagating the imperial cult. John's divinely revealed insights understood the end to be imminent. Although nearly 2,000 years have passed since he wrote Revelation, his understanding of the forces that will bring history to a close remains true. In the end Satan by means of his control over secular society will demand ultimate allegiance and deceitfully use every method available to gain the worship of the inhabitants of the world.

11 Ancient tradition spoke of two primeval monsters, which inhabited the ocean depths and the dry land. According to *1 Enoch* 60:7-10 Leviathan (a female monster) lived "in the abysses of the ocean," and Behemoth (the male) occupied a "waste wilderness named Duidain."¹⁰⁸⁵ Since such "mythology" was already known to the authors of the OT, there is no particular reason why John may not have reflected on it. To borrow images known to common culture is not the same as saying that they are authentic and real. Some writers think that since the first beast may have been suggested by Dan 7:3 (the four great beasts came up *from the sea*), the second beast could well have been suggested by the interpretation of this passage a few verses later (Dan 7:17 says that the beasts are kings that arise *out of the earth*). A simpler solution is that as the first beast came from across the sea (hence appearing to come "out of the sea"), the second beast rose within Asia Minor itself. In any case, the evil triumvirate is now complete. As Christ received authority from the Father (Matt 11:27), so Antichrist receives authority from the dragon (Rev 13:4); and as the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), so the false prophet glorifies the Antichrist (Rev 13:12).¹⁰⁸⁶

The beast out of the earth is a deceiver (cf. v. 14). Elsewhere he is uniformly called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). His two horns like a lamb represent his attempt to convey the impression of gentle harmlessness. This passage recalls the warning of Jesus, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matt 7:15). The horns like a lamb may refer to the seductive inducements (considerations of loyalty, patriotism, self-interest, etc.) held out to Christians by the beast.¹⁰⁸⁷ It is unlikely that the two horns are intended to contrast with the two witnesses of chapter 11. Neither do they allude to the seven-horned Lamb of 5:6.¹⁰⁸⁸ In the parody that runs

throughout this section it is the first, not the second, beast who corresponds to the Lamb. That the beast spoke like a dragon may mean either that he spoke with the roar of a dragon or that, as the serpent in Eden (cf. 12:9), his speech was deceitful and beguiling.^{[1089](#)}

The role of the second beast is to cause people to worship the first beast. To achieve this end he is empowered to work miracles. By economic boycott and the threat of death he intends to make everyone worship the image of the beast. This priestly role identifies the second beast as a religious power. In John's day the reference would be either to the local priests of the imperial cult^{[1090](#)} or to the provincial council responsible for enforcing emperor worship throughout Asia.^{[1091](#)} John clearly saw Rome and emperor worship as the primary cause for the churches' suffering. Pergamum was one of the primary centers for the emperor cult, and already Antipas had been put to death there (2:13).

Wilcock is representative of those interpreters who take the figures in this section of Revelation in a general and timeless sense. He writes that the second beast is "in modern parlance, the *ideology* — whether religious, philosophical, or political — which 'gives breath to' any human social structure organized independently of God."^{[1092](#)} In the final days of Antichrist the false prophet stands for the role of false religion in effecting the capitulation of society to the worship of secular power. It is the universal victory of humanism. Peterson, in his self-styled and highly readable "pastoral midrash," writes that "dragon, sea beast, and land beast are a satanic trinity^{[1093](#)} that infiltrates the political world in order to deflect our worship from the God whom we cannot see to the authorities that we can see, and to deceive us into buying into a religion or belief-system that has visible results in self-gratification."^{[1094](#)}

12 As the dragon gave his authority to the first beast (13:4), so the second beast exercises the authority of the first. He carries out the desires of the first beast as a prophet who stands in readiness before his god (cf. 1 Kgs 17:1). His purpose is to cause everyone^{[1095](#)} to worship the beast whose fatal wound has been healed. Writers who interpret the fatal wound that had been healed as a reference to the Nero Redivivus legend find it necessary to point out that here and in v. 14 the beast is to be identified with the head impersonating him. It is simpler to understand that the beast himself

recovered rather than one of his heads that was mortally wounded (see comm. on v. 3).

13 In keeping with a long biblical tradition understood as a parody of Elijah, John goes on to offer the reason for the false prophet's ability to perform spectacular signs. Deut 13:1 warns of the false prophet who would lead people to worship other gods by means of signs and wonders. The second beast imitates the miracles of the true prophets to deceive the people into worshipping the beast. Like Elijah he calls down fire out of heaven in the sight of everyone.^{[1096](#)} As a false Elijah he prepares the way for a false Messiah. It was widely expected that the appearance of the Antichrist would be marked by numerous miracles. Jesus predicted the rise of false Christs who would lead astray, if possible, even the elect (Mark 13:22). Paul speaks of the lawless one whose coming "will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (2 Thess 2:9). According to the *Asc. Isa.* 4:10 the Antichrist will make the sun rise at night and the moon appear at the sixth hour.^{[1097](#)} The second beast carries out his task of deception in fulfillment of these expectations.

14 The power of Satan to deceive (12:9; 20:3, 8) is shared by the false prophet (cf. 19:20). He is the Antichrist's Minister of Propaganda.^{[1098](#)} "The inhabitants of the earth" is a semitechnical designation for the entire body of unregenerated humanity.^{[1099](#)} They are deceived by^{[1100](#)} the miracles that the false prophet is empowered to perform in the presence of the beast. Some writers see a parody on the two witnesses who stand "before the Lord of the earth" (11:4) and devour their enemies with fire from their mouths (11:5). The second beast instructs the people to make an image of the beast who^{[1101](#)} survived the stroke of the sword. The translation "who had the stroke of the sword and *came to life*" is permissible,^{[1102](#)} but in view of the parallel passages (13:3, 12), which say that he was *healed*, it is better to take the Greek verb in its normal sense. The image would probably be a bust or statue of the emperor rather than his image stamped on a coin.^{[1103](#)} According to *Asc. Isa.* 4:11 the Antichrist is to set up his image in every city. Only the death of Caligula prevented his intention of erecting his statue in the Jewish temple.

15 The second beast is given the power to animate the image of the first beast. He gives to it the breath of life,^{[1104](#)} and the image speaks. Belief in

statues that spoke and performed miracles is widely attested in ancient literature. Simon Magus is reputed to have brought statues to life.^{[1105](#)} Andreas, the sixth-century commentator, reminds us that it was the age of Apollonius of Tyana, whose trickery was held to come from the powers of evil. Ventriloquism was practiced by the priests of Oriental cults, and sorcery had found a place in the official circles of Rome.^{[1106](#)} Apelles of Ascalon was at home in the court of Caligula, and Apollonius was a friend of several Roman emperors. The sorcerer and false prophet Elymas on the island of Cyprus sought (perhaps by devious methods) to prevent Sergius Paulus, the proconsul, from accepting the faith as preached by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:6-8; see also 16:16).

The syntax of the verse suggests that the image not only spoke but also passed the death sentence upon all^{[1107](#)} who would not worship it. There may be a change of subject in the final clause so that it is the second beast who enforces worship of the image.^{[1108](#)} In either case the result is the same. In the last days there is to be a great division in the human race. Some will remain true to the faith even in the face of death; others will turn in worship to the Antichrist. It is this decision which accounts for the apostasy that is to precede the return of Christ (2 Thess 2:1-3). Half-hearted Christians do not surrender their lives for a cause in which they do not really believe. The view that John was speaking of the legal status of Christians rather than their actual fate^{[1109](#)} is strange in view of the fact that at least by Trajan's day failure to worship the emperor was a capital offense.^{[1110](#)}

16 The second beast requires all people to receive the mark of the first beast on their right hand or forehead. The coupling of opposites (small, great; rich, poor; free, slave) is a rhetorical way of stressing the totality of human society (cf. 11:18; 19:5, 18; 20:12). No one who would carry on the normal pursuits of everyday life (v. 17) is exempt. The origin of the mark is variously explained. It could derive from the practice of branding disobedient slaves^{[1111](#)} or soldiers defeated in battle.^{[1112](#)} Religious tattooing was widespread in the ancient world, and devotees of a particular god were often branded to indicate their loyal devotion.^{[1113](#)} Ptolemy Philopator branded Jews who submitted to registration with the ivy leaf, the mark of Dionysiac worship (3 Macc 2:29). The word translated "mark" was also used for the likeness or name of the emperor on Roman coins. This may be the reason why in the present verse the mark is placed on the hand as well

as on the forehead.¹¹¹⁴ The word was also a technical designation for the seals that were attached to commercial documents and stamped with the name and date of the emperor.¹¹¹⁵ Some writers see a reference to the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries (little leather boxes containing portions of the law) on the left hand and on the forehead (Deut 6:8).¹¹¹⁶ Others take the passage as an apocalyptic description of certificates issued to those who had fulfilled the ceremonial obligations of emperor worship.¹¹¹⁷ Still others see a reference to the X of Christ's name (in Greek) and suggest that the mark of the beast was a parody of the practice of making the sign of the cross on the forehead of the new Christian.¹¹¹⁸

Whatever the background of the word, its significance in the present passage is to parody the sealing of the servants of God in chapter 7. As the elect are sealed upon their foreheads to escape the destruction about to fall upon the earth, so the followers of the beast are to escape his wrath against the church by bearing his mark. In the apocalyptic vision of John the mark is obviously visible. It symbolizes unqualified allegiance to the demands of the imperial cult.¹¹¹⁹ In the final days of Antichrist it will represent the ultimate test of religious loyalty. Only those who would rather die than compromise their faith will resist the mark of Antichrist.

17 Not only does the mark serve to identify those who worship the beast, but¹¹²⁰ it allows them to engage in the simple commercial transactions of the day.¹¹²¹ An economic boycott is raised against all who refuse to fall into line. Its purpose seems to be to harass believers rather than the method by which they are to be put to death (v. 15). The mark is identified as the name of the beast written in its numerical equivalent. It is not the name of the beast or the number of his name that is stamped on his followers. The mark is the number of the name.¹¹²²

In ancient times, letters of the alphabet served as numbers. The first nine letters stood for the numbers one through nine, the next nine for the numbers ten through ninety, and so on. As there were not enough letters in the then current Greek alphabet, certain obsolete letters and signs were brought into the system. Thus, every name yielded a number. To decipher a number presented a rather fascinating riddle. An often quoted graffito from Pompeii reads, "I love her whose number is 545."¹¹²³ Among the Jews the practice was known as gematria. Rabbis delighted in discovering esoteric meanings in the numbers found in Scripture. For example, in Gen 14:14 the

318 trained men who accompanied Abram to recover Lot from his captors turn out to be Eliezer, the chief servant. A striking example is found in *Sib. Or.* 1:324ff., where the name of Jesus in Greek is given as 888.¹¹²⁴ In the following verse in Revelation we learn that the number of the beast stamped upon his followers was 666. But just who is referred to by this cryptogram is another story!

18 No verse in Revelation has received more attention than this one with its cryptic reference to the number of the beast. Although the verse opens with the declaration, “This calls for wisdom,” the history of interpretation demonstrates that no consensus has been reached on whom or what John had in mind.¹¹²⁵ The person who has understanding is called upon to calculate¹¹²⁶ the number of the beast. This is an invitation to work backward from the number 666 to the name for which it is the numerical equivalent. Gematria was widely used in apocalyptic because of its symbolic and enigmatic quality. It served as a precaution against the charge of sedition.

The number of the beast is the number of a certain man.¹¹²⁷ Some writers feel that the clause should be read, “for it is a human [rather than a supernatural] number.” But exactly what a nonhuman number would be or why it should enter this context is not at all clear. The reference is to some definite historical person (the NRSV translates the final clause, “for it is the number of a person”).

The beast’s number is 666. Already by the second century the solution to this riddle had escaped so prominent a theologian as Irenaeus, a native of Asia Minor and a disciple of Polycarp. In his work, *Against Heresies* (5.30) he mentions as possible interpretations *Euanthas* (a name no longer identifiable), *Lateinos* (the Roman Empire), and *Teitan* (the Titans of Greek mythology who rebelled against the gods). Another early conjecture was *arnoumē*, a form of the Greek verb meaning “to deny.” Recent suggestions are equally ingenious and similarly unconvincing. Giet finds that the initials of the Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Vespasian add up to 666,¹¹²⁸ but he has to omit Otho and Vitellius to make it work out. Stauffer suggests that John was counting up an abbreviated form in Greek of the full Latin title of Domitian (*Imperator Caesar Domitianus Augustus Germanicus*), which appeared in part on his coinage.¹¹²⁹ A rather different solution has been offered by G. A. van den Bergh van Eysinga,¹¹³⁰ who shows that 666

is the triangular number of 36 (1 plus 2 plus 3 etc. up to 36), and 36 is the triangular number of 8 — the number of the Antichrist (cf. 17:11).

The solution most commonly accepted today is that 666 is the numerical equivalent of Nero Caesar.¹¹³¹ It is held to be supported by the variant reading 616, which also yields the name of Nero when the Latinized spelling is followed.¹¹³² What is not generally stressed is that this solution asks us to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name,¹¹³³ and that with a defective spelling.¹¹³⁴ A shift to Hebrew letters is unlikely in that Revelation is written in Greek and there is no indication that the riddle is to be solved by transposing it into another language. Further, the name of Nero was apparently never suggested by the ancient commentators even though his persecuting zeal made him a model of the Antichrist.

Some writers take the number more as a symbol than a cryptogram. 666 is the number that falls short of perfection in each of its digits. For Hendriksen it represents “failure upon failure upon failure.”¹¹³⁵ It is symbolic of the beast’s continuing failure to accomplish his purpose. It is the trinity of imperfection.¹¹³⁶

In view of the widely divergent and highly speculative solutions to the riddle it seems best to conclude that John intended only his intimate associates to be able to decipher the number. So successful were his precautions that even Irenaeus some one hundred years later was unable to identify the person intended. An additional 1,800 years of conjecture have not brought us any closer to a definitive answer.

Chapter 12 introduced us to the great dragon, the primary adversary of God. In chapter 13 we met the two great forces used by Satan to accomplish his nefarious plans. The stage is being set for the final encounter. What is crucial at this point is to recognize the true nature of the struggle. While the Lamb was victorious on the cross, the full and public acknowledgment of that victory awaits a final moment. Believers live in the already/not yet tension of a battle won but not quite over. While victory has been achieved, the defeated enemy must still be permanently removed from the field of battle. That will take place when the conquering Messiah returns to establish his eternal rule.

F. THE REDEEMED AND THE LAMB ON MOUNT ZION (14:1-5)

1 Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. 3 And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. 5 No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

In order to keep before his readers the ultimate reward for their endurance, the author of Revelation intersperses glimpses of final blessedness among his presentations of judgment. The detailed description of the beast and the false prophet in the preceding chapter was a somber reminder of what lay in the immediate future, suffering and death, with a call to steadfastness. A note of encouragement is in order. John moves quickly beyond the storm about to break to the bright morning of eternity when the Lamb and his followers stand on the heavenly Mount Zion with the anthem of redemption everywhere resounding like the roar of a mighty waterfall and the echo of thunder. Verses 1-5 are often referred to as in some respects the most enigmatic in the book. The major difficulty is the description of the 144,000 as “virgins” (AV, ASV, NKJ, etc.) who have not “defile[d] themselves with women” (v. 4). Yet even this “violent and paradoxical metaphor”^{[1137](#)} yields

an intelligible interpretation when proper consideration is given to John's highly figurative literary style.^{[1138](#)}

In chapter 7 we learned that the servants of God were sealed on the forehead to protect them from the coming judgments (vv. 2-4). In chapter 13 we discovered another kind of mark — the mark of the beast (v. 16). Without this mark on the right hand or forehead no one would be able to buy or sell (v. 17; cf. also 14:11; 16:2; 19:20). In each case the “mark” is the name of the one to whom ultimate loyalty is given (13:17; 14:1). The 144,000 on Mount Zion bear the name of God; the unbelieving world carries the name (or its number) of the Satanic beast. The destiny of every person is determined by the mark that person bears. When judgment comes there will be no room for ambiguity; people will have by their “mark” declared their master. For the believer it will be a time of joy and celebration as before the throne of heaven they sing the new song of their redemption.

1 The striking quality of the vision is stressed by the opening words, “I looked, and there before me.”^{[1139](#)} Suddenly John sees the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, accompanied by the 144,000 who bear his name (and the name of his Father) on their foreheads. The scene is in obvious contrast to the beast of chapter 13, whose followers are stamped with his mark (666) on the right hand or forehead (vv. 16-17). The Lamb who in chapter 5 was counted worthy to unloose the seals of the scroll of destiny, and in chapter 7 to receive the adulation of the innumerable multitude of heaven, now stands victorious with his followers.^{[1140](#)}

It is fitting that the Lamb should be standing^{[1141](#)} on Mount Zion, for this sacred place had long been associated with divine deliverance. The prophet Joel foretold that those on Mount Zion would escape the great and terrible day of the Lord (Joel 2:32).^{[1142](#)} The mountain in John's vision, however, is not on earth. It is the heavenly Mount Zion (cf. Heb 12:22), the Jerusalem that is above (Gal 4:26).^{[1143](#)} Some writers take it as the earthly site of a millennial reign,^{[1144](#)} but the entire scene is one of praise before the throne of heaven.

The identity of the 144,000 (and their relation to a group of the same number in chapter 7) has been variously interpreted. Verse 4 seems to set them apart as a select group of supersaints. As firstfruits they would be consecrated to God in a special way, and as celibates they would enjoy a

privileged relationship. The absence of any article before 144,000 is argued in support of this interpretation. But, as will be argued below (vv. 3-5), they are better understood as the entire body of the redeemed. In chapter 7, 144,000 were sealed against the woes that lay ahead (7:4-8). Now the same number stands secure beyond that final ordeal. The repetition of the number is not to ensure an exact identification between the two groups but to point out that not one has been lost. John's symbols are fluid, and, in fact, the number 144,000 of chapter 14 corresponds with the innumerable multitude found in the second vision of chapter 7. Both portray the full complement of the redeemed throughout history. On their foreheads are written the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father.¹¹⁴⁵ In this context the mark is primarily a symbol of basic allegiance. Those who bear the mark have committed themselves to the Lamb and to the path of self-sacrificing love. They are the overcomers upon whom the risen Christ has written his own new name (3:12).

2-3 As elsewhere in John's visions this one includes both seeing (v. 1) and hearing (vv. 2-3). What is heard is the (very loud) new song sung by the redeemed. It is not only loud but melodic as well, as the unfolding similes make clear. The sound that John hears from heaven is like the roar of a mighty cataract (or the roar of the ocean; NJB). Ezekiel uses the same figure for the sound of the winged cherubim in flight as they accompany the chariot throne of God (Ezek 1:24). It is like the voice of God approaching in his glory (Ezek 43:2). Apparently the Seer was greatly impressed by the sound, for he adds two more descriptive similes: it is like the sound of thunder (cf. 6:1; 19:6), and it is like the swelling refrain of an ensemble of harpists. The sound is not that of an angelic choir (as in 5:11-12 and 7:11-12), but is the anthem of redemption sung by the 144,000. They alone, having experienced deliverance, are able to sing its praise (cf. v. 4). Many commentators see the angels as teaching this new song to the redeemed, a concept that is theologically inappropriate and by no means necessitated by the text.

That the sound is actually a chorus of many voices is indicated by the plural, "they sing."¹¹⁴⁶ It is the "new song" of 5:9, but now it is sung by the very ones who have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb and made a kingdom of priests before the heavenly throne. As in so many of the "new songs" spoken of in the Psalms (96:1; 98:1; 144:9; etc.), the theme is deliverance. Only those who have paid the full price of endurance in the

faith are equipped by experience to give voice to the subsequent anthem of victory. They sing before the throne of God, with the angelic orders of heaven (the living creatures and the elders) as audience. That they have been redeemed from the earth does not mean that they were removed bodily from the earth (cf. John 17:15) but that they were separated from the evil ways of the world and the tyranny of its pernicious philosophies.

4 The 144,000 are now described under three figures intended to reveal both who they are and what characterizes them: they are virgins who have not defiled themselves with women; they are followers of the Lamb; and they are firstfruits purchased from among men.

The first figure has occasioned considerable discussion. A number of commentators understand John to be describing the 144,000 as an elite group of saints who have attained the utmost in spirituality by renouncing marriage with its detracting sexual relationships.¹¹⁴⁷ They are celibates and virgins.¹¹⁴⁸ That certain segments of the early church came to exalt celibacy is perfectly true. Jesus had spoken with approval of eunuchs (Matt 19:12), and Paul wished that all people possessed the gift of continence so as to serve without hindrance the cause of Christ (1 Cor 7:1; 7:32). As early as the second century, Marcion had established a church solely for celibates. Origen, the great theologian and apologist, was said to have castrated himself to insure chastity.

The major difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that it implies that sexual relationships within marriage are defiling. This is contrary to the clear teaching of the NT. From the beginning, God made male and female for one another (Gen 2:18-24), and what he has joined in holy wedlock no one is to separate (Matt 19:4-6). 1 Corinthians 7 notwithstanding, Paul held marriage in such high esteem that he could use it as an illustration of the intimate relationship between Christ and his church (Eph 5:31-32).¹¹⁴⁹

Another interpretation takes the words in a more figurative sense and understands the 144,000 to be those who have kept themselves from adultery and fornication.¹¹⁵⁰ They are virgins in the sense of having never entered into immoral relations with the other sex.¹¹⁵¹ While chastity was a highly regarded virtue in the Christian community, it should not be elevated to the distinctive mark of the redeemed in heaven.

There is a symbolism in the description of the church as virgins that must not be overlooked. On many occasions throughout the OT, Israel is spoken of as a virgin. She is the “Virgin Daughter of Zion” (2 Kgs 19:21; Lam

2:13), “Virgin Israel” (Jer 18:13; Amos 5:2). When she lapsed into idolatry, she is said to have played the harlot (Jer 3:6; Hos 2:5). The figure is carried over into the NT when Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Cor 11:2). The 144,000 are here pictured as the promised bride of Christ (cf. 21:9) who, as they await the day of marriage, have kept themselves pure from all defiling relationships with the pagan world system. They have resisted the seductions of the great harlot Rome with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication (17:2).¹¹⁵² The apparent confusion of the sexes is of no moment since the entire figure is to be understood symbolically.

The redeemed are next described as those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.¹¹⁵³ They do not follow the Lamb as he strolls around heaven, but they follow his life and instructions while he was still on earth. The statement echoes the words of Jesus in such passages as Mark 8:34 (“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”), Matt 19:21, and others. While the language does not require a specific reference to martyrdom, a significant number of those who enter the final tribulation may in fact follow him to death.

If the first figure stressed the fidelity of the redeemed and the second their discipleship, the third speaks of the sacrificial offering of themselves to God. Although the Greek word translated “firstfruits” originally meant a token offering to God that released the harvest that followed for secular use, it had come to signify more often than not in the LXX no more than an offering or gift.¹¹⁵⁴ The point is that by offering themselves to God they were set free from human entanglements to belong solely to him. Purchased by the blood of the Lamb (5:9),¹¹⁵⁵ they are an offering to God.

5 In contrast to those who will forever be excluded from the eternal city — evil people of every sort and “everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:15; cf. 21:27) — it can be said of the redeemed that “no lie was found in their mouths.” Unlike the pagan world that “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Rom 1:25; cf. also 2 Thess 2:11), they made no compromise with the heretical claims of Antichrist. Zephaniah had prophesied that the remnant of Israel would speak no lies, nor would deceit be found in their mouths (Zeph 3:13).¹¹⁵⁶

The 144,000 are also “beyond the reach of blame” (TCNT).¹¹⁵⁷ When used of NT believers, the Greek word uniformly means ethically

blameless.¹¹⁵⁸ Since the theme of sacrifice is present in the immediate context (cf. v. 4c), a number of writers are of the opinion that the word should here be taken in the ritual sense of sacrificially acceptable. This is the meaning of the word when used of Christ the Paschal Lamb in 1 Pet 1:19 (cf. Heb 9:14).

The vision of the Lamb and the 144,000 on Mount Zion, following as it does the distressing visions of the two Satanic beasts, brings a surge of spirited expectation. As difficult as the future may be, there remains the joyful prospect of soon standing beyond this sphere of suffering on the mountain of the Lord and singing with the innumerable multitude of the redeemed the new song of salvation. Visions of what will be strengthen the believer to endure the reality of what for the present must be.

INTERLUDE: VISIONS OF FINAL JUDGMENT (14:6-20)

Between the sixth and seventh seal we encountered an interlude in which the 144,000 were sealed and protected in the coming judgments (7:1-8). The second half of the chapter, looking ahead, portrayed the innumerable multitude in heaven serving God and enjoying the blessings of the eternal state (7:9-17). Between the sixth and seventh trumpet we found another interlude, this time telling of the little scroll that the seer is to eat and laying out the prophetic role of the two witnesses (10:1-11:14). In chapter 14 (vv. 6-20) we once again encounter an interlude — this time, not (as in the first interlude) of safety and joy but of judgment. Following as it does the heavenly vision of the 144,000 on Mount Zion, it reminds the reader that the redeemed will be vindicated when judgment falls on the unbelieving world. It is a way of assuring the martyrs under the altar (6:9-11) that God has not forgotten that violent death was the price they paid for their convictions

1. Impending Judgment Announced (14:6-13)

The tableau of the Lamb and his followers standing victorious on the heavenly Mount Zion is followed by a series of three angel proclamations (vv. 6-11). These three are interrelated and progressive. The summons to worship the Creator (vv. 6-7) leads to a prediction of the downfall of the great citadel of paganism (v. 8) and then to a vivid portrayal of the torment awaiting all who worship the beast (vv. 9-11). The unit is then brought to a close with a voice from heaven pronouncing blessed those who die in the Lord.

6 Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth — to every nation, tribe, language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

8 A second angel followed and said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.”

9 A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, 10 he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” 12 This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.”

“Yes, ”says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them. ”

6 That the angel flying in midair is called “another angel” has no particular significance. The seventh angel of 11:15 is too far removed for an intended contrast. If the designation involves any contrast at all, it would probably be with angels in general who have appeared throughout the book to this point.¹¹⁵⁹ Like the eagle of woe in 8:13, it flies in midair to be seen and heard by all. The proclamation goes out over¹¹⁶⁰ those who living¹¹⁶¹ on earth. The angel’s message is called “the eternal gospel.” It is not the gospel of God’s redeeming grace in Christ Jesus¹¹⁶² but, as the following verse shows, a summons to fear, honor, and worship the Creator.¹¹⁶³ It is an eternal gospel in that it sets forth the eternal purpose of God for people. It relates to judgment and salvation in the coming eternal age. Those who dwell on the earth are further specified as every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.¹¹⁶⁴

7 The angel speaks with a loud voice so that all can hear. The eternal gospel calls on people to fear and honor the Creator, for the hour of judgment is at hand. God has revealed himself in nature so that people are without excuse (Rom 1:19-20).¹¹⁶⁵ To fear God is to reverence him; to give him glory is to pay him the respect and honor that is his due. Paul wrote of the moral retrogression of paganism that began with people’s failure to glorify God (Rom 1:21). Now we hear one last call for civilization to repent and give him glory. The proclamation is couched in the language of natural theology. People are called upon to worship the God who made the heaven, the earth, and the waters, both salt and fresh (cf. 10:6). An interesting parallel is the message of Barnabas and Paul to the multitudes at Lystra: “Turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them” (Acts 14:15).

8 A second¹¹⁶⁶ angel now appears (apparently flying in midair as the first) and announces the fall of Bab^ylon the Great. The introduction of this symbolic reference without explanation assumes that the readers would understand the allusion. The ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon had become the political and religious capital of a world empire. It was renowned for its luxury and moral corruption. Above all it was the great enemy of the people of God. For the early church the city of Rome was a

contemporary Babylon.¹¹⁶⁷ The designation “Babylon the Great” (used consistently throughout Revelation: e.g., 14:8; 16:9; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21) goes back to Dan 4:30 and emphasizes, “the Nebuchadnezzar-like self-importance of the rulers of Rome rather than the actual size or true greatness of the city.”¹¹⁶⁸ It is a symbol of the spirit of godlessness that in every age lures people away from the worship of the Creator. It is “the dark counterpart of Jerusalem,” ¹¹⁶⁹ the final manifestation of “secular humanism” in its attempt to destroy the remaining vestiges of true religion. Society set free from God is its own worst enemy.

The angel announces the destruction of this center of pagan power and corruption in the very words used by Isaiah when prophesying of Babylon on the Euphrates: “Babylon has fallen, has fallen!” (Isa 21:9). Drawing upon Jer 51:7 (“Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD’S hand; she made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore they have now gone mad”), the angel describes the doomed city as having “made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (NRSV). It is the word “wrath” that makes this compound phrase difficult to interpret. Since a basic meaning of the Greek word is “passion,” it could be translated, “the wine of her passionate immorality.” ¹¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, the “wrath” of v. 10 could be the final, irrevocable judgment of God.¹¹⁷¹

Most likely the awkwardness of the phrase comes from the blending of two somewhat distinct ideas. In 17:2 we learn that the great harlot has made the kings of the earth drunk with “the wine of her adulteries.” This pictures Rome the prostitute seducing the world by the intoxicating influence of her corrupt practices. The other concept is that of the cup of God’s wrath as divine punishment (a figure used elsewhere in Rev: 14:10; 16:19; 19:15). By joining the two symbols, the angel may be pointing out that the heady potion of Rome’s seductive practices inevitably involves the wrath of God.¹¹⁷² In any case, the wrath of God is falling upon the pagan city, and judgment is determined.

9-10 Verses 9-11 form a counter-proclamation to that of the image in chapter 13. There it was decreed that those who would not worship the image should be killed and that those without the mark of the beast should be able neither to buy nor to sell (13:15, 17). Now the third angel of chapter 14 pronounces a much worse fate for those who do worship the beast and bear his mark.¹¹⁷³ They are to drink the wine of God’s fury and endure

eternal torment in burning sulfur. This fierce warning is directed both to the pagan population (cf. v. 6) and to those within the Christian community tempted to deny their faith in view of the coming persecution. That the warning is directed at apostate Christians as well, follows from John's added comments in vv. 12 and 13, which speak of the coming trial and promised blessedness for those who die in the Lord.

Those who worship^{[1174](#)} the beast will also^{[1175](#)} suffer the wrath of God. This wrath is often pictured in the OT as a draught of wine (Job 21:20; Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15-38). The nations to whom the cup of God's wrath is given shall "stagger and go mad ... get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more" (Jer 25:16, 27). God's wrath is not merely the outworking of impersonal laws of retribution built into the structure of reality, but the response of a righteous God to people's adamant refusal to accept his love. The Greek word refers to anger that is passionate and vehement.^{[1176](#)} The wine of God's fury is said to be "poured full strength into the cup of his wrath." The participle (which literally means "mixed") was used of the preparation of wine by the addition of various spices. In Ps 75:8 the mixture is apparently poisonous. The adjective ("unmixed") refers to the practice of diluting the wine with water. When taken in a literal sense, the clause says that the wrath of God is "mixed [so as to increase its strength] unmixed [not diluted with water]." The participle "mixed," however, had come to mean "properly prepared" and then "poured out." The angel is saying that those who defect to emperor worship will drink the wine of God's wrath poured out in full strength, untempered by the mercy and grace of God.

The torment of those who worship the beast is to be with burning sulfur^{[1177](#)} — a figure taken from God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:28; cf. Luke 17:29) and used repeatedly in the final chapters of Revelation (19:20; 20:10; 21:8). That we are dealing with a rather obvious apocalyptic symbol^{[1178](#)} should not lead us to take it lightly. The intention of the proclamation is to startle readers into the realization of the eternal consequences of denying their faith in Christ and worshiping the beast. It is not the appropriate time to discuss the semantics of symbol and hyperbole! This torment takes place in the very presence of the Lamb and his holy angels. In Luke 12:9 Jesus says that those who disown him before others will be disowned before the angels of God. To suffer in the presence of the hosts of heaven is not to lessen the fierceness of the judgment but to make it more grievous. Christians had borne the shame of public derision

and opposition; soon their antagonists will suffer before a more august gathering. It was a common idea in Jewish apocalyptic that the suffering of the damned is increased by beholding the bliss of the righteous. 2 Esdras compares “the place of refreshment” with “the pit of torment” and the “Paradise of delight” with the “furnace of Gehenna,” calling upon those who have been raised for judgment to look and consider whom they have denied and to view fire and torment in comparison with delight and refreshment (2 Esdr 7:35-38). The book of Enoch speaks of the kings of the earth burning “as the straw in the fire ... before the face of the holy” (1 *Enoch* 48:9; also 27:2, 3; cf. 2 *Bar.* 30:4). In Revelation there is no suggestion that the suffering of the damned takes place in the presence of martyred believers who now rejoice to see their oppressors burning in hell.¹¹⁷⁹ It is the holy angels,¹¹⁸⁰ and even the Lamb, who witness divine retribution upon the wicked.

11 The punishment of the damned is not a temporary measure. The smoke of their torment rises forever and ever (cf. 20:10).¹¹⁸¹ Without hope of acquittal, they pay the eternal price of having chosen evil over righteousness. A number of modern writers point out that the doctrine of hell is offensive to modern people.¹¹⁸² Yet the teaching of the NT on the eternal consequences of willfully rejecting the love of God as manifested in the death of Christ for our sins does not allow us to put the doctrine aside as sub-Christian or reinterpret it in such a way as to remove the abrasive truth of eternal punishment. It was Jesus more than anyone else who spoke of the fires of hell. Better to enter life maimed, he said, than having two hands “to go to hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:44). The story of the rich man tormented in the fires of hell who begged to have Lazarus dip his finger in water to cool his tongue (Luke 16:9-31) was narrated by none other than the gentle Jesus. After due allowance is made for the place of symbolism in apocalyptic, what remains in these verses is still the terrifying reality of divine wrath poured out upon those who persist in following Antichrist. What the angel has proclaimed so vividly must not be undermined by well-intentioned euphemisms.

12 This verse is a comment by the Seer appended to the angel’s proclamation of divine wrath.¹¹⁸³ The trials and sufferings that are the lot of the faithful as a result of the enforcement of emperor worship call for patient endurance. The demands of the imperial cult accompanied by the threat of capital punishment (13:15) would be a crucial test of the believer’s

loyalty. Steadfast allegiance to Christ involved the rejection of the claims of Caesar and could result in widespread martyrdom. But the price of apostasy (eternal torment, vv. 9-11) would be far greater than the temporary suffering of fidelity. The saints are described in terms of their obedience to divine revelation (“who obey God’s commandments”) and their continuing reliance on Jesus (“remain faithful to Jesus”).^{[1184](#)}

13 The Seer’s comment is followed by a voice from heaven that declares, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.” The connection with v. 12 is clear: faithfulness to Christ may issue in martyrdom, but the faithful dead are blessed in that they have entered victoriously into their rest.^{[1185](#)} If v. 12 was negative encouragement, v. 13 is positive. The voice from heaven is not specifically identified. It is probably not the Spirit in that in the latter portion of the verse the Spirit is pictured as responding to the voice. More important is the fact that a proclamation from heaven carries divine authority (cf. 10:4, 8; 11:12). The command to write emphasizes the importance of the message that follows.^{[1186](#)} The beatitude is the second of seven to be found in Revelation (cf. 1:3; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). It pronounces blessed those who meet death in a state of spiritual union with Christ Jesus (“who . . . die as Christians,” Goodspeed). They stand in sharp contrast to the apostates who have denied their faith and the pagans who have never accepted it. For the latter, death leads to judgment and eternal loss.^{[1187](#)}

Most commentators connect “from now on” with the preceding clause. Those who die in the Lord from that time on are blessed. But this seems to imply that from that point on a special blessedness is connected with the death of the faithful that sets them apart from believers who have died previously. Others connect the phrase with the following clause: “Henceforth, says the Spirit, they may rest from their labors” (NEB). This requires the omission of the word “yes.”^{[1188](#)} The apparent implication that gave rise to these alternatives, however, is more imaginary than real. To assure those facing the prospect of martyrdom that to die in the Lord is to enter into eternal blessedness is not to deny the same reward to those saints who previously died in less trying circumstances. “From now on” marks the transition into the more active persecution of those who hold unswervingly to their faith.

To this pronouncement of blessedness, the Spirit adds the emphatic affirmation, Yes indeed! The blessedness consists in the cessation of all the

trials and sufferings brought upon the faithful by the demands of emperor worship. The labors from which they rest are not those of normal toil, but the troubles that have arisen from their steadfastness in faith. Their supreme labor is faithfulness unto death.^{[1189](#)} They are blessed because their deeds follow after them. God will not forget all they have endured in loyalty to the faith. Their deeds are acts of steadfast resistance to the demands of Antichrist. There is no need to interpret deeds as spiritual attitudes or inward character. Nor are we to think of them in the Jewish sense of accompanying the righteous to judgment to win for them divine approval.^{[1190](#)} The faithfulness of the martyrs unto death is not a legalistic work that merits eternal bliss, but a manifestation of their devotion to Christ. These deeds follow them in the sense that there can be no separation between what a person is and what that person does.

2. Harvest of the Earth (14:14-16)

14 I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one “like a son of man” with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” 16 So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

Two visions of judgment bring the chapter to its close. Verses 14-16 picture the advent of divine judgment in the familiar figure of a grain harvest. Verses 17-20 emphasize the violent nature of the wrath of God as the treading of a winepress into which the grape clusters of the earth have been cast. These visions serve to remind those who were suffering for their refusal to honor the emperor by taking part in the imperial cult that their faith in God and their reliance upon the saving efficacy of the sacrificial death of the Lamb will most certainly be vindicated.

14 John looks, and there appears a white cloud with “one ‘like a son of man’ ” sitting upon it. This is none other than the risen Christ (cf. 1:13). The background is Dan 7:13-14, in which “one like a son of man” comes with the clouds of heaven to receive universal and everlasting dominion. The golden wreath^{[1191](#)} designates the Messiah as one who has conquered and thereby won the right to act in judgment. The sharp sickle is the instrument of harvest and portrays the son of man prepared to reap the harvest of earth in righteous retribution.

A few commentators identify the reaper as an angel rather than Christ. They argue that it would be strange for the exalted Christ to be commanded by an angel (as he is in v. 15), and unlikely that he would not know that the end had arrived. But the angel is no more than a messenger from God whose purpose is not to reveal the time of the end, but to deliver the divine command to begin the harvest. Rather than taking the one “like a son of

man” as an angel so as to have yet another series of seven (14:6, 8, 9, 15, 17, 18),¹¹⁹² the very title sets him apart from the six angels. While the designation may be used in apocalyptic as a normal reference to angelic beings, the context in Revelation indicates that he is the Messiah returning in judgment.

15 The angel that delivers the divine command to commence the harvest comes out from the temple, that most holy place of the presence of God (cf. 7:15). Judgment upon sin is a necessary function of righteousness. He cries out in a loud voice (appropriate to his role in the vision; cf. vv. 7, 9, 18) to the one sitting on the cloud that he should take his sickle and reap, for the hour is come, and the harvest of the earth is ripe. The command follows the language of Joel 3:13 (“Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe”). There is a difference of opinion about the identity of those who will be harvested. Some understand this scene (vv. 14-16) as the gathering of the righteous at the return of Christ and interpret the next unit (vv. 17-20) as the judgment of the wicked.¹¹⁹³ Supporting this position is the fact that in the NT the figure of the harvest is normally used of the gathering of people into the kingdom of God (Matt 9:37-38; Mark 4:29; Luke 10:2; John 4:35-38). The idea of an eschatological harvest, however, is not limited to the gathering of the elect. In the parable of the Wheat and Tares, it involves the gathering of the wicked for burning as well (Matt 13:30, 40-42). In the OT the harvest was a regular symbol of divine judgment (Jer 51:33; Hos 6:11; cf. 2 Esdr 4:35; 2 Bar. 70:2). The harvest of vv. 14-16 is likewise a general picture of the coming judgment.¹¹⁹⁴

The time to reap is the precise moment determined by God. As in the hymn of the twenty-four elders in chapter 11 (v. 18), the time for judgment and reward has come. The harvest of the earth is fully ripe.

16 In an interesting display of brevity, John does no more than state that the One who was seated¹¹⁹⁵ on the cloud now swings his sickle over the earth and the earth is harvested. Details are left to the reader’s imagination.

3. Vintage of the Earth (14:17-20)

17 Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." 19 The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. 20 They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

Verses 14-16 portrayed judgment under the general figure of the harvest. Now, by means of the more vivid figure of the vintage, John stresses the violent carnage of that judgment. There are a number of structural similarities between the two visions (vv. 14-16 and vv. 17-20). Each vision involves an agent of God's wrath bearing a sickle. In each vision the command to carry out God's judgment is given by another angel. At the same time there are differences. The harvest was reaped by Christ himself while the vintage is gathered by an angel from the temple in heaven. The two visions present the same judgment from slightly different perspectives. The harvest served as a more general presentation of final judgment, while the vintage draws the reader's attention to the violent nature of the carnage.

17 If the harvest scene intended a separation of wheat and tares (cf. Matt 13:30) or wheat and chaff (cf. Luke 3:17), the vintage envisions nothing but unmitigated judgment. That the angel who is to reap the vintage of the earth comes out from the temple indicates that he is God's agent for this awesome event. Like the son of man, he also has a sharp sickle. [1196](#)

18 Yet another angel (the sixth in vv. 6-20) [1197](#) enters John's vision, this one from the altar. As the altar is elsewhere connected with the prayers of the righteous (6:9; 8:3-5), we are probably to understand here that the prayers of the faithful play a definite part in bringing about God's judgment

upon the wicked. The angel is further identified as the one in charge of the fire. In the developed angelology of the intertestamental period, angels are assigned to the various elements of nature. Enoch speaks of the angels of thunder, sea, hail, snow, rain, and so on. (*1 Enoch* 60:11-21; cf. *Jub.* 2:2). But John undoubtedly has in mind the angel of 8:3-5 who filled a censer with fire from the altar and cast it upon the earth. Fire is commonly associated with judgment in the NT (Matt 18:8; Luke 9:54; 2 Thess 1:7). The angel who had charge of the fire commands the angel with the sharp sickle to gather the vintage. This follows closely the parallel command in the previous vision to reap the harvest of the earth. Joel 3:14 is the model for both. Like the grain that has turned golden and must be harvested immediately, the grapes are fully ripe.¹¹⁹⁸ The time for judgment is now!

19 Without delay the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered its vintage. We are not to think of the sickle as reaping on its own, but as active in the hand of the angel. *1 Enoch* 53 speaks of “angels of punishment” who prepare the instruments that destroy the kings and mighty of the earth (vv. 3-5; cf. 56:1). The angel is God’s agent to execute wrath upon the unrighteous. Those who interpret the two scenes as the gathering of the elect and the judgment of the wicked usually point out that this grisly work is left to an angel rather than to the Son.¹¹⁹⁹ However, in chapter 19 it is Christ himself who treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God, supplying the vultures with a great feast of human flesh (19:15, 17-18). John is not squeamish about the Son entering into the execution of judgment.

The vintage is now thrown into the great winepress¹²⁰⁰ of the wrath of God. In biblical days grapes were trampled by foot in a trough that had a duct leading to a lower basin where the juice collected. The treading of grapes was a familiar figure for the execution of divine wrath upon the enemies of God. In Isa 63:3 God the warrior returns from Edom with his garments stained as one who has been treading in the winevat. He says, “I have trodden the winepress alone.... I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments” (RSV; cf. Lam 1:15; Joel 3:13; Rev 19:15). The vintage of the earth is a collective expression for all who by their obstinate refusal to embrace righteousness have made themselves the enemies of God.

20 The city outside of which the winepress was trodden is probably Jerusalem. The judgment of the nations in Joel 3:12-14 (which supplies the

dual figures of harvest and vintage) takes place in the valley of Jehoshaphat, which tradition links with the Kidron valley lying between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Zech 14:1-4 places the final battle on the outskirts of Jerusalem. *1 Enoch* 53:1 speaks of judgment in a deep valley near the valley of Hinnom. Judgment “outside the city” must certainly be an allusion to the One who suffered for the sins of the human race “outside the city gate” (Heb 13:12; cf. John 19:20). Those who refuse the first judgment must take part in the second.

As a winepress yields the red juice of the grape, so the judgment of God issues in a blood bath that flows as high as the bridles of the horses and extends the length and breadth of the land.^{[1201](#)} *1 Enoch* 100:3 speaks of a carnage in which “the horse shall walk up to the breast in the blood of sinners.” The distance, 1,600 stadia^{[1202](#)} (some 184 miles), has been variously interpreted. Geographically it is the approximate length of Palestine.^{[1203](#)} Symbolically it squares the number four (the number of the earth: “four corners of the earth,” 20:8; “four winds of the earth,” 7:1) and multiplies it by the square of ten (the number of completeness; cf. 5:11; 20:6).^{[1204](#)} The judgment of God, portrayed ideally as taking place outside the holy city, extends to all people everywhere who find themselves beyond the pale of divine protection.

Judgment is certain. The followers of the Lamb are made to realize by means of the visions of chapter 14 that not only will they ultimately enjoy the immediate presence of God and the Lamb but that their faith will be vindicated by the judgment brought upon their oppressors. The beasts of chapter 13 employ every method at their disposal to gain the allegiance of the entire world, but those who belong not to this world but to the heavenly realm yet to be fully manifested successfully resist both the deceptive ploys of the Satanic beasts and all their attempts to bring about allegiance by force.

VII. THE SEVEN LAST PLAGUES (15:1-16:21)

Chapter 15 serves to introduce seven angels who in the following chapter will pour out on the entire heathen world the seven bowls of divine wrath. The seven bowls are the third series of seven in the interrelated sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls. The divine retribution revealed by the seals and announced by the trumpets is now fully executed by the bowls. While the three series cover the same period leading up to the end, each presenting God's judgment under a different set of images, from a literary standpoint the bowls are an unfolding of the seventh trumpet, just as the trumpets were an expansion of the seventh seal. In understanding Revelation, however, it is important that one does not project this literary device onto the one-dimensional plane of historical sequence. The visions are intended to confront readers with vivid portrayals of eschatological truth rather than to supply them with data for a precise chronology of the consummation.

Before the seven plague angels receive the seven bowls filled with the wrath of God, we hear those who have emerged victorious over the beast singing a song of praise to God for his great and righteous works (vv. 3-4). It is the song of redemption that began with Moses and found its completion in the sacrificial death of the Lamb. God is to be praised because his ways are just and true.

The angels come from the presence of God (the temple in heaven, v. 5) and receive from one of the living creatures the golden bowls of divine wrath. Immediately the temple is filled with the glory of God so that no one can enter until the plagues have been completed. Chapter 16 describes the outpouring of the seven bowls of wrath. It is a time of tremendous upheaval and unprecedented suffering. The land, sea, inland waters, and solar system all bear the impact of God's wrath. People gnaw their tongues in agony, and incited by demons the kings of the whole earth prepare for the final battle. When the seventh bowl is poured out, a voice from heaven declares that the plagues have run their course and we stand now on the threshold of eternity. The entire cosmos is in turmoil; a "storm-theophany"¹²⁰⁵ fills the air, the world collapses under a great earthquake, and gigantic hailstones fall from the sky. The wrath of God has run its full course.¹²⁰⁶

A. PREPARATION FOR THE BOWL-PLAGUES (15:1-8)

1 I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues — last, because with them God's wrath is completed. 2 And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God 3 and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

*“Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
4 Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed. ”*

5 After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. 6 Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. 7 Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. 8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

These preparatory words create an atmosphere of awesome solemnity. John's readers are about to experience a terrifying portrayal of the final outpouring of God's wrath. The seriousness of the situation calls for words of assurance that God's ways are just.

1 In chapter 12 the visions of the radiant woman (v. 1) and of the great red dragon (v. 3) were called signs. John now sees another great and marvelous sign in heaven. Signs point beyond themselves and disclose the theological meaning of history. That there are seven angels having seven plagues speaks of the certainty and completeness of divine wrath against all unrighteousness.¹²⁰⁷ They are great and marvelous in their awe-inspiring effect¹²⁰⁸ on all of nature, the human race, and the kingdom of Antichrist. Chapter 16, which will tell the story, moves with an ever increasing crescendo from noisome and grievous sores, through water turned to blood, and scorching sun, to an earthquake so great that the entire configuration of earth is violently altered. These are the last of the plagues in that they complete¹²⁰⁹ the warnings of God to an impenitent world. All that remains is final judgment itself. The plagues anticipate the final outpouring of divine retribution and are met with blasphemy by people whose hearts, like that of Pharaoh, are hardened against God (v. 21). The use of Exodus typology throughout this vision is worthy of special note.¹²¹⁰

2 Verses 2-4 form an interlude of victory and praise that stands in sharp contrast with the narrative that follows. The exultation of the heavenly chorus is as glorious as the visitation of wrath is somber. John sees those who have emerged from their final battle with the beast standing victorious upon the crystal surface before the throne. Carrying harps of God, they join their voices in an anthem of praise celebrating the holiness of God and the righteousness of his works.

The "sea of glass" is mentioned twice in the Apocalypse. In 4:6 it was said to be as "clear as crystal," while in the present passage it is "mixed with fire." While several options are offered as to the intent of this image,¹²¹¹ most likely it is nothing more than a descriptive detail intended to heighten the splendor of the scene. While the larger context has much to say about wrath and judgment, the interlude itself (vv. 2-4) treats quite a different subject.

These who stand on¹²¹² the crystal pavement are those who have emerged victorious¹²¹³ over the beast. They have not abandoned their faith

nor succumbed to the threats of Antichrist. They are the overcomers to whom the seven letters hold out promise of eating of the tree of life (2:7), protection from the second death (2:11), hidden manna (2:17), authority over the nations (2:26), white garments (3:5), the honor of becoming a pillar in the temple of God (3:12), and the privilege of sitting with Christ on his throne (3:21). Little wonder that they break out in song!

The struggle against the beast is actually a struggle against paying homage to his image or being marked with the number of his name.^{[1214](#)} The two additional phrases explain and make explicit what victory over the beast consists of. The harps that the victors play are harps of God in that they belong to the celestial litany. The “pleasant harp” (Ps 81:2, NKJ) is an appropriate instrument for songs of praise.

3-4 The song of the victors is a song of praise to God for his great and marvelous acts. It celebrates his righteous and redemptive activity beginning with Moses and culminating with the Lamb. We are not to understand two songs, but one. The deliverance of which Moses and the people sang in Exod 15:1-18 prefigured the greater deliverance wrought by the Lamb. Although some commentators take the song of Moses as a reference to the final address of the great lawgiver recorded in Deuteronomy 32,^{[1215](#)} the many parallels between Exodus 15 and Revelation 15 argue the more widely accepted earlier song. For example, “Great and marvelous are your deeds.... Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” (Rev 15:4) echoes “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exod 15:11). This song commemorating Israel’s greatest deliverance was sung on Sabbath evenings in the synagogue service. Its imagery was stamped on the consciousness of every pious Jew.^{[1216](#)} The theme of victory in Exodus 15 becomes the basis for praise and adoration in the song of the victors. God is worthy of glory and honor because his great and marvelous works are true and righteous. The song does not celebrate the judgment of God upon his enemies but the righteousness of his great redemptive acts. As Moses triumphed over Pharaoh, and as the risen Lord was victor over the world (John 16:33), so also the faithful have maintained their fidelity against all demands of the imperial cult.

The structure of the hymn suggests that it may have been used in the liturgy of the early church. The first four lines are a classic example of

synonymous parallelism:

“Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty;
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.”

Verse 4 raises the rhetorical question,

“Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?”

and is followed by three causal clauses,^{[1217](#)}

“For you alone are holy;
All nations will come and worship before you,
For your righteous acts have been revealed.”

Practically every phrase of the hymn is taken from the rich vocabulary of the OT. For the first strophe cf. Ps 111:3 (“Glorious and majestic are his deeds”); Amos 4:13 (“the Lord God Almighty is his name”); Deut 32:4 (“all his ways are just”); Jer 10:7 (“O King of the nations”). In the Nestle-Aland text almost 80 percent of the words in the hymn (10 of 48) are italicized to show that they have been taken from the OT.^{[1218](#)}

The hymn begins by extolling God’s “deeds” and his “ways.” The first are cause for wonder and praise. The second emphasizes God’s justice and faithfulness. We need not limit this ascription of praise to any particular event. All God’s redemptive works are great and marvelous. They are met with awe, not simply because of their magnitude, but also because of their intrinsic righteousness. In keeping with the OT, God’s righteousness is most often seen in his saving acts on behalf of his people.

As in the earlier song of the elders (11:17-18), God is designated the Almighty. He possesses the power to carry out whatever he determines to do. This title, which is ascribed to God nine times in the book of Revelation, is found but once in the NT outside the Apocalypse (2 Cor 6:18), where, as here, it reflects the language of the Septuagint. That God is the Almighty is supremely appropriate in the present context of ultimate victory. He is also King of the Ages.^{[1219](#)} His sovereignty is everlasting. Jeremiah speaks of the everlasting king at whose wrath the earth trembles,

and whose indignation the nations are unable to abide (Jer 10:10). The ways of the heavenly king, says John, are absolutely just and completely in accord with truth.

The second part of the hymn continues in the language of Jer 10:7, while at the same time echoing the Song of Moses (Exod 15:11). The rhetorical question it raises, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name?” is in response to the ascription that has preceded. In turn it prompts the threefold basis for such praise that follows.^{[1220](#)}

Universal recognition of the Lord as the one true God is a common expectation in the OT (cf. Phil 2:9-11, echoing Isa 45:23). The confidence that during the messianic age the nations of the world will worship the God of Israel and bring glory to his name (Ps 86:9; Mal 1:11; cf. Rom 15:9-12) is adapted by John as an expression of the complete sovereignty of God over all the hostile opposition of the beast and his followers in the last days. To glorify the name of God is to praise him for what he is and all that he has accomplished. All shall come before God in worship because he alone is holy.^{[1221](#)} God is to be praised by all nations because his righteous acts have been fully manifested.^{[1222](#)} We should probably interpret v. 4 as a metaphor of victory rather than an actual scene to be enacted at some specific time and place.^{[1223](#)} A strictly literal interpretation could infer a doctrine of universal salvation unless the worship offered is in grudging recognition of his righteous acts.

5-6 The praise of God, sung by the victorious redeemed as the song of Moses and the Lamb (vv. 2-4), is followed immediately by a description of the angels who will pour out the final seven judgments. John sees the heavenly temple open and the seven angels of devastation emerge. The temple is more closely defined as “the tabernacle of the Testimony,”^{[1224](#)} a reference to the period of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness. In this context it emphasizes that the final plagues come from the presence of God and are the expression of his unalterable opposition to sin. The ancient tabernacle was a “Tent of the Testimony” (Num 17:7; 18:2) because it contained the two tables of testimony brought down from Mt. Sinai by Moses (Exod 32:15; Deut 10:5).

As in v. 1, the seven angels are described as having the seven plagues, even though they do not receive the bowls of wrath until the following verse (v. 7). That they come out of the temple points to the divine origin of their commission.^{[1225](#)} Their robes of linen,^{[1226](#)} clean and shining, denote the

noble and sacred nature of their office (cf. Ezek 9:2; Dan 10:5). Golden girdles are symbolic of royal and priestly functions. John repeatedly pictures these moments in OT images. Here the angels (1) come from the presence of God, (2) are arrayed as priests, and (3) will now receive their “censers.”

7 It is from the four living creatures that the seven angels receive the golden bowls of divine wrath. These guardians of the throne appear throughout Revelation (4:6; 5:6; 6:1; 7:11; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4) and are appropriate as intermediaries between God and the avenging angels. Each of the seven angels receives a golden bowl.¹²²⁷ In 5:8 the golden bowls were full of incense representing the prayers of the saints.¹²²⁸ Since the mention of the golden bowls in Revelation is limited to these two contexts, John may be calling our attention to the relationship between prayer and divine retribution. Gold does not necessarily denote the service of God. The great harlot of chapter 17 holds in her hand “a golden cup ... filled with abominable things” (17:4).

The cups are full of the wrath of God. The vivid scene of 2 Thess 1:7-9 is about to be expanded in detail (Rev 16). It is the wrath of a God whose existence has neither beginning nor end. He is a living God, fully able to execute punishment upon all his adversaries.

8 As the angels receive their bowls of wrath, the temple is filled with smoke, symbolizing the glory and power of God (echoing 1 Kgs 8:10-11). In the OT God often revealed his presence by cloud or smoke. He descended upon Mt. Sinai, and smoke ascended as a great furnace (Exod 19:18). When the glory of God filled the tabernacle in the wilderness, a cloud rested upon it (Exod 40:34). In Isaiah’s vision of the heavenly temple, the adoration of God by the seraphim was followed by smoke that filled the sanctuary (Isa 6:4). The smoke that fills the heavenly temple in Revelation indicates the presence of God in all his glory and power actively to carry out his judgment upon wickedness. Until the seven plagues are finished, no one is able to enter the temple. Once the time of final judgment has come, none can stay the hand of God. The time for intercession is past. God in his unapproachable majesty and power has declared that the end has come. No longer does he stand knocking; he enters to act in sovereign judgment.

Thus the stage is set. Because these are the “final” plagues, John has prepared his readers by stressing the awesome nature of the occasion. They have been reminded that the redemptive deeds of the Almighty God are

great and marvelous. As King, his ways are just and true. Judgment comes from the temple in heaven that is his eternal abode. When the bowls of wrath are delivered to his angels of judgment, the temple is filled with the smoke of his glory. By such a breathtaking scenario John prepares his listeners for the actual outpouring of divine wrath.

B. PLAGUES POURED OUT (16:1-21)

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. "

2 The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

3 The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

4 The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. 5 Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

*"You are just in these judgments,
you who are and who were, the Holy One,
because you have so judged;
6 for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve. "*

7 And I heard the altar respond:

"Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments. "

8 The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. 9 They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their

tongues in agony 11 and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. 13 Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. 14 They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

15 “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed. ”

16 Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

17 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, “It is done!” 18 Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. 19 The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. 20 Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. 21 From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

We come now to the third and final series of numbered plagues. Once again we encounter the four/three structure in which the first four plagues are closely related and the final three intensify the entire series. Unlike the seals of chapter 6 and the trumpets of chapters 8-9 in which the sixth plague is followed by an interlude, the bowls move relentlessly to a close. They are the final series depicting the outpouring of God’s wrath and as such there is no place for yet another interlude. There are, however, two expansions within the final series. Following the third bowl plague, in which the inland waters are turned to blood, an angel declares that God’s judgments are just because the inhabitants of the earth have shed the blood of his saints and prophets (vv. 5-7). And following the sixth bowl-plague evil spirits from the

mouth of the dragon go out to gather the kings of the whole world for the final battle.

The chapter is given over in its entirety to the carrying out of the final series of plagues. The parallels between this series of judgments and the trumpet-plagues (chaps. 8-11) are readily apparent. In each series the first four plagues are visited upon the earth, sea, inland waters, and heavenly bodies respectively. The fifth involves darkness and pain (cf. 16:10 with 9:2, 5-6), and the sixth, enemy hordes from the vicinity of the Euphrates (cf. 16:12 with 9:14ff.). Both series draw heavily for their symbolism on the ten Egyptian plagues. The turning of water into blood (8:8; 16:3, 4) parallels the first Egyptian plague in which Moses struck the waters of the Nile, turning them to blood (Exod 7:20). The darkening of the sun (8:12; cf. 16:10) has as its counterpart the ninth Egyptian plague in which thick darkness prevailed over the land for three days (Exod 10:21-22). In the following discussion a number of other parallels will be mentioned.

It would be wrong, however, to imagine the Seer slavishly setting forth a standard set of plagues. Nor is he attempting a careful recapitulation of each of the seven trumpet-plagues under the new symbolism of bowls. John freely employs the vocabulary of natural disaster to describe the prophetic visions of the imminent and catastrophic denouement of human history. While it is true that both series deal with the same crucial period of time just before the end, overly subtle interpretations in the interest of a plague-by-plague recapitulation overlook the distinct differences between the two series. Among the more important are: (1) the trumpet-plagues are partial in their effect (one-third of the earth is burned, 8:7; one-third of the sea becomes blood, 8:8; see also 8:9-12), while the bowls are universal ("every living thing in the sea died," 16:3; "every island fled away," 16:20) and final; (2) the trumpets are to a certain extent a call to repentance, while the bowls are the pouring out of divine wrath; and (3) people are affected indirectly by the first four trumpets but are directly attacked from the outset by the bowls.

It should also be noticed that the bowls are poured out in rapid succession [1229](#) with the customary interlude between the sixth and seventh elements of the sequence missing. The three numbered series are cyclical restatements employing images of greater and greater intensity. [1230](#) Each series brings us to the end, but in each successive case the severity and magnitude of judgment are heightened significantly. [1231](#)

As a result of the seventh bowl of wrath being poured out into the air an unprecedented earthquake splits Babylon the Great into three parts. John is telling his readers that in the end God will make the city of Rome drink “the wine of the fury of his wrath” (v. 19). This anticipates the more detailed fall of the city that is found in the two chapters that follow. In chapter 17 Rome is pictured as an opulent and self-indulgent prostitute who sits astride the scarlet beast who ultimately turns on her, eating her flesh and burning her with fire (v. 16). In chapter 18 Rome is portrayed as fallen, with the kings, merchants, and the maritime industry mourning their great loss. Both chapters picture the end of Rome, that evil nemesis whose claims to deity and whose cruel attempts to enforce emperor worship have brought such suffering and distress to the people of God.

1 Isaiah counsels Israel to “hear that uproar from the city, hear that noise from the temple! It is the sound of the LORD repaying his enemies all they deserve” (Isa 66:6). John also hears a loud voice from the temple instructing the angels of recompense to pour out upon the earth the seven bowls of God’s wrath.¹²³² The voice, presumably, is the voice of God, for according to the previous verse (15:8) no one is allowed to enter the temple until the seven angels have completed their mission.¹²³³ In placing the adjective before the noun the Greek text stresses the impressive nature of the loud voice¹²³⁴ that comes from the heavenly sanctuary.¹²³⁵ There is no necessary connection between this command and the prayers of the saints (cf. 8:3-5), although some relationship could exist.

2 The first angel is dispatched and carries out his awesome task of pouring out the wrath of God upon the followers of the beast.¹²³⁶ Those who once bore the mark of the beast are now visited by the “marks” of God.¹²³⁷ The first bowl brings “loathsome and malignant ulcers” (Phillips) on people. We are reminded of the sixth Egyptian plague in which sores in the form of boils and abscesses broke out on people and beasts throughout the land (Exod 9:9-11).¹²³⁸ Job spoke from experience of the pain and irritation of such afflictions (Job 2:7-8, 13).

3 The second angel goes to the earth¹²³⁹ and pours his bowl on the sea, turning it to blood. This parallels the first plague of Exod 7:19ff. in which the waters of Egypt were turned to blood. It also parallels the second trumpet in which a burning mountain fell into the sea, turning it to blood (8:8-9). Note that in all three instances it is water, one of humanity’s basic

requirements and of critical importance in the more arid regions of ancient civilization, that is affected by divine judgment. The sea becomes like the blood of a dead person — that is, coagulated and rotting. In such a state it obviously cannot support life. All sea life dies.^{[1240](#)}

4 The third angel pours his bowl upon the rivers and springs of water, turning them to blood.^{[1241](#)} In the corresponding trumpet-plague a third part of the rivers and fountains of the waters were made bitter by a great burning star that fell from heaven (8:10-11). The parallels that exist between the first four trumpets and the first four bowls display an intensification of divine recompense in which the two series share the same imagery. As the sea when turned to blood brought death to all living in it (v. 3), so also do the rivers and springs of water spread death when turned to blood. In recounting the story of the Exodus the Psalmist says that God “turned their rivers to blood; they could not drink from their streams” (Ps 78:44). John draws freely from the vocabulary of judgment and adapts it appropriately to describe the final plagues.

5-6 The righteousness of God’s action in turning water to blood is attested to by the angel of the waters (vv. 5-6). In Jewish thought the elements of nature were held to be under the jurisdiction of appropriate angels.^{[1242](#)} In Rev 7:1 we learned of angels who restrained the four winds of the earth, and in 14:18 of an angel who had charge of the fire. *1 Enoch* 66:2 tells of angels of punishment who held the subterranean waters in check. Whether such an angel is here referred to is uncertain.^{[1243](#)} In any case, the lyric utterance of the angel closely resembles that of the overcomers in 15:2-4 who sang the song of Moses and the Lamb.

“You are just in these judgments”

“you who are and who were”

“the Holy One”

“because you have so judged”

“Just and true are your ways”

“King of the ages”

“you alone are holy”

“for your righteous acts have
been revealed”^{[1244](#)}

The judgment of God is neither vengeful nor capricious. It is an expression of his just and righteous nature. All caricatures of God that ignore his intense hatred of sin reveal more about human nature than about God. In a moral universe God must of necessity oppose evil. “Righteous are you, O LORD,” declared the Psalmist, “and your laws are right” (Ps 119:137).¹²⁴⁵

As in 11:17, God is addressed as the one who is and who was. In 1:4, 8 and 4:8 the title was expanded to include a future reference (“who is to come”), but in the present context this is unnecessary because the final sequence of events has already begun.¹²⁴⁶

The syntactical relationship between vv. 5 and 6 is not clear. It is probably best to take v. 6 as a separate sentence that provides further evidence of the righteousness of God in carrying out his judgment by turning the waters to blood.¹²⁴⁷ Because they had poured out the blood of the saints, God has given them blood to drink.¹²⁴⁸ The punishment is tailored to fit the crime.¹²⁴⁹ Isaiah declared that the oppressors of Israel would eat their own flesh and be drunk on their own blood (Isa 49:26). In Wis 11:16 we read, “By what things people sin, by these they are punished.” That the determined action of God in righteous retribution and its resulting consequence is something more than momentary discomfort is supported by the Greek perfect tense, “and you have given them blood to drink.”¹²⁵⁰ Those who have shed the blood of the faithful are said to be “worthy” (AV) of receiving blood to drink.¹²⁵¹ “It is what they deserve” (TCNT). A comparison with the saints in Sardis who will walk with Christ in white — “for they are worthy” (3:4) — is not intended.

The saints and prophets are not two distinct groups but faithful believers, some of whom exercised prophetic gifts.¹²⁵² The prophetic ministry within the early church involved not only prediction (as in Acts 11:28; 21:10-11) but also edification, exhortation, and consolation (1 Cor 14:3).

7 A second voice confirms the justice of God’s retributive act. The speaking altar is obviously a personification (cf. 9:13). It represents the corporate testimony of the martyrs in 6:9 and the prayers of the saints in 8:3-5.¹²⁵³ It is significant that throughout Revelation (except in 11:1) the altar is connected with judgment (6:9; 8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7). The principles of sacrifice and judgment are inextricably interwoven. Like the angel in charge of the waters, the voice of the altar echoes the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:3-5), whose judgments are true and just.¹²⁵⁴ Both

reflect OT passages such as Ps 19:9 (“The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous”). God’s acts of judging¹²⁵⁵ are in accordance with truth and are absolutely just.

8-9 The fourth angel pours out his bowl upon¹²⁵⁶ the sun, and people are scorched by its fiery heat (cf. the Egyptian plague of darkness, Exod 10:21ff.). After the blast of the fourth trumpet, a third of the sun, moon, and stars were darkened for a third of the day and night (8:12). But now the fourth bowl is followed with intense heat rather than a partial eclipse. In the first instance the sun was struck so that its light was diminished; this time the heat is intensified.¹²⁵⁷ Fire is commonly connected with judgment in Scripture (see Deut 28:22; 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Pet 3:7). The sovereign control of God over the entire process of retributive justice is emphasized by the fact that the power to scorch people is said to be given to the sun.¹²⁵⁸

In v. 9 the intensity of the heat is reemphasized by the expression that may be translated “scorched with a great scorching.”¹²⁵⁹ Over against this terrible plague we may compare the lot of those in heaven upon whom the sun “will not beat ... nor any scorching heat” (7:16). The heathen world does not respond to this great pain by repenting and giving glory to God. Instead they blaspheme his name. Following the great earthquake of 11:13 the nations were “dazzled into homage and conversion”¹²⁶⁰ — a temporary condition at best — but now, knowing full well that it is God himself who controls the plagues, they refuse to repent but resort to blasphemy. Like Pharaoh, they have hardened their hearts, and repentance is out of the question. They have gradually taken on the character of the false god they serve.

10 When the fifth angel pours out his bowl of wrath upon the throne of the beast, a darkness settles over the kingdom and people gnaw their tongues in pain.¹²⁶¹ The throne of the beast would be his authority or dominion,¹²⁶² and in John’s day Rome was the geographical focus of that power. The resulting darkness is reminiscent of the ninth Egyptian plague (Exod 10:21-29). This supernatural darkness not only intensifies the distress of the previous plagues, but also adds a terror of its own.¹²⁶³ The torments of darkness are vividly portrayed in Wisdom of Solomon 17. While some have adopted a less literal interpretation of this plague¹²⁶⁴ it is still true that it causes such agony that people gnaw¹²⁶⁵ their tongues in agony.

11 Far from repenting of their evil, the followers of the beast curse God because of their pains and sores. They have become one in character with their evil master, whose most characteristic activity is to blaspheme God and his followers (13:5, 6; cf. 13:1; 17:3). The term “God of heaven” may reflect Dan 2:44, where it is used of the One who in his sovereignty destroys the kingdoms of this world and establishes his universal reign. That people blaspheme because of their pains and their sores indicates that the discomfort of the previous plagues continues into the present. But punishment does not bring repentance. The decision to persevere in evil has permanently precluded any possibility of a return to righteousness.^{[1266](#)}

12 When the sixth bowl is poured out upon the Euphrates, the river dries up, thus opening a way for the kings from the East. There is at least a literary parallel between the sixth bowl and the sixth trumpet. When the sixth trumpet sounded, four angels bound at the Euphrates were released to lead a vast army of grotesque horses to the slaughter of one-third of the world’s population (9:13-19). The Euphrates marked the eastern boundary of the land given by covenant to Abraham and his seed (Gen 15:18; Deut 1:7-8; Josh 1:3-4). It also separated the Roman Empire on the east from the much feared Parthians whose expert cavalry bowmen had conquered the entire territory from the Euphrates to the Indus. It is frequently pointed out that in the OT God’s great redemptive acts were often associated with the drying up of water. The Exodus (Exod 14:21) and the entrance into Canaan (Josh 3:14-17) are the two major examples.^{[1267](#)} In the present context it is the enemy that is allowed to advance for war by the drying up of the Euphrates.

It is unlikely that John is alluding to the famous capture of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian, but the incident is relevant. Herodotus^{[1268](#)} tells us that Cyrus, finding the city seemingly impregnable, temporarily diverted the Euphrates, which ran through the center of Babylon, leaving open the riverbed, through which his armies entered and captured the city.

The kings from the East have been variously interpreted. Walvoord notes that as many as fifty different interpretations have been advanced.^{[1269](#)} Whatever the ultimate reference, the historical context of John’s imagery favors the interpretation of the kings as Parthian rulers. The tradition that Nero, although dying by his own hand, would return from the East leading a great army of Parthian warriors is preserved in the *Sibylline Oracles* (4:115-39). Some confusion results from the fact that this tradition is partially

intertwined in Revelation with an older tradition that portrayed a final assault on the people of God by the united kings of earth (Joel 3:2; Zeph 3:8). The kings of the East (v. 12) who will lay siege to Rome (17:15-18 and chap. 18) are distinct from the kings of the whole world (v. 14) who will wage the final war against Christ and the armies of heaven (19:11-21; note 17:12-14 as well).^{[1270](#)}

Verses 13-16 are sometimes taken as a brief interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls similar in structure to the break between the sixth and seventh seals (chap. 7) and the sixth and seventh trumpets (10:1-11:14). This would limit the sixth bowl to v. 12 only and thus depart from John's custom of making the fifth and sixth plagues in each series considerably longer than the first four. Verses 13-16 should be viewed as a topical expansion of v. 12 (with v. 15 serving as a summons to readiness). The drying up of the Euphrates may have suggested the frogs of v. 13, which in turn would remind the reader of the second Egyptian plague (Exod 8:1-15). In any case, preparation for war is the common theme.

John sees three evil spirits coming out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. The dragon is without doubt the seven-headed dragon of chapter 12 (specifically identified as Satan in 12:9), and the beast is the beast out of the sea as described in the first ten verses of chapter 13. The false prophet (appearing by that name for the first time) is surely the beast out of the earth of 13:11-17.^{[1271](#)} The evil spirits come out of the *mouths* of the unholy triumvirate, suggesting the persuasive and deceptive propaganda that in the last days will lead people to an unconditional commitment to the cause of evil.^{[1272](#)} These historically conditioned symbols reveal eschatological truth that far transcends the limitations of their origins. In time the Roman Empire would crumble, but beyond all temporary manifestations of secular power the entire structure of human opposition to the kingdom of God will come crashing down in defeat. In the mind of the apocalypticist this will happen not by the gradual turning of people to the truth but by the dramatic and sudden return of the warrior Christ. People duped by the subtle propaganda of secularism have cut themselves off from the source of truth and must bear the inevitable consequences.

That the three spirits looked like frogs emphasizes their uncleanness^{[1273](#)} and perhaps their endless croaking. Williams takes the final phrase in an

adverbial sense and supplies a verb — “Then I saw three foul spirits leap like frogs from the mouths of the dragon.”

14 The first clause of v. 14 is a parenthetical remark that explains why the spirits are called evil. “They are diabolical spirits performing wonders” (Phillips).¹²⁷⁴ The following clause (“and they go out”) connects with “three evil spirits” of v. 13 and completes the sentence that began, “Then I saw.”¹²⁷⁵ John’s syntax invites considerable conjecture at times. The activity of the deceptive and demonic spirits reminds us of the living spirit who through the mouth of Ahab’s prophets would entice the profligate king into battle (1 Kgs 22:19-23). Jesus warned that in the last days false prophets would arise and by signs and wonders would lead many astray (Matt 24:24). Paul wrote of the lawless one whose appearance would be with “all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” and with “evil’s undiluted power to deceive” (2 Thess 2:10, Phillips). The evil spirits in Revelation work their spell on world rulers rather than ordinary people. By deceit they gather the kings of the whole world¹²⁷⁶ for a great battle against God and the hosts of heaven (explained in detail in 19:11-21).¹²⁷⁷ This epoch is designated “the great day¹²⁷⁸ of God Almighty.” It is the day when God will reckon with the ungodly nations of the world. Israel believed that in the last days her enemies would gather to war against her (Ezek 38-39; Zech 14; 1 *Enoch* 56:5-8; 90:13-19), but God would intervene and bring victory. Joel foretells a great and terrible day of the Lord (Joel 2:11) when God will gather the nations into the valley of Jehoshaphat and execute judgment upon them (Joel 3:2). The great assize described by John goes beyond nationalistic expectations. It is nothing less than the climax of human history when, in the words of the twenty-four elders, God the Almighty takes up his great power and enters into his reign (11:17).

15 The interjection of a warning in the midst of a prophecy of final conflict is entirely appropriate. When all the forces of the beast are gathered for the last battle, the believer will enter a period of supreme crisis.¹²⁷⁹ It is Christ himself who says, “Behold, I come like a thief!”¹²⁸⁰ We are reminded of the unexpectedness that the historical Jesus connected with his own return (Matt 24:42-44) and of Paul’s statement that the day of the Lord will come “like a thief in the night” (1 Thess 5:2). The faithful are admonished to be on the alert for this great event — not taken by surprise as a soldier who, when the alarm is sounded, must run away naked¹²⁸¹ because

he has misplaced his clothing. The kind of spiritual preparedness that Christ requires is the discernment that cuts through the deceptive propaganda of Satan and his henchmen (cf. 13:13-15). The beatitude is the third of seven that are found in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). It promises the blessing of God for those who remain faithful in the critical hours that lie ahead.

16 Following the parenthesis of v. 15, the narrative resumes and leads directly into one of the more cryptic and difficult problems of Revelation. The kings of the world are said to be gathered together to the place “that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” Magedon is normally connected with Megiddo, the ancient city lying on the north side of the Carmel ridge and commanding the strategic pass between the coastal plain and the valley of Esdraelon. It is one of history’s famous battlefields, having witnessed major conflicts all the way “from one fought by Tuthmosis III in 1468 B.C. to that of Lord Allenby of Megiddo in 1917.”¹²⁸² “By the waters of Megiddo” Barak and Deborah defeated the chariots of Sisera (Judg 4-5; cf. 5:19). Ahaziah, wounded by the arrows of Jehu, fled to Megiddo, and died there (2 Kgs 9:27).

Instead of Armageddon, the NRSV and a few others use the designation Harmagedon¹²⁸³ which would mean “the Mountain of Megiddo.” But here a difficulty arises: there is no Mt. Megiddo. It is possible that Harmagedon could be a reference to the hill country near Megiddo or perhaps a reference to Megiddo and Mt. Carmel in the same breath.¹²⁸⁴ In John’s day the tell or mound upon which Megiddo was built was about seventy feet in height, hardly enough to justify the designation Mount. One frequent suggestion is that the Apocalypticist began with Ezekiel’s prophecy of a great eschatological slaughter of the nations on “the mountains of Israel” (Ezek 38:8-21; 39:2, 4, 17) and then made the reference more specific by adding the name Megiddo as the place where so often in Israel’s history the enemies of God were destroyed.¹²⁸⁵ Still others interpret the term in reference to some ancient myth in which an army of demons assault the holy mountain of the gods. If one reads Armageddon (instead of Harmagedon), the reference could be to the city of Megiddo rather than to a mountain.¹²⁸⁶

Others interpret Harmagedon without reference to Megiddo. Some have held it to be the “mount of assembly” mentioned in Isa 14:13.¹²⁸⁷ Or it could be a corruption in the Hebrew text for “his fruitful mountain” or the

“desirable city” (i.e., Jerusalem). As Rome is to be overthrown by the kings of the East (16:12; 17:16-17), so the kings of the whole world will be destroyed in final conflict outside the city of Jerusalem (see Joel 3:2; Zech 14:2ff.). Yet another suggestion is that Megiddo could be derived from a root meaning “to cut, attack, or maraud.” In this case Mt. Megiddo would mean “the marauding mountain” (a variant to Jeremiah’s “destroying mountain,” Jer 51:25) and indicate that John expected the battle not in northern Palestine but at Rome.^{[1288](#)}

As in the case of the number of the beast (13:18), the cryptic nature of the reference has thus far defeated all attempts at a final answer.^{[1289](#)} Fortunately, geography is not the major concern. Wherever it takes place, Armageddon is symbolic of the final overthrow of all the forces of evil by the might and power of God. The great conflict between God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist, good and evil, that lies behind the perplexing course of history will in the end issue in a final struggle in which God will emerge victorious and take with him all who have placed their faith in him.^{[1290](#)} This is Har-Magedon.

17 It is not surprising that there are a number of similarities between the last trumpet and the final bowl: they both bring history to a close. Following the seventh trumpet loud voices in heaven proclaimed the realization of the kingdom of God (11:15), the twenty-four elders announced the arrival of the time of judgment (11:18), the temple of God in heaven was opened (11:19), and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm (11:19-21). Likewise the seventh bowl is followed by a loud voice from the heavenly temple declaring God’s purpose accomplished (16:17), judgment falls upon the entire earth (16:19-20), and there are flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, along with the greatest of all earthquakes and tremendous hailstones (16:18, 21).

The seventh bowl is poured out into the air, the atmosphere that surrounds the earth.^{[1291](#)} A loud voice from the heavenly sanctuary proclaims, “All is over!” (Moffatt). The seven plagues (15:1) have run their course, and the human race stands on the threshold of eternity. The loud voice is the voice of God. The blending of heavenly sanctuary and throne room^{[1292](#)} was seen in 7:15 and 8:5 as well.

18 The divine proclamation is accompanied by flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder — the same “storm-theophany”^{[1293](#)} we

encountered in similar scenes in 4:5; 8:5; and 11:19 (cf. Exod 19:16-18). The earth is rocked with an earthquake far greater than any since the human race has inhabited the earth. The severity of the earthquake is emphasized by the statement, “No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth,¹²⁹⁴ so tremendous was the quake.” This would have a vivid impact upon people living in a century that had experienced a great number of severe quakes.

19 The great city that is split into three parts is undoubtedly to be identified as Rome. This follows from the fact that in the following chapter Rome is repeatedly referred to as the “great city” (vv. 10, 16, 18, 19, 21).¹²⁹⁵ The subsequent reference in the same verse to Babylon does not imply yet another different city.¹²⁹⁶ For John the allusion would be to Rome as the center of Satanic power and oppression against the fledgling church. The division of the great city into three parts indicates the completeness of its destruction. That all the cities of the nations fall with Rome indicates the dominant role of the great capital in its network of imperial communications.

God remembers to give Rome “the wine-cup of his passionate wrath.”¹²⁹⁷ No longer does the kindness and patience of God (intended to lead people to repentance, Rom 2:4) restrain his righteous indignation against all who have by their own free will decided irrevocably for evil. If God were not to punish unrighteousness, the concept of a moral universe would have to be discarded.

20 When the sixth seal was opened, there followed a great earthquake, dramatic cosmic disturbances, and “every mountain and island was removed from its place” (6:12-14). Likewise the great earthquake of the seventh bowl causes every island to flee away and the mountains to disappear. Some writers see in the reference to the removal of “every island” an allusion to the author’s imprisonment on the island of Patmos.¹²⁹⁸ Others find eschatological hostility toward mountains due to prophetic denunciation of high places.¹²⁹⁹ But the references are probably general in nature and represent the devastating effects of the tremendously violent earthquake.¹³⁰⁰ Similar indications of the end are found in *As. Mos.* 10:4 and *I Enoch* 1:6. In Rev 20:11 the earth and sky flee away before the presence of the one who sits upon the great white throne.

21 The storm of divine wrath reaches its climax with hundred-pound [1301](#) hailstones falling from the sky upon people. In the OT God repeatedly punished the enemies of his people with hail. As the armies of the five kings fled before Joshua, God cast down great hailstones, killing more than died by the sword (Josh 10:11). Ezekiel prophesied against Gog a great shaking in the land with torrential rain and hailstones (Ezek 38:18-22). Hail was part of the accepted arsenal of divine retaliation.

The plague of hail produces no change in those who dwell on the earth. After each of the three final plagues people blaspheme God (16:9, 11, 21). Even the exceedingly great [1302](#) hail fails to shatter their confidence in the kingship of Apollyon, the angel of the Abyss (9:11), and bring them to acknowledge the sovereignty of the God of heaven. Their Faustian bargain has transformed them into blasphemers who carry out to the end the hatred of the beast for God.

With this vision, the Revelation might have come to an end — in terms of God's judgments. But the vision does not end here. What follows is an extended description of Rome as a luxurious prostitute who meets a gruesome death at the hands of the scarlet beast she commands (chap. 17). The demise of the great city is then described in chapter 18 as a great funeral dirge complete with the mourning of kings, merchants, and all seafaring people whose livelihood depended upon Rome's insatiable appetite for extravagance. Both chapters spell out in detail what is involved in the final bowl judgment.

VIII. THE FALL OF BABYLON (17:1-19:5)

Chapters 17 and 18 portray the judgment of God on the great (read “notorious”) prostitute, Rome, that citadel of pagan opposition to the cause of Christ. From a literary point of view the two chapters are distinct. In chapter 17 the harlot appears in a vulgar display of the trappings of wealth and power, and drunk with the blood of martyrs. In chapter 18 she is a city brought to ruins from her former position of world domination. After the opening vision (17:1-6) John learns from an interpreting angel the meaning of its various symbols. The seven heads are both seven hills and seven kings (v. 9), its ten horns are ten kings who join the beast in warring against the Lamb (vv. 12-14), the waters on which the prostitute is seated represent the nations of the world (v. 15), and the woman herself is the capital city of Rome (v. 18).

While the symbols themselves are not difficult to understand, the picture is complicated by such additional intricacies as the statement that the beast “belongs to the seven” yet “is an eighth king” (v. 11). Anticipating some bewilderment the angel-interpreter adds, “Here is a problem for a profound mind!” (v. 9, Goodspeed). By contrast the following chapter (18) is fairly clear: it is a dirge over the fallen capital. Kings, merchants, and all seafarers bewail its destruction. Echoes from the prophetic taunt songs of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel reverberate throughout the chapter.

It is clear that both chapters deal with the same epic event — the downfall of Rome, the center of power and influence that is threatening the early church. Chapter 17 portrays the overthrow of “Babylon” in terms of the destruction of a prostitute who sits astride the scarlet beast and flaunts her vile profession. In chapter 18 the central meaning of this entire episode comes into sharp focus; the prostitute is a city, and that city is “Babylon,” that is to say, Rome. Both chapters fill in in detail the essential meaning of the seventh bowl judgment. Chapter 17 combines a fuller interpretation of the two visions of chapter 13 with the final outpouring of God’s wrath as depicted by the last bowl judgment and sets the stage for the funeral dirge of chapter 18. From this point on John is laying before us his own “tale to two cities” — the city of man (earthly Babylon) and the city of God (the Jerusalem above).

19:1-10 is a great burst of heavenly jubilation over the fall of Babylon. It follows in stark contrast to the mournful dirges of chapter 18. It gives expression to the incredible rejoicing in heaven when the citadel of paganism and opposition to the people of God finally collapses. It prepares the way for the triumphal return of the Lamb and the establishment of the eternal reign of God.

A. THE PROSTITUTE AND THE SCARLET BEAST (17:1-18)

1. The Vision (17:1-6)

1 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. 2 With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

3 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. 5 This title was written on her forehead:

**MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.**

6 I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

One of the seven bowl-angels now invites John to view the punishment to be meted out to the notorious prostitute with whom the kings of earth have committed adultery and whose adulteries have intoxicated the inhabitants of the earth (vv. 1-2). Taken into the desert by the Spirit, John sees a loathsome prostitute astride a scarlet, seven-headed beast (vv. 3-6). In her hand is a golden cup filled with the filth of her adulteries, and on her forehead she bears the title "Mother of Prostitutes." Her ultimate sin is that she has gorged herself on the blood of God's people. She is the one

responsible for the suffering and bloodshed brought upon the struggling church.

1 The Seer is summoned by one of the seven bowl-angels to view the judgment of the infamous prostitute. In 21:9 the same angel appears to show John the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.¹³⁰³ The connection is not accidental. When the great prostitute with all her seductive allurements is exposed and destroyed, then the Bride of Christ will be seen in all her beauty and true worth.

In OT prophetic discourse the imagery of the prostitute is commonly used to denote religious apostasy. Isaiah laments that the once faithful Jerusalem has become a prostitute (Isa 1:21). Jeremiah speaks of Israel's "adulteries and lustful neighings" (elsewhere she is a wild donkey "sniffing the wind in her craving," Jer 2:24) and "shameless prostitution" (Jer 13:27; cf. Jer 2:20-31; Ezek 16:15ff.; Hos 2:5). Since the prostitute of the Apocalypse is a pagan city (cf. 17:18), it is more likely that a passage like Nah 3:4 or Isa 23:16, 17 supplies the immediate background. In the former, the prostitute is Nineveh, who betrays nations with her harlotries and her charms (cf. Rev 17:4). Isaiah pictures Tyre as a forgotten prostitute. In the context of Revelation 17 and 18 the imagery is not that of religious profligacy but of the prostitution of all that is right and noble for the questionable ends of power and luxury.

Whether Jezebel or Cleopatra sat for the portrait John is now painting makes little difference.¹³⁰⁴ The prostitute is Rome.¹³⁰⁵ Adorned in luxury and intoxicated with the blood of the saints, she stands for a dominant world system based on seduction for personal gain over against the righteous demands of a persecuted minority. John's images are timeless in that they portray the essential conflicts of humanity from the beginning of time until the end. At the close of history the great prostitute stands as the final and intensified expression of worldly power. The apocalyptic proclamation that the prostitute shall soon be stripped naked and be utterly destroyed (17:16) comes as a necessary and welcome reminder that God is forever sovereign and continues to occupy the throne of the universe. He will judge with equity the enemies of righteousness and will usher in the kingdom of eternal joy.

The prostitute is pictured as sitting upon¹³⁰⁶ many waters. According to v. 15, the waters are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. Since the prostitute is later named Babylon the Great (17:5), it would appear that this

part of the description comes from Jer 51:13, where Babylon is said to dwell “by many waters.” The reference to the numerous canals that distributed the waters of the Euphrates to the surrounding territory symbolizes the influence of Rome as it flows out throughout the entire world.

2 The kings of the earth who have committed adultery with the great prostitute are the nations who have entered into illicit relations with Rome. They represent the apostate nations that Rome has enticed into idolatrous worship of herself and the beast. The influence of her pernicious doctrines has spread to the entire pagan population. The inhabitants of the earth are further identified in 17:8 as those “whose names have not been written in the book of life.”¹³⁰⁷ They are portrayed as drunk with the intoxicating influence of Rome’s seductive practices. In a somewhat similar way Jeremiah pictured Babylon as a gold cup in the Lord’s hand whose wine the nations drank and went mad (Jer 51:7).¹³⁰⁸

3 The Seer is now carried away into a desert to watch the coming judgment of the prostitute.¹³⁰⁹ Four times in the Apocalypse John is said to be in the Spirit (1:10; 4:2) or carried away in the Spirit (17:3; 21:10).¹³¹⁰ The reference is to that state of ecstasy in which John experienced the entire visionary experience recorded in the Apocalypse (cf. 2 Cor 12:1-3). It does not necessarily point to some new state of exaltation that came over him. In this context the desert is not a place of divine protection and nourishment (as in 12:6, 14), but an appropriate setting for a vision of judgment.¹³¹¹ It may have been suggested by the opening statements of Isaiah’s oracle against Babylon in chapter 21. In the course of Jewish history the desert had often been the setting for unusual and visionary experiences (Exod 3: Iff.; 1 Kgs 19:4ff.; Matt 4:1ff.).

As the vision begins to unfold, John sees a woman seated upon a scarlet beast. That she was earlier said to be sitting upon many waters (v. 1) should cause no problem. The constantly shifting scenes of apocalyptic should not be taken with a rigidity that imposes artificial conformity on its symbols. The scarlet-colored beast is the beast that rose out of the sea in chapter 13 (vv. Iff.). It is the great persecuting power that rules by brute force and is the supreme enemy of Christ and the church.¹³¹² The scarlet color does not necessarily convey an idea such as “ostentatious magnificence.”¹³¹³ Nor is it symbolic of the blood of martyrs. Rather, it is primarily descriptive and

heightens the terrifying appearance of the beast. Like its master, the great red dragon of chapter 12, it is terrifying to behold. Blasphemous names cover its entire body.¹³¹⁴ The reference is to the blasphemous claims to deity made by Roman emperors, who employed such titles as *theios* (divine), *sōtēr* (savior), and *kyrios* (lord). The blasphemies are not so much directly spoken against God by the beast as they are implied by his self-deification. The beast (like the dragon of chap. 12) has seven heads and ten horns (cf. 13:1). These are interpreted later in the chapter (vv. 9-14, 16-17).

4 The woman who sits astride the scarlet beast is clothed in luxurious garments and adorned with gold and costly jewels. Purple and scarlet signify the luxury and splendor of ancient Rome. Both dyes were expensive to extract. Purple was often used for royal garments (Judg 8:26; Dan 5:7), and scarlet was a color of magnificence (cf. Nah 2:3). The costly and spectacular garb of the prostitute should be contrasted with the “fine linen, bright and clean,” worn by the Bride of the Lamb (Rev 19:8). The prostitute is lavishly adorned with gold¹³¹⁵ and precious stones. In her hand she holds a golden cup that promises a heady draught of carnal satisfaction. Its contents, however, are quite otherwise. The cup is full of the “abominable things and¹³¹⁶ the filth of her adulteries.”¹³¹⁷ Moral corruption and all manner of ceremonial uncleanness are what she offers.¹³¹⁸

5 The description of the prostitute continues with special attention to the name written on her forehead. There are seven other references in Revelation to the marking of the forehead. In 13:16, 14:9, and 20:4 the mark is the mark of the beast. Elsewhere it is the seal or name of God (7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4). Placing the name upon the forehead (probably upon a headband) appears to have been a custom of Roman courtesans.¹³¹⁹ The NIV includes MYSTERY as part of the inscription (following the punctuation of Tischendorf), but it is better understood as indicating that the name is to be understood in a mystical rather than literal sense. The NEB translates, “Written on her forehead was a name with a secret meaning.” Only those to whom the meaning is revealed (v. 7) will grasp the full significance of the title.¹³²⁰

The prostitute is Babylon the Great, that great system of godlessness that leads people away from the worship of God and to their own destruction (see before on 14:8). Specifically she is Rome, who, like Babylon of old, has gained a worldwide reputation for luxury, corruption, and power.¹³²¹

Not content with her own evil vice, she spawns her harlotry and abominable practices throughout the world. She is the “mother of whores and of every obscenity on earth” (NEB). Tacitus describes Rome as the place “where all the horrible and shameful things in the world congregate and find a home.”¹³²² Certainly Juvenal’s account of the vile and debased profligacy of the Roman Empress Messalina, who served incognito in the public brothels, is an indication of the depths of immorality in the ancient capital.¹³²³

6 The woman John sees is drunk with the blood of righteous martyrs. The figure recalls OT passages such as Isa 49:26, where it is prophesied that the oppressors of Israel “will be drunk on their own blood as with wine.”¹³²⁴ The metaphor was common among Roman writers as well.¹³²⁵ It portrays the wanton slaughter of a great number of believers along with the intoxicating effect it produces upon the murderous prostitute.¹³²⁶ Although the Neronian massacre after the great fire of A.D. 64¹³²⁷ may have been in the back of John’s mind, the drunken prostitute pictures the final days of persecution at the end of the age.

The woman is said to be drunk “from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (lit.). The text, however, does not intend two groups. They are saints,¹³²⁸ that is, believers who have sacrificed their lives in faithful testimony to Jesus. The second expression specifies more closely the first and more general designation. The revolting and gory spectacle causes John to wonder “with a great wonder” (ASV). When he was taken to the desert John had expected to see the judgment of the prostitute, but up to this point she appears triumphant. Ostentatiously attired and adorned in wealth, she sits upon the scarlet beast advertising her base trade and intoxicated with the blood of her victims. The true nature of the empire is at last fully revealed.

2. The Vision Interpreted (17:7-18)

7 Then the angel said to me: “Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. 8 The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

9 “This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. 10 Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. 11 The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

12 “The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. 13 They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. 14 They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings — and with him will be his called, chosen and, faithful followers. ”

15 Then the angel said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. 16 The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. 17 For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled. 18 The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. ”

The interpreting angel sets out to explain to John the mystery of the woman and the beast she rides. The seven heads of the beast (who emerged from the Abyss) are both seven hills and seven kings. Five of the kings have fallen, one now is, and one is yet to come. The beast is an eighth king. His ten horns represent ten other kings who join with the beast in waging war against the Lamb and are defeated. The beast and the ten kings turn their hatred on the prostitute and bring her to a gory death. Granted, this “interpretation” leaves considerable room for further discussion. In a general sense we immediately understand that here we see the appropriate end of “Babylon,” the cruel oppressor of God’s people. It is a picture of the self-destructive power of evil. Rome has overreached itself and is responsible for its own terrible destiny.

7 The angel responds to John’s astonishment by offering to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast on which she rides.¹³²⁹ It is a single mystery that involves both figures. Neither can be understood apart from the other. While the remainder of chapter 17 is primarily concerned with the interpretation of the beast, 18:1-19:5 details the judgment of the prostitute.

8 The Seer first learns from his angel-interpreter that the scarlet-colored beast “once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss.” This is an obvious parody of the Lamb, who was put to death yet came back to life and now is alive forevermore (1:18; 2:8).¹³³⁰ The description is also an intentional antithesis to the One “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4, 8; 4:8). In the broadest sense the beast is that satanically inspired power which, although having received the stroke of death, returns to hurl himself with renewed fury against the forces of God. It is this incredible power of resuscitation that causes the inhabitants of the earth to stand in awe. He is the beast of chapter 13 who had received a death-stroke in one of his heads and yet survived (13:3, 12, 14). Down through history he repeatedly “comes up out of the Abyss”¹³³¹ to harass and, if it were possible, to destroy the people of God. He is the little horn of Daniel 7 (Antiochus Epiphanes) who rises out of the fourth kingdom (the “most terrifying” fourth beast, Dan 7:19) to make war against the saints (Dan 7:21). He is Nero, who instigates a persecution of the Christians to avert suspicion that he is responsible for the burning of Rome. The beast *was*; at the moment he is *not*. John wrote under the shadow of an impending persecution. The beast is about to come again. This coming will be his last, for now the King of kings and Lord of lords will throw him (along with the

false prophet) alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (19:20). This is what it means that he will “go to his destruction” (see v. 11 as well).

John understood the persecution that lay in the immediate future to be the return of the beast expressed in the ruthless tyranny of the imperial government. He had exercised a controlling influence in the successive reigns of the emperors of Rome, but in this final sortie he is to be revealed for what he really is — the very incarnation of evil in its deep-seated hatred and violent opposition to God and all that is just and good.

The inhabitants of the earth stand in awe when they behold the beast. They are those whose names have not been written in the book of life (cf. Ps 69:28; Isa 4:3; Rev 3:5) from the creation of the world. John is not teaching a form of determinism (according to 3:5 names may be blotted out of the book of life), but emphasizing the great distinction that exists between the followers of the Lamb and those who give their allegiance to the beast. It is the reappearance of the beast that causes the astonishment on the part of the unbelieving world. The verb used to describe the coming of the beast is closely related to the noun¹³³² that regularly describes the parousia or second coming of Christ (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 1 John 2:28; etc.).

9 In v. 8 the beast was portrayed as an evil power who had appeared throughout history and was about to put in one final appearance that would lead to his destruction. In the verses that follow (9-14) the angel relates this more general truth to John’s historical context by providing clues for the interpretation of the beast’s seven heads and identifying the ten horns as those forces that will join with the Antichrist in his last fierce assault upon the Lamb. The rather cryptic statement with which this section begins (“This calls for a mind with wisdom”)¹³³³ may be a warning to interpret with care, or an aside to the effect that what follows “is the clue for those who can interpret it” (NEB). The number of the beast in 13:18 was introduced with a similar statement, but in neither case has the meaning been clear. What is being said is that although the interpretation of the seven heads is not obvious, it may be understood by those who ponder the riddle with care and wisdom.¹³³⁴

The seven heads of the beast are first identified as seven hills upon which the prostitute is sitting. There is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built upon seven hills. Rome began as a network of seven hill

settlements on the left bank of the Tiber, and was from the time of Servius Tullius (her sixth king) an *urbs septicollis*. The reference is commonplace among Roman authors.¹³³⁵ Some writers point out that in OT usage the hill may be a symbol of power (cf. Dan 2:35; Jer 51:25), and interpret the seven hills as successive kingdoms or empires.¹³³⁶

Others take the number symbolically.¹³³⁷ Whatever the overtones may be, the immediate reference is to the city of Rome. In John's day Rome epitomized all the antagonism and opposition to the Christian faith. The beast is about to come from the Abyss and become incarnate in this hostile world order of which the city on seven hills is the governing center.

10 But now the plot thickens.¹³³⁸ The seven heads of the beast are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, and one has not yet come. The simplest answer would be that the angel is referring to a series of Roman emperors and pointing out that one more must rule for a short time before the final advent of the beast. The five that have fallen would be Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero; the one who is would be Vespasian, and Titus would be the one yet to come. This interpretation, however, has several problems. It regards Augustus as the first emperor although his predecessor, Julius Caesar, took the title *Imperator*, and was reckoned by many writers (both Roman and Jewish) as the first emperor.¹³³⁹ A second problem is the omission of the three rival emperors who ruled briefly between Nero (A.D. 54-68) and Vespasian (A.D. 69-79).¹³⁴⁰ Although Suetonius seems to dispose of them by referring to their reigns as *rebellio trium principum*,¹³⁴¹ Josephus, in treating the bloody period between Nero and Vespasian, names both Galba and Otho as emperors and speaks of the troubles under Vitellius before the civil war was brought to an end.¹³⁴² In the *Sibylline Oracles* (5:35) they are the "three kings" after Nero who "perish at each other's hands." It is therefore not at all certain that these three emperors should be passed over so lightly.

By starting with Augustus and skipping the three pretenders, we would arrive at Vespasian as the king who is, that is, the ruler in power at the time of the writing of the book. Yet the evidence is fairly conclusive that the book of Revelation was written at a considerably later period, during the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96). Different answers are offered for this anachronism. One frequent suggestion is that John incorporates an earlier oracle from the time of Vespasian.¹³⁴³ Another is that John placed himself

back in time and after the manner of apocalyptists wrote history in the guise of prophecy. These and others lack persuasion.¹³⁴⁴ The text is quite clear: king number six is ruling at the time of John's writing. However people try to calculate the seven kings as Roman emperors, they encounter difficulties that cast considerable doubt on the entire approach.

A different approach is to take the seven kings as a succession of secular empires. One writer, for instance, lists Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon, Persia, and Greece as the five that have fallen; Rome is the present kingdom; and the one to come is the Christian empire beginning with Constantine.¹³⁴⁵ Another has a slightly different listing and makes the seventh a "collective title for all antichristian governments between the fall of Rome and the final empire of antichrist."¹³⁴⁶ The basic problem with this approach is that the Greek word under consideration is everywhere throughout the NT translated "king," not "kingdom."¹³⁴⁷

The most satisfactory explanation of the seven kings is that the number seven is symbolic and stands for the power of the Roman Empire as a historic whole.¹³⁴⁸ John is not interested in a careful tabulation of the past but is declaring the nearness of the end by the commonly accepted use of a numerical scheme. For John seven is the number of completeness. Five kings have fallen, one is, and the last one remains for only a short time. In other apocalyptic writings the number of ages or world periods conforms to different numerical schemes. In 2 Esdr 14:11 history is divided into twelve parts, of which 9½ (or 10½) have already passed.¹³⁴⁹ In the *Apocalypse of Weeks*, Enoch divides history into ten periods, seven of which are already past (*1 Enoch* 93), and three yet future that lead to eternal judgment (*1 Enoch* 91:12-17). The single purpose of the apocalyptists in all such number schemes is to declare the imminent end of the age. In Revelation the seven kings represent the entire period of Roman domination regardless of the exact number of emperors. The important point is that the end is drawing near.¹³⁵⁰

11 We now arrive at the heart of the riddle. The beast himself is an eighth king who is at the same time one of the seven. If the seven kings were specific Roman emperors, then the most likely candidate for number eight would be Domitian. This would identify the beast as the emperor reigning at the time John receives his vision. Yet three times in the chapter we are told that the beast is not (19:8 [twice], 11). At the time of writing, the beast

has not yet ascended from the Abyss (19:8). He is an eighth in the sense that he is distinct from the other seven. He is Antichrist, not simply another Roman emperor. He is not a human ruler through whom the power of evil finds expression — he is that evil power itself. He belongs to the cosmic struggle between God and Satan that lies behind the scenes of human history. Yet he will appear on the stage of history as a man. He is “of the seven” (*ek tōn hepta*) — not “one of the seven”¹³⁵¹ — in that he plays the same sort of role as his earthly predecessors. He himself, however, belongs to another sphere of reality. His period of hegemony is the great tribulation preceding the return of the Messiah.

This interpretation requires no reliance upon the Nero Redivivus myth (see earlier in 13:3), although its existence would aid in the understanding of John’s prophecy of Antichrist. Nero, the epitome of evil and the abuse of power, *was* (he lived and ruled) and *is not* (i.e., he is now dead). Yet (according to the myth) he will *return to life* and once again seize power.¹³⁵² Commentators who understand the eighth king as Domitian stress that early writers recognized a resemblance between Nero and Domitian.¹³⁵³ But since all the beast’s heads were part of the same imperial system through which the evil intent of Antichrist found expression, we would of course expect the two prominent persecutors to be comparable.

A somewhat different approach holds that the beast is Antichrist in but two of his heads (successive worldly kingdoms at enmity with God).¹³⁵⁴ He was embodied in Antiochus Epiphanes, he does not now exist in the same malevolent form, but will in the future arise from the Abyss in the person of the eschatological Antichrist. It is doubtful, however, that the essentially Gentile church in Asia Minor at the end of the first century would place into such an exclusive category a Syrian ruler who, more than 250 years before, had persecuted the Jews in Palestine. Certainly the terrors of the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64, which only a few years before had set the stage for Roman opposition to the Christian faith, would be a more likely historical expression of Antichrist.

12-13 The ten horns are said by the angel-interpreter to be ten kings who as yet have not received their royal power.¹³⁵⁵ When they do receive authority, they will turn it over to the beast and join him in war against the Lamb. The ten kings are not the ten emperors of Rome because, unlike the Roman emperor, these have received no kingdom as yet. Nor are they the kings of the earth who in 18:9 mourn the fall of Babylon. Many writers

identify them as Parthian satraps coming from the east in a massive invasion under the leadership of a revived Nero. This would fit the context of the following paragraph in which the ten kings and the beast destroy the prostitute city Rome (19:16-18). Still others take them to be the governors of senatorial provinces who held office for one year. Whatever the immediate historical allusion, the complete fulfillment of the imagery awaits the final curtain of the human drama. Ultimately the ten kings are “purely eschatological figures representing the totality of the powers of all nations on the earth which are to be made subservient to Antichrist.”¹³⁵⁶ The number ten is symbolic and indicates completeness. It does not point to ten specific kings nor to ten European kingdoms of a revived Roman empire.

All the forces that join with Antichrist rule but a short period.¹³⁵⁷ With one mind they turn over their power and authority to the beast.¹³⁵⁸ They are willing colleagues who share the same hostility to Christ and his followers.

14 Verse 14 passes on quickly to the final conflict between Antichrist and the Messiah (19:11-21). It is a promise of victory for the Lamb in the battle of Armageddon. The Lamb will overcome his adversaries, for he is “Lord of lords and King of kings.” These well-known phrases emphasizing the sovereignty of God go back to Deut 10:17, where the Lord God is named the God of gods and Lord of lords (cf. Ps 136:2, 3; Dan 2:47; 2 Mace 13:4). In *1 Enoch* 9:4 the Most High is named “Lord of lords, God of gods, King of kings, and God of the ages.”¹³⁵⁹ The beast will be overcome because he has met the One to whom everyone will ultimately be subordinate. The armies of heaven share his victory as well (cf. Rev 19:14). Those who overcome will exercise the authority of the Lamb over the nations of the earth and will rule them with an iron scepter (Rev 2:26-27). The concept of the righteous taking part in the destruction of the wicked is a standard apocalyptic theme. In *1 Enoch* 98:12 the unrighteous are warned that they are to be delivered into the hands of the righteous, who will cut off their necks without mercy (cf. *1 Enoch* 38:5; 91:12; 96:1). The specific role of those who accompany the Lamb in battle is not discussed. They are simply identified as called, chosen, and faithful.¹³⁶⁰

15 The angel continues his interpretation (cf. vv. 8 and 12) by identifying the waters upon which the prostitute sits as peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. This fourfold grouping stresses universality.¹³⁶¹ The imagery of the waters comes from Jer 51:13, where Babylon is pictured as

dwelling by many waters,^{[1362](#)} a reference to the Euphrates and its system of waterways in and around the city. For John the symbol serves to emphasize the vastness of the power of Rome, the capital city of the entire Mediterranean civilization.^{[1363](#)}

16 The fate of the prostitute is now related in phrases reminiscent of Ezekiel's vivid allegory of Oholibah (Ezek 23:11-35), who doted on the Assyrians (23:12), was defiled by the Babylonians (23:17), and played the prostitute in the land of Egypt (23:19). The beast and the ten kings turn in hatred upon the prostitute ("they will deal with you in hatred," Ezek 23:29), make her desolate ("strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry," Ezek 23:26) and naked ("leave you naked and bare," Ezek 23:29), eat her flesh ("cut off your noses and your ears," Ezek 23:25), and burn her utterly with fire ("those of you who are left will be consumed by fire," Ezek 23:25). This turning of the beast against the woman who sits on it speaks of "a terrible and mysterious law of political history, according to which every revolutionary power contains within itself the seed of self-destruction."^{[1364](#)} It describes the self-destroying power of evil. The wicked are not a happy band of brothers, but precisely because they are wicked they give way to jealousy and hatred, so that "at the climax their mutual hatreds will result in mutual destruction."^{[1365](#)}

The woman who was once arrayed in purple and scarlet and adorned with jewelry (Rev 17:4) is now stripped bare. The eating of her flesh^{[1366](#)} suggests wild beasts tearing at the body of their prey and portrays the fierceness with which the prostitute is attacked by her assailants. One is reminded of the bloody scene when Jezebel, having been thrown from the window and trampled by horses, was then eaten by the dogs except for skull, feet, and palms of hands (2 Kgs 9:30-37).^{[1367](#)} Finally, the prostitute is burned with fire. Leviticus teaches that if the daughter of any priest defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she is to be burned in the fire (Lev 21:9). So also is the man who takes a wife and her mother also — the three shall be burned in the fire (Lev 20:14).^{[1368](#)}

17 The angel explains that it was God who brought about the slaughter of the prostitute by putting it into the hearts of the ten kings to do his will. They were of one mind^{[1369](#)} in relinquishing their sovereignty to the beast and joining in his assault upon the prostitute (v. 17) and in his final campaign against the Lamb (vv. 13-14). This verse denies the existence of

any ultimate dualism in the world. In the final analysis the powers of evil serve the purposes of God. The coalition between the beast and his allies will continue until the words of God — the prophecies leading up to the overthrow of Antichrist — are fulfilled.

18 For the fourth time in this chapter the angel identifies and interprets a figure in the vision.^{[1370](#)} The woman is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. For John, the city is Rome. She is the wicked seducer whose pernicious influence has permeated the whole of the Mediterranean world. Yet Babylon the Great, source of universal harlotry and abomination (v. 5), is more than first-century Rome. Every great center of power that has prostituted its wealth and influence restores to life the spirit of ancient Babylon.^{[1371](#)} John's words extend beyond his immediate setting in history and sketch the portrait of an eschatological Babylon, which will provide the social, religious, and political base for the last attempt of Antichrist to establish his kingdom.

B. FUNERAL DIRGE OVER ROME (18:1-24)

John follows the vision of judgment that takes the life of the infamous prostitute with a detailed account of the destruction of Rome, that center of power, luxury, and fierce antagonism against the Christian faith. Drawing heavily upon prophetic oracles and taunt songs of Jewish scripture, the Apocalyptist records an extended dirge over the accursed city. The dirge is in three parts. First, in vv. 1-8 an angel invested with great authority comes down from heaven and declares that Babylon the Great is fallen. Another angel calls God's people out of the city and proclaims judgment against her many crimes and sins. In the second part of the dirge (vv. 9-20) we hear the mournful lament of three different segments of society that had profited from Rome's voracious appetite for material abundance — the kings of the world who had committed adultery with her (vv. 9-10), the merchants who supplied her with anything and everything she wanted (vv. 11-17a), and the maritime industry that brought her cargo from around the world (vv. 17b-20). The third and final segment is the actual fall of Rome (vv. 21-24). It is important to note that the entire dirge is poetic in language and form. To interpret the section as prose leads to some serious misunderstandings.

A number of scholars assume that some sort of Jewish source lies behind this section.¹³⁷² The special source theory is based primarily on the large number of rare words in the chapter and differences of outlook that are held to exist.¹³⁷³ The idea of a non-Christian source is strengthened by what appears to be an antagonism against Rome so violent as to be inconsistent with teaching elsewhere in the NT concerning the state (e.g., Rom 13:1-7). But the author of Revelation is not at this point discussing how believers are to live under normal circumstances within the state. He is portraying in a prophetic manner the ultimate collapse of a monstrous antichristian world order determined to defeat the purpose of God in history. It is not personal vindictiveness but loyalty to God and his great redemptive purpose that moves the Seer to deliver a prophetic oracle in the accepted literary genre of

his predecessors. Squeamishness about his rhetoric results more from a misunderstanding of the literary nature of the prophetic taunt song than from any supposedly sub-Christian ethic being expressed.

The argument against the idea of a specific source adapted by the Seer rests mainly upon John's regular practice of drawing freely upon the words and phrases of Jewish literature. Elaborate attempts to discover an earlier source¹³⁷⁴ are unnecessary and detract from the accomplishment of the author himself. John is more original than some of his interpreters would allow him to be. In addition to describing what he actually "sees" in the visions given to him he serves as an inspired writer who not only comments on the visions but at times is actually involved in them (e.g., 11:1-2).

The greatness of John as a prophet is seen with great clarity in this section of the Apocalypse. Remember that Rome is at the height of her glory. She rules the world, and nations serve her interests as obedient servants. Her power is unchallenged. Over against this mighty monolith stands a lonely prophet in exile on a barren island in the Aegean. As Rome carries on her opulent lifestyle unaware of any pending danger, John sings her funeral dirge — in the past tense! Rome has fallen. The mighty city has become nothing but a haunt for evil spirits and unclean animals. Imagine how this message fell on the ears of believers in the seven churches. Facing persecution and loss, they are led by the prophetic Spirit to understand that their oppressor will soon be destroyed. The future is not desolate but filled with the joyful expectation of the vindication of their faith. John's message could not have come at a more appropriate time.

1. Babylon Declared Desolate (18:1-8)

1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. 2 With a mighty voice he shouted:

*“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!
She has become a home for demons
and a haunt for every evil spirit,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.
3 For all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of her adulteries.
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive
luxuries. ”*

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

*“Come out of her, my people,
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
5 for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes.*

*6 Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.
Mix her a double portion from her own cup.*

*7 Give her as much torture and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.*

*In her heart she boasts,
‘I sit as queen; I am not a widow,
and I will never mourn.’*

*8 Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.*

*She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.*

The announcement of Babylon's desolation comes in two segments. First, in vv. 1-3, an angel descends from heaven and its very presence illumines the earth. With great authority it announces that Rome has fallen. Then, in vv. 4-8, another voice from heaven calls the people of God out of the city, for it is about to receive a double portion of the suffering it inflicted on others.¹³⁷⁵ There is nothing ahead for the city but death, mourning and famine. The once proud monarch has been brought to ruin.

A major poetic feature in this section is the repeated sets of three lines. Rome has become a home for demons, a haunt for evil spirits, and a haunt for unclean birds (v. 2). Nations drink her adulterous wine, kings commit adultery with her, and merchants grow rich from her excessive luxuries (v. 3). The voice from heaven issues the order to give back to her what she has given, to pay her back double, and to mix her a double portion (v. 6). The plagues that overtake her are death, mourning, and famine (v. 8). Those who listened to this prophecy as it was read must certainly have been caught up in the rhythmic excitement of these passages, to say nothing of the message itself.

1 In vv. 1-3 an angel descends from heaven to announce the fate of Rome. The messenger is not the interpreting angel of the previous chapter (see vv. 1, 7, etc.) but "another angel." The designation serves only to distinguish between the two and carries no special significance.¹³⁷⁶ The angel comes from the presence of God, empowered with great authority and reflecting the radiance and glory of God.¹³⁷⁷ One is reminded of the return of the glory of God to the temple through the east gate as described in Ezek 43:1-5. Elsewhere in Scripture God is pictured as dwelling in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16) and as wrapping himself in light as with a garment (Ps 104:2). Little wonder that those who come from his presence are marked by a lingering radiance (Exod 34:29-35). The authority of the angel should be understood in terms of the power required to proclaim to all the complete destruction of Rome¹³⁷⁸ as well as the incredible nature of what he is about to prophesy. In the ears of those who read the

prophecy the collapse of mighty Babylon sounds absolutely impossible. John is about to tell them that God is now responding to the cry of the martyrs in the fifth seal.

2 The declaration of the angelic herald is like that of Isa 21:9 when news of the capture of Babylon by Cyrus reached the children of Israel — “Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!” With a mighty voice the angel shouts out that Babylon the Great has fallen.¹³⁷⁹ Babylon has always been symbolic of opposition to the advance of the kingdom of God. As it fell in times past, so will it be destroyed in the future. Part of the reason for using “Babylon” is that the readers will know what God did to the first Babylon and be quick to recognize that in giving Rome that title he will once again carry out his judgment on the city. The aorist tense denotes the certainty of future fulfillment. It is the prophetic way of declaring that the great purpose of God in triumphing over evil is a *fait accompli*.

The once-proud city of Babylon is to lie utterly desolate. It is to become the haunt for evil spirits and all kinds of unclean creatures. For background we should turn to Isaiah’s oracle against ancient Babylon. There we find that Babylon once fallen will never again be inhabited except by creatures of the desert (Isa 13:20-21). Satyrs (RSV), demonic creatures having the appearance of hairy goats, will leap about among the ruins to the howling of hyenas and jackals (Isa 13:21-22).¹³⁸⁰ There is some question about the meaning of the word twice translated “haunt” in v. 2 as well as the relationship between the parallel clauses.¹³⁸¹ The structure of the verse suggests that the word is roughly parallel to “home.” Demons dwell among the ruins of Babylon, as do unclean spirits and animals. It is not a place of detention¹³⁸² but a place where they dwell undisturbed. In any case, it is a prophetic picture of absolute desolation where the proud achievements of the human race become the demonic haunts of unclean and detestable creatures. Since Rome is already the habitation of evil spirits, it follows that when she falls nothing will remain but the evil spirits and ceremonially unclean creatures.

3 This verse supplies the reason for the fall of Rome. Again it is set out in a triplet progressing from the nations intoxicated by her adultery, to the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her, to

the merchants who grew wealthy from her desire for luxury. Rome has fallen because she has made the nations drink¹³⁸³ the maddening wine of her adulteries.¹³⁸⁴ Adultery is a well-known figure in the OT for apostasy from God (Hos 4:10; Jer 3:2). It is used here to denote the unclean and illicit relationships between the capital of the empire and all the nations of the earth. In the last days it will be epitomized by worship of the beast. The merchants of the earth have profited from their economic alliances with Rome. They have become rich through the power of her luxury. The excessive luxury¹³⁸⁵ of Rome is spoken of as an actual power that has made the merchants of the earth rich.

4 John hears another voice from heaven, addressing itself first to the people of God (vv. 4-5) and then to those who execute his wrath (vv. 6ff.). The voice is probably that of an angel who speaks on behalf of God. Although the reference to believers as “my people” would seem to designate God as speaker, the following verse indicates otherwise by placing God in the third person. The people of God are called upon to come out of the doomed city. Prophets of former days had issued similar warnings. “Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing!” cried Isaiah (52:11). “Come out of her, my people! Run for your lives!” echoed Jeremiah (51:45).¹³⁸⁶ The call to separation has marked the elect throughout the history of God’s redemptive activity.¹³⁸⁷ The Jewish race had its origin with God’s command to Abram, “Leave your country ... and go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?” asks Paul (2 Cor 6:14). The summons in Rev 18:4 suggests a literal flight from the doomed city (as Christian Jews fled to Pella at the fall of Jerusalem), but when projected on the larger screen of the consummation it becomes a call to the last generation of believers for “spiritual withdrawal from Vanity Fair.”¹³⁸⁸

The persecuted church has always faced the temptation to compromise with worldliness and thus ease the tension of living in a hostile environment. Separation is the order of the day: sometimes physical, always ideological. Augustine interpreted the section spiritually, commenting, “We must renounce our rights as citizens of this world, and flee unto God on the wings of faith” (*De Civ. Dei* 18.18).

Two reasons are given for separation from the city: so as not to share in her sins and so as not to receive any of her plagues (which brings together two basic issues in the book — sin and judgment). To share in her wickedness is to reap her recompense. The most common NT designation for a believer (“saint”) means to be set apart to God for a holy purpose.

5 Plagues are about to come upon the city because her sins have accumulated¹³⁸⁹ to such an extent that they extend up into heaven where God has not forgotten them. If the verse builds on Jer 51:9 (“for her judgment reaches to the skies”), the figure would be less vivid. God remembers the iniquities of Babylon and will make her drink the cup of his wrath (cf. 16:19).

6 The voice from heaven continues to speak, but it now addresses itself to undesigned agents of divine vengeance.¹³⁹⁰ With yet another triplet, the judgment is expressed in terms of repayment in kind. They are to give back to her as she has given, to pay her back double for what she has done, and to mix her a double portion from her own cup. Attempts to soften the passage out of consideration for the character of God (as well as the credibility of the Seer) misunderstand the eschatological wrath of a righteous deity.¹³⁹¹ Babylon has shed the blood of prophets and saints (v. 24) and is about to receive in kind the reward for her cruelty. Not divine revenge but just requital is the issue. The martyrs of chapter 6 need wait no longer for the sovereign God, holy and true (6:10), to avenge the death of all whose faith has conquered the sword.

While it is true that “double [unto her] the double” was a “conventional expression for *full requital*,”¹³⁹² it would appear that in this setting what is being called for is not *lex talionis* but a more severe form of punishment — one that corresponds to Babylon’s enlightenment.¹³⁹³ The parallel structure of the first two clauses and the demand for equal payment in the following verse favor the first interpretation. John follows the prophetic tradition — “Repay her for her deeds; do to her as she has done” (Jer 50:29). In the very cup from which she made the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries (Rev 14:8), she must now drink the wrath of God (cf. 2 Bar. 13:8).

7 With the second command for judgment (v. 7a) the repayment takes a new turn. Rome is to receive misery in exact proportion to the

self-glorification and luxurious lifestyle she has chosen. Like the daughters of Zion who “walk with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes” (Isa 3:16-17), the harlot Babylon is also to be smitten by the Lord. The Greek idea of *hybris* (an arrogant self-assertiveness that insults and abuses others)¹³⁹⁴ is an attitude uniformly decried in Scripture. “A man’s pride brings him low,” reads Prov 29:23. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled” is the NT counterpart (Luke 14:11). The humbling of Babylon will involve torment and grief.

The voice from heaven now gives the reasons for these judgments.¹³⁹⁵ With arrogant pride Rome sees herself as mistress of the world beyond any possibility of personal loss or sorrow. The rhetoric of her monologue is modeled after Isa 47:7-8, where Babylon, the lover of pleasures, says in her heart, “I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.” Rome’s assertion that she is no widow is not a retort against the suggestion that she is without lovers, but indicates that she has not experienced the debilitating effects of war and loss of life. Her soldiers are victorious: they have not died on the fields of battle. There is no mourning in her streets.¹³⁹⁶

8 Because of her arrogant self-confidence, her plagues will come suddenly¹³⁹⁷ upon her, and she will be utterly devastated by the fire of divine judgment. Belshazzar, his court and his concubines, drinking wine from the sacred vessels of the temple, suddenly saw their fate being written on the wall of the palace by the fingers of a man’s hand (Dan 5). Rome, drunk with the blood of martyrs (17:6; 18:24), will suddenly meet a like disaster. The three plagues that come are death, mourning, and famine.¹³⁹⁸ Judgment by fire is a common Biblical concept. In one chapter in Jeremiah the Lord says that Babylon will be a “burned-out mountain” (51:25) whose dwellings (v. 30), marshes (v. 32), and high gates (v. 58) will all be set on fire. Fire will test the quality of each person’s work on the day of the Lord (1 Cor 3:13). In ancient times the smoke of a burning city signaled its collapse. Once under way, nothing can prevent the spread of its hungry flames until the city is left in smoldering ruins. In the case of Rome it is the Lord¹³⁹⁹ God in his strength who will bring about judgment by fire.

Even though the churches of John's day were subject to opposition and oppression from the government, the certainty of God's judgment would bring great hope. God has not forsaken them. His ears are not deaf to the cry of the martyrs for vindication. The announcement of Rome's imminent demise, unbelievable as it would appear from all outward observation, was a sure indication that God still ruled the nations of the world and that he will never allow his eternal plan to be overthrown. His kingdom will prevail!

The judgment that will fall Rome will be like in kind to what she has meted out to others. She will be mixed a double portion from her own cup. She who boasted of her invincibility will be brought to nothing. As she has caused others to suffer every kind of hardship, so now she herself will experience the sorrow of deprivation and death. The point is not that the church will be able to rejoice because others suffer but that God in his justice will see to it that the arrogant cruelty of pagan Rome will not go unpunished.

2. Lament of Kings, Merchants, and Seamen (18:9-20)

9 *“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. 10 Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:*

*“‘Woe! Woe, O great city,
O Babylon, city of power!
In one hour your doom has come!’*

11 *“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more — 12 cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; 13 cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.*

14 *“They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ 15 The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn 16 and cry out:*

*“‘Woe! Woe, O great city,
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
17 In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’*

“Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. 18 When they see

the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ 19 They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

*“‘Woe! Woe, O great city,
where all who had ships on the sea
became rich through her wealth!
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!
20 Rejoice over her, O heaven!
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she treated you.’ ”*

Verses 9-19 consist of three dirges raised over the fallen city of Babylon.¹⁴⁰⁰ They are chanted by the kings of the earth who have shared in her luxury (vv. 9-10), the merchants of the earth who have grown rich by supplying her insatiable appetite for luxury (vv. 11-17), and the entire maritime trade that had prospered in delivering her desires (vv. 17-19). The section is modeled after Ezekiel’s lamentation over Tyre (chap. 27). Fifteen of the twenty-nine commodities listed in Rev 18:12-13 are also found in Ezek 27:12-22. The same three groups of mourners are all referred to in the Ezekiel passage, although their reactions to the fall of the cities differ somewhat — the mariners cry bitterly (vv. 29-30), the kings shudder with horror (v. 35), and the merchants hiss (v. 36). Then in sudden and sharp contrast to the thrice-repeated “Woe! Woe, O great city” (vv. 10, 16, 19) heaven and God’s people on earth are called on to rejoice that God has judged the city for the way she treated them (v. 20). This prepares the way for the actual fall of Rome in the dramatic verses that follow (vv. 21-24).

9-10 The first lament is that of the kings of the earth. These are not the kings of 17:16 who turn upon Rome to bring her down to destruction, but the governing heads of all nations who have entered into questionable trade with the commercial center of the ancient world. They represent “the bankruptcy of an arrogant existence which believed that it was ‘secure’ because it was living in a perverted political order.”¹⁴⁰¹ They have committed adultery (entered into illicit relations; cf. 17:2) with the prostitute and lived voluptuously ¹⁴⁰² with her. Now their fortunes have changed, and they weep and wail¹⁴⁰³ as the rising smoke announces her

destruction by fire. Like the princes of the sea who are “clothed with terror” at the fall of Tyre (Ezek 26:16-18), the world leaders lament the unexpected disaster that falls upon Rome. The imagery of fire is prominent in the description of the eschatological collapse of the world order — epitomized in John’s day by Rome (17:16; 18:8, 17; 19:3; cf. Isa 34:10; Ezek 28:18). Peter speaks of the coming day of God when the heavens will be destroyed by fire and the elements will melt in the heat (2 Pet 3:12).

The kings of the earth do not rush to the rescue of their paramour but “stand at a distance, horrified at her torture” (TCNT). They are astounded that judgment could fall so suddenly (“in one hour”) upon a city as great and strong as Rome. They raise their voices in the sorrowful lament, “Woe! woe, O great city” (to be repeated by both the merchants [v. 16] and sailors [v. 19]). Both the English word “woe” and its Greek equivalent (pronounced *ouai*) have a desolate and mournful sound. The city that seemed so strong and powerful has fallen. In one hour her doom had come.¹⁴⁰⁴ Those who admired the accomplishments of strength are amazed that the most powerful city in existence lies smoldering in the ashes of destruction.

11 In vv. 11-17 the dirge is taken up by the merchants of the earth.¹⁴⁰⁵ They weep and mourn, not out of sympathy for the proud city now brought low, but because with its collapse they have been deprived of their major source of financial gain. There is no longer anyone to buy their merchandise. The tremendous volume of this trade may be inferred from contemporary writers such as Pliny and Aristides.¹⁴⁰⁶ The excessive luxury of Rome and its passion for the extravagant are well known.¹⁴⁰⁷ At one of Nero’s banquets the Egyptian roses alone cost nearly \$100,000. Vitellius had a penchant for delicacies like peacocks’ brains and nightingales’ tongues. In his reign of less than one year he spent \$20,000,000, mostly on food. One Roman, after squandering an immense fortune, committed suicide because he could not live on the pittance that remained — about \$300,000. In the Talmud it is written, “Ten measures of wealth came down into the world: Rome received nine, and all the world one.”¹⁴⁰⁸ Small wonder that the suppliers of such gross extravagance mourned the passing of their market!

12-13 We are now presented with a list of imports brought from all over the world into Ostia, the port of Rome. The inventory is quite similar to the one found in Ezekiel 27, where Tyre is the chief maritime capital in a

former period of splendor. The twenty-nine items fall into six groups of four to six each:¹⁴⁰⁹ (1) precious metals and gems, (2) fabrics for expensive clothing, (3) ornamental pieces, (4) aromatic substances, (5) foodstuffs, and (6) animals and people. The purpose of the long list is to impress the reader with the tremendous flow of trade that poured into Rome, enabling her to live luxuriously as the mistress of the world. Not every item requires discussion. At that time there was in Rome a passion for silver dishes. Women would bathe only in silver tubs. Even generals on the field insisted upon dining on silver dishes. Gems and pearls were greatly prized. Julius Caesar gave Servilia a single pearl costing more than \$18,000. Purple was imported primarily from Phoenicia, where the expensive dye was extracted a drop at a time from a shellfish called the murex. Silk came from the distant land of China and was extremely expensive. Yet it was imported in such quantities that Josephus reports how the triumphant army appeared before Vespasian and Titus arrayed in silken garments.¹⁴¹⁰

Citron wood was an expensive dark wood imported from North Africa and used for costly furniture and inlay work. Its unusual ornamental veining resembled at times the eyes of the peacock's tail or the stripes or spots of wild animals.¹⁴¹¹ Seneca is reported to have had three hundred tables of citrus wood¹⁴¹² with ivory feet. The wood and various kinds of vessels are a further expansion of the merchandise of v. 11 that no one any longer will buy. Wealthy Romans ate from ivory plates. Ornaments of costly wood,¹⁴¹³ bronze, iron, and marble decorated the homes of the rich. Cinnamon was an aromatic spice imported from South China. The prostitute in Prov 7:17 perfumed her bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon (cf. Cant 4:14). The word translated "spice"¹⁴¹⁴ is an Eastern perfume used to scent the hair. Incense was burned for its fragrant odor. Myrrh was used medicinally and as a perfume. Wheat was imported mainly from Egypt. The word translated "cattle"¹⁴¹⁵ means a beast of burden. The carriage¹⁴¹⁶ was a four-wheeled vehicle in which the Roman aristocracy rode.

The word translated "slaves" in many contemporary versions is literally "bodies."¹⁴¹⁷ This is a vivid commentary on the social conditions of the day. Slave traders regarded their human cargo as so much merchandise to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. It is estimated that there were as many as 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. The final item on the list, "souls of men," is an old Hebrew phrase that, according to Swete, means

little more than human livestock.¹⁴¹⁸ It may, however, refer to something even more sinister than the regular slave trade. While some slaves served in the houses of the great, “there were others whose fate was to fight for their lives and to die for the entertainment of the Roman crowds in the amphitheaters built for that purpose by the Caesars.”¹⁴¹⁹ Most commentators take the expression in apposition to slaves and translate the connective “even.”¹⁴²⁰

14 John now picks up the narrative that may have been lost in the long list of cargoes.¹⁴²¹ The merchants, somewhat in irony, lament the fact that all the rich luxuries that Rome longed for have vanished forever. The concluding clause, “never to be recovered,” brackets the list along with the earlier statement, “no one buys their cargoes any more” (v. 11). The change to second person (“you”) is typical of the Seer’s freedom of expression. The riches (“dainties,” NRSV) probably refers to exotic foods, and the splendor¹⁴²² to expensive clothing and decorative objects.¹⁴²³

15-17a The merchants’ dirge resumes following the parenthetical listing of imports to Rome. They had profited richly from their lively trade with the great capital of the world empire. Now, like the kings of the earth (v. 10), they take their stand at a safe distance to weep and mourn. Their lament is poetic in form. Continuing the use of triplets, the merchants describe the city as dressed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet; she glitters with gold, precious stones, and pearls. The merchants’ sorrowful song is like that of the kings, but the changes in phraseology are instructive. To the kings, Rome was the “city of power” (v. 10); to the merchants she is dressed in expensive clothes and adorned with costly ornaments (cf. 17:4). Each group sees her fall in terms of its own interests. The merchants mourn because so suddenly (“in one hour”) her great riches have been laid desolate.

17b-18 The dirge is now continued by a third group, those involved in and connected with the shipping industry. The “sea captain” was the steersman or pilot rather than the owner of the ship.¹⁴²⁴ The “sailors” were the rank-and-file seamen.¹⁴²⁵ “All who travel by ship” (“every one upon/to a place sailing,” lit.) is an awkward phrase but probably refers simply to passengers.¹⁴²⁶ “Those who earn their living from the sea” refers to all those whose livelihood depends on the maritime industry (cf. Ps 107:23) or, if the phrase is taken more literally (“as many as work the sea”), it could

refer to such trades as fishing or pearl diving.¹⁴²⁷ Like the others, they too stand afar off (vv. 10, 15). As they watch the smoke rise from the burning ruins, they cry out in amazement, “Was there ever a city like this great city?” The same note of astonishment is heard in the lament over Tyre: “Who can be compared to Tyre?” (Ezek 27:32, GNB).

19 With one further description, those “who go down to the sea in ships” now are pictured as throwing dust on their heads (another act of sorrow also found in the lament over Tyre in Ezek 27:30) and raising the mournful lament, “Woe! Woe, O great city” (cf. vv. 10, 16). The phrase “through her wealth” could mean that the seagoing merchants and maritime personnel were made rich “through the greatness of her costly trade.”¹⁴²⁸

20 The sudden change from an extended lament (vv. 9-19) to a call for rejoicing (v. 20) is in keeping with the free style of the Apocalypse. Some writers feel that v. 20 is a call to the church to rejoice over the suffering of the unrighteous. The call, however, is first of all addressed to heaven. If we interpret the verse in light of its parallel in 12:12, then the saints, apostles, and prophets¹⁴²⁹ would be “you who dwell in the heavens.” It is the church glorified, not believers on earth, who are invited to rejoice. The specific reason offered for their rejoicing is variously understood. In an excellent discussion, Caird posits a forensic setting in which Babylon is found guilty of perjury and God requires from her the penalty she has exacted from her victims. He translates, “God has imposed on her the sentence she passed on you.”¹⁴³⁰ This interpretation comports well with an earlier verse in the chapter, “Give back to her as she has given” (v. 6). The church victorious is to rejoice that God the righteous judge has turned back the evidence laid against believers and in turn has served to bring judgment upon the accuser himself.

With this final lament by the maritime industry the sorrow and frustration of all who have profited from Rome’s profligacy come to a close. Each part of society has mourned the fall of Rome in terms of its own personal advantage. The city has come to ruin, and so have the special benefits of all who have served her for personal gain. In times of crisis human nature inevitably reveals how self-centered and opportunistic are its concerns.

3. Babylon Destroyed (18:21-24)

21 Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

*“With such violence
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,
never to be found again.
22 The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and
trumpeters,
will never be heard in you again.
No workman of any trade
will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone
will never be heard in you again.
23 The light of a lamp
will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride
will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world’s great men.
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.
24 In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints,
and of all who have been killed on the earth. ”*

In vv. 9-19 we saw how Rome’s political and commercial allies were affected by her fall. In the verses that follow we view her collapse from within. The arts, crafts, commerce, and customs of the great city have all been permanently silenced. Six times in vv. 21-23 the phrase “never ... again”^{[1431](#)} tolls the collapse of the city. The paragraph consists of a doom song introduced by symbolic action. It recalls an event in the days of Jeremiah when Seraiah the quartermaster was to go to Babylon and read a

prophetic oracle against the proud city, bind a stone to it, and cast it into the Euphrates, saying, “So will Babylon sink to rise no more” (Jer 51:59-64; cf. Neh 9:11; *Sib. Or.* 5:155-61).

21 A mighty angel now takes a huge boulder and hurls it into the sea, declaring that so will Babylon be thrown down, never to be found again. Twice before we have encountered a mighty angel. In 5:2 he was the guardian of the great scroll. In 10:1 a strong angel arrived from heaven with the little scroll.^{[1432](#)} The stone this “apocalyptic Paul Bunyan”^{[1433](#)} throws into the sea is like a large millstone^{[1434](#)} in size. As it plunges to the depths of the sea, the angel interprets the action as symbolizing the disappearance of Rome. The word translated “with such violence” appears in its cognate verb form in Mark 5:13 to describe the herd of swine that rushed down the steep bank into the lake, and in Acts 19:29 of the crowd of people who rushed into the theater in Ephesus.^{[1435](#)} The huge millstone does not fall but is violently hurled into the sea. This stresses how suddenly and spectacularly the judgment of God will be executed not only upon an ancient city but ultimately upon the entire antichristian world in its opposition to God.

22-23a John now spells out the effects of the violent overthrow of Rome. In poetic form he describes various aspects of everyday life in Rome that will never again take place. First, the streets will never again be filled with music. Silence reigns in the fallen city. Where once the streets were filled with the sound of harpists and musicians,^{[1436](#)} flute players and trumpeters, now an eerie silence has taken over. Isaiah describes the coming universal judgment as a time when “The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent” (Isa 24:8; cf. Ezek 26:13). In Isa 5:12 the harp and flute are associated with carousing, and in 2 Sam 6:5 David and the house of Israel make merry before the Lord with harps, lyres, and various percussion instruments. Flutes were used both at festivals (Isa a 30:29) and at funerals (Matt 9:23). Trumpets served for games and in the theater.^{[1437](#)}

Not only has music ceased, but, second, the sounds of craftsmen plying their trade as well. The entire economy has abruptly ceased. This is intensified by a third woeful reality, the cessation of food. The sound of the millstone is heard no more.^{[1438](#)} Jeremiah describes the years of Israel’s exile as a time when God will banish from them “the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of

the lamp” (Jer 25:10). The parallels in these two passages are not accidental. John writes out of an extensive acquaintance with the prophetic literature of his Jewish predecessors.

Fourth, the absence of all light adds to the desolation of the fallen city. It is not known whether or not Rome had street lights, but everyone had at one time or another watched the wealthy as they were escorted home from festivals by a large entourage of slaves carrying torches. The busy city was accustomed to lights that burned by night as craftsmen worked long hours to fill their orders. But now the blackness of night blankets the deserted and lonely metropolis. Finally, the joy of matrimony — that closest bonding of human relationships — is likewise past. Weddings are a thing of the past. The merry sounds of bridal festivities have been forever silenced.

23b The exact connection between the two final clauses of v. 23 is not readily apparent.¹⁴³⁹ It is clear, however, that both supply reasons for the judgment that has fallen on Babylon and that each repeats what has been said earlier. First, Rome’s merchants¹⁴⁴⁰ had become the “magnates of the earth” (NRSV) — a title scarcely able to conceal considerable arrogance. Through their places of business had passed into the capital city enormous cargoes of extravagant and luxurious goods from around the world. The merchants’ personal fortunes had grown alongside the insatiable appetites of their patrons. Wealth had made them “the great ones.”¹⁴⁴¹

A second reason for judgment was the deception of the nations, which Rome had achieved by means of her magic spell. It is unlikely that we are intended to understand this as the actual practice of magic for the benefit of commerce, although the black arts were widely known in Rome.¹⁴⁴² It is intended to be taken in the broader sense of that art of deception by which Rome had bewitched the nations into a false sense of security, leading them to believe that she was in fact the eternal city.¹⁴⁴³

24 A third reason, the ultimate one, for judgment is added — the blood of Christian martyrs that ran red in the streets of Rome. In fact, Rome’s guilt extends to all who have been slain upon the earth because she is the reigning sovereign of the entire world. Wherever life has been sacrificed, the responsibility lies at her door.¹⁴⁴⁴ In Semitic thought the blood of innocent victims cries out for vengeance. Cain learned that the blood of his murdered brother Abel cried out to God from the ground (Gen 4:10; cf. 2 Mace 8:3-4). The martyrs under the altar in chapter 6 demanded to know how long it would be until their blood would be avenged (Rev 6:10). The

prophets and saints are not to be taken as two distinct groups: the first is a special class within the second.¹⁴⁴⁵ The massacre under Nero in A.D. 64 as well as current troubles under Domitian would supply a realistic background for this stark reminder of imperial brutality.

For John, the judgment brought against the city of Rome was at the same time the eschatological judgment that would bring history to its close. He was describing things that “must soon take place” (1:1). While history has shown that some 2,000 years have intervened and the “end” has not yet come, it is nevertheless true that the forces exemplified by Rome will in fact be those very forces which will play the major role at the end of time. In the same way that the desolation of historic Jerusalem in Luke 21:5ff. becomes the eschatological finale, so does the portrayal of the fall of Rome describe the final judgment that will usher in the eternal state. Prophecy by nature resists being forced into any particular time sequence. It guarantees the ultimate issues of God’s redemptive program, which will be completely fulfilled when the end comes. Living in a world dominated by the oppressive practices of Rome, John portrays the eschaton in figures taken from that specific cultural setting. It is incumbent on us, living at a much later period in history, to interpret those same figures in the eschatological setting toward which we are rapidly moving. It will happen exactly as John has laid out. The last great secular society will demand that Christians wear the “mark of the beast,” but genuine believers remain true to the Lordship of Christ; as a result, religious persecution will follow. But eschatological “Babylon” will collapse in defeat, and the Lamb will return to claim those who have been faithful to the end.

C. HYMN OF VINDICATION (19:1-5)

1 After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

“Hallelujah!

Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,

2 for true and just are his judgments.

He has condemned the great prostitute

who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.

He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

3 And again they shouted:

“Hallelujah!

The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever. ”

4 The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

“Amen, Hallelujah!”

5 Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

“Praise our God,

all you his servants,

you who fear him,

both small and great!”

In response to the admonition of 18:20, “Rejoice over her, O heaven!” comes the “Hallelujah Chorus” of 19: 1 ff. The first five verses of chapter 19 constitute a fitting climax for the lengthy section on the fall of Rome, which began at 17:1.¹⁴⁴⁶ The heavenly jubilation breaks out in marked contrast to the solemn dirges of the kings, merchants, and seafarers whose

economic empires collapsed with the devastation of the imperial capital. The series of three laments is followed by the adulation and worship of a new grouping of three. First, we hear the heavenly multitude (vv. 1-3) as they raise their voices to extol the salvation, glory, and power of God. His judgment on the notorious prostitute who corrupted the earth with her adulteries is true and just. Next we hear the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures (v. 4) as they cry out, “Amen, Hallelujah!” Finally, a voice from the throne (v. 5) invites those on earth to join the mighty chorus of praise to God.

1 The great multitude in heaven praises God for judging the prostitute and avenging the blood of the martyrs. Many writers understand this multitude to be an angelic host; others believe it to be made up of the faithful dead. The specific mention of salvation (as in 7:10) and the concern for avenging the blood of the martyrs (as in 6:10) make it more likely that they are the church triumphant of 7:9-10, 13-17.¹⁴⁴⁷ The word “Hallelujah” occurs only in this passage in the NT (vv. 1, 3, 4, 6). It is derived from two Hebrew words (*hālāl* and *Jah*), and means “Praise Yahweh.”¹⁴⁴⁸ The Hebrew form introduces a number of Psalms (106, 111-13, 117, 135, 146-50), and is regularly translated “Praise the LORD.”¹⁴⁴⁹ Salvation, glory, and power belong to God. Salvation is more than personal deliverance. In this context it refers to the safeguarding of God’s entire redemptive program. It stands first in the sequence in that it is the fundamental aspect of God’s redemptive work (cf. 7:9). Glory and power follow and refer respectively to the majesty and the might revealed in effecting a deliverance of such magnitude.

2 The outburst of praise rests upon the fact that the judgments of God — specifically, his judgment of the great harlot¹⁴⁵⁰ — are both true and just. That God’s actions are “true” indicates that they are valid. The punishment that the prostitute Rome has received is precisely what she deserved. It is also “just,” that is, absolutely fair. The same two attributes are ascribed to God by the victors in 15:3 and by the voice of the altar in 16:7. Following the sounding of the seventh trumpet, it was announced that the time of judgment had arrived (11:18). With the fall of Babylon that judgment is under way. Once again we hear the grounds on which the judgment of the prostitute is based: she has corrupted the earth by her adulteries and has murdered the servants of God (cf. 18:23-24). Constant reference to her corrupting influence on the kings of the earth (14:8; 17:2; 18:3) stresses the

extent of her guilt. Her adultery is her seductive and unholy alliances with the entire civilized world.

In the final clause of the section the multitude in heaven declares that by the utter destruction of Babylon God has avenged on her¹⁴⁵¹ the blood of his servants. This is a concern that has run throughout the entire Apocalypse. The martyrs under the fifth seal asked God how long it would be until he would avenge their blood (6:10). The blood of the saints and/or prophets is mentioned in 16:6, 17:6, and 18:24 as well. Early in the history of Israel God was portrayed as one who avenges the blood of his servants and takes vengeance on his adversaries (Deut 32:43). Since God is by nature absolutely just, it becomes necessary for evil to be punished in a moral universe. That God will vindicate those who gave their life rather than betray their faith is absolutely certain.

3 Once again the heavenly multitude lifts its voice in praise to God. The second “Hallelujah” is not simple repetition but a sort of “heavenly encore”¹⁴⁵² that heightens measurably the dramatic quality of the scene. If the second “and” (*kai*) in v. 3 (omitted by the NIV) is a Hebraism that introduces a circumstantial clause and not a mere conjunction,¹⁴⁵³ then the clause that follows supplies the reason for that praise. The multitude praises God because the destruction of the wicked city is absolutely final. The smoke of her burning rises forever and ever.¹⁴⁵⁴ John’s readers would perhaps recall the oracle of Isaiah against Edom in which the enemy’s land is to burn night and day and “its smoke will rise forever” (Isa 34:8-10; cf. Rev 14:11).

4 In 5:6-10, when the Lamb took the scroll from the right hand of God, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before him and sang of his worthiness to open the seals. Once again they join in the same act of worship, this time honoring God for his righteous judgment.¹⁴⁵⁵ This is their last appearance in the book of Revelation. Their words, “Amen, Hallelujah!” echo the close of the doxology that marked the end of book 4 of the Psalter (Ps 106:48).

5 In vv. 1-3 the redeemed in heaven sing out the praises of God. In v. 4 the heavenly court responds, echoing antiphonally its affirmation. Now the church on earth is invited to join in. The voice that is heard from the throne calling upon all the servants of God to praise him is probably that of one of the heavenly beings who surround the throne. It is not the voice of God; nor is it the voice of the Lamb, who would have said “my God” rather than “our

God” (cf. 3:12; John 20:17). Nor are the servants of God a limited and select group such as the glorified martyrs, but, as the two following phrases indicate, the entire group of faithful believers.¹⁴⁵⁶ “You who fear him, both small and great” (cf. Ps 115:13) are believers on earth from every socio-economic level, and represent every stage of spiritual maturity. The call is directed to the church on earth because it wouldn’t make sense to admonish those in heaven to praise him, for that is what they were just doing in vv. 1-4.¹⁴⁵⁷

It could appear to some that rejoicing over judgment is something less than a Christian response. Should the destruction of a mighty city and its effect upon all who do business with it be the cause of universal rejoicing? The answer is that it is not the actual suffering of those who are punished that brings rejoicing on the part of the redeemed but the fact that God has vindicated his cause in the world. Nothing less than the character of God is at stake. The one who promised the martyrs that their willingness to sacrifice their lives would not go unrequited must of necessity bring judgment on their oppressors. The redeemed shout “Hallelujah” not because tyrants are suffering but because God has vindicated himself by bringing about the punishment they deserve.

IX. THE FINAL VICTORY (19:6-20:15)

We come now to scenes depicting the final victory of God over Satan and the forces of evil. The fall of Rome in chapter 18 is a picture of the eschatological demise of every proud human institution that glories in its accomplishments at the expense of all that is right and good. In the end God's righteousness will prevail. Following the ecstatic praise of God for his just punishment of the prostitute we are told that at last the time for the wedding supper of the Lamb has come. The church as the bride of Christ will at last be united forever with the Lamb. The realization that this long-awaited day has come overpowers John, who falls to his knees in worship. This remarkable section of Revelation, which begins with an announcement of the marriage of the Lamb (19:6-10), leads on to the return of Christ as messianic conqueror (19:11-16), the final destruction of the Antichrist and his allies (19:17-21), the binding of Satan (20:1-3), the millennial reign (20:4-6), the end of Satan's regime (20:7-10), and the great final judgment (20:11-15). As the visions follow one after another, they leave an ever deepening awareness that God really is in control and that righteousness will reign eternally supreme.

A. MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB ANNOUNCED (19:6-10)

6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

7 Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

8 Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear. ”

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

9 Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he added, “These are the true words of God. ”

10 At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. ”

In vv. 1-3 a heavenly multitude praised God for his judgment of the prostitute (previously described in chaps. 17 and 18). In vv. 6-8 they rejoice that the wedding of the Lamb is at hand. This change of perspective suggests a new division in the narrative. Although the Greek text shows no specific break before v. 6, the context indicates that we are entering into a new phase in the eschatological finale of Revelation. The previous “Hallelujahs” (vv. 1, 3, 4) pointed back to the destruction of Babylon in

chapter 18. The “Hallelujah” of v. 6 points forward in anticipation of the coming wedding of the Lamb.

The bride in this joyous wedding is the Lamb. She wears a wedding garment of fine linen (the righteous acts of the saints). An angel tells John to write that those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb are indeed blessed. Overcome with the grandeur of the scene, John falls at the feet of the angel to worship him but is stopped by the angel with the reminder that he, too, is simply a fellow servant of those who hold to the testimony of Jesus.

6 The sound that John hears is like the sound of a great throng of people, like the roar of a mighty cataract, and like a great peal of thunder. Such high drama is appropriate for the announcement that God has at last established his universal reign on earth.¹⁴⁵⁸ While the universal and timeless sovereignty of God is assumed in Judeo-Christian thought, it can be said to be established on earth in a special eschatological sense when the powers of evil are destroyed and the kingdom of God becomes a visible reality (cf. 11:15).¹⁴⁵⁹ In the historical context of a proud and powerful Roman Empire, for John to call God “the Almighty” (NRSV) is an act of extreme confidence. Domitian had conferred upon himself the title “Our Lord and God.”¹⁴⁶⁰ Literally the word means one who holds all things in his control. Nine times in Revelation the Seer uses it of God, while only once is it found elsewhere in the NT. The multitude declares that this all-powerful being who has entered into his reign is a personal God — he is the Lord *our*¹⁴⁶¹ God.

7 The heavenly multitude continues its song of praise with the exhortation, “Let us rejoice and be glad.”¹⁴⁶² The only other place in the NT where these two verbs are used together is Matt 5:12, where the cause for rejoicing is given as the greatness of the heavenly reward awaiting those who were reviled and persecuted for the cause of Christ. That reward is now pictured as a great wedding feast in which the Lamb and his bride¹⁴⁶³ celebrate their union. The metaphor of marriage as expressing the relationship between God and his people has its roots in the prophetic literature of the OT. To Israel God said, “I will betroth you to me for ever” (Hos 2:19). Israel in exile is comforted by the remembrance that the Lord of hosts is her husband and will bring her back (Isa 54:5-7). This same symbolism runs throughout the NT. Matt 22:2ff. compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son. Paul portrays the

relationship of Christ and his church in terms of the intimacy of marriage (Eph 5:32).

In biblical times a marriage involved two major events, the betrothal and the wedding. These were normally separated by a period of time during which the two individuals were considered husband and wife¹⁴⁶⁴ and as such were under the obligations of faithfulness. The wedding began with a procession to the bride's house, which was followed by a return to the house of the groom for the marriage feast. By analogy, the church, espoused to Christ by faith, now awaits the parousia when the heavenly groom will come for his bride and return to heaven for the marriage feast that lasts throughout eternity. John is not saying that the eternal festivities have in fact arrived, but is speaking proleptically of that period of blessedness which follows the millennium (cf. the declaration in 14:8 with the actual fall of Babylon in chaps. 17 and 18).

8 In contrast to the prostitute, who was arrayed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls (17:4), the bride is attired in fine linen, bright and clean. The following clause explains that the fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. The plural ("acts") may indicate that the bride's garment is woven of the innumerable acts of faithful obedience by those who endure to the end. This does not deny the Pauline doctrine of justification based on the righteous obedience of Christ (Rom 5:18-19), but suggests that a transformed life is the proper response to the call of the heavenly bridegroom.¹⁴⁶⁵ At issue for John (cf. the letters to the seven churches) is holiness within the church. The righteousness to which he refers stands in stark contrast to the unrighteousness of the wicked. Note that what was given to her was not the "fine linen" (as the NIV suggests) but the privilege of arraying herself in righteous acts (the NRSV translates, "to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen"). Believers are created for divinely prepared good works (Eph 2:10).¹⁴⁶⁶

9 Here we encounter the fourth of the seven beatitudes in the Apocalypse (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). The speaker is probably the interpreting angel of chapter 17, although, as the following verse indicates, John apparently mistakes him for the Lord (elsewhere he never falls before the feet of an angel). The Seer is told to write of the blessedness of those who are called to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Although the feast is nowhere described, we should understand that the time of blessedness it portrays is presented under different symbolism in the last two chapters of

the book. This great feast is prefigured in Isa 25:6-8, where the Lord prepares on Mt. Zion a great banquet, removes the reproach of his people, and “swallow[s] up death forever.” The concept of a sacred meal shared by Israel and the Messiah is common in Jewish thought. According to 3 *Enoch* 48:10 this banquet takes place in Jerusalem. The idea is found in apocalyptic settings as well. According to the *Apocalypse of Elijah* the righteous are to feast with the Messiah during the forty-year *interregnum* between this age and the age to come. In Luke 13:29 Jesus speaks of those from all points of the compass who will come and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Later in his ministry he foretells a day when he will drink the fruit of the vine anew with his disciples in the kingdom of his Father (Matt 26:29). Such promises cause the believer to anticipate with joy the great messianic banquet that will celebrate the long-awaited marriage of the Lamb and his bride the church. Note that in vv. 7-9 the church is pictured both as the bride and as the guests who are invited to the wedding. Far from constituting a contradiction, this sort of freedom is a normal characteristic of apocalyptic writing.

At the end of the beatitude the angel adds, “These are the true words of God.” ¹⁴⁶⁷ This authentication should probably not be limited to the beatitude itself but refer as well to the song of the heavenly multitude (vv. 6-8), and even to all that the angel has explained beginning with chapter 17.

10 Overwhelmed by the magnificence of the wedding scene and the pronouncement of blessing on those invited to attend, John falls at the feet of the angel in worship. The suggestion that he is acting out a charade¹⁴⁶⁸ in order to discourage some tendency toward angel worship that may have lingered among the churches of Asia Minor (Col 2:18) is improbable. It is difficult to imagine the Seer waiting for an opportunity to prostrate himself before an angel in order to teach his readers that God alone is worthy of worship. John is brought up sharply with the command, “Do not do it!”¹⁴⁶⁹ One recalls Peter’s words to Cornelius, who had fallen at his feet, “Stand up ... I am only a man myself” (Acts 10:25).¹⁴⁷⁰ Such an act of worship is inappropriate because the angel is simply a fellow servant with John and his brethren. Since both Christians and angels are servants of the same Lord (cf. Matt 18:28-33 with Heb 1:7, 14), it follows that they are fellow servants with one another.¹⁴⁷¹ The brothers are those who hold to “the testimony of Jesus.” As in the three previous occurrences of this phrase (1:2, 9; 12:17), the “testimony of Jesus” is the witness that was borne by Jesus (subjective

genitive). By his life and death Jesus has demonstrated to his followers what it means to bear a faithful witness (1:5; 3:14) to the message revealed by God.

The last clause of the verse (“for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”) has been variously interpreted. The “testimony of Jesus” is often taken as an objective genitive. In this case the clause would mean that the testimony about Jesus is the common substance of all prophecy¹⁴⁷² or that the true spirit of prophecy always manifests itself in bearing witness to Jesus.¹⁴⁷³ It is better, however, to retain the subjective genitive (as earlier in the same verse) and interpret the saying accordingly. It could mean that the witness or testimony that Jesus bore is the essence of prophetic proclamation — the principle that dominates prophecy.¹⁴⁷⁴ However, John’s readers would certainly understand his reference to “the spirit of prophecy” in terms of the Holy Spirit as the one who inspired all prophecy. Peter spoke of the Spirit of Christ who moved in the OT prophets to predict the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (1 Pet 1:10-11) and that prophecy came as the result of men speaking from God as they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21). For this reason people are to worship God, the giver of revelation, and not the angel, who is merely the interpreter of visions. This approach makes it unnecessary to consider the explanatory sentence as a gloss added by someone who had 22:8ff. in mind¹⁴⁷⁵ or (following the punctuation in the RSV) as John’s explanation of why the angel should not be worshiped.

B. THE WARRIOR-MESSIAH APPEARS (19:11-16)

11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. 13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. 14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter. "He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

By now the reader will be accustomed to sudden and dramatic changes as vision after vision appears to John. The blessedness of the wedding supper of the Lamb is abruptly followed by a vision of the warrior-Messiah who appears on a white horse ready to wage war. His blazing eyes reflect his eagerness to carry out his mission. His robe dipped in blood symbolizes his coming victory. Accompanying the one whose name is "the Word of God" are the armies of heaven, dressed in fine linen, white and clear. It is with the sharp sword that protrudes from his mouth that he slays the nations. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God, for he is King of kings and Lord of lords. Nowhere in Revelation is the victorious Christ portrayed in symbols and language more likely to convince the reader that in spite of Satan's best efforts God and the Lamb will emerge triumphant in the end. The language of apocalyptic is sufficiently flexible to allow the destruction of the great city in chapter 18 to be followed by a final battle in chapter 19. Chronology must never be allowed to determine how truth can best be expressed.

11 Almost without warning heaven opens.¹⁴⁷⁶ There appears a white horse whose rider is to wage a holy war and bring to a close the present age. The imagery used to depict this great event reflects the Jewish tradition of a warrior Messiah more than the NT teaching of the second advent of Christ.¹⁴⁷⁷ Among the Hebrew prophets it was Yahweh himself, who would come forth in the last days to establish his kingdom over rival nations. As the figure of the Messiah became more distinct in Jewish expectation, it is he who emerged as the great defender of God's cause in the final conflict.¹⁴⁷⁸ In 2 Baruch 72 it is the Messiah who summons the nations, sparing some and slaying others. The Jewish dream of a conquering Messiah is clearly advanced in Ps. Sol. 17:23-27, a passage closely related to the present text.¹⁴⁷⁹ This representation of the Messiah is not at variance with NT teaching. In 2 Thess 1:7-8 Paul teaches that the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven in flaming fire to inflict vengeance upon the wicked. In Matt 25:41 Jesus commands the cursed to depart into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Whatever difference of emphasis may exist between the appearance of a warring Messiah and the return of Christ as generally depicted in the NT can be accounted for on the basis of two complementary (not antithetical) themes — messianic judgment upon the wicked and the fulfillment and vindication of the Christian hope. Both themes are found in 2 Thess 1:9-10, where Paul speaks of Christ inflicting vengeance upon the wicked at his return as well as being glorified in those who believe. After noting that the idea of Christ pictured as a warrior going forth to battle “comes perilously near to being irreconcilable with the Christian concept of God,” Schlatter goes on to say that the metaphor is then transformed from one of battle into one of judgment. “God triumphantly clears the battle field and swallows up his enemies in death.”¹⁴⁸⁰

In 4:1 a door stood open into heaven. Later (11:19; 15:5) the heavenly sanctuary itself was opened for further revelations. Now the heavens themselves stand open (cf. Ezek 1:1; 2 Bar. 22:1; Matt 3:16; John 1:51) to reveal the conquering Messiah and his armies returning from heaven to war against the beast, the false prophet, and the nations of the world who flock after them. Like the first of the four horsemen of chapter 6, the rider is mounted upon a white horse, a symbol of victorious conquest. He is called “Faithful and True,”¹⁴⁸¹ and with justice he judges and makes war. The righteousness of divine judgment is a prominent theme throughout

Revelation. In 16:5-7 the angel in charge of the waters proclaimed, “You are just in these judgments,” and the altar responded, “Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.” The great multitude in 19:2 praised God, “for true and just are his judgments.” There is no doubt in the Seer’s mind that the righteous retribution about to be enacted upon the beast and his followers is perfectly compatible with truth and justice. Centuries before, the Psalmist had sung of the coming of the Lord when he would judge the world with righteousness and the peoples in his truth (Ps 96:13). If “Faithful and True” is understood as a title,¹⁴⁸² it is the first of four ascribed to Christ in the immediate paragraph. He also has a secret name (v. 12), is called “The Word of God” (v. 13), and on his garment displays the title “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (v. 16). In 3:14 Christ was called the faithful and true witness. Ladd notes that the two words are practically synonymous in that the Hebrew idea of truth was reliability rather than correspondence to reality as in Greek thought.¹⁴⁸³ God is faithful to his promises and will in due time vindicate the faith of all who place their confidence in him.

12 The first thing that John records about the Rider of the white horse is that his eyes are a flame of fire.¹⁴⁸⁴ Nothing can be hidden from the penetrating gaze of the Messiah. Upon his head are many crowns. Here is an obvious contrast to the seven crowns of the dragon (12:3) and the ten crowns of the beast out of the sea (13:1). Many crowns indicate unlimited sovereignty.¹⁴⁸⁵ Since he is King of kings, all authority is his. The entire description is obviously symbolic and should not be visualized in any concrete way. The Rider also bears a name that only he knows. Some find here a reference to the sacred tetragrammaton, *YHWH*, a name too holy to pronounce so that the vowels of another name for God (*Adonai*) are read with the consonants of the holy name, with the resulting combination usually represented (in English) as Yahweh.¹⁴⁸⁶ Others hold the name to be “the name that is above every name” (“the Lord,” Phil 2:9-11) given to Christ in fulfillment of his messianic ministry.¹⁴⁸⁷ One writer suggests that it may be the name inscribed upon the Rider’s thigh in v. 16, which was not legible at first because of the radiance of the vision.¹⁴⁸⁸ The most common interpretation is that it is a secret name whose meaning is veiled from all created beings. It expresses the mystery of his person. There will always remain a mystery about Christ that finite minds will never fully grasp.

There exists an ancient idea that to know the name of a god or demon is to possess certain powers over him. This could account for the refusal of the divine visitors in Gen 32:29 and Judg 13:18 to identify themselves (cf. *I Enoch* 69:14; *Asc. Isa.* 9:5). It is highly questionable, however, that the returning Messiah would share such a reluctance.

13 The robe that the Rider wears has been dipped¹⁴⁸⁹ in blood. The figure draws heavily upon the oracle of vengeance in Isa 63:1-6. In answer to the prophet's inquiry, "Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?" God replied, "I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments." The blood that stains the robe of the conquering Messiah is not his own (as in 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11), but the blood of the enemy shed in conflict.¹⁴⁹⁰ The Palestinian Targum on Gen 49:11 reads in part, "How beauteous is the King Messiah! Binding his loins and going forth to war against them that hate him, he will slay kings with princes, and make the rivers red with the blood of their slain.... His garments will be dipped in blood and he himself like the juice of the winepress" (cf. Rev 14:14-20). The argument that the blood cannot be the blood of battle because the conflict has not yet been joined misunderstands the nature of apocalyptic.¹⁴⁹¹ The blood-stained robe of the Messiah symbolizes his victory in the coming conflict.¹⁴⁹²

The name of the warrior is "The Word of God." Here is a striking link with the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, where the preexistent Son is the Word (John 1:1), who in God's time became incarnate and lived among us (John 1:14). As the title is used in Revelation, however, it emphasizes not so much the self-revelation of God as it does the authoritative declaration by which the nations of the world are destroyed.¹⁴⁹³ In Hebrew thought a word is not a lifeless sound but an active agent that achieves the intention of the one who speaks (Gen 1:3, 7, 9, etc.). The Word of God is God fulfilling his divine purpose. This idea finds expression in Heb 4:12, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword." The same concept is found in the Wisdom of Solomon in connection with the death of the firstborn in Egypt: "Thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command" (18:15-16). The Messiah as avenging warrior is appropriately named "the Word [the powerful and active utterance] of God."

14 The conquering Messiah commands a heavenly army clothed in fine linen and mounted, like their leader, on white horses. Normally, one would think of a heavenly army as composed of angels (cf. Matt 26:53; 2 *Enoch* 17; *T. Levi* 3:3; Zech 14:5), but the parallel in Rev 17:14 in which those who battle on the Lamb's side are designated "called, chosen and faithful" would indicate that the martyrs (those who have remained faithful unto death) should be included as well. Apparently the armies take no part in the actual battle, although later (in v. 19) the armies of Antichrist are said to make war "against the rider on the [white] horse and his army."¹⁴⁹⁴ It is the sword of the Messiah that smites the enemy (vv. 15, 21), and his garment alone is dipped in blood. The "fine linen, white and clean," in which the armies are clothed, speaks of the righteousness of divine retaliation.

15 The activity of the warrior Messiah is portrayed by three figures taken from the OT. First, he is said to strike down the nations with a sharp sword that comes out of his mouth. In Isa 11:4 we find that the messianic king will "strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" (cf. *Ps. Sol.* 17:39; 1 *Enoch* 62:2). The sharp sword symbolizes the lethal power of his word of judgment. We are not to envision a literal sword but a death-dealing pronouncement that goes forth like a sharp blade from the lips of Christ. In the initial vision of Revelation the Lord is pictured with a sharp, double-edged¹⁴⁹⁵ sword coming out of his mouth (1:16; 2:12) with which he will wage war against the Nicolaitans (2:16). The same general figure is used in 2 Thess 2:8, where the Lord Jesus is to slay the lawless one with "the breath of his mouth."¹⁴⁹⁶

The second figure is that of ruling with an iron scepter. In Psalm 2 the Lord tells his anointed, "I will make the nations your inheritance.... You will rule them with an iron scepter" (cf. 12:5). To rule with an iron scepter means to destroy¹⁴⁹⁷ rather than to govern in a stern fashion. The shepherd not only leads his flock to pasture but defends the sheep from marauding beasts. His rod is a weapon of retaliation. The Messiah's rod is a scepter of iron; that is, it is strong and unyielding in its mission of judgment.

The third figure is that of treading the winepress (cf. comm. on 14:19-20). Once again we meet the stern reality of the "fierce anger of God" (Weymouth). The two nouns normally translated "wrath" or "anger"¹⁴⁹⁸ are found thirteen times in chapters 6 through 19. Any view of God that eliminates judgment and his hatred of sin in the interest of an emasculated

doctrine of sentimental affection finds no support in the strong and virile realism of the Apocalypse.

16 On the garment of the Rider where it falls across his thigh (a most prominent place for one mounted on a horse) is inscribed the name “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”^{[1499](#)} This name emphasizes the universal sovereignty of the warrior Christ in his eschatological triumph over all the enemies of God. The title, as it occurs here and elsewhere in Scripture (Rev 17:14; 1 Tim 6:15; Dan 2:47), goes back to Moses’ declaration to Israel, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords” (Deut 10:17; cf. *1 Enoch* 9:4). He will strike down the nations, rule them with an iron scepter, and tread the winepress of the fury of his wrath because all power is his and all the nations are subject to the might of his righteous retribution.

Commentators differ on the exact location of the inscription. If written in two places (as the NIV suggests), it could be inscribed on the girdle (or hilt of the sword) as well as on the outer garment. If “and on his thigh” means “that is, on his thigh,”^{[1500](#)} then it would refer to the place where the sword would customarily hang.^{[1501](#)} The simplest explanation is that the name was written on that part of the garment which fell open across the thigh.

C. ANTICHRIST AND ALLIES DESTROYED (19:17-21)

17 And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, 18 so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great. "

19 Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. 20 But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. 21 The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

The next vision in the series depicting the final victory of the Lamb describes the destruction of the two beasts and all who had joined forces with them. An angel calls with a loud voice to the birds flying in midair to come and feast on the flesh of all who are about to be slain. The beast and his false prophet are captured and thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. Their followers are killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the warrior-Messiah, and the birds gorge themselves on their dead bodies. The victory of the Lamb is complete.

17-18 The heavens have opened, revealing the Messiah and his armies about to engage in final conflict. Now, as if to heighten still further the suspense of this dramatic moment, John interposes yet another brief vision (vv. 17-18). An angel appears in the sun, a position of splendor appropriate to a herald of victory. From this vantage point he will be able to deliver effectively his message to the birds that circle in mid-heaven. His message

is, Come to the great supper of God and gorge on the flesh of the fallen! Representative of a somewhat squeamish point of view, one writer calls this a “bloodthirsty picture ... far more in line with Old Testament apocalyptic expectations than with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁰² That it draws upon OT apocalyptic is obvious. It is a free interpretation of Ezekiel’s oracle against Gog, which reads in part, “Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals: ‘Assemble ... to the sacrifice I am preparing for you.... You will eat the flesh of mighty men and drink the blood of the princes of the earth’” (Ezek 39:17-20). It is not true, however, that with the coming of the gospel age the God of the OT decided to prove to people that he really was a gentleman after all and so dispensed with any further recourse to judgment. The good news is that people need not bear the just punishment due their sin but that Another has paid the price on their behalf. Only when people refuse forgiveness must they bear the penalty for their wickedness.

The supper of God presents a grim contrast to the wedding feast of the Lamb. It is the supper of God in the sense that God will provide it. The ranks of the enemy are composed not only of kings and generals, but of all people, free and slave, small and great.¹⁵⁰³ In the final conflict no preference will be given to rank or station. Their bodies will lie on the field of battle to be devoured by birds of prey. To remain unburied for the pleasure of the predators was considered by the ancients to be an ignominious fate. The scene is one of universal dishonor and destruction.

19 John now sees the beast and his¹⁵⁰⁴ armies arrayed against the Messiah and his army. The battle of Armageddon has arrived. Earlier we learned that evil spirits went forth from the mouth of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet to gather the kings of the whole world for battle on the great day of God Almighty (16:13-14): “They gathered [them] together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (16:16). The scene is eschatological in an absolute sense. The Seer is not describing the gradual conquest of evil in the spiritual struggles of the faithful, but a great historic event that brings to an end the Antichrist and his forces and ushers in the long-awaited era of righteousness. History may offer examples of the triumph of right over wrong, but far from exhausting the truth of Revelation, they merely prefigure the actual consummation with its end to wickedness and beginning of universal peace.

20 Interestingly enough, there is no description of the actual warfare. This should remind the reader that the Apocalypse is dominated by

metaphor and symbol. While the events portrayed in apocalyptic language are to be taken with all seriousness, they are not to be taken literalistically. Armageddon portrays the eschatological defeat of Antichrist (an event that takes place in time and brings to a close this age as we know it) but does not require that we accept in a literal fashion the specific imagery with which the event is described. [1505](#)

The beast and false prophet are seized [1506](#) and thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The beast is the personification of secular power in its opposition to the church. The false prophet represents the role of false religion in persuading people to worship the antichristian power (cf. comm. on 13:1, 11). The false prophet is again described in terms of his two characteristic functions: he deceives by performing miraculous signs (cf. 13:13-15), and he brands with the mark of the beast all but those who are willing to die for their faith (cf. 13:16-17).

It is into a fiery lake of burning sulfur that the beast and false prophet are thrown. This designation for the place of final torment occurs only in Revelation, although the idea of punishment by fire is prominent in the extrabiblical Jewish writings. *1 Enoch* 54:1 speaks of the place of judgment as “a deep valley with burning fire,” and in *2 Enoch* 10 it is described as a place of terror with all manner of tortures including a fiery river. [1507](#) Although the actual word Gehenna is not used in Revelation, this is what John refers to as the fiery lake of burning sulfur. Gehenna (an abbreviation for “valley of the son of Hinnom”) was the name given to the valley lying to the south and west of Jerusalem (the modern *Wadi er Rababi*). As the site of a cultic shrine where human sacrifices were offered (2 Kgs 16:3; 23:10; Jer 7:31), it acquired an unholy reputation. Because of prophetic denunciation of this place of terrible wickedness (Jer 7:32; 19:6), it came to be equated with the hell of final judgment in apocalyptic literature. In NT times Gehenna was a place of fire and the abode of the wicked dead (Matt 5:22; Mark 9:43). [1508](#)

In our passage the fiery lake is said to burn with sulfur, a yellow substance that burns readily in air. It is found in a natural state in volcanic areas such as the valley of the Dead Sea (cf. Gen 19:24; Ezek 38:22). A lake of burning sulfur would not only be intensely hot, but malodorous and fetid as well. It is an appropriate place for all that is sinful and wicked in the world. The Antichrist and the false prophet are its first inhabitants. Later the

devil (20:10), Death and Hades (20:14), and all evil people (21:8) will join them in this place of ceaseless torment.

21 The armies of Antichrist are killed with the sword that comes out of the mouth of Messiah. While this is obviously not to be understood as a literal sword, neither is it to be taken as a metaphor for the gospel message. The scene is one of judgment, and the sword is the proclamation of divine retribution that slays all who have in the final alignment of loyalties arrayed themselves against God and the forces of righteousness. The supper of God is ready, and the vultures gorge themselves on the flesh of the wicked.

Punishment has been meted out to all who accepted the mark of the beast and pledged to him their allegiance. Their destruction is complete. There now remains but one who must still meet a like fate — Satan himself, and his demise is detailed at length in the following section. That the wicked will ultimately be brought to ruin is absolutely certain. While it would appear to the first-century believer still facing possible persecution that the enemy's strength was undiminished, the truth is that with God in control the future must inevitably yield an ultimate and complete victory for the Lamb and those whom he has sealed.

D. SATAN BOUND (20:1-3)

1 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. 2 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. 3 He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

Judging from the amount of attention given by many writers to the first ten verses of chapter 20, one would think they were the single most important segment of the book of Revelation. The tendency of many interpreters at this point is to become apologists for a particular view of the millennium. Without denying the significance of this important passage, it should not be elevated above such basic themes as the return of Christ, the final judgment and removal of all wickedness, and the splendor of the eternal state. A careful reading of the millennial passage (vv. 1-10) will show that it is probably limited to the resurrected martyrs alone, and that it contains no specific indication that their reign with Christ takes place on earth or that it necessarily follows the second advent. This commentary understands the millennium portrayed as an earthly reign that follows the second coming of Christ, although the text itself does not rule out alternate explanations.¹⁵⁰⁹

1 The angel that descends from heaven has in his hand the key to the Abyss and a great chain. The angel is probably the one who in chapter 9 released the demonic locusts by opening the shaft leading to the Abyss. The Abyss was thought of as a vast subterranean cavern¹⁵¹⁰ that served as a place of confinement for disobedient spirits awaiting judgment (Jude 6; *Jub.* 5:6; Luke 8:31).¹⁵¹¹ With the great chain¹⁵¹² he is about to bind Satan. There is no specific indication in v. 1 as to when this event takes place,

although it should be noted that the recurring “and I saw”¹⁵¹³ of 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 12; and 21:1 strongly implies a sequence of visions that carries through from the appearance of the Rider on the white horse (19:11) to the establishment of the new heaven and new earth (21:1ff.). The interpretation that discovers recapitulation for the segment 20:1-6 must at least bear the burden of proof.

2-3 The angel seizes¹⁵¹⁴ the dragon, binds him (with the chain), and throws him into the Abyss. There he remains for a thousand years, unable to carry on his practice of deceiving the nations. At the close of the thousand years he is to be loosed for a little time (this brief period is described in 20:7-10). In v. 2 all four titles by which Satan is designated in Revelation are brought together. He is the dragon defeated in heavenly combat by Michael (12:7-8), the serpent who tried to sweep away the messianic community with a flood (12:15), and the devil who knows that his time is short (12:12).

What the binding of Satan entails depends upon whether the passage is taken as descriptive of the present age or of a period that will follow the second advent. The first option holds that in the period between the two comings of Christ the devil’s influence is curtailed so that he is unable to prevent the extension of the church by means of an active missionary program.¹⁵¹⁵ In support proponents list a number of verses in which the binding, casting out, or falling of Satan is associated in some way with the first coming of Christ (Matt 12:29; Luke 19:17-18; John 12:31; Col 2:15). The second option, however, says that the intention of the passage is not to represent Satan as merely restricted but as rendered completely inactive during the thousand-year millennial period following the second advent.¹⁵¹⁶ In support of this position a number of NT passages may be cited that show Satan as extremely active in the present age (Luke 22:3; Acts 5:3; 2 Cor 4:3-4; 11:14; Eph 2:2; 1 Thess 2:18; 2 Tim 2:26; and especially 1 Pet 5:8, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour”).

The answer to the problem obviously does not lie in one’s ability to support an interpretation by collecting verses from other contexts in Scripture. Careful attention needs to be given to the text of Revelation itself.¹⁵¹⁷ All the text actually says is that during a period designated as a thousand years Satan is bound and cast into the Abyss, which is then locked and sealed. The purpose of the confinement is not to punish him but to

prevent him from deceiving the nations. ¹⁵¹⁸ The elaborate measures taken to insure his custody are most easily understood as implying the complete cessation of his influence on earth (rather than a curbing of his activities). The Abyss is sealed (cf. Dan 6:17; Matt 27:66) as a special precaution against escape. Satan's imprisonment is to last a thousand years. Some commentators understand this period as a literal one thousand years, but the majority take it to indicate a lengthy period of undetermined duration. In support of the latter interpretation are such verses as Ps 50:10, which speaks metaphorically of cattle on a thousand hills, and 2 Pet 3:8 with its equation of one day and a thousand years. Nothing in the immediate context favors either interpretation. It is the larger concern to find a consistent millennial position that leads exegetes to commit themselves on the meaning of the thousand years. ¹⁵¹⁹

In chapter 19 the kings of the earth and their armies were killed with the sword of Messiah (19:19-21). Yet now in chapter 20 the nations are pictured as still in existence. Since apocalyptic eschatology does not require the chronological precision of narrative, this overlapping of scenes and repetition of figures causes no real problem. If consistency is called for, it is probably best to understand the nations of 20:3 as the remnant from nations who opposed the Messiah rather than select nations here and there who never entered the final battle. ¹⁵²⁰ In either case, however, they are no longer under the seductive influence of Satan. No longer are they deceived into giving to the emperor the worship that belongs to God alone. Looking ahead to the close of the thousand-year period, John adds that for a little while Satan must be set free. It is futile to speculate just why there needs to be yet another conflict. Satan will gather a following from around the earth and march on the beloved city. They are to be devoured by fire from heaven, but Satan will be cast into the lake of burning sulfur (20:7-10). Apparently a thousand years of confinement does not alter Satan's plans, nor does a thousand years of freedom from the influence of wickedness change people's basic tendency to rebel against their creator.

E. MILLENNIAL REIGN (20:4-6)

4 I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

John's next vision take place in a judicial setting. Sitting on thrones are "judges" before whom stand all those who have been faithful to the Lamb, even to death. Having proven their loyalty to the Lord by not worshiping the beast, they were brought to life to reign with Christ for a thousand years. This is the first resurrection. The faithful, over whom death has no power, will serve as priests to God during the millennium. After the thousand years are over, the rest of the dead will then come to life. With the binding of Satan in vv. 1-3 the stage is now set for the triumphal reign of the church victorious. Exactly what this reign involves and when it takes place is a question that has met with a great variety of answers in the history of NT eschatology. The interpretation that follows is essentially premillennial but with considerable hesitation on the fine points of chronology. As time verges into eternity, the standard measures of life as we know them prove inadequate to communicate the fullness of eschatological truth.

4 John now sees thrones and the faithful martyrs who gave their lives rather than worship the beast or receive his mark. All we know for sure

about the occupants of the thrones is that they have been given the authority to judge.¹⁵²¹ It is not likely that this judgment relates to the question of who is worthy to be resurrected and share in the millennial reign with Christ. The judgment appears to be connected in some way with the vindication of the martyrs and their right to assume the empire of the defeated powers of wickedness. Daniel's vision of the four beasts, their judgment, and the passing of the kingdom to the saints of the Most High is undoubtedly the background for much of John's presentation. In Daniel, one like a son of man receives everlasting dominion from the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13-14). The interpretation is then supplied, which is that with the coming of the Ancient of Days judgment is given in favor of¹⁵²² the saints of the Most High, and they receive the kingdom (Dan 7:22).

The problem of naming the martyrs as those who sit upon the thrones is that they are not mentioned until later in the verse.¹⁵²³ Some writers hold that the occupants of the thrones include apostles (who in Matt 19:28 are promised that they will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel), saints (who in 1 Cor 6:2-3 are reminded that they will judge both the world and angels), and all who remain faithful in the final trial (Rev 3:21). Since the text itself remains silent about the occupants of the thrones, it may be wise not to go beyond suggesting that they may be a heavenly court (as in Dan 7:26) that will assist in judgment. One possibility is that mention of the martyrs in v. 4 leads away from the original theme of judgment, which is then picked up again in v. 11.

In addition to thrones John sees the souls of those who had been martyred for faithfulness in bearing the testimony of Jesus¹⁵²⁴ and the word of God. These are the souls under the altar in 6:9 and all who are to meet a similar fate until the time of their vindication (6:11).¹⁵²⁵ They are called souls because at this point they are still awaiting the resurrection. That they are said to have been beheaded does not restrict the group to those martyrs who had met death in this specific fashion.¹⁵²⁶ It is representative of all who gave their lives in faithfulness to their commitment to Christ.

There is a question as to whether one or two groups of believers are mentioned in v. 4b-c (those who had been beheaded and those who had not worshiped the beast). Those who find two groups (those who were actually martyred and "those who suffered everything short of death for their loyalty to Christ")¹⁵²⁷ have difficulty explaining the fact that in 13:15 John wrote

that the first beast was enabled to “cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.” All who refused to worship the image met a martyr’s death. Thus in the final conflict there are none who resist the Antichrist without paying for their stand with their life. It is better to understand that both references apply to the same group. The relative pronoun “who” (*hoitines*) that lies behind the NIV translation “They”¹⁵²⁸ indicates a fuller definition of the previous group just mentioned. They are those of chapter 13 who refused to worship the beast (13:12) or to receive his mark (13:16) and consequently paid for their loyalty by death (13:15).¹⁵²⁹

These martyrs are said to come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. How people interpret this simple statement reveals their position on the millennial question. The crux of the entire exegetical problem is the meaning of “they came to life again” (NKJ, “they lived”). Apart from the immediate context (vv. 4-5) where it is used twice and in reference to two distinct groups, the aorist active indicative form of the verb is found in Revelation in but two other places: in 2:8 of Christ who “died and came to life again,” and in 13:14 of the beast who was wounded by the sword “and yet lived.” There is no basis for the claim that if the author of Revelation had wished to speak of an actual physical resurrection he would have used some other verb since there is no Greek verb that exclusively means “to raise from the dead.”¹⁵³⁰ The verb he did use also occurs in such passages as Matt 9:18, where the ruler of the synagogue tells Jesus that his daughter has just died but that if he will lay his hand on her “she will be restored to life” (TCNT), and in Rom 14:9 of the bodily resurrection of Christ (“For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life”).

The strong presumption is that the verb in v. 4 should be taken in the same sense as it is in v. 5. In the second case the statement, “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended,” certainly refers to a bodily resurrection at the close of the millennial period. If “they came to life” in v. 4 means a spiritual resurrection to new life in Christ, then we are faced with the problem of discovering within the context some persuasive reason to interpret the same verb differently within one concise unit. No such reason can be found. Alford’s much-quoted remark is worth repeating: “If, in a passage where *two resurrections* are mentioned ... the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave; — then there is an end

of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything.”¹⁵³¹

The length of the martyrs’ reign is said to be a thousand years. It is this number that gives rise to the term “millennium” (from Latin *mille*, “thousand,” and *annus*, “year”). Only in Rev 20:1-10 do we find any NT teaching about a millennium.¹⁵³² The origin of the idea seems to stem from the eschatological expectations of late apocalyptic Judaism. In earlier times the Jews pictured a messianic kingdom that would last on the present earth forever (Isa 11:10-16; 65:20-25; Dan 7:14, 27). Under the influence of dualism there developed from about 100 B.C. onward an increasing pessimism about this earth as a proper place for such a glorious period. The idea of a partial and temporary realization of God’s kingdom prior to its complete establishment arose in an effort to mediate between the earlier eschatological hope of an earthly kingdom in Palestine ruled by Yahweh himself, and a later conception of a transcendental and universal kingdom for risen saints in a renewed heaven and earth.¹⁵³³ The millennium is really “a late and attenuated form of the old Jewish expectation of an eternal Messianic Kingdom on the present earth.”¹⁵³⁴

Jewish speculation as to the length of this temporary reign ranges from forty to 7,000 years.¹⁵³⁵ In Enoch’s *Apocalypse of Weeks* human history takes place in seven weeks, followed by the messianic kingdom established in the eighth and lasting through the tenth week (*I Enoch* 93; 91:12-17). In 2 Esdr 7:28 it is definitely set at four hundred years. Some people argued from the week of creation and the thousand-years-equals-one-day idea reflected in Ps 90:4 (cf. 2 Pet 3:8) that after 6,000 years of world history there would be a thousand-year cosmic Sabbath corresponding to the seventh day of creation in which God rested from his work (*Barn.* 15). In *Slavonic Enoch* the world is to last seven days of one thousand years each, followed by an eighth day with time divisions (2 *Enoch* 32:2-33:2).¹⁵³⁶ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the reign of the martyrs sketched in Revelation (preceding judgment and the eternal state) should last one thousand years. Nor is there any particular reason to suppose that in the mind of John the one thousand years represented a period of time of some other duration. Many of the earliest church fathers were millenarians. Toward the middle of the second century Justin Martyr said that properly instructed Christians were assured of a resurrection of the dead to be

followed by a thousand years in Jerusalem.¹⁵³⁷ Irenaeus, near the end of the same century, believed in an earthly millennium during which the saints and martyrs would be rewarded.¹⁵³⁸ Unfortunately, many chiliasts allowed their imaginations to run riot and read into the thousand-year period all manner of materialistic and sensuous extremes. Papias records as the words of Jesus an extravagant portrayal of the fertility of the earth in which each grape would yield twenty-five measures of wine and every grain of wheat 10,000 pounds of flour.¹⁵³⁹ Eusebius records that the heretic Cerinthus taught an earthly kingdom of sensual pleasure (“the gratification of appetite and lust; i.e., in eating, drinking, and marrying”) to follow the resurrection.¹⁵⁴⁰ He also refers to Nepos, an Egyptian bishop who “supposed that there would be a certain millennium of sensual luxury on this earth.”¹⁵⁴¹

These extremes led later scholars to condemn the materialistic chiliasm that had taken root in the church. In the third century Origen rebuked those who looked forward to bodily pleasure and luxury in the millennium.¹⁵⁴² It was Augustine, however, who about the beginning of the fifth century made the first serious effort to interpret Revelation 20 in a nonmillenarian fashion. He held that the thousand-year period was to be taken as the interval between the first advent and the final conflict. The binding of Satan during this period was accomplished by Christ during his earthly ministry. The first resurrection was the spiritual birth of believers.¹⁵⁴³ This same embarrassment over the chiliasm of sectarians carried over into the theology of the Reformers.¹⁵⁴⁴ The fundamental fault of those who interpret this passage in a nonliteral fashion is “that they mistake the nature of apocalyptic prophecy, and read into the vision of our Apocalyptist here a meaning of which he gives no intimation and which is at variance with his language. Apocalyptic prophecy is not allegory.... Nor can the age-long struggle of the Church militant ... answer to the picture of the millennial reign of the risen martyrs.”¹⁵⁴⁵

A question normally raised by nonmillenarians is, What is the purpose of the thousand-year reign? The usual answer is that it is the vindication within history of the cause of Christ. With the establishment of the kingdom of God upon earth, there is tangible and convincing proof of the victory of righteousness over evil.¹⁵⁴⁶ There is another response, however, that is more specific and grows out of the text itself. Noting that the millennial reign with Christ should be limited to martyrs, who gave their lives rather

than submit to the blasphemous demands of emperor worship, it understands the thousand-year reign as a special reward to the martyrs of chapter 6. These were told to wait under the altar until their number would be complete and then their blood would be avenged upon those who dwell upon the earth (6:9-11). The millennium is not, for John, the messianic age foretold by the prophets of the OT, but a special reward for those who have paid with their lives the price of faithful opposition to the idolatrous claims of Antichrist.

This leads to a further question, Are we to think of this millennial reign as an actual period of political and social history that is to follow the return of Christ? One very plausible argument is that when we distinguish the essential truth of prophecy from the form in which it is communicated (this being determined by the historical circumstances and dominant religious conceptions of the day), we will cease to find in Revelation 20 the prediction of an *eschatological* era. The essential truth of the passage is that the martyrs' steadfastness will win for them the highest life in union with God and Christ.¹⁵⁴⁷ It is a commentary on the Lord's saying in Matt 10:39, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."¹⁵⁴⁸ This does not mean that the author composed an allegory to communicate to his readers certain abstract truths. He worked within the necessary limitations of his own historical perspective and wrote for his own day. His understanding reflects the immediacy of the culture in which he lived and worked.¹⁵⁴⁹ Some will disagree with the distinction between form and content, but others will find in this approach a reasonable answer to some of the more perplexing aspects of predictive prophecy. In short, John described the millennium in temporal terms, but its essential meaning cannot be restricted to the form in which it was communicated.

5 The rest of the dead who did not come to life until the close of the thousand years would be all the faithful except the martyrs, plus the entire body of unbelievers.¹⁵⁵⁰ The first sentence of v. 5 is a parenthetical statement that anticipates the activity depicted in vv. 11 and following.¹⁵⁵¹ The second sentence of the verse, "This is the first resurrection," continues the thought of verse 4 and refers to the resurrection of the martyrs.

6 Those who participate in the first resurrection are pronounced "blessed and holy." The basis for their blessedness is threefold: they are not subject to the second death, they will be priests of God and Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. The second death is defined in 20:14

and 21:8 as being cast into the lake of fire. It is to share the eternal fate of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet (19:20; 20:10, 14-15), which is to be tormented day and night forever and ever (20:10). While the first resurrection is selective^{[1552](#)} and the second absolutely universal, the first death is virtually universal (some will be alive at the parousia) and the second is selective.^{[1553](#)} At Sinai God promised the Israelites that if they would obey his voice and keep his commandments they would be to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6). The faithful, by remaining true to Christ in the final trial by Antichrist, are thus priests^{[1554](#)} of God and Christ. As a royal priesthood (cf. 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10) they reign with him a thousand years.

F. SATAN DESTROYED (20:7-10)

7 When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth — Gog and Magog — to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. 9 They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. 10 And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

These four verses portray the release of Satan from his thousand-year imprisonment, the gathering of the nations for a final assault on the people of God, the fire from heaven that devours the enemy, and the devil's final destiny in the lake of burning sulfur. Ezekiel had described an attack upon Israel in the last days in which the aggressors would be completely defeated after a cataclysmic battle (Ezek 38-39). This eschatological warfare against Israel became one of the standard ideas in Jewish teaching about the last days. *Sib. Or.* 3:662-701 is a good example. We are told that "fiery swords" (673) shall fall from heaven upon the "undisciplined empty-minded people" (670) who have surrounded Jerusalem. God is to judge "with war and sword and with fire and cataclysms of rain" (689-90).¹⁵⁵⁵ It is worth noting that in Ezekiel and Revelation the assault *follows* the period of the messianic kingdom. In Ezekiel 36-37 Israel is restored to the land; then comes the warfare in chapters 38 and 39. This is followed by a portrayal of the eternal state under the figure of a rebuilt temple in the New Jerusalem (chaps. 40-48).

7 The release of Satan was anticipated in v. 3. Perhaps the most reasonable explanation for this rather unusual parole is to make plain that neither the designs of Satan nor the waywardness of the human heart will be

altered by the mere passing of time. Once loosed from prison, Satan picks up where he left off and people rally to his cause. The Babylonian legend of Tiamat (the chaos-monster) who is released at the end of time and once again defeated by Marduk (the god of light)¹⁵⁵⁶ is an interesting parallel but adds little to our understanding of the Apocalypse. The verb translated “are over” carries the idea of bringing to an appointed end or goal.¹⁵⁵⁷

8 Both Satan and the false prophet are portrayed in Revelation as deceivers (12:9; 20:3; 13:14; 19:20). It comes as no surprise that upon Satan’s release from the Abyss he returns to his nefarious activity. It is probable that the second infinitive clause in v. 8 builds upon the first (rather than being parallel),¹⁵⁵⁸ so that the verse says that Satan shall come forth to deceive the nations *for the purpose* of gathering them for battle. The nations that fall prey to Satan’s propaganda are said to be in “the four corners of the earth.” This figure of speech is not intended to stress some ancient cosmology but to emphasize universality (cf. Isa 11:12; Ezek 7:2; Rev 7:1). The nations are further identified as Gog and Magog. In Gen 10:2 Magog is listed as one of the sons of Japheth. In Ezek 38:2 Gog is the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal,¹⁵⁵⁹ who leads the invasion against Israel. Magog, according to Ezek 39:2, is a territory located in “the far north.” In Revelation, however, both Gog and Magog are symbolic figures representing the nations of the world that band together for a final assault upon God and his people.¹⁵⁶⁰ No specific geographical designations are intended. They are simply hostile nations from all across the world.

Apart from two “fruitless references” in the *Sibylline Oracles*, Gog and Magog are not mentioned in the apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical literature. On the other hand, the war of Gog and Magog is a constituent part of the apocalyptic thinking of the rabbis. Thus the Apocalypse is closer to the more scriptural apocalyptic of the rabbis than to the noncanonical writings.¹⁵⁶¹ The assault itself may be modeled on the invasion of the Scythians into Asia in 630 B.C.¹⁵⁶² Some authors hold that not only are the names Gog and Magog mythical, but the entire account should be interpreted as such. The myth of Gog, it is said, “enshrines a deep insight into the resilience of evil.” ... [It is the] “mythical equivalent of the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone.”¹⁵⁶³ While these insights are no doubt true, and may well be illustrated in the Gog and Magog account, it would be questionable to reduce all events to the nonhistorical truths of

which they are an expression. The war itself should be distinguished from that in 17:14 and 19:19 in that it follows the thousand-year reign.

9 The nations that have been gathered by Satan surround the millennial capital and are devoured by fire from heaven. 2 Esdras, a contemporary Jewish apocalypse, contains a vision that is remarkably parallel. An innumerable multitude of soldiers gather to make war on the Man from the sea. Although seized with fear they dare to fight, and are burned to ashes by a fiery stream that suddenly flows from the mouth of the Messiah (2 Esdr 13:1-12).

The phrase “the breadth of the earth” is not clear, but in this context it seems to refer metaphorically to a great plain sufficiently large to accommodate the multitude of assailants determined to bring down the citadel of the saints. In Hab 1:6 the same expression is used in connection with the Chaldeans, “that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth.” The camp of God’s people is to be understood in the OT sense of the Israelite encampments during their wilderness wanderings (Exod 14:19-20; Num 2:2ff.; Deut 23:14). It is a reminder that while on earth the people of God will always be pilgrims in a foreign land. The camp of God’s people is also the beloved city.¹⁵⁶⁴ The fire that comes down out of heaven¹⁵⁶⁵ is reminiscent of the account in 2 Kings 1 in which Elijah twice calls down fire from heaven that consumes groups of fifty soldiers with their captains. This incident had apparently impressed the brothers James and John, who during the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry wanted to call down fire upon an unreceptive Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-54). The judgment of fire upon Gog (Ezek 38:22) and Magog (Ezek 39:6) is also in mind.

10 The devil does not share the same fate as those he has led to the final assault. They are devoured by fire from heaven, but he is cast into the lake of burning sulfur. In the preceding chapter the beast and false prophet were cast into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (19:20). They are now joined by the arch culprit, the devil himself. Following the great white throne judgment, Death, Hades, and all whose names are not found in the book of life are to be cast into the same fiery grave (20:14-15; cf. 14:10). The torment of the unholy trinity continues unceasingly, “day and night for ever and ever.”¹⁵⁶⁶ Ladd interprets this figure as describing in picturesque language a “real fact in the spiritual world: the final and everlasting

destruction of the forces of evil which have plagued men since the garden of Eden.”[1567](#)

G. FINAL JUDGMENT (20:11-15)

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

With this vision the theme of judgment on evil finds its final expression. After being bound for a thousand years Satan had been released, only to resume his active antagonism against the people of God. Those who were deceived by him and took up his cause were devoured by fire from heaven, while Satan himself was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur to be tormented there forever along with the beast and the false prophet. The time has now come to judge the rest of the dead (v. 5). With this vision we close forever the chapter on sin and stand ready to enter the eternal state of glory.

11 We now come to the scene of final judgment. John sees a great white throne and One who sits upon it. A somewhat similar portrayal is found in Daniel 7, where the Ancient of Days takes his seat upon a throne flaming with fire to execute judgment upon the kingdoms of this world. In Revelation the throne is great in size and white or shining¹⁵⁶⁸ in appearance. Its size conveys the grandeur of its authority, and its appearance reflects the presence of the glory of God.

There is some question about the identity of the One who sits upon the throne. The NT teaches generally that judgment has been committed to the

Son. John 5:22 specifically says, “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (cf. 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:1). Similarly, in *1 Enoch*, eschatological judgment is the function of the Messiah (“On that day Mine Elect One shall sit on the throne of glory and shall try their works,” 45:3; cf. 51:3; 55:4; 61:8). Yet in the present passage it is apparently God the Father who is judge. Elsewhere in Revelation the One seated upon the throne is the Father (4:2, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5). It is more natural in the present context to see the Father rather than the Son in the role of judge.¹⁵⁶⁹ The ease with which the NT speaks both of the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10) and of the judgment seat of God (Rom 14:10) implies a unity that makes unnecessary any quibbling over exact assignment of functions. In his Gospel John records the statement of Jesus, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Earth and heaven flee away before the awesome grandeur of God seated upon the throne of judgment. This action may be only poetic imagery expressing the fear of the corruptible in the presence of God, although it may be understood more literally as the dissolution of the universe as we know it in preparation for the new heaven and new earth that will shortly appear (21:1).¹⁵⁷⁰ Isa 51:6 spoke of a time when “the heavens will vanish like smoke and the earth will wear out like a garment.” Jesus contrasted the permanency of his words to the transitoriness of heaven and earth (Matt 24:35). Peter indicates that it is by fire that the heaven and earth are to be destroyed (2 Pet 3:10-12). Some feel that we are dealing with two variant traditions concerning the end of the physical universe. Whether it simply passes away or is melted by fire is of minor import. The essential truth of the entire description, however, is that God is in charge and that he will execute a just sentence upon all that has fallen under the control of evil. In its flight from the presence of God no place is found for the terrified universe. One is reminded of the Psalmist’s query, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps 139:7). There is no place, for God is everywhere.

12 Before the great white throne stand the dead, both great and small. These are part of the “rest of the dead” who were resurrected at the close of the thousand-year period (v. 5). If the first resurrection is limited to actual martyrs, then the judgment of vv. 11-15 involves both believer and impenitent. If the second resurrection is of the wicked only, then the judgment is of those who will in fact be consigned to the lake of fire.

Reference to the book of life as part of the final testimony suggests a general judgment of the entire human race (excluding the martyrs who had already entered into their reward). There is no significance in the change from “small and great” (11:18; 13:16; 19:5, 18) to “great and small” in v. 12. The point is that no one is so important as to be immune from judgment, and no one is so unimportant as to make judgment inappropriate.

The great white throne judgment is not arbitrary but based on the evidence written by the life of every person.¹⁵⁷¹ Books are opened, and the dead are judged on the basis of what they have done as recorded therein. The teaching of judgment by works runs throughout both the OT and the NT. Ps 62:12 gives expression to the commonly accepted principle that God requites a person according to his work. In Jer 17:10 God says, “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.” The same principle is taught in the NT. Paul writes that God “will give to each person according to what he has done” (Rom 2:6), and Peter reminds his readers that God “judges each man’s work impartially” (1 Pet 1:17). The issue is not salvation by works but works as the irrefutable evidence of a person’s actual relationship with God. Salvation is by faith, but faith is inevitably revealed by the works it produces.

In addition to the record of people’s deeds¹⁵⁷² there is another book to be opened, the book of life. The idea of a divine register is an ancient one. Isaiah speaks of those who had been recorded among the living in Jerusalem (Isa 4:3). Many years before, Moses had pleaded with God to blot him out of his book (a register of those included within the theocratic community) rather than to withhold forgiveness from those who had sinned (cf. Dan 12:1; Mal 3:6; Rev 3:5; 17:8; 21:27). The relationship between the record of people’s deeds and the book of life is not clear.¹⁵⁷³ It has been suggested that those whose names are missing from the citizen list have access to the “books of deeds” as a last assessment of their claim to remain. The list in its final or revised state would then admit to the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (21:2).¹⁵⁷⁴ In any case, judgment proceeds on the evidence supplied both by the record of deeds and the book of life. This seems to support a general judgment rather than one restricted to the wicked dead.

13 The sea now gives up its dead, as do death and Hades, and all people are judged on the basis of what they have done. It is a bit pedantic to argue

that v. 13 is out of sequence since resurrection (v. 13) must precede judgment (v. 12). John mentions the sea, death, and Hades all giving up their dead to indicate and emphasize the universal scope of judgment.¹⁵⁷⁵ The sea is specifically mentioned to show that no one — not even those whose bodies had gone unburied because lost at sea¹⁵⁷⁶ — would escape resurrection and judgment.¹⁵⁷⁷ In 6:8 Death and Hades appeared as the rider of the pale horse and his inseparable companion. In 1:18 they designate the regions of the underworld whose keys are in the possession of the glorified Christ. Here (20:13) they appear as the realm of the dead, and in the following verse they personify all that remains of the effects of wickedness in the world. In Acts 2:27, 31 Hades denotes the place of all souls during the intermediate state, but elsewhere (such as in Luke 16:23) it is the abode of the unrighteous dead. This dual concept of Hades existed within later Judaism and carried over into NT thought.¹⁵⁷⁸ Thus nothing definitive can be determined from the term itself about the nature of those resurrected. A general resurrection of all except martyrs seems most plausible.

14-15 Death and Hades are now cast into the lake of fire,¹⁵⁷⁹ where the beast, the false prophet (19:10), and the devil (20:10) are already in torment. In 1 Cor 15:26 death is the last enemy to be destroyed (cf. 1 Cor 15:54-55). Coupled with Hades (that “grim receptacle of death’s prey”),¹⁵⁸⁰ it symbolizes the effects of sin and wickedness that entered the world through the sin of the first man (Rom 5:12). In a great psalm of thanksgiving the prophet Isaiah declares that God “will swallow up death forever” (Isa 25:8). The last vestige of sin’s unlawful hegemony is cast into the lake of fire. The lake of fire indicates not only the stern punishment awaiting the enemies of righteousness but also their full and final defeat. It is the second death,¹⁵⁸¹ that is, the destiny of those whose temporary resurrection results only in a return to death and its punishment.¹⁵⁸²

In Matt 25:41 Jesus indicated that the eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. In the final judgment all whose names do not appear in the book of life will share their fate. The grim simplicity of the narrative stands in contrast with the lurid descriptions found in Jewish apocalypticism. In *1 Enoch* 48:9 the wicked are given over into the hands of the elect in whose presence they burn like straw in the fire and sink like lead in water. Later in *1 Enoch* the apostates burn in a fiery Abyss in full view of Jerusalem (90:26).

And so ends “the tale of the first city.” Babylon has ruled the world with regard for no one but herself. She is a great prostitute who has seduced the nations into following her illicit way of life. Inspired by Satan, she has taken into her own hands the right to control the entire inhabited world. Her deceptive practices have lured all but the faithful into ungodliness. Her doom, however, is certain. She will be reduced to a heap of burning ashes, and her “lovers” will stand afar and marvel at how great has been her fall. Heaven will be filled with the Hallelujahs of those who have resisted her claims even to the point of death. The triumphant Messiah will return, and all who have fallen under the control of the beast and false prophet will be destroyed. The death of the martyrs will be vindicated. Satan will be bound in the Abyss for a thousand years, while the church will reign triumphant with the Lamb. Babylon has fallen. The forces of Satan in this world will be destroyed, and he and his henchmen will burn forever in the lake of fire.

X. THE NEW HEAVEN AND THE NEW EARTH (21:1-22:5)

In the closing chapters of Isaiah God promised that he would “create new heavens and a new earth” that would endure before him forever (Isa 66:17, 22). The fulfillment of this promise now begins to unfold in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to take its place upon a renewed earth. Ladd emphasizes that biblical thought — in contrast to Greek dualism in which salvation consists of the flight of the soul from the earthly and transitory to the spiritual and eternal — “always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence.”¹⁵⁸³ This final vision constitutes the last major unit of the Apocalypse (21:1-22:5). It describes among other things the descent of the new Jerusalem adorned as a bride for her husband, the new order in which sorrow will be no more, the eternal city resplendent with gold and precious stones, and the incredible joy of God’s servants, who will finally “see his face” (21:4). Mention of the tree of life (22:2) and of the river of the water of life (22:1) recalls the scene in the garden of Eden where the tree of life was planted in the midst of the garden (Gen 2:9; 3:22) and watered by a river that flowed from Eden (Gen 2:10). The emphasis on the renewed fellowship between God and his people (Rev 21:2-4, 7, 9; 22:3-4) encourages the reader to see in this final section a reconstitution of the garden of Eden.¹⁵⁸⁴

A. THE NEW CREATION (21:1-8)

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. "

5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. "

6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. "

1 In John's vision the first heaven and earth are replaced by a new heaven and a new earth. The renovation of the old order is a concept that belongs to the common stock of apocalyptic tradition. In *I Enoch* 45:4-5 the heaven and earth are to be transformed as a place for the elect (72:1; 91:16). 2 Esdras 7:75 speaks of a future time when God shall "renew the creation" (cf. 2 *Bar.* 32:6). In 2 *Pet* 3:10-13 we learn that following a great conflagration in which the heavens "will be kindled and dissolved" (RSV) and the earth will be burned up, there will be a new heaven and a new earth

in which righteousness will dwell. Interpreters understand these figures with varying degrees of literalness. Paul spoke of the whole creation groaning in travail while it waits with eager longing its emancipation from decay (Rom 8:19-22). The new order of things is probably not to be thought of primarily as a physical transformation.¹⁵⁸⁵ The entire presentation stretches the limits of human vocabulary and thought to emphasize the glorious reality of God dwelling among his people. As the new covenant is superior to and replaces the old (Heb 8:7-13), so the new heaven and earth provide a setting for the new and eternal state.¹⁵⁸⁶

In the new earth there is no longer any sea. Various explanations are offered to account for this omission. One suggestion is that it reflects the dread of the sea felt by ancient peoples.¹⁵⁸⁷ To discover a mythological connection with the Babylonian legend of Tiamat, the ancient dragon of chaos who struggles with Marduk, the god of order, is possible since OT writers had already taken over and reformed the ancient myth in order to reflect God's victory over idols. Perhaps by saying that the sea no longer exists John is reflecting God's final victory over all it stood for in ancient thought. A more plausible reason for the disappearance of the sea is that "in the mind of the writer it is associated with ideas which are at variance with the character of the New Creation."¹⁵⁸⁸ Isaiah compares the wicked to the tossing sea that cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt (Isa 57:20). It was out of the sea that the beast who blasphemed God and made war on the saints had arisen (Rev 13:1, 6-7). According to the *Assumption of Moses*, when God shall appear in the last days to punish the Gentiles, "The sea shall retire into the abyss" (10:6).¹⁵⁸⁹

2 John's vision¹⁵⁹⁰ includes not only a new heaven and earth but a New Jerusalem as well. The concept of a New Jerusalem unveiled at the advent of the Messiah is common in Jewish apocalyptic.¹⁵⁹¹ Apparently, the earliest reference is that in the *Testament of Dan* (late second century B.C.) which pictures the New Jerusalem as a place in which the saints rejoice and enjoy the glory of God forever (5:12). 2 *Baruch* 32:2-4 says that it is to be "renewed in glory, and perfected for evermore." The New Jerusalem is more than the old rebuilt. When "the city that now is invisible [shall] appear" (2 Esdr 7:26), it will be constructed according to a heavenly pattern (2 Esdr 10:49).¹⁵⁹² In the NT it is "the Jerusalem that is above" (Gal 4:26), whose "architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:10; cf. 12:22; 13:14; Phil

3:20). Those who remain faithful in the church in Philadelphia are to be inscribed with the name of “the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven” (Rev 3:12).

Although a few writers take the New Jerusalem in John’s vision to be an actual city,¹⁵⁹³ it is far better to understand it as a symbol of the church in its perfected and eternal state.¹⁵⁹⁴ The point is that Jerusalem is the site of the temple, the place where the Presence dwells. In 1 Cor 3:16-17 the people of God form the temple where God dwells; here (in Revelation) they are the city. The vision itself takes the form of a magnificent city symbolizing the eternal felicity of all who follow the Lamb.¹⁵⁹⁵ The holy city (cf. Isa 52:1; Matt 4:5) is of heavenly origin. It comes down from¹⁵⁹⁶ God, that is to say, the church is not a voluntary organization created by human beings but a fellowship initiated and given by God (cf. Matt 16:18).

The New Jerusalem descends from heaven adorned as a bride for her husband.¹⁵⁹⁷ The adornment is given in detail in vv. 11-21. In 19:7 the people of God were presented as a bride; here the same figure is used of the place of their abode, the heavenly Jerusalem. The contrast between the earthly city as prostitute and the heavenly city as bride is obvious.¹⁵⁹⁸

3 A loud voice is heard from the throne, ¹⁵⁹⁹ announcing the fulfillment of a basic theme that runs throughout the OT. It is clearly stated in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 26, “I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will ... be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev 26:11-12; cf. Jer 31:33; Ezek 37:27; Zech 8:8). The voice from heaven declares that the dwelling place of God is with people, and that he will live with them. The Greek word for tabernacle (*skene*) is closely related to the Hebrew *Shekinah*, ¹⁶⁰⁰ which was used to denote the presence and glory of God. In the wilderness wanderings the tabernacle or tent was a symbol of the abiding presence of God in the midst of his people. In the Fourth Gospel, John writes that the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* (*eskenosen*) among people so that they saw his glory, the glory of the One and Only (John 1:14). When the Seer writes that the tabernacle of God is with us, he is saying that God in his glorious presence has come to dwell with us. The metaphor does not suggest a temporary dwelling. From this point on God remains with his people throughout eternity.

It is interesting that most recent translations have the plural, peoples (e.g., NRSV, “they will be his peoples”), rather than the singular, people.¹⁶⁰¹

Apparently, John modified the traditional concept (Jer 7:23; 30:22; Hos 2:23) and substituted a reference to the many peoples of redeemed humanity. Jesus had spoken of “other sheep that are not of this sheep pen” that must become part of the one flock (John 10:16). It is with the redeemed peoples of all races and nationalities that God will dwell in glory. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. ¹⁶⁰² It is the presence of God, and the fellowship with him of all believers, that constitutes the principal characteristic of the coming age.

4 John now describes the benefits that come to God’s people when he takes up his eternal abode in their midst. Abolished forever are the debilitating effects of sin. Death, mourning, crying, and pain are all part of the “old order of things” that has now passed away. They belong to a previous order that has now become history. Eternal blessedness is couched in negation because the new and glorious order is more easily pictured in terms of what it replaces than by an attempt to describe what is largely inconceivable in our present state.

In Isaiah’s portrayal of Zion restored, the ransomed of the Lord return “with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Isa 35:10; cf. 65:19). John employs much the same language in writing of the final restoration — God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” and there shall be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (cf. Rev 7:16-17). The tears are not tears of remorse shed in heaven for failures on earth, but tears of suffering shed on earth as a result of faithfulness to Christ. ¹⁶⁰³ Death had entered the world as a consequence of sin (Gen 3; Rom 5:12), and the human race not only became subject to death (Heb 9:27) but also was enslaved by the fear of death (Heb 2:15). In an eschatological section of the Isaiah Apocalypse God is said to “swallow up death forever” (Isa 25:8). Paul echoes the theme in his triumphant announcement, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54). Now at last prophetic declaration receives its fulfillment, and death exists no longer. ¹⁶⁰⁴ With the extinction of death, grief and affliction disappear as well. The old order ¹⁶⁰⁵ marred by sin and its accompanying distress gives way to the new and perfect order of eternal blessedness. ¹⁶⁰⁶

5 The silence of God in Revelation ¹⁶⁰⁷ is broken by his declaration, “I am making everything new!” ¹⁶⁰⁸ The throne upon which God sits (cf. 4:2,

9; 5:1, 7; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:14) symbolizes his sovereignty and majesty. It is from this position of awesome power that he announces his intention of creating the new order. The renovation of the universe was a familiar concept in apocalyptic literature. *Jub.* 1:29 spoke of a “new creation when the heavens and the earth shall be renewed” (cf. *1 Enoch* 91:16; *2 Bar.* 57:2; 44:12; *2 Esdr* 7:75; etc.). Through the prophet Isaiah God had promised, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isa 65:17). The transformation that Paul saw taking place in the lives of believers (2 Cor 3:18; 4:16-18; 5:16-17) will have its counterpart on a cosmic scale when a totally new order will replace the old order marred by sin.

Most scholars hold that the command to write in v. 5 comes from an angel, as in 14:13 and 19:9. The interpretation is based primarily on the changes in tense of the verb “to say” in vv. 5 and 6 (lit., “said ... says ... said”). It is argued that since the first and third utterances are from God, why would the second be altered if the speaker were the same? It is of equal weight, however, to argue that there is no reason why the second verb should not be altered for stylistic reasons and God be the one who speaks throughout. In 1:19 the glorified Christ had also instructed John to write. The content of what he is to write is contained in the vision of eternal blessedness given in vv. 1-5. He is to write it because¹⁶⁰⁹ the revelation is trustworthy and true.

6 The descent of the New Jerusalem and all the attendant blessings may now be considered as having taken place.¹⁶¹⁰ God says, “It is done.” There is no uncertainty about the eternal felicity of those who hold fast in the trial of faith because from God’s vantage point the future is determined. He is not subject to the vagrancies of time because time itself is encompassed by his eternal nature. He is the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), the Beginning and the End (cf. 1:8; 22:13 and Isa 44:6; 48:12). That God is the Beginning refers not only to the fact that he was first in point of time (cf. John 1:1, NEB, “When all things began, the Word already was”), but also that he is the source and origin of all things. He is the end in the sense that he constitutes their goal or aim (as in 1 Tim 1:5; Rom 10:4). As such he allows those who are thirsty to drink from the spring of the water of life. Scripture often employs the figure of thirst to depict the desire of the soul for God. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God,” sang the Psalmist (Ps 42:1; cf.

36:9; 63:1; Isa 55:1). God is a spring of living water (Jer 2:13; cf. Ps 36:9) that assuages thirst and wells up into eternal life (John 4:14). In the arid climate of Palestine a spring of cool water would be a vivid symbol of refreshment and satisfaction.

7 It is the overcomers who are to inherit these blessings of the eternal state. In the letters to the seven churches we learned that the overcomers will eat from the tree of life (2:7), not be hurt by the second death (2:11), be given hidden manna and a white stone (2:17), receive authority over the nations (2:26), not have their names blotted from the book of life (3:5), be a pillar in the temple of God (3:12), and sit with Christ on his throne (3:21). All this is the inheritance of those who remain constant in their faith during the period of final testing.

With Abraham God established a covenant “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7). To David he promised, concerning Solomon, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:14). This age-old covenant is fulfilled to all who are Abraham’s heirs by faith (Gal 3:29). God declares that it is the overcomer who will be his child and to whom he will be God. Those who deny Christ and are enticed by the allurements of the prostitute to follow the beast have no inheritance in the family of God. The thirst for God mentioned in v. 6 is satisfied only by the reality of divine sonship.¹⁶¹¹

8 In contrast to the overcomers are all those who have cowered in the face of persecution and joined the company of the reprobate. Leading the retreat are the cowardly,¹⁶¹² who in the last resort choose personal safety over faithfulness to Christ. They are the rootless ones of the Parable of the Sower who “when trouble or persecution comes because of the word ... quickly [fall] away” (Matt 13:21). It is not a natural timidity that makes them what they are, but a lack of genuine commitment that provides the incentive for continuing in spite of persecution. They choose to forget the admonition of Jesus that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Mark 8:35). The unbelieving are not the secular pagan world (as in 1 Cor 6:6; 7:12ff.; 10:27; 14:22ff.) but believers who have denied their faith under pressure. They are “apostates, those who had renounced, or given up, their Christian faith.”¹⁶¹³

In fact, all eight classes of people mentioned in the verse may refer to professing believers who have apostatized (although after the second or third class they apply to pagans as well).¹⁶¹⁴ The “vile” are those who have

joined in the detestable and unholy ritual of emperor worship. They are successors to the idolatrous Israelites who “consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile¹⁶¹⁵ as the thing they loved” (Hos 9:10; cf. Exod 5:21; Titus 1:16; Rev 17:4ff.). They have become defiled by the impurities of the imperial cult. “Murderers” may refer to those committing acts of homicide under the tyranny of the beast (13:15). The “sexually immoral”¹⁶¹⁶ are mentioned because the practice had become the major vice of paganism. “Those who practice magic arts” remind us of the scene in Ephesus where the sorcerers brought their scrolls together and burned them in public (cf. Acts 19:19). The inclusion of “liars” is appropriate in view of John’s emphasis on truth (cf. 1 John 2:21-22; 3:19; 4:6).¹⁶¹⁷ Throughout Revelation deviation from truth has been stigmatized (2:2; 3:9; 14:5; 21:27; 22:15). The lot of all apostates and pagans is to be cast into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (cf. 20:15).

B. THE NEW JERUSALEM (21:9-27)

9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb. " 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. 14 The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. 16 The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. 17 He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. 19 The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

22 I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is

its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. 27 Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

This section consists of an extended presentation of the New Jerusalem, the eternal dwelling place of God and his people. It is described in terms that would delight the first readers of Revelation for whom a beautiful and abundant city would symbolize everything that is necessary for complete satisfaction. The city of pure gold is laid out foursquare as a cube, reflecting the dimensions of the inner sanctuary of the temple — the place of divine presence. Thus it shone with the glory of God (v. 11). Its twelve gates on which were written the names of the twelve apostles stress the unity of God's ancient people and the NT church. The city needed no temple because God and the Lamb were there. Inside its gates are those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

9 One of the seven angels who carried out the seven last plagues (chap. 16) now commands^{[1618](#)} the Seer to come and see the bride, the wife of the Lamb.^{[1619](#)} The angel is undoubtedly the one who in 17:1 summoned John to witness the judgment of the great prostitute. This seems to be the purpose of the identical introductions.^{[1620](#)} It also draws attention to the contrast between the great prostitute (the wicked city Babylon) and the bride of the Lamb (the holy city Jerusalem).^{[1621](#)} One is of the earth, symbolizing the unbridled passion of evil, and the other descends from heaven, the epitome of all that is pure and beautiful.

It is perhaps overly subtle to find in the different messages delivered by the angel an indication that God's servants do not choose their roles but without question fulfill their mission whether it involves doom or bliss.^{[1622](#)} Likewise it is a bit pedantic to balk at the designation of God's people as both bride and wife of the Lamb.^{[1623](#)} As bride the church is pure and lovely, and as wife she enjoys the intimacy of the Lamb. To question whether or not the marriage has taken place at this point is to miss the significance of the metaphors.^{[1624](#)} As we approach the close of the Apocalypse, the figure of the Lamb becomes increasingly prominent. In the next twenty-two verses he is mentioned seven times.

10 Verses 10-14 in the Greek text comprise one compound sentence that describes the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven. In a vision the angel transports John to a great, high mountain to watch the descent. The mountain is neither a literal mountain nor merely a symbol of that “elevation of spirit ... necessary for the one who would see the heavenly vision.”¹⁶²⁵ It is an essential part of the visionary experience. It is an appropriate vantage point from which to view the descent of the eternal order. The idea of spiritual exaltation has already been emphasized by the expression “in the Spirit” (cf. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3). The mountain “existed” in John’s vision of eternal realities. When taken into the desert in the Spirit John had seen the wicked Babylon (17:3), but it is from a high mountain that he views the New Jerusalem. In Jewish thought mountains have always played a significant role. Moses’ historical encounter with God on Mt. Sinai marked the origin of the Jewish nation (Exod 19ff.). Ezekiel’s great vision of the restored temple and land was given to him “on a very high mountain” (Ezek 40:1-2). Enoch portrays one of seven magnificent mountains excelling the others in height and beauty as the throne of God (*1 Enoch* 24-25).

The holy city¹⁶²⁶ coming down from God out of heaven should be understood as a “real event” within the visionary experience. That in 21:2 there is a similar reference does not mean that there are two descents. The expression is more than a convenient metaphor for God’s continuing entrance into our earthly existence. The descent is an announcement in visionary terms of a future event that will usher in the eternal state. That the city comes down from God means that the eternal blessedness is not an achievement of people but a gift from God.

11 As the holy city descends from heaven, it glitters with a shimmering radiance¹⁶²⁷ that manifests the presence and glory of God. It is the eternal fulfillment of God’s promise to captive Israel that in the restoration the glory of the Lord will arise upon them and he will be their everlasting light (Isa 60:1, 2, 19). In apocalyptic literature the glory of God is a designation for his presence (Ezek 43:5). The radiance of the city is likened to a glittering gem. “Clear as crystal” is a somewhat unfortunate translation because it suggests transparency. In antiquity the designation “jasper” was used for any opaque precious stone. The point of comparison is the brilliance and sparkle¹⁶²⁸ of the gem. The reference could be to the diamond.

12-13 The city is surrounded by a great wall with twelve gates,^{[1629](#)} which are guarded by twelve angels. On the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The mention of a wall is not to suggest the necessity of security precautions in the eternal state. Nor does it imply that Christians are a people set apart (although in one important sense this is certainly true; cf. Titus 2:14). The wall is simply part of the description of an ideal city as conceived by ancient peoples accustomed to the security of strong outer walls.^{[1630](#)}

The twelve gates are distributed three on each side of the city. In Ezek 48:30-34 the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem are named after the twelve tribes of Israel. ^{[1631](#)} Through these gates the tribes go out to their allotted land. In John's vision the gates that bear the names of the twelve tribes are entrances for all the peoples of the earth whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21:24-27). That the gates are twelve in number symbolizes abundant entrance. Reference to twelve tribes emphasizes the continuity of the NT church with God's people of OT times. John chooses to list the sides of the city in the order of east, north, south, west (v. 13), although Ezekiel, who seems to be his model, places north before east.^{[1632](#)} One suggestion is that John chooses "the most erratic" order to discourage any interest his readers might have in the "zodiacal cycle."^{[1633](#)} The twelve angels are celestial gatekeepers and may reflect the Isaianic picture of watchmen upon the walls of Jerusalem (Isa 62:6). They belong to the concept of an ideal city.

14 The wall of the city, evenly divided by twelve gates, rests on twelve foundations upon which are inscribed the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. "Twelve apostles" is obviously a corporate reference to the disciple group without specific attention to Judas.^{[1634](#)} In Eph 2:20 Paul teaches that the household of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The church in a historical sense rests upon the apostles and prophets, that is, upon the faith and labors of those who first proclaimed the gospel message. The juxtaposition of the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles shows the unity of ancient Israel and the NT church.

15 Verses 15-17 describe the measuring of the heavenly city. In chapter 11 it was John who was told to measure the temple of God and its altar, and count those that worship there (11:1). The holy city, however, is to be measured by the angel (cf. 21:9), who appropriately uses a reed or staff of

gold.¹⁶³⁵ The reed was a measure slightly more than ten feet in length. This part of the vision may have been suggested by the elaborate measuring described in Ezekiel 40-41 (cf. Zech 2:1-5). The measuring in chapter 11 was to insure protection; here it serves to portray the enormous size and perfect symmetry of the eternal dwelling place of the faithful.¹⁶³⁶

16 The city that appears to John is said to lie “foursquare” (NRSV). This could mean that it was laid out in a square pattern,¹⁶³⁷ but more likely it refers to a three-dimensional form — a cube whose length, breadth, and height are all equal. Not only are the terms in which the city is described most naturally interpreted as a cube, but the Greek word itself is used of huge rocks in the shape of a cube and of stones appropriate for building blocks.¹⁶³⁸ Some have imagined the city to be in the form of a pyramid¹⁶³⁹ — this would allow the river of life to flow down from the throne of God — but all such concrete visualizations obscure the symbolic meaning of the cube-shaped city. This particular shape would immediately remind the Jewish reader of the inner sanctuary of the temple (a perfect cube, each dimension being twenty cubits; 1 Kgs 6:20), the place of divine presence. A city foursquare would be the place where God has taken up residence with his people.

The angel measured the city with his golden rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia¹⁶⁴⁰ in length. Some writers take this distance to be the circumference of the entire city rather than the length of a given side. This attempt to reduce the size of the city forgets that the numbers are symbolic.¹⁶⁴¹ Others understand the 12,000 as symbolizing immensity and perfection. Twelve times the cube of ten stands for the perfect total of God’s people.¹⁶⁴² In rabbinic writing the size of the restored Jerusalem is often mentioned. One source says that it will reach the gates of Damascus and will cover as much ground as the whole of Israel. Another source sets its height at twelve miles.¹⁶⁴³ In the Sibylline Oracles (5:247-51) a great ring is to be built around the city, reaching as far as Joppa. The best interpretation of the measuring of the city is that the apocalypticist is “struggling to express by symbols the vastness, the perfect symmetry, and the splendor of the new Jerusalem.”¹⁶⁴⁴

17 When the angel measures the wall, it is found to be 144 cubits. It is not clear whether this measurement is to be taken as the height or the thickness of the wall. The NIV says “thick” but adds in the margin the

alternative, “high.” In either case the wall would be hopelessly out of proportion for a city some 1,400 miles high! The significance of the measurement lies in the fact that it is a multiple of twelve and has to do with the people of God in their eternal sanctuary. The Seer notes that the 144 cubits are calculated by the normal measurements of man (a cubit being roughly the length of a man’s forearm), and then quickly adds that it makes no difference that the measuring is being carried out by an angel. In either case a cubit is a cubit.¹⁶⁴⁵ The measuring was not for preservation (as in 11:1) but for demarcation.

18 The wall is said to be made of jasper. But because in the following verse the first of the city’s twelve foundations is made of jasper (v. 19), it would be well to understand this reference as indicating some sort of inlay of precious stone rather than solid jasper as a building material. ¹⁶⁴⁶ In either case it is the splendor and worth of the wall that is so graphically reported. But it may be more. In Rev 4:3 the One upon the throne appears like jasper. Earlier in chapter 21 the holy city aglow with the glory of God emits the radiance of precious jasper (v. 11). Thus it is called to our attention that even the wall of the city speaks of the glorious presence of God.

The city itself is said to be of pure gold. While no allusion is necessarily required, it may be that in the back of John’s mind is the memory of Herod’s temple whose golden front reflected the first rays of the morning sun so brilliantly that those who looked upon it had to turn away their eyes from its “fiery splendour.”¹⁶⁴⁷ The gold of the heavenly city is as pure as glass. This is normally taken to mean that it had a transparent quality. The complete absence of any impurity in the gold is comparable to the lack of any trace of opaqueness in rare crystal glass. In v. 21 the gold is compared to transparent glass rather than pure glass.¹⁶⁴⁸

19-20 In v. 14 we learned that the wall of the city had twelve foundations bearing the names of the twelve apostles. The foundations are now further described as adorned with precious stones, a different gem for each foundation. It is not clear whether the foundations are to be understood as the segments between the twelve gates (21:12) or as layers built upon each other and extending all around the four sides of the city. The twelve stones correspond generally to the twelve gems set into the breastplate of the high priest,¹⁶⁴⁹ which suggests that the privileges reserved for the high priest alone under the old covenant are now freely given to the entire people of

God. The order of the stones and the significance of each has been the subject of an extended, yet rather fruitless, debate.¹⁶⁵⁰

In ancient times, as today, precious stones were desirable for their beauty and scarcity. The various stones mentioned in the Bible are hard to identify with any exactness because of the many different species and colors as well as the lack of a standard terminology. Jasper was a translucent rock crystal green in color. Sapphire was a deep blue stone with spangles of iron pyrite (the modern lapis lazuli). Chalcedony is usually taken as a green silicate of copper found near Chalcedon in Asia Minor. The emerald was another green stone. The sardonyx was a layered stone of red (sard) and white (onyx). It was prized for use in making cameos. The carnelian was a blood-red stone and commonly used for engraving. Chrysolite may have been a yellow topaz or golden jasper. The beryl was a green stone, and the topaz a greenish gold or yellow. The jacinth was bluish-purple and similar to the modern sapphire. The amethyst was a purple quartz, so called because it was regarded as an antidote for drunkenness.¹⁶⁵¹

The overall picture is of a city of brilliant gold surrounded by a wall inlaid with jasper and resting upon twelve foundations adorned with precious gems of every color and hue. The city is magnificent beyond description. As the eternal dwelling place of God and his people, it is described in language that continually attempts to break free from its own limitations in order to do justice to the reality it so imperfectly describes.

21 Two descriptive touches remain. First, each of the twelve gates consists of a single pearl. A rabbinic prophecy promises that God will set up in the gateways of Jerusalem gems and pearls thirty cubits by thirty in which he will hollow out openings ten cubits wide and twenty cubits high.¹⁶⁵² Along with gold and expensive clothing the pearl was a mark of affluence (1 Tim 2:9). Jesus spoke of a pearl so valuable that a merchant sold all he possessed in order to purchase it (Matt 13:45-46). The spectacle of a pearl large enough to serve as a city gate boggles the mind. Secondly, the street (or streets)¹⁶⁵³ of the city was made of gold so pure that it seemed to be transparent as glass. Like the priests of the OT (1 Kgs 6:30) who ministered in the temple, the servants of God walk upon gold.

22 In the heavenly city there is no temple. At this point John demonstrates his independence from the prophet Ezekiel, whose imagery plays a prominent role in the Seer's vision. Ezekiel spent seven chapters describing the restored temple and its ordinances (Ezek 40-46). For John

there is no temple because symbol has given way to reality. The temple is replaced by “the Lord God Almighty,¹⁶⁵⁴ and the Lamb.” Jesus told the woman at the well that the day would come when worship of God would no longer be geographically circumscribed (John 4:21). Paul later declared that the believing congregation was in fact the temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21-22). The final state toward which this points is eternity itself, where the presence of God the Father and the Lamb permeates and sanctifies all that the heavenly Jerusalem symbolizes. It is unimportant that in 7:15 it was said that the tribulation martyrs serve God day and night “in his temple.” The purpose of the statement is not to describe the architecture of heaven but to speak meaningfully to a people for whom the temple was supremely the place of God’s presence.

23 The heavenly city has no need of sun or moon to shine because it is illuminated by the glory of God. Isaiah had pictured the glorious restoration of Jerusalem in much the same terms (Isa 60:19-20). John is not supplying his readers with information about future astrological changes but setting forth by means of accepted apocalyptic imagery the splendor that will radiate from the presence of God and the Lamb. In his Gospel John used language in much the same way. He called Jesus the “true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9) and the “light of the world” (John 8:12; cf. 3:19; 12:35). The metaphor is not uncommon in apocalyptic language (2 Esdr 7:39-42).

24 The nations are said to walk by the light of God’s glory, and the kings of the earth bring their splendor into the city. Isaiah 60 serves as a model. The glory of the Lord is seen upon Jerusalem, and nations and kings are attracted to its brightness (Isa 60:1-3). The wealth of the nations comes back to Zion as her sons and daughters return from afar (Isa 60:4-5; also vv. 6, 9, 11, 13, 17).

The problem raised by vv. 24-26 (along with 22:2 and 22:15) is the presence of Gentiles outside the heavenly Jerusalem following the final judgment, the overthrow of evil, and the restoration of a new heaven and earth. Just who are these referred to in such a manner?

Many critics (e.g., Vischer, Pfeleiderer, J. Weiss, and others) regard the paragraph 21:9-22:5 as a slightly changed Jewish document that retains mention of the heathen who remain on earth as the subjects of God’s people in the messianic kingdom.¹⁶⁵⁵ But a borrower who needed to make at least eight additions to give it a Christian tone would hardly have failed to

remove the reference to the heathen. A second solution is to interpret the nations as redeemed peoples.¹⁶⁵⁶ But in our metaphor the redeemed live *within* the city. Yet another point of view is that in these verses we have a picture of universal salvation. God is not content to save a few martyrs and let the rest of humankind perish along with all of human culture.¹⁶⁵⁷ This interpretation, while possessing a certain rhetorical persuasiveness, reads far too much theology into incidental references that are more easily explained in another way.

The solution to the “problem” of the presence of the unregenerate in the age to come is that John has taken over from the prophets the language and figures of speech that presuppose the continuance of Gentile peoples on the earth after the establishment of the eschatological era.¹⁶⁵⁸ The prophetic perspective was to speak of the future in terms of the historical conditions of the present. How else could the prophets describe that which lay beyond the boundaries of their daily experience. As John utilized aspects of their visions in portraying the eternal scene he inadvertently retained certain elements that were not entirely appropriate to the new setting. This is certainly the answer to the presence of nations “outside the new Jerusalem” throughout eternity. The imagery of the Apocalypse must of necessity be concrete and spatial, but its significance is inevitably spiritual.

25-26 The gates of the New Jerusalem stand open because with the demise of evil security measures are no longer necessary. John’s parenthetical remark about the absence of night explains why only day is mentioned in the preceding clause. Day extends indefinitely without interruption because darkness never comes. Thus there is no need of closing gates. One is reminded of the Isaianic declaration concerning the restored Jerusalem, “Your gates will always stand open” (Isa 60:11). Through these open gates the kings of the earth bring the glory and honor of the nations. The reference is to the choicest of earthly treasures. Once again we are to think of the imagery, not in a literal sense, but in its symbolic significance.

27 Those who enter the city are not the wicked and deceitful but those whose names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life. In the imagery of this paragraph the people with free access to the city are one with those who dwell within it. The earlier prophetic reference to Gentiles has in John’s reinterpretation been redirected to refer to the entire body of the people of God. The sanctity of God’s city was proclaimed by the prophets

(Isa 52:1; Ezek 44:9) and echoed by the writers of the NT (1 Cor 6:9-10; 2 Pet 3:13).[1659](#)

C. EDEN RESTORED (22:1-5)

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Throughout chapter 21 John has been using the imagery of a magnificent city to describe the people of God in the glorious and eternal age to come. While the first five verses of chapter 22 continue that description, they also portray the eternal state as Eden restored, thus “book-ending” the Christian Bible. In Genesis we were introduced to the tree of life planted in the middle of the garden (Gen 2:9). To eat of its fruit was to live forever (Gen 3:22); as a consequence of Adam’s sin, therefore, the first couple were banished from the garden to work the ground cursed with thorns and thistles (Gen 3:17-18). Now in Revelation we see redeemed humanity back in the garden, able to eat the bountiful fruit of the tree of life (22:1-2). The curse has been removed (cf. 22:3 with Gen 3:14-24), and God’s people are again privileged to “see his face” (cf. 22:4 with Gen 3:8) and serve him. No greater good or more joyous truth could be imagined than eternal fellowship with God and the Lamb! Truly, the unimaginable blessings of Eden have been restored.

1 The angel shows John a sparkling river that flows crystal clear from the heavenly throne. The background seems to be Ezekiel’s vision of the sacred river (47:1-12), which flowed from under the threshold of the temple

eastward past the altar and ultimately into the Dead Sea, where it healed the water of its saltiness so that many fish could again live in it.¹⁶⁶⁰ Elsewhere in Revelation we read of “springs of waters of life” (7:17; cf. 21:6 and 22:17) as a significant part of the blessings of the eternal state. Some writers find in the imagery of flowing water a reference to the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁶¹ Others find the promise of immortality¹⁶⁶² or a reference to the abundant life that God now gives to his people.¹⁶⁶³ All this is true, but the central affirmation of the verse is that in the eternal state the faithful will live at the source of the life-giving stream that proceeds from the very presence of God. In the hot and arid climate of Palestine this figure would hold special appeal.

“Clear as crystal” describes the river as a sparkling rush of pure water. Its source is the throne of God and of the Lamb. In 7:15 and 12:5 we read only of the throne of God. This place of honor is now shared with the Lamb, whose sacrificial death has made him worthy of heavenly praise (cf. 5:9-15).

2 The crystal river is bordered on either side by the tree of life, which bears fruit continually throughout the year and whose leaves bring healing to the nations. The exact placement of river, street, and trees is less than clear. If the initial phrase (“down the middle of the great street”) goes with the preceding verse, then the river would flow down the center of a wide avenue.¹⁶⁶⁴ If it is taken with what follows, then the street and river probably run side by side, with the trees in between. Other possibilities have been suggested,¹⁶⁶⁵ but the specific geographical layout is of no particular importance in understanding the symbolism of the verse.

The imagery has a double source. In the early chapters of Genesis we read that if Adam had eaten of the tree of life he would have received immortality (Gen 2:9; 3:22).¹⁶⁶⁶ In Ezekiel there is the picture of healing water flowing from the temple to form a river along whose banks are trees that bring forth new fruit each month and whose leaves are for healing (Ezek 47:12). The tree of life was a regular feature in Jewish portrayals of Paradise (cf. 2 Esdr 8:52; 2 *Enoch* 8:3-4). To eat of its fruit would be to live forever. In John’s vision the tree “produced twelve kinds of fruit, yielding a fresh crop month by month” (Weymouth). Both the abundance and the variety of fruit are being emphasized. God’s provision is ever new and always more than adequate.

Not only does the tree provide fruit to be eaten, but its leaves are therapeutic and bring about healing. But why would healing be required in the eternal city? Here we find evocative language of the most potent kind. In the restored Eden all has been reversed: eating of one tree brought the curse — eating of this tree eternal life. Although John speaks of “the healing of the nations,” we are not to infer that nations will continue to exist outside the New Jerusalem. As in 21:24ff., imagery borrowed from the present state of affairs is carried over into the description of the eternal state. The glory of the age to come is necessarily portrayed by means of imagery belonging to the present age. The healing leaves indicate the complete absence of physical and spiritual want. The life to come will be a life of abundance and perfection.

3-4 Nothing that is under God’s curse will exist in the city. The curse that the human race brought upon itself will be removed forever (again, Gen 1-3 restored). The greatest of all eternity’s blessings is reflected in the one phrase, “They will see his face.”¹⁶⁶⁷ Moses, the great lawgiver of the old dispensation, was not allowed to see the face of God because God had declared, “No one may see me and live” (Exod 33:20; cf. 33:23, where Moses is allowed to see only the back of God). In the ancient world criminals were banished from the presence of the king and not allowed to look upon his face (Esth 7:8; cf. 2 Sam 14:24). Jesus taught that only the pure in heart will see God (Matt 5:8), and John in his first epistle speaks of the great transformation to take place at the return of Christ when “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

On the foreheads of God’s servants will be stamped the name of God.¹⁶⁶⁸ His name stands for his character. The faces of those who have experienced the beatific vision will reflect the unmistakable likeness of their heavenly Father. The process of transformation now under way in the life of the believer (2 Cor 3:18) will be brought to completion when the church enters its ultimate and ideal state. As the followers of the beast bore his mark upon their foreheads (Rev 13:16), so the faithful will bear the name of God upon theirs (cf. Rev 3:12). The metaphor stresses ownership and likeness.

5 The disappearance of night and the lack of any need for the light of the sun is modeled on Isaiah’s description of that time in Zion’s future when the light of the sun and the moon will be replaced by the everlasting light of the glory of God (Isa 60:19-20; cf. Rev 21:23). As Zechariah prophesied, the age to come will not be divided between day and night but will be one

continuous day (Zech 14:7). In the New Jerusalem God is ever present, and his glory makes unnecessary all other sources of light. Charles takes the clause “God will give them light” as a Hebraism that would be rendered, “The Lord God shall cause His face to shine upon them.” [1669](#) The face that the saints behold (v. 4) will shine upon them in eternal benediction (v. 5). In contrast to the martyrs of 20:4, 6, inhabitants of the New Jerusalem are to reign forever and ever (cf. Dan 7:18, 27 and Rev 5:10).

In divine providence, our Bible ends with the ultimate restoration of the original creation. Paul teaches that although the creation is currently in bondage to decay, it nevertheless eagerly awaits the time when it will be liberated from this bondage. This will take place when the children of God are brought into the glorious future prepared for them (Rom 8:19-21). Although sin has marred the history of the human race, God has, through the redemption wrought by his Son, set into motion a new humanity. In the present age he rules the hearts of all who have turned to him in faith: in the age to come that reign will find its full completion. Sin will be forever removed and the design of Eden will be totally realized. The book of Revelation is the final chapter in God’s eternal plan for his children. It portrays in imagery of the most evocative kind the glorious future of all who resist the mark of the beast and turn in believing faith to the Lamb. It brings us full circle to the original desires of God in his creation of all that is.

XI. EPILOGUE (22:6-21)

Verses 6-21 of chapter 22 form the Epilogue of the book of Revelation. This section consists of a number of rather loosely related utterances that are difficult to assign with any certainty to specific speakers. The difficulty of identifying speakers is only superficial because ultimately we hear the voice of Christ, whether echoed by the angel or recorded by the prophet.¹⁶⁷⁰ It is unnecessary to account for the disjointed nature of the Epilogue by conjecturing that John left only a rough draft that needed additional rewriting and a final edit. The material itself has determined the form it has taken. Although falling into a number of short sections, it sets forth but two major themes: the authenticity of the book as a divine revelation,¹⁶⁷¹ and the imminence of the end.

The similarities between the Prologue and Epilogue of Revelation have often been noted. The book is a genuine prophecy (1:3; 22:6, 9-10, 18-19) by a duly commissioned prophet (1:1, 9-10; 22:8-10) to be read in the churches (1:3, 11; 22:18) for the encouragement of the faithful (1:3; 22:7, 12, 14). These and other similarities support the view that the Prologue may have been the last part of the book to be written and thus reflects the influence of the Epilogue.¹⁶⁷² In any case, this is deliberate inclusio.

6 The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place. "

7 "Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book. "

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. 9 But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

10 Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. 11 Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy. "

12 *“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*

14 *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

16 *“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. ”*

17 *The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*

18 *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. 19 And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*

20 *He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon. ” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

21 *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.*

6 The speaker is the angel of the preceding paragraph who showed to John the eternal city with its crystal river and life-giving tree. He now attests the genuineness of the entire revelation. The words that relate the visions of things to come are trustworthy and true. They are worthy of belief because they correspond to reality.

As in the Prologue, it is an angelic intermediary who is sent to show to God’s servants “the things that must soon take place” (cf. Rev 1:1). It is through God’s servant John that the message then goes out to the members of the churches — the servants of 22:6 (cf. v. 16). The source of the revelation is the Lord, who is further described as “the God of the spirits of the prophets.” The “spirits” (note plural) are the “natural faculties of the prophets, raised and quickened by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶⁷³ It is unnecessary to decide between OT and NT prophets because in either case the same

prophetic function is being carried out. All true prophecy originates with God and comes through people moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21).¹⁶⁷⁴

The nearness of the consummation, as reflected by the clause “that must soon take place,” is not a problem peculiar to Revelation. Paul, as well, writes that the time is short and that people must adjust their manner of life accordingly (1 Cor 7:29-31). In one of his earliest letters the apostle includes himself with those who are to be alive when Jesus returns (1 Thess 4:15). One answer to the problem of this as-yet-unfulfilled expectation is to hold that God is more concerned with the fulfillment of his redemptive purposes than he is with satisfying our ideas of appropriate timing. All the issues that find their complete fulfillment in that point in time yet future when history will verge into eternity, are also being fulfilled in the ever advancing present. The end and the beginning are but two perspectives on the same great adventure. The final overthrow of evil was determined from the beginning and has been in force ever since the defeat of Satan by the sacrificial death of Christ and his triumphal resurrection.

7 From this point forward we encounter a number of changes in speakers. Here the words “Behold, I am coming soon” are those of the risen Lord.¹⁶⁷⁵ The coming of Christ is to be “soon.”¹⁶⁷⁶ It is best to take the utterance at face value and accept the difficulty of a foreshortened perspective on the time of the end rather than to reinterpret it in the sense that Jesus “comes” in the crises of life and especially at the death of every person. Revelation has enough riddles without our adding more. Matt 24:42-44 counsels every generation to be on the alert for the return of the Son of man. An infallible timetable would do away with that attitude of urgent expectation that has been the hallmark of the church down through the centuries.

We come now to the next to the last of the seven beatitudes in the Apocalypse (1:3; 13:13; etc.). It is pronounced upon those who stand fast in the great persecution about to break upon the church. They are those who keep the prophetic injunctions of the book. Note again the insistence of the author that his visions of the end constitute genuine prophecy. Under the impulse of the Holy Spirit he has faithfully recorded what God has revealed concerning the end of all things (cf. 1:3; 19:10).

8-9 John now attests that he has actually heard and seen all the things that are recorded in the book. His literary product is not the result of any flight of imagination. Then, curiously — since in Rev 19:10 he was corrected by the angel for the same ill-advised act — he falls before the angel to worship

him for his role as revealer and interpreter.¹⁶⁷⁷ It is the vision of the New Jerusalem which is primarily in view, although the response of the Seer comes as the culmination of the entire series of revelations.

John is prevented from carrying out his intention by the angel, who explains that he himself is a fellow servant with John, the other prophets, and those who keep the words of the book.¹⁶⁷⁸ The worship of angels, although prohibited, did exist among the Jews before the Christian era.¹⁶⁷⁹ This tendency seems to have made some inroads into the Christian community (cf. Col 2:18),¹⁶⁸⁰ although it was strongly resisted. Since angels are fellow servants with the redeemed, they may be esteemed for their contribution but are not in any way to be worshiped. This honor is reserved for God alone. The angel's exhortation, "Worship God!" puts in the most succinct form possible the theme of the entire book.

10 The speaker in vv. 10 and 11 is probably the angel, but it matters little because behind all the instruction and admonition of the Epilogue lies the will of the risen Christ. What is important is that the "sealed-up" characteristic of apocalyptic is now discarded. The visions that John has seen are prophetic and intended to be heard and understood.

In the last chapter of Daniel the prophet is told to "close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end" (Dan 12:4). Considerable time is to elapse before the fulfillment of all that Daniel has predicted.¹⁶⁸¹ Not so in the Apocalypse. The crisis is imminent, and John is not to seal up the prophecy of the book. Since "the time is near," the message of judgment and hope is to be proclaimed among the churches.¹⁶⁸² This raises once again the problem of a postponed consummation. In view of the fact that nearly two millennia have passed since the announcement that the time was at hand, some have concluded that John was simply wrong in his eschatological expectation. Writers with a higher view of the reliability of Scripture usually take the phrase in a less than literal way. For instance, the end is always near in the sense that each successive Christian generation may be the last,¹⁶⁸³ or the return of Christ at the rapture makes the end always impending during the church age.¹⁶⁸⁴ One of the more helpful suggestions is that the Apocalypse has a twofold perspective: it is primarily concerned with the struggle between Christ and Antichrist that comes to a climax at the end of the age, but this struggle also existed between church and state in the first century and has surfaced in history whenever the state

has made totalitarian demands.¹⁶⁸⁵ Thus the time has always been at hand. The tension of imminence is endemic to that span of redemptive history lying between the cross and the parousia.

11 From the perspective of the Seer the end is so close that there is no longer time to alter the character and habits of people. Those who do wrong will continue to do wrong, and those who are morally unclean¹⁶⁸⁶ will continue in their vile condition.¹⁶⁸⁷ The major thrust of the verse is that since the end time is now at hand people are certain to reap the consequences of the kinds of lives they have led. The time arrives when change is impossible because character has already been determined by a lifetime of habitual action. The arrival of the end forecloses any possibility of alteration.¹⁶⁸⁸

12 Once again (see v. 7) Christ announces that he is coming soon. This time, however, he replaces the beatitude with the promise of reward. He will bring with him a reward for each person based upon what each has done. The distribution of rewards on the basis of works is taught throughout Scripture. Jer 17:10 is representative: “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.” Paul teaches that God “will give to each person according to what he has done” (Rom 2:6), and Peter declares that God “judges men by their actions” (1 Pet 1:17, Phillips).¹⁶⁸⁹ The reward will be spiritual blessedness to the righteous but judgment for those who are evil. It is the quality of a person’s life that provides the ultimate indication of what that person really believes.

13 In 1:8 and 21:6 it was God who identified himself as the Alpha and the Omega. Now the risen Christ applies the title to himself. Its meaning is essentially the same as that of the two following designations — “the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” — the first of which Christ has already applied to himself in 1:17 and 2:8. The names set him apart from the entire created order. He is unlimited by time, and in that all things are found both in the Father and in the Son the attributes of the former belong to the latter as well.¹⁶⁹⁰

14 John now writes a seventh and last beatitude. A blessing is pronounced on those who wash their robes, that is, those who remain undefiled by their steadfast refusal to comply with the demands of the beast. In 7:14 the great multitude around the heavenly throne clothed in white robes are “they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have

washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” It is instructive to note that in Rev 7:14 the verb “washed” was aorist, denoting an action belonging to a specific point in time, while in the verse under consideration the participle “those who wash” is present tense, suggesting continual action. ¹⁶⁹¹ One is reminded of Jesus’ injunction to Peter, “A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet” (John 13:10).¹⁶⁹²

Those with white robes are blessed in that they have the right to the tree of life (note the tie to the preceding vision). Eternal life is the reward of faithfulness in the face of tribulation. To “go through the gates into the city” is another way of portraying the same condition of eternal blessedness. The city represents the eternal dwelling place of God and redeemed humanity; the tree of life is a symbol of immortality.

15 Having described the blessedness of believers, John now speaks of those who have no right to the tree of life and may not enter the heavenly Jerusalem. Five of the six designations are also found in the slightly longer list in 21:8 of those whose lot is the fiery lake of burning sulfur.¹⁶⁹³ The verse does not intend to teach that in the eternal state all manner of wicked people will be living just outside¹⁶⁹⁴ the heavenly city. It simply describes the future with the imagery of the present. The contrast is between the blessedness of the faithful and the fate of the wicked. John’s concern is not chronology but the use of powerful images to convey truth.

John describes six (or perhaps seven, depending upon how one views the two kinds of liars) types of evildoers who are excluded from the city. The term “dog” is used in Scripture for various kinds of impure and malicious persons. In Deut 23:17-18 the term designates a male cult prostitute.¹⁶⁹⁵ In the Jewish culture of first-century Palestine it was used in reference to the heathen (Matt 15:22ff.), and in Phil 3:2 Paul turns the tables and applies it to the Judaizers. Those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters, and all liars are to be excluded along with the dogs. To love and practice falsehood is to be totally devoid of truthfulness. These have become like their leader, Satan, “who leads the whole world astray” (Rev 12:9; also 13:13-15; 16:14).

16 The angel who has guided John through the various visions of the book is now authenticated by Jesus himself. It is to the angel of Christ¹⁶⁹⁶ that the revelation has been delegated. The plural “you” indicates that it was

intended for others besides John. It stresses that the revelation is not a private affair but for the entire church.¹⁶⁹⁷

Jesus identifies himself as “the Root¹⁶⁹⁸ and the Offspring of David.” He is the fulfillment of the Isaianic promise that the Messiah shall come forth as “a shoot... from the stump of Jesse” (Isa 11:1, 10; cf. Rom 1:3). In the throne-room vision of Revelation 5 he was “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (v. 5). Jesus also calls himself “the bright Morning Star.”¹⁶⁹⁹ In the fourth oracle of Balaam the prophet declares that “a star will come out of Jacob” (Num 24:17). While the immediate reference is to David, in the passage under consideration it is transferred to David’s greater son.¹⁷⁰⁰ The star was a familiar symbol in Jewish writings for the expected Davidic king (T. Levi 18:3; T. *Judah* 24:1). The morning star is a promise that the long night of tribulation is all but over and that the new eschatological day is about to dawn.

17 Jesus has spoken in turn in vv. 12-13, 14-15, 16 of himself, of the blessedness of the faithful, and of the interpreting angel. Now John moves toward conclusion by inviting his readers in the well-known (to them) language of Isaiah. Verse 17 consists of four invitations. It is possible to take the first two as requests directed to Christ for his return and the second two as invitations to the world to come and take of the water of life. It is more likely that the first half of the verse should be interpreted by the second, and that the entire invitation is addressed to the world. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit,¹⁷⁰¹ and the bride is the church (21:2, 9). It is the testimony of the church empowered by the Holy Spirit that constitutes the great evangelizing force of this age.

Those who hear and accept repeat the invitation to others who thirst for the water of life. Whoever wishes may take of this life-giving water without charge. John deliberately echoes Isaiah’s “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters ... come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isa 55:1; cf. John 7:37). The threefold use of the present imperative (“come/let him come”) serves to extend the invitation until that very moment when history will pass irrevocably into eternity and any further opportunity for decision will be past.

18-19 The book draws to a close with a severe warning against adding to or taking away from its prophetic message. It is addressed not to future scribes who might be tempted to tamper with the text (nor to textual critics who must decide between shorter and longer variants!) but to “everyone

who hears,” that is, to members of the seven churches of Asia where the book was to be read aloud.¹⁷⁰² The warning is against willful distortion of the message. It is not unlike Paul’s stern words in Gal 1:6, 7 to those who would pervert the gospel.

Warnings of this nature were not uncommon. In Deut 4:2 Moses tells the Israelites, “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it.” When the translation of the Septuagint was completed, it was ordered that they “pronounce a curse in accordance with their custom upon anyone who should make any alteration either by adding or changing in any way whatever any of the words which had been written or making any omission.¹⁷⁰³ The warning is a “stereotyped and vehement form of claiming a canonicity equal to that of the O.T.”¹⁷⁰⁴ The solemnity of the injunction suggests that the speaker is Christ himself.

Note again that the book is considered a prophecy. Apocalyptic imagery is pressed into the service of NT prophecy.¹⁷⁰⁵ The passage should be taken in a straightforward manner as a severe warning to the hearers not to distort the basic message revealed through John. To lose one’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city is an awesome punishment. Commentators who hold that this verse does not teach that people can lose their salvation interpret it to mean that it is a very serious matter indeed to tamper with the word of God.¹⁷⁰⁶

20 For the third time the Risen Christ speaks. The verse opens with his testimony that his coming will be soon,¹⁷⁰⁷ and closes with the Seer’s response, which echoes the church’s longing for that great day. “Come, Lord Jesus” (the earliest confession of the church) is the equivalent of the transliterated Aramaic in 1 Cor 16:22, *maranatha*.¹⁷⁰⁸ At the very close of the book is the confession that the answers to the problems of life do not lie in people’s ability to create a better world but in the return of the One whose sovereign power controls the course of human affairs.¹⁷⁰⁹ Redemptive history remains incomplete until Christ returns. It is for the final act in the great drama of redemption that the church waits with longing.

21 For an apocalypse to end with a benediction is unusual. Its presence may be accounted for by the fact that since it began as an epistle (1:4ff.), it would be appropriate to close with a benediction (cf. 1 Cor 16:23; Eph 6:24; etc.). The benediction is pronounced upon all who have listened to the

book as it was read aloud in the churches of Asia. The final “Amen” is probably a scribal addition (in view of the weakness of manuscript evidence supporting its inclusion).^{[1710](#)}

With this the book of Revelation is complete. It has served to inform the readers of that day (and all subsequent time) that God is sovereign and that his eternal plan for the human race will in fact be carried through. During the interim there will be hostility and opposition, but what he has decreed must of necessity come to pass. People will be faced with the crucial decision of pledging their allegiance to the beast (and hence to Satan himself) or to the Lamb. Those who choose to wear the mark of the beast will ultimately share his fate. The great city Babylon will fall. Those who choose to follow the Lamb, who bears the marks of redemptive sacrifice, will ultimately be brought into eternal fellowship with God in the New Jerusalem. The end of all things has been laid bare before the readers of Revelation. All uncertainty regarding the eschaton has been removed. Believers are encouraged to remain faithful to their trust and wait expectantly for the return of Christ, who will forever put away all evil and usher in the eternal state of blessedness. “Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”

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22:20-21

22:21

1

Thompson distinguishes between *apocalypse* (“a set of writings, a literature, that includes such works as Daniel, I Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Book of Revelation”), *apocalyptic eschatology* (“a ‘religious perspective ... that involves certain beliefs about the world and the place of humans in it’”), and *apocalypticism* (“social aspects of apocalypses and transcendent eschatology”) (*Revelation*, 23).

2

Michaels writes that “many literary theorists have suggested that good, and especially great works never quite belong to a single genre. They are highly individual creations that expand the categories to the breaking point” (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 31).

3

The SBL Genres Project defined apocalyptic as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (cited in J. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 4). Rist defines apocalypticism as “the eschatological belief that the power of evil (Satan), who is now in control of this temporal and hopelessly evil age of human history in which the righteous are afflicted by his demonic and human agents, is soon to be overcome and his evil rule ended by the direct intervention of God, who is the power of good, and who thereupon will create an entirely new, perfect, and eternal age under his immediate control for the everlasting enjoyment of his righteous followers from among the living and the resurrected dead” (347). Cf. introductory paragraphs of Ladd’s article, “Why Not Prophetic-Apocalyptic?” *JBL*, 76 (1957), 192-200.

4

JTC, 6 (1969), 155.

5

An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament, 23.

6

Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 30-33. Fiorenza writes that at an earlier time “the majority of scholars agreed that the book was an only slightly redacted

Jewish apocalypse” but today it “seems to emerge more and more as a Christian writing *sui generis*” (*Revelation*, 25).

[7](#)

Relevance of Apocalyptic, 15. Aune acknowledges that “most scholars regard apocalyptic as the offspring of Israelite prophecy” but adds the caveat, “Yet apocalyptic must be regarded, not simply as the successor of prophecy, but as one among many offspring” (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 114)

[8](#)

Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 88.

[9](#)

Dawn of Apocalyptic, 7-8.

[10](#)

“Apocalyptic, Apocalypse” in *BDT*, 50-51.

[11](#)

Thompson writes that there is “widespread agreement that an apocalypse arises within a particular kind of situation, namely a situation of crisis” (*Revelation*, 25), yet notes that Schmithals “severs all genetic connections between apocalypses and their social, historical situation” (27).

[12](#)

Relevance, 38.

[13](#)

Ladd mentions the prophetic expectation of the future kingdom including a redeemed earth, the transformation being accomplished by a divine visitation that will cause a new order to emerge from the old (*BDT*, 52).

[14](#)

Schmithals writes, “The apocalypticist meets this present age with radical pessimism. The world is on a downward course and cannot be halted” (*Apocalyptic Movement*, p. 21).

[15](#)

Hanson says that in apocalyptic, history becomes no more than a “timetable of cosmic events” that indicates how close people are to the end (*Int*, 25 [1971], 478-79).

[16](#)

Method, 106. These four features are discussed at length in his chapter, “Characteristics of the Apocalyptic Writings” (104-39).

[17](#)

Beckwith, 169.

[18](#)

Russell, *Method*, 117.

[19](#)

I Enoch 86:1-4 tells of stars falling from heaven, becoming bulls who “let out their privy members” and “cover the cows of the oxen.” These then “bare [sic] elephants, camels, and asses” (the three classes of giants, according to R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2.250).

[20](#)

Method, 123-25.

[21](#)

Revelation is the outstanding exception: Beckwith refers to the *Shepherd of Hermas* (172), and Rist mentions the apocalyptic treatise by Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*, as well as Isaiah 24 — 27, which he regards as “an anonymous interpolation into Isaiah” (350).

[22](#)

Cf. R. H. Charles, *Religious Development between the Old and the New Testaments*, 38-46; cf. S. B. Frost, *Old Testament Apocalyptic*, 11-12, 166-67. Russell says this view of the “autocracy” of the law “cannot find any substantiation in fact” (*Method and Message*, 131). Morris thinks Charles may be claiming too much and that “the closed canon was probably one factor in the situation” (*Apocalyptic*, 52).

[23](#)

Relevance, 40-41.

[24](#)

Method and Message, 132-38. Bruce Jones acknowledges some truth in explanations such as Russell’s but notes that “Noah’s daughter-in-law was not a person with whom a later writer might easily feel ‘corporate solidarity,’ nor would her name give authority to any writing” (“More about the Apocalypse as Apocalyptic,” *JBL*, 86 [1968], 326). Jones writes that pseudonymity (whose function is simply to identify the books as “old”) along with *vaticinium ex eventu* prophecy says in effect, “Now is the decisive time. Even the ancient heroes were talking about us.”

[25](#)

1611 2053 2062 pc gig vg^{ww} sy bo add ταύτης, making the designation even more specific.

[26](#)

BDT, 53. Cf. J. Comblin, *Le Christ dans l'Apocalypse*, 5-6, 85.

[27](#)

"Apocalypse as Apocalyptic," 327.

[28](#)

Boring, 42.

[29](#)

Theology of the Old Testament, 2.303ff.

[30](#)

Feine-Behm-Kümmel write, "The conception of salvation history, in whose center Jesus stands, lies at the basis of the Apocalypse's philosophy of history, gives to it the tone which comes from the certainty of salvation" (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 323).

[31](#)

James Kallas argues on the basis of its attitude toward suffering that Revelation is not an apocalyptic book ("The Apocalypse — An Apocalyptic Book?" JBL, 86 [1967], 69-80). He holds that in apocalyptic thought suffering comes from the forces that oppose God, while the regular OT view is that it comes from God and should not be resisted. "The nonapocalyptic nature of Revelation is seen most markedly ... in its total reinterpretation of suffering" (78). While it has subsequently been pointed out that the attitude toward suffering in Revelation is not as consistent as Kallas holds (cf. Jones, "Apocalypse as Apocalyptic," 325-26), it nevertheless adds support to the more general argument that in a number of ways the book diverges from standard apocalyptic.

[32](#)

"Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John," NTS, 18 (1971-72), 406. Newman has a good bibliography of works discussing the similarities and differences between prophecy and apocalyptic in NTS, 10 (1963), 134, n. 4. Kenneth Strand reviews the commentaries of Minear, Morris, and Ladd and concludes that they all slight the apocalyptic nature of Revelation ("The Book of Revelation," AUSS 11 [1973], 181-93). More recently (1994) Smalley reminds us that John exhibits a double identity (both prophet and seer), and that "the book of Revelation, therefore, may be identified as apocalyptic deepened by prophetic insight, and also as prophecy intensified by apocalyptic vision" (*Thunder and Love*, 31). Roloff concludes that "Revelation is a prophetic writing that contains numerous

apocalyptic motifs and elements of style, but whose form is chiefly characterized by the purpose of epistolary communication” (8).

[33](#)

Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 7.25.

[34](#)

Charles, 1 .xxxviii-xxxix.

[35](#)

Charles, l.xxxix.

[36](#)

Charles, l.xxxviii.

[37](#)

Charles, l.xliv.

[38](#)

J. N. Sanders suggests as a “substantial hypothesis” the view that John, the Seer of the Apocalypse, was a Sadducean aristocrat who also edited the Fourth Gospel (“St John on Patmos,” *NTS*, 9 [1962-63], 75-85). Collins’s conclusion is that “although we must admit that we cannot identify the author of Revelation with any historical person otherwise known, we can infer a great deal about his social identity” (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 49). This social identity is laid out on 34-49 with a summary on 49-50.

[39](#)

Hist. Eccl. 3.39.

[40](#)

Cf. Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2.452.

[41](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.

[42](#)

New Testament Introduction: Hebrews to Revelation, 267.

[43](#)

Ford, 28-41, 50-56.

[44](#)

Ford, 26.

[45](#)

Ford, 56.

[46](#)

Ford, xi.

[47](#)

Collins says that Ford's theory is not persuasive because it is "based on the assumption that Revelation is a compilation of sources" and because "it ignores the Christian character of the book as a whole" (*Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 31).

[48](#)

Charles dates the testimony about A.D. 135 (1.xxxvii, n. 2).

[49](#)

Dial. 81.15.

[50](#)

Hist. Eccl. 4.18.

[51](#)

Adv. Haer. 4.14.1; 5.26.1.

[52](#)

Eusebius, *Hist Eccl.* 5.20.

[53](#)

Paed. 2.119; *Quis Div. Salv.* 42; *Strom.* 6.106-7.

[54](#)

Adv. Marc. 3.14, 24. Other ancient witnesses to the apostolic authorship often listed are Papias (according to Andreas of Caesarea), Melito of Sardis (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26), Origen (*Com. in Joh.* 2.5), Hippolytus (*Antichr.* 36, 50), and the *Antimarcionite Prologue to Luke*.

[55](#)

"A Note on the Authorship of the Apocalypse." *NTS*, 8 (1961-62), 77-79.

[56](#)

Authorship, 79.

[57](#)

Morris, 28-29; Bacon, *The Making of the New Testament*, 190-91.

[58](#)

Haer. 51.33.

[59](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.28.1-2. Disputed by Westcott, *On the Canon of the New Testament*, 275, n. 2. Charles calls authorship by Cerinthus "an utterly baseless and gratuitous hypothesis" (1.xxxix, n. 2).

[60](#)

Charles, 1.xlv-1; conclusion on 1. 1.

[61](#)

Beckwith, 366-93.

[62](#)

Beckwith, 393.

[63](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.25.

[64](#)

Cited above, Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.

[65](#)

Charles, 1.x1.

[66](#)

After surveying the question, F. C. Grant concludes that it is “impossible to ascribe it [the Gospel of John] to the son of Zebedee without a full explanation of serious difficulties and discrepancies” (HDB *rev.*, 515).

[67](#)

1.xxix-xxxii; cf. also the forty-two-page “Short Grammar of the Apocalypse,” 1.cxvii-clix, for all the grammatical peculiarities of the Apocalypse.

[68](#)

For example, ἀληθινός is said by Charles to mean “genuine” as opposed to unreal in the Gospel, while it means “true in word as opposed to false” in the Apocalypse (1.xxxi; cf. other examples in loco).

[69](#)

Swete, cxxi.

[70](#)

Swete, cxxx.

[71](#)

This point is convincingly made on 256-58 (Introduction).

[72](#)

Caird acknowledges the possibility of mounting a case for common authorship but adds that “the balance of probability is still against it” (5). Thompson writes that “the style, vocabulary, and theology of the Apocalypse are sufficiently different from the Gospel of John as to make one conclude that common authorship is unlikely and that the apostle did not write the Apocalypse” (*Revelation*, 2).

[73](#)

Smalley, *Thunder and Love*, 40.

[74](#)

Maintained by Epiphanius, fourth-century bishop of Salamis (*Haer.* 51.12), although Guthrie notes that “this was no doubt an error for Nero Claudius” (*Introduction*, 277).

[75](#)

Synopsis de vita et morte prophetarum is attributed to Dorotheus; cf. Theophylact on Matt 20:22 (it is interesting to note that he wrote commentaries on all the books of the NT except Revelation!). Swete (c) notes that the reference to Trajan was perhaps suggested by Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2.22.5.

[76](#)

There is the possibility that Melito of Sardis in the second century understood the book to have come from that period (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26.9).

[77](#)

Adv. Haer. 5.30.3; cf 2.22.5; 3.4.4.

[78](#)

xx. The argument that the subject of ἑωράθη in Irenaeus is not ἡ ἀποκάλυψις but ὁ τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν ωραῶς, i.e., ὁ Ἰωάννης, was not employed by Hort (cf. Swete, cv-cvi).

[79](#)

Hist. Eccl. 3.18.3.

[80](#)

Quis Div. Salv. 42.

[81](#)

In Matt. 16.6.

[82](#)

In Apoc. 10.11; 17.10.

[83](#)

Hist. Eccl. 3.18.1; 3.20.9; 3.23.1; 3.20.9; 3.23.1.

[84](#)

De Vir Illus. 9.

[85](#)

A. Y. Collins holds that the occasion for the writing of the book seems to have been the perception of a fourfold crisis: a disturbing split with local Jewish communities, the rejection of the Greco-Roman civic life and culture in which the church found itself, hostility toward Rome and a sense of being threatened by its agents, and resentment by the ordinary people

toward the provincial elite because of the disparate degree of wealth and privilege (“The Revelation of John: An Apocalyptic Response to a Social Crisis,” *CurTM* 8 (1981), 4-12. Barclay Newman rejects the idea that Revelation originated amidst a persecution of a political-religious nature and supports the idea that the work is to be understood against an antignostic polemical background (“The Fallacy of the Domitian Hypothesis,” *NTS*, 10 [1963-64], 133-39). Cf. his later book, *Rediscovering the Book of Revelation* (1968).

[86](#)

In Ephesus a temple was erected to him bearing the inscription, “To the goddess Roma and the divine Julius.”

[87](#)

Feine-Behm-Kümmel, *Introduction*, 327. It is pointed out that in A.D. 96 members of the emperor’s house were charged with ἁθεότης, an offense against the state religion.

[88](#)

Moffatt acknowledges that insufficient evidence exists to posit a general Asiatic persecution, but suggests that a few drops of rain warn of an approaching storm (*Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 504).

[89](#)

Introduction. 328.

[90](#)

Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

[91](#)

ἁθεότης (Dio Cassius, *Hist. Rom.* 67.14). Domitilla is thought from inscriptions in the Cemetery of Domitilla to have been a Christian.

[92](#)

Clement of Rome 1.1.

[93](#)

“Arrogant to the point of megalomania” is Rist’s description of the emperor (355). Standard sources present him as evil, treacherous, cruel, insane, and given over to excessive sexual activity (Thompson, *Revelation*, 96-99). Dio Cassius comments that Domitian was “profligate and lewd towards women and boys alike” (*Romaika*, 67.6.3).

[94](#)

Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 3.18.4; Sulpicius Severus (an early fifth-century historian, one of whose works summarized sacred history from creation until his own day), Chronicle 2.31. Thompson, however, points out that “those who establish the official view of Domitian [Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Dio Chrysostom, Juvenal, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and Philostratus] write in the early years of the reign of Trajan” and “what they say about Domitian’s reign does not square with epigraphic, numismatic, and prosopographical evidence from the Domitianic period” (*Revelation*, 109). He regards as settled the fact that “Domitian served those writers as foil for Trajan” (116).

[95](#)

Collins writes that “there is insufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that Domitian persecuted Christians as Christians” (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 77; see the section, “Domitian and the Christians,” 69-73; cf. Boring, 13-17). Thompson notes that the Jews in Asia “lived according to their traditions and as active, recognized participants in the municipal life. Those who converted to Christianity continued to live the same kind of life in the seven churches of the Apocalypse” (*Revelation*, 145). Thompson goes on to say that whatever opposition there was “came primarily from local people, not from the imperial machinery” (130) and that it resulted from the seer “advocating attitudes and styles of life not compatible with how most Christians were living in the cities of Asia” (132). Collins speaks of a “perceived crisis” (*Crisis and Catharsis*, 84-110), and Thompson says the crisis was only in the mind of John and his community. But certainly the entire book of Revelation, set as it is over against the impending eschaton with its dramatic denouement of human history, is far more than a treatise dealing with problems of conduct in local communities. Opposition was not merely local. The martyrs under the altar cried out for vindication (6:9-10), and the return of Christ will usher in a period of reward for those who paid with their lives for their testimony to Jesus (20:4). Babylon the whore is Rome, and yet more than Rome. It symbolizes the evil power of totalitarian secularism that would engulf the entire world, and every movement that would rise in opposition to its will.

[96](#)

Beckwith, 206-7.

[97](#)

Cf. the argument for this in Charles, 1.xciv.

[98](#)

Thunder, 42-50.

[99](#)

Thunder, 69. Moberly as well holds to the early date. He thinks that Revelation was conceived on Patmos during the fall of A.D. 69 and written out during that winter. The quasi-letters were written or updated at a later time when John returned to the mainland (R. B. Moberly, "When Was Revelation Conceived?" *Bib*, 73 [1992], 376-93.) Cf. A. A. Bell, Jr., "The Date of John's Apocalypse: The Evidence of Some Roman Historians Reconsidered," *NTS* 25 (1978), 93-102, who says that the most natural date is immediately following the death of Nero in June of 68.

[100](#)

Introduction, 3.438.

[101](#)

Introduction, 280.

[102](#)

Introduction, 3.447, n. 4.

[103](#)

Adv. Haer. 5.28-30.

[104](#)

Swete, cii-cvi.

[105](#)

St. John, lxxxvi-lxxxvii.

[106](#)

Hort, xxvi-xxvii.

[107](#)

Swete, cii.

[108](#)

Swete, ciii.

[109](#)

Swete, cvi.

[110](#)

For a complete and thorough treatment of the external evidence cf. Ned Stonehouse, *The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church*.

[111](#)

Vis. 2.2.7; 4.2.5; 4.3.6; cf. Rev 7:14 and 3:10.

[112](#)

Vis. 1.1.3 with Rev 17:3.

[113](#)

Cf. Charles, 1.xcvii, n. 2 for a full listing with appropriate references.

[114](#)

Barn. 21.3 with Rev 22:10, 12; 7.9 with Rev 1:7, 13; and 6.13 with Rev 21:5.

[115](#)

Eph. 15.3 with Rev 21:3; *Phil.* 6.1 with Rev 3:12.

[116](#)

Although Eusebius does not list Revelation among the NT books known to Papias (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39), the statements attributed to him concerning a “millennium after the resurrection” and “a corporeal reign of Christ on this very earth” (3.39.12) seem to echo a personal knowledge of the book.

[117](#)

Dial. 81.15.

[118](#)

Hist. Eccl. 4.26.2.

[119](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.8.

[120](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.1.58.

[121](#)

For example, *Adv. Marc.* 3.14.24; *De Pud.* 12ff.

[122](#)

Paed. 2.119; *Quis Div. Salv.* 42; *Strom.* 6.106-7.

[123](#)

Comm. in Joh. 5.3.

[124](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.24.

[125](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.28.

[126](#)

Ad Dard. 129; however, cf. *In Ps.* 149.

[127](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.24-25.

[128](#)

Hist. Eccl. 3.39.

[129](#)

Beckwith, however, notes that “that part of the decree as now extant is not generally regarded genuine” (342).

[130](#)

Oecumenius is the author of the oldest extant Greek commentary on Revelation. He held it to be divinely inspired and canonical, relevant for his day as well as important for an understanding of both past and future. The other two Greek commentaries of the first millennium were by Andreas (bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, fifth or sixth century) and Arethas (tenth century).

[131](#)

This brief historical survey draws heavily upon Beckwith’s essay, “History of Interpretation” (318-34).

[132](#)

Fredriksen writes that Tyconius and Augustine provided an approach to the interpretation of Revelation that affirmed its historical realism while at the same time liberated it from the embarrassments of literalism (“Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo,” VC 45 [1991], 151-83).

[133](#)

For a concise presentation of the contribution of Joachim of Fiore see Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 49-53.

[134](#)

For a statement of and response to Luther’s objections to Revelation see Franzmann, 7-29.

[135](#)

M. Hopkins (“The Historical Perspective of Apocalypse 1-11,” CBQ, 27 [1965], 42-47) is a contemporary exponent of the view that Revelation 1 — 11 recalls Christianity’s triumph over Judaism in order to encourage their encounter with Rome (chaps. 12 — 20).

[136](#)

Boring lists as “Types of Interpretation”: (1) nonhistorical, (2) church-historical, (3) end-historical, and (4) contemporary-historical (47-51). Court has eight “systems of exegesis” that succeed one another in a roughly chronological sequence. They are: (1) Chiliastic, (2) “Alexandrian” (spiritual or allegorical), (3) Recapitulation Theory, (4) Historical Applications, (5) Eschatological, (6) Contemporary-Historical, (7) Literary

Analysis, and (8) Comparative Studies (*Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, 1-19).

[137](#)

Fiorenza writes, “Since the advent of scientific historical-critical interpretation, scholars no longer search Revelation for predictions of future events or seek to decipher its schedule for the end time. Instead they study this book as a historical source-text that provides a window to its own time and community” (*Revelation*, 16).

[138](#)

Charles, 1.clxxxiii.

[139](#)

Introduction to the New Testament, 436.

[140](#)

Kuyper, 22. Later he writes that chapter 4 “makes a giant leap across what in no case could be less than twenty centuries” (49).

[141](#)

This is said to correspond with a tripartite division of 1:19: “Write, therefore, what you have seen [the vision of 1:12-16], what is now [seven periods of church history symbolized by the seven letters of chaps. 2 and 3], and what will take place later [the final events following the rapture of the church: chaps. 4 — 22].” For a more satisfactory interpretation cf. comm. on 1:19.

[142](#)

Milligan, 154-55.

[143](#)

T. S. Kepler, “Revelation, Book of,” *HDB rev.*, 850.

[144](#)

Beckwith, 301. Cf. the section, “Permanent and Transitory Elements in the Apocalypse Distinguished,” 291-310. Caird argues that biblical eschatology is a characteristic product of the Semitic mind, and its primary concern is not with the future but the present — “it is in fact a figurative way of interpreting current history” (“On Deciphering the Book of Revelation: III. The First and the Last,” *ET*, 74 [1962-63], 82-84).

[145](#)

God in History, 24.

[146](#)

Charles, 1.xxiii-xxv. Three sections lie outside the orderly development of the author's theme and are proleptic. Charles finds hopeless confusion in the traditional order of 20:4 — 22:21, which he explains as the work of a less than intelligent editor whose interpolations can be found elsewhere in the book as well (1.1-1v).

[147](#)

Farrer, 23. Smalley, concurring with Fiorenza, writes that "the content of the Apocalypse is not chronologically ordered, but theologically and thematically conceived" (103).

[148](#)

Farrer, 7, 23. Guthrie questions the complexities of Farrer's approach and notes that an author with a burning message to proclaim would put it in a form more readily understood than the theory supposes (*Introduction*, 291). For a good summary and appreciative evaluation of Farrer's view on the structure of Revelation see E. J. Stormon, "Austin Farrer on Image-Patterns in the Apocalypse," *AusBR*, 10 (1962), 21-31.

[149](#)

J. W. Bowman, "The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure and Message," *Int*, 9 (1955), 436-53.

[150](#)

Kiddle, xxvii-xxxiii.

[151](#)

Giblin, 29.

[152](#)

Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 185-86. Cf. Hendriksen, 25, 47-48.

[153](#)

M. H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse*, 75-97. Cf. André Feuillet, *The Apocalypse*, 23-36 for a good discussion of the structure of Revelation. Also 289-94 of Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*.

[154](#)

Kraft, 14-15.

[155](#)

Fiorenza builds a rather formidable case for her view that the eschatological understanding underlying the Apocalypse has determined the structure of the book ("The Eschatology and Composition of the Apocalypse," *CBQ*, 30

[1968], 537-69). Cf. the review of Fiorenza's article by A. J. Bandstra in *CTJ*, 5 (1970), 180-83.

[156](#)

Metzger writes that "the structure of the book involves a series of parallel yet ever-progressing sections" (18).

[157](#)

Morris writes, "It seems to be part of the method of our author to repeat his themes, not exactly, it is true, but on another level like a spiral staircase. In this way the same ground is traversed, but other perspectives are revealed and fresh facts of the revelation are brought out" (41-42).

[158](#)

Του θεολόγου (also added in MajT; see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 662, for the twenty-seven-word title on a manuscript of Revelation at Mount Athos). BAGD define θεολόγος (only here in the NT) as one who speaks of God or divine things, God's herald (356).

[159](#)

Ford conjectures that this first prologue (Rev 1:1-3) may have been written by a disciple of the Baptist (375), while the second prologue (Rev 1:4-8) may have been the work of a Jewish Christian who expected the imminent return of Jesus (380).

[160](#)

See Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 149-51, for a concise treatment of ἀποχάλυψις. In relation to παρουσία and ἐπιφάνεια it reminds us that the second advent is "a 'revelation' of the Divine plan and purpose which has run through all the ages, to find its consummation at length in the 'one far-off divine event,' to which the whole Creation is slowly moving" (Milligan, 151).

[161](#)

Ladd, 20.

[162](#)

Hort, 4.

[163](#)

Hort, 6.

[164](#)

Gk. ἐν τάχει; also in Rev 22:6; cf. ταχύ, Rev 22:7, 12, 20; also ὁ γὰρ χαίρει in Rev 1:3 and 22:10.

[165](#)

So Caird, 12.

[166](#)

Sweet, 58.

[167](#)

In biblical prophecy temporal judgments are regularly expressed against the backdrop of the final eschatological events. This is a profoundly theological view, in which everything God does by way of judgment is to be understood in light of the final events.

[168](#)

Both verses use ἐν τῷ χεῖ, as does Rev 1:1.

[169](#)

Talbert says that the “servants” are best understood as “the prophetic leadership of their various congregations” (17).

[170](#)

Taking this position Montague writes, “This chain from God to Jesus to the angel(s) and to the seer (prophet) echoes late Judaism’s increasing tendency to preserve the transcendence of God by introducing intermediaries” (31).

[171](#)

Note the many and various angels that are mentioned in the book: the mighty angel, 5:2; the angel coming up from the east, 7:2; the angel standing on the sea and the land, 10:1-2; the angel with the sickle, 14:19; etc.

[172](#)

Philo used σημαίνω “with reference to the deeper signification of the OT” (*TDNT abr.*, 1023).

[173](#)

Metzger writes that “in the book of Revelation the descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of the real occurrences” (66).

[174](#)

2036 pc omit τοῦ θεοῦ. with the result that John is said to have borne witness to the word and the testimony of Jesus Christ. MajT adds a variation of 1:19 after εἶδεν.

[175](#)

Both genitives are subjective, as they are in 1:9. In 6:9 the “testimony” is that borne by the martyrs (cf. 12:11).

[176](#)

Roloff notes that “already toward the end of the first century, the practice of reading aloud Christian writings in worship alongside texts from the Old Testament seems to have been widespread” (21).

[177](#)

Tertullian, *Praescr. Haer.* 41.

[178](#)

Throughout Revelation John presents himself in such a way as to make legitimate his claim to be a prophet (cf. D. E. Aune, “The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John,” 26 [1981], 16-32).

[179](#)

Cf. χαίρως in Matt 8:29; 1 Cor 4:5.

[180](#)

Vanni proposes that Rev 1:4-8 may be taken as a liturgical dialogue between lector and congregation (U. Vanni, “Un esempio di dialogo liturgico in Ap 1:4-8,” *Bib* 57 [1976], 453-67).

[181](#)

Letters, 128.

[182](#)

Letters, 132.

[183](#)

Gk. χάρις (grace) in place of χαίρε (hail, welcome; cf. LSJ, 1970).

[184](#)

Metzger, 23.

[185](#)

Knox translates “from him who is, and ever was, and is still to come.”

[186](#)

Usually mentioned are: (1) the name stands in the nominative where we would expect the genitive after ἀπό, and (2) the finite ἦν is placed in parallel with the two participial clauses. The use of the nominative after ἀπό indicates that John considers the paraphrase of the divine name as an indeclinable noun. “He perhaps regards the unchangeable form more appropriate to the majesty of God and to the grandioseness of the apocalyptic style” (Beckwith, 424). That it is not due to ignorance of the language is obvious from the fact that the second ἀπό is immediately followed by the genitive τῶν ἑπτὰ πνευμάτων. The use of the finite is usually explained by the lack of a past participle for εἰμί. Charles suggests that we are dealing with the exact reproduction of a Hebraism, **הוּא** **וְהוּא**

(1.10). ὁ γινόμενος would have been unacceptable because γίνομαι means “to become” as well as serving as a substitute for εἰμί, and John would use no word that could imply change in God.

[187](#)

Farrer, 61. Michaels’s conclusion is that “theological meaning and rhetorical style took precedence over concern for the niceties of proper grammar” (*Interpreting*, 87).

[188](#)

Pausanias 10.12. The shrine of Minerva at Sais provides the inscription, “I am all that hath been and is and shall be” (Plutarch, *De Isid.* 9).

[189](#)

The MT lists three couplets of two virtues each, for a total of six. The LXX breaks the poetic parallelism and inserts εὐσεβείας, “godliness” (plus a verb and direct object), for a total of seven.

[190](#)

Morris, e.g., writing in 1987, says that the phrase is probably “an unusual way of designating the Holy Spirit” (49).

[191](#)

Roloff says that idea of the sevenfold Spirit of God “was influenced by later dogmatics” and has no sound support (24).

[192](#)

Bauckham notes that “Revelation itself refers to these seven angels (8:1) in terms quite different from the way it refers to the seven Spirits.” He adds that while the term “spirit” could be used of angels, and frequently is in the Dead Sea Scrolls, “it very rarely has this meaning in early Christian literature and never in Revelation” (162).

[193](#)

F. F. Bruce, “The Spirit in the Apocalypse” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, 336.

[194](#)

Bruce, in the article just mentioned (336), favors Beckwith’s interpretation that they represent the one Spirit symbolized by the seven torches (4:5) and the seven eyes (5:6). Cf. Beasley-Murray, 56, “The seven spirits of God represent the Holy Spirit in his fullness of life and blessing.”

[195](#)

Fiorenza concludes that in Rev 1:5-6 John quotes from a traditional baptismal formula (“Redemption as Liberation: Apoc 1:5f and 5:9f,” *CBQ*,

36 [1974], 220-22). In the latter hymn John changes his anthropological understanding of redemption by expressing it in sociopolitical images (231). See also Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 72, 76.

[196](#)

Charles explains the anomaly of the title in the nominative standing in apposition with the genitive as a Hebraism (the Hebrew noun in the indirect cases is not inflected) and notes similar instances (2:20; 3:12; 9:14; etc.; 1.13).

[197](#)

The noun μαρτυρία carries the same connotations (cf. 1:9; 6:9; 11:9; 12:11, 17; 20:4). Allison Trites argues that μάρτυς in Revelation is moving toward but still does not have the meaning of martyr (“Μάρτυς and Martyrdom in the Apocalypse,” *NovT*, 15 [1973], 72-80).

[198](#)

J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 144-48; cf. 155-56.

[199](#)

Metzger writes that the TR, “following the later uncials (P 046), most of the minuscules, and several early versions,” reads λούσαντι rather than λύσαντι (*Textual Commentary*, 662). He argues that λύσαντι is to be preferred because (1) it has superior manuscript evidence, (2) it is in accord with OT imagery, and (3) it suits better the idea expressed in vs. 6a.

[200](#)

Charles calls the change from participle to finite verb in parallel clauses “a pure Hebraism” (1.15).

[201](#)

Gk. ἱερεὺς stands in apposition with βασιλείαν and stresses the mediating role of believers in their consecration to the service of God.

[202](#)

Lenski notes that “the Greek takes its greatest term for time, the eon, pluralizes this, and then multiplies it by its own plural” (48).

[203](#)

BAGD, 45. Kuhn calls it “a liturgical concluding word” (*EDNT*, 1.70).

[204](#)

Aune argues that v. 7 is of oracular origin although it is not first person singular speech of a divine revealer — “the single reliable feature whereby

the oracles embedded in the Apocalypse may be confidently identified” (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 278-81 and 433, n. 184).

[205](#)

Rev 1:7 reads μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν; Matt 24:30 has ἐπί, and Mark 13:26/Luke 21:27 has ἐν. R. B. Y. Scott holds that νεφέλαι are not the ordinary clouds of nature, but clouds *in heaven* seen in the vision around the throne of God (“Behold, He Cometh with Clouds,” *NTS*, 5 [1958-59], 127-32).

[206](#)

Hort, 12.

[207](#)

In the NT ἐχχεντέω is found only in John 19:37 and Rev 1:7. The LXX of Zech 12:10 uses χατορχέομαι, “to mock.”

[208](#)

Thus the NEB translates, “shall lament in remorse.” Bratcher and Hatton favor the idea that the weeping is caused by fear or despair over what is about to happen (24). The TCNT has “shall wail for fear of him.”

[209](#)

Note that the AV follows the MSS that add ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος in 1:8 (N*² 1854 2050 (2329) 2351 MajT^A lat bo). In 22:13 Jesus applies the same title to himself and adds the interpretive phrase, “the First and the Last.” W. J. P. Boyd calls the title “a brilliant translation of the Hebrew logion found in Isaiah 44,6” (“I am Alpha and Omega,” *SE*, 4 [1964], 526).

[210](#)

Aune cites as a close parallel “Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus shall be” (see 1:4) and concludes that in Rev 1:8 “a popular hymn to Zeus emphasizing his oracular capabilities has been transferred to the God of Israel and Christianity” (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 281). Some will question whether similar statements are necessarily causally related.

[211](#)

Gk. pantnkr9 twr was used at times in secular literature to describe an attribute of the gods (e.g., *Epigr. Graec.* 815, of Hermes).

[212](#)

Harrington, 47.

[213](#)

Cf. Michaelis in *TDNT*, 3.915.

[214](#)

The personality of the writer is kept to the fore in apocalyptic literature (cf. Dan 8:1; 10:2; 1 *Enoch* 12:3). Montague notes that “by naming himself as author John parts company with other apocalypses of the time” (43).

[215](#)

Other MSS read ἐν χριστῷ. (A pc), ἐν Χριστῷ. Ἰησοῦ.([N²] 1006 1841 2351 MajT^K a h vg^{cl}), and Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. (2329 MajT^A sy^{h**} [sa]).

[216](#)

Ladd notes that the great tribulation at the end of time “will be only the intensification of what the church has suffered throughout all history” (30).

[217](#)

Gk. ἐν Ἰησοῦ is equivalent to the Pauline ἐν Χριστῷ. and is joined more closely to ὕπομονη. than to the two other nouns.

[218](#)

Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 4.69, is frequently invoked in this connection, but all that Pliny says about Patmos is that it was thirty miles in circumference. Eusebius reports that John was released by the emperor Nerva (A.D. 96-98) and returned to Ephesus (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.20.9). Sweet says of Patmos that there is “no contemporary evidence that it was used as a penal settlement” (64).

[219](#)

Some scholars think that by saying he was on the island of Patmos, Paul is indicating that he is no longer there at the time when he is writing his letter. This inference is not necessary since it refers to the experience of his vision in the past, which he is now writing down.

[220](#)

Tertullian, *Praesc. Haer.* 36.

[221](#)

Robbins calls it, “an elevated state of mind, a kind of ecstasy in which a man is lifted out of himself” (41). Hailey, however, holds that the expression does not mean that John was “under the spell of a self-imposed ecstasy” but that he was “under the power or control of the divine Spirit” (106). Bauckham understands John’s experience as a state in which the Holy Spirit replaced normal sensory experiences with visions and voices that spoke to him (R. J. Bauckham, “The Role of the Spirit in the Apocalypse,” *EQ*, 52 [1980], 66-83). Jeske holds that ἐν πνεύματι is not a technical term for ecstasy, but serves as a symbolic code indicating John’s involvement in the community of the Spirit (R. L. Jeske, “Spirit and

Community in the Johannine Apocalypse,” *NTS*, 31 [1985], 452-66). In *The Climax of Prophecy* Bauckham describes the phrase as a “trance-like suspension of normal consciousness” (152). See Aune’s discussion of altered states of consciousness in *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 19-21.

[222](#)

Caird, 23.

[223](#)

If the reference were to the eschatological day of the Lord, we would have expected the more usual ἡμέρα Κυρίου of 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10 rather than ἡ Κυριακή, which apart from our text occurs in the NT only in 1 Cor 11:20. Cf. *Did.* 14:1; Ignatius, *Magn.* 9.1; *Gospel of Peter* 9; Melito of Sardis (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26). W. Stott summarizes his study by saying, “Κυριακή ἡμέρα in Rev. i.10 may be taken to refer to the first day of the week, the Christian Sunday, and not to the Last Day, or to Easter” (“A Note on the Word KYPIAKH in Rev. 1.10,” *NTS*, 12 [1965-66], 75). Strand criticizes Stott for not giving adequate attention to the view of C. W. Dugmore (that the earliest Christian ‘Lord’s Day’ references are to Easter), and argues that while the thesis is plausible for early Christianity in general, it cannot be applied to Rev 1:10 (“Another Look at ‘Lord’s Day’ in the Early Church and in Rev. 1.10,” *NTS*, 13 [1966-67], 174-81). Cf. the discussion in Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord’s Day*, 58-60.

[224](#)

The voice of God as a trumpet goes back to the theophany at Sinai (Exod 19:16, 19; cf. Heb 12:19). It had acquired eschatological significance for the early church (Matt 24:31; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16).

[225](#)

This is the first of 12 times in Revelation that John is told by divine command to write (1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 4, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). Note that the participle λεγούσης agrees with the dependent genitive σάλπιγξ rather than with the noun φωνή. Cf. 4:1 and 6:7. Similar commands to write are found in Tob 12:20 and 2 Esdr 12:37.

[226](#)

Letters, 137.

[227](#)

Reviewing the use of “the Voice” in apocalyptic literature, both Jewish and Christian, Charlesworth says that “I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me” should be understood literally (J. H. Charlesworth, “The

Jewish Roots of Christology: The Discovery of the Hypostatic Voice,” *SJT*, 39 [1986], 19-41).

[228](#)

Gk. λυχνία was a lampstand, not a candlestick. λύχνος was the portable lamp that was placed upon the stand. Candles as we now know them were not in use.

[229](#)

Swete, 15.

[230](#)

Charles maintains that “ὡς υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου in the Apocalypse is the exact equivalent of ὁ υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου in the Gospels and Acts vii.56” and that the one who appears to the Seer is not “like the Son of Man” but is “the Son of Man” (27).

[231](#)

Barclay finds all three offices in the dress of the risen Lord (1.45-46). Robert Thomas writes that the ten distinguishing characteristics of the risen Christ serve to prepare the apostle for the vision to follow (“The Glorified Christ on Patmos,” *BSac*, 122 [1965], 241-47).

[232](#)

Bratcher and Hatton, 30.

[233](#)

Ant. 3.7.4.

[234](#)

Peterson notes that “if the clothes present a role, the head and eyes declare character” (34).

[235](#)

Caird, 25-26.

[236](#)

1 *Enoch* 46:1 says of the Ancient of Days, “His head was white like wool,” but it is doubtful that the description in Revelation resulted from combining the two texts in *Enoch* and Daniel.

[237](#)

Hugh Michael would transfer λευκὸν ὡς χιών from v. 14 and place the phrase immediately following ποδήρη in v. 13 (“A Slight Misplacement in Revelation i.13, 14,” *ET*, 42 [1930-31], 380-81). The suggestion receives additional support from C. Cave Oke (*ET*, 43 [1931-32], 237).

[238](#)

If the basic roots of the compound are χαλκός (copper) and λίβανος (furnace), it could refer to bronze ore in the process of smelting. Hort takes the second root to be λίβανος, frankincense, and understands the compound to be an amber-colored metal, electrum, which in the LXX is designated ἤλεκτρον (17). The Syriac version takes it to be a metal from Lebanon. Cf. comm. at 2:18 and reference to Hemer's discussion on χαλκολίβανος.

239

Gk. πεπυρωμένης is favored because of strong textual attestation (A C) and because it explains the others. πεπυρωμένω (Σ 2050 2053 2062 *pc*; Ir^{arm, lat} ^{vid}) qualifies χαμίνίω, and πεπυρωμένοι (MajT sy^{hmg}) qualifies οί πόδες.

240

This meets the problem of the feminine genitive participle πεπυρωμένης by joining it with a modified ex χαμίνου.

241

Gk. ἔχων continues the participial construction of v. 13. The last finite verb was εἶδον in v. 12. A omits ἔχων, while the original version of Σ reads εἶχεν.

242

For a presentation of this idea see M. Wojciechowski, "Seven Churches and Seven Celestial Bodies," BibNot, 45 (1988), 48-50.

243

Roloff comments that "in the ancient world the stars were viewed as powers that determine the course of the world and control human destiny in a variety of ways. Dominion over them thus means supreme power and authority that encompasses everything" (36).

244

Outside of Revelation (1:16; 2:12, 16; 6:8; 19:15, 21) ῥομφαία occurs only in Luke 2:35 in the NT. It appears to have been a large Thracian weapon, although it is not certain whether it was a sword or a spear (HDB, 4.634). See the note on 6:8.

245

The imagery is widely attested; cf. Isa 49:2 ("He made my mouth like a sharp sword"); Wis 18:15-16 ("Thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven ... a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of thy authentic command"); 2 Esdr 13:10; Heb 4:12; etc. Some have noted the appropriateness of the imagery in that the short Roman sword was tongue-like in shape.

246

Peterson comments that “the power that the world acknowledges comes out of the mouth of a gun; the power that the person of faith respects comes from the mouth of Christ” (37-38).

[247](#)

Moffatt, 345.

[248](#)

Gk. ἐγώ εἰμι would also have a familiar ring. It is a favorite Johannine phrase (twenty-four times in the Fourth Gospel while less than a dozen times in the Synoptic).

[249](#)

Montague notes that the Greek word for “last” is not the neuter ἔσχατον but the masculine ἔσχατος indicating that “the end is not an event but a person, Jesus Christ” (48).

[250](#)

Translating καὶ as an explicative. That the phrase goes with what precedes is assumed by the punctuation in the ASV (also the RSV, NEB, and others). Charles, however, connects it with what follows (1.31). It is omitted in the Vulgate.

[251](#)

The ASV “for evermore” connotes for all future time, which, although true, fails to catch the antithesis between ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς and ζῶν εἰμι. The emphasis is not on the resurrection but on the reality of Christ’s continuing life.

[252](#)

Hades is always joined with death in Revelation (6:8; 20:13-14). It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol and stands for the abode of departed spirits. It is not Gehenna, the place of torment (Matt 5:22, 29, 30).

[253](#)

Tg. *Jer.* on Gen 30:22; *Sanh.* 113a. In ancient Greek mythology it was often thought that the keys of Hades were in the possession of Hecate, a chthonian goddess (Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and Greco-Roman Magic,” *NTS*, 33 [1987], 484-89).

[254](#)

Charles says that they “summarize roughly the contents of the Book” (1.33), and Swete accepts the division with some reservation, noting that it is “rough and superficial” (21). Others, however, are less reserved about the threefold hypothesis. Walvoord, e.g., says, “It is not too much to claim that

this outline is the only one which allows the book to speak for itself without artificial manipulation” (48). Cf. Robert Thomas, “John’s Apocalyptic Outline,” *BSac*, 123 (1966), 334-41. In his recent commentary he writes, “The threefold division is the most natural understanding of the symmetrical grammatical construction of 1:19 and fits the contents of the Apocalypse quite well” (1.115). Caird, however, calls the threefold division “a grotesque over-simplification” (26).

[255](#)

W. C. van Unnik calls attention to the three-part formula used in *Ap. John* (“Now I have come to reveal to you that which is, that which has been, and that which will be”) and points out examples in pagan and Christian literature where it is found (“A Formula Describing Prophecy,” *NTS*, 9 [1962-63], 86-94). He holds that by using this apocalyptic formula the authors are indicating the prophetic-revelation character of their works.

[256](#)

Gk. δ βλέπεις in v. 11 and $\tilde{\alpha}$ εἶδες in v. 19.

[257](#)

Michaels reminds us of an interpretation common in the nineteenth century but rarely encountered today in which the second clause ($\chi\alpha\iota$ $\tilde{\alpha}$ εἰσίν) is taken to mean “and what they are” in the sense of what the visions mean or what they are about (98).

[258](#)

Moffatt, 347. Beale sets forth five basic approaches to the interpretation of Rev 1:19. He holds that all three clauses refer equally to the whole book (G. K. Beale, “The Interpretative Problem of Rev. 1:19,” *NovT*, 34 [1992], 360-87).

[259](#)

Swete, 21.

[260](#)

Wilcock states that the simplest answer is to take the term at face value — angel, “a spiritual counterpart on the heavenly level” (441). Hartingsveld writes, “Each of the seven churches has its own angel as patron — analogous to the angels of the ‘little ones’ (Matt. 18:10) and Peter’s angel (Acts 12:15)” (14-15). Montague understands “angel” as a code word for the recognized prophet-leader of the community who would be in turn the visible presence of its invisible prophet-guardian angel (56). See Roloff’s excursus, “The Angels of the Churches,” 38-40.

[261](#)

Hailey lists seven explanations and favors the view that they are to be identified as “the inward state or prevailing spirit of the church itself” (116).

[262](#)

Cf. also Thyatira (2:18 with 1:14-15), Sardis (3:1 with 1:16), Philadelphia (3:7 with 1:18), and Laodicea (3:14 with 1:5).

[263](#)

Charles, 1.46.47.

[264](#)

Charles, 1.44.

[265](#)

Walvoord, 52. See J. L. Boyer (“Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2-3 Prophetic?” *GTJ* 6 [1985], 267-73) for a plausible presentation of the position that the churches may be understood prophetically of the historical development of the church.

[266](#)

Richardson, 44-45.

[267](#)

Swete, xi.

[268](#)

Beckwith, 446-47.

[269](#)

D. E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches,” *NTS* (1990), 182-204.

[270](#)

The Apocalypse, 48-49. The *τάδε λέγει* in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14, is customarily used in the LXX to announce a prophetic message. Shea understands the letters as modeled after the covenant formulary of the OT and ancient Near East (W. H. Shea, “The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches,” *AUSS* 21 [1983], 71-84).

[271](#)

Cf. Beckwith (260), Morris (58), or Caird (27) for the general pattern common to each of the seven letters.

[272](#)

Bruce, 637. Boring writes that the options open to those who were being pressured to go through the formalities of venerating the image of the

Caesar were to quit, to lie, to fight, to change the law, to adjust, or to die (21-23).

[273](#)

Robbins says that the angel “seems to be the bishop or pastor of the church, but he may be the celestial counterpart of the earthly organism” (53). Brownlee notes that while previously having interpreted the angel as a spiritualized personification of the church, he now takes the term as referring to the priestly role of the bishop (“The Priestly Character of the Church in the Apocalypse,” NTS, 5 [1958-59], 224-25).

[274](#)

Pliny (Hist. Nat. 2.201) wrote that “once the sea used to wash up to the temple of Diana.”

[275](#)

Kraeling states that the route up the Maeander to the Lycus and on toward Apamea was “the most important avenue of civilization in Asia Minor under the Roman Empire” (HDB rev., 262).

[276](#)

Pliny, Hist. Nat. 36.95ff.

[277](#)

Barclay, Churches, 59.

[278](#)

Lightfoot’s opinion that οἶδα refers to knowledge of facts absolutely and γινώσκω to the attainment or manifestation of knowledge (St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians, 171; also Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul, 178-79) is not generally accepted (cf. MM, 439; Morris, Commentary on the Gospel of John, 206-7, n. 96).

[279](#)

They are linked by one pronoun, σου (N MajT vg^{ms} sy^{ph}, however, add σου after Νόπον).

[280](#)

Robbins points out that the derived meaning of Νόπος is “excessive labor united with trouble” (54). In Paul Νόπος is used primarily in connection with the work of the gospel.

[281](#)

We need not distinguish between two separate groups (wicked people and false apostles), although the latter may be only one kind included in the more general term mentioned first.

[282](#)

Did. 11.8; cf. Herm *Mand.* 11:16.

[283](#)

Sweet calls attention to the fact that “deception, even of the elect, was one of the expected signs of the End” (81).

[284](#)

1 pc read ἐβάππισας (“were baptized”) rather than ἐβάστασας (“endured hardships”).

[285](#)

Barclay concludes that “heresy-hunting had killed love and orthodoxy had been achieved at the price of fellowship” (1.64), while Robbins observes that “their hatred of heresy had left no room for love of those who differed in their beliefs” (54).

[286](#)

Harrington, 57.

[287](#)

Roloff writes that at stake here is “not only the abatement of the initial enthusiasm” but also “a breakdown in obeying the love commandment” (45). Moffatt translates, “You have given up loving one another as you did at first” (*The NT: A New Translation*).

[288](#)

Tertullian records the heathens’ observation on the Christians, “See, they say, how they love one another” (*Apol.* 39).

[289](#)

In “Letters to a Nobleman” John Newton acknowledges that there is something very beautiful in the “honest vehemence of a young convert” but also finds it attended with considerable defects (*Voice of the Heart*, 25-28).

[290](#)

Kiddle, 24.

[291](#)

Moffatt remarks that “the way to regain this warmth of affection is neither by working up spasmodic emotion nor by theorising about it ... but by doing its duties” (351).

[292](#)

Note the role of repentance in the letters to Pergamum (2:16), Thyatira (2:22), Sardis (3:3), and Laodicea (3:19).

[293](#)

The present tense, ἔρχομαι, emphasizes the nearness of the time. ταχύ is added in MajT (a) t vg^{mss} sy^h; Aug^{pt} Prim. Thomas, however, thinks that “reasons for associating this threat with the second advent of Christ are compelling” (1.144)

[294](#)

Hailey writes that “the lampstand’s purpose or place was to uphold and dispense light, but without the motivation of true love it fails in its purpose and therefore no longer has a right to exist” (123).

[295](#)

The name combines ν.ΙΧΘΟΣ (victory) and λαός (people), and is held by some to be roughly the Greek equivalent of Balaam (according to *Sanh.* 105a Balaam is derived from בלע עם meaning “he has consumed the people”).

[296](#)

D. M. Beck takes the Nicolaitans to be “a heretical sect, who retained pagan practices like idolatry and immorality contrary to the thought and the conduct required in Christian churches” (*IDB*, 3.548). W. M. Mackay finds three separate sects in Revelation 2, which represent the three great obstacles to the witness of the church in all ages; each is connected with a personal name — Balaam, worldliness; Jezebel, false doctrine; Nicolas, ritualism (“Another Look at the Nicolaitans,” *EQ*, 45 [1973], 111-15). Heiligenthal agrees that they were skeptical regarding ritual purity and traces their stance back to the position held by the “strong” in the Pauline congregations (“Wer waren die ‘Nikolaiten’?” *ZNW*, 82 [1991], 133-37).

[297](#)

Fiorenza identifies the Nicolaitans as a Christian group within the churches of Asia Minor whose professed insight into the divine allowed them freedom to become part of their syncretistic pagan society (“Apocalyptic and Gnosis in the Book of Revelation and Paul,” *JBL*, 92 [1973], 565-81; esp. 579).

[298](#)

Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.26.3; 3.11.1; Hippolytus, *Philos.* 7.36; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 1.29, *Praescr. Haer.* 33, *De Pud.* 19; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.20, 3.24.

[299](#)

Hist. Eccl. 3.29.1.

[300](#)

Cf. Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:23; etc. Aune notes that this *weckformel* “is a formula which calls attention to the significance of what has been said.” It is similar to the proclamation formula (“Hear the word of Yahweh”) that often introduces prophetic oracles in the OT (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 278).

[301](#)

Charles thinks the call to hear was added to each of the seven letters when they were incorporated in an edition of his visions (1.53), but this judgment stems from a critical methodology that need not be accepted.

[302](#)

Kiddle, 25.

[303](#)

Beckwith, 451.

[304](#)

Lilje says that “all the promises about ‘victory’ point beyond this world to another” and the entire Apocalypse is an exposition of this concept (72). Schick writes that this “victor-text” reminds us that the life of a Christian in this world means battle (1.29). “The word *conquer* is a military term,” writes Metzger. “It suggests that the Christian life, so far from being a bed of roses, involves a struggle against anyone and anything that saps the Christian life of all that gives it strength and power” (30).

[305](#)

1 *Enoch* 24:4 — 25:6; *T. Levi* 18:11; cf. also 2 Esdr 8:52; 2 *Enoch* 8:3.

[306](#)

Tacitus, Ann. 4.55-56.

[307](#)

According to Pionius, *Life of Polycarp* 1-2, Paul visited Smyrna on his way to Ephesus.

[308](#)

Smyrn. 12.2.

[309](#)

Gk. ἔζησεν, aorist of ζάω. For the “came to life again” of the NIV see BAGD, 333, 1, β.

[310](#)

Although θλιψιν is singular, it refers here to the many kinds of trouble that the church at Smyrna was undergoing. Morris calls it “the burden that crushes” (63).

[311](#)

Trench's oft-quoted distinction between the two Greek words for "poor" is, "The *penēs* has nothing superfluous, the *ptochos* nothing at all" (*Synonyms of the NT*, 129).

[312](#)

Noting that the poverty in Smyrna was related to the church's affliction, Thomas observes that "it is unlikely that it can be traced to the converts belonging to a poorer class of society" (1.163). It is unlikely, however, to be either/or. Slaves are already "poor."

[313](#)

Montague observes that "those who, like Frances of Assisi, embrace poverty for the love of God, find it a spiritual treasure" (59).

[314](#)

Bratcher and Hatton suggest that the slander probably consisted of "false accusations made by their enemies for the purpose of getting them into trouble with the Roman authorities" (46-47). Roloff says that the slander was "open contradiction with respect to the center of the Christian proclamation, the confession of Christ" (48). In a city loyal to Rome Caesar would have been honored as *Χύριος*.

[315](#)

Mart. Pol. 12.2; italics added.

[316](#)

Mart. Pol. 13.1. Jewish agitation against Paul and others is well attested in Acts (13:50 at Antioch; 14:2, 5 at Iconium; 14:19 at Lystra; 17:5 at Thessalonica). Barclay lists six kinds of slander leveled against the Christians: cannibalism, lust and immorality, breaking up homes, atheism, political disloyalty, and incendiarism (1.80-81).

[317](#)

Cf. Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 1.2. Charles gives additional sources (Justin, Tertullian, Ignatius, etc.) that indicate strong Jewish opposition to the Christian church (1.56-57).

[318](#)

Note that this is not anti-Semitism but religious conviction from a person who is himself a Jew. For a different view cf. Tarn, who believes that since Zeus was worshiped in synagogues in Mysia and at Delos, the reference in 2:9 to those who claimed to be Jews but were not genuine may indicate

some sort of syncretistic worship (Tarn and Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 3rd ed., 225).

[319](#)

Farrer, 72.

[320](#)

A number of reasons have been advanced to account for the designation “synagogue of Satan”; the city was filled with idols, there was a magnificent temple to Zeus on the acropolis, and local observance of the imperial cult was vigorously promoted.

[321](#)

The present imperative φοβο.υ. with μή may indicate “stop being afraid” and betray an existing atmosphere of fear.

[322](#)

Thomas suggests that βάλλειν has the durative idea of the present tense (“keep on casting”). He writes that “one after another, certain members of the Christian community could expect to be seized by the Roman authorities in Smyrna as a result of accusations brought by the Jewish community in the city” (1.167).

[323](#)

Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 302. Lenski translates ἡμερῶν δέχα “during ten days,” genitive of time within; for extent of time the accusative would be used (99-100). 1006 1611 1841 2351 MajT^K read ἡμέρας.

[324](#)

The former position is held by Kiddle, who remarks, “As we should say, ‘a week or so’ ” (28), and the latter by Summers, who defines “ten days” as “a number symbolizing extreme, complete tribulation” (113).

[325](#)

Moffatt says the “ten days” is originally due to the rough Semitic division of a month into “decades” (354).

[326](#)

Bruce, 21.

[327](#)

The second death was a rabbinic term for the death of the wicked in the next world (*Tg. Jer.* on Deut 33:6; cf. targums on Jer 51 :39,57 and Isa 52:14; 65:6, 15). Although the evidence comes from a slightly later period, it is not without relevance at this point.

[328](#)

Ramsay's argument that Pergamum continued as the capital city until about A.D. 130 (*HDB*, 3.750-51) is contested by V. Chapot, who holds that Ephesus had become the capital early in the Roman period (*La Province Romaine Proconsulaire d'Asie*, 138-39).

[329](#)

Hist. Nat. 5.30.

[330](#)

Hough, *IB*, 12.385.

[331](#)

The word "parchment" is derived from περγαμηνή. Wiseman notes that parchment is attested from ca. 1288 B.C. in Egypt (*NBD*, 1343), a thousand years earlier.

[332](#)

It may now be seen in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

[333](#)

The emblem of Asklepios was a serpent. Pausanias (2.26.8) says that the cult was introduced from Epidaurus.

[334](#)

Charles calls the shrine of Asklepios "the Lourdes of the Province of Asia" (1.60).

[335](#)

Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.37.

[336](#)

Some think that the double-edged sword is mentioned in view of the impending visitation threatened in v. 16.

[337](#)

MajT sy^{h**} add τὰ ἔργα σου χαί (from 2:2).

[338](#)

Deissmann, *LAE*, 281, n. 3.

[339](#)

Zahn notes that under Diocletian, Christian stonecutters from Rome working in the quarries of Pannonia refused to carve an image of Aesculapius (Latin designation of Asklepios) and consequently were put to death for being followers of Antipas of Pergamum (Zahn, *Introduction*, 3.421).

[340](#)

“Local Knowledge in the Letters of the Apocalypse,” *ExpTim* 73 (1961-62), 263-64.

[341](#)

MM, 293. Swete notes that *θρόνος* is always used in this sense in the NT (cf. Matt 5:34; 19:28; 25:31; Luke 1:32, 52) and occurs forty-five times as such in the Apocalypse (34).

[342](#)

Short for *Ἀντίπαρος* (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.10). Lachmann conjectures a genitive *Ἀντιπ.α* on the basis of an accidental doubling of the definite article that follows, with the first omicron being taken as a sigma (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 664).

[343](#)

Bruce notes that a passage like this marks the beginning of the transition of the meaning of the Greek *μάρτυς* from witness to martyr (638).

[344](#)

Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 187.

[345](#)

Scapul. 12.

[346](#)

Alford writes, “It is hardly possible to withhold indignation at the many childish symbolic meanings which have been imagined for the name, in defiance of philology and sobriety alike” (569).

[347](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.15.

[348](#)

Montague holds that “the false teaching is not coming from itinerant prophets but from prophets and teachers within the community” (67).

[349](#)

Gk. *διδαχή* is often used in a passive sense of what is taught; cf. Matt 16:12; John 7:16-17; etc.

[350](#)

Blaiklock notes that Balaam’s clever notion was to break down Israel’s power by an indirect attack on their morale. “Pagan food and pagan women were his powerful tools against the rigidity of the Mosaic Law” (Seven Churches, 39).

[351](#)

Caird, 39.

[352](#)

Caird, 41.

[353](#)

In the Greek text ὁμοίως is the final word in the sentence and seems to repeat the earlier οὕτως. It was omitted by a few mss. and altered to ὁ μισῶ . by MajT^A.

[354](#)

Charles, however, takes καὶ σύ as a reference to the Ephesian church; cf. 2:6 (1.64). Hailey says that it argues for two separate groups, Balaam and the Nicolaitans (132).

[355](#)

See Thomas for the position that there were two different yet similar groups in the church, both of which disobeyed the Jerusalem council in regard to idolatrous practices and fornication (1.193).

[356](#)

Kiddle remarks that the church's path lay between two deadly giants — legalism with its exaltation of trivialities and pharisaical insistence on codes of rules, and antinomianism, which, in its reliance on the strength of a devoted spirit, insisted on freedom from the tyranny of legal precepts and prohibitions (33-34). Schick sees Christianity in a battle against two fronts — “against hostility and detraction from the outside and against dangers of false doctrines from within” (34).

[357](#)

Montague correctly observes that “the identity of the Christian faith is assured only when there is a break with the prevailing culture” (63-64).

[358](#)

Charles, 1.65.

[359](#)

Cf. 2 Bar. 29:8; Sib. Or. 7:149.

[360](#)

Walvoord calls it “the present spiritual food of the saints as well as a part of their future heritage” (70).

[361](#)

See the discussion in Hemer, *Local Setting*, 96-97.

[362](#)

Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 7.40.131.

[363](#)

Suetonius, Aug. 40.2; 42.3.

[364](#)

Local Setting, 106.

[365](#)

An earlier settlement probably existed there, as indicated by the fact that the name seems to be old Lydian in origin and means “the citadel/castle of Thya.”

[366](#)

Letters, 239.

[367](#)

The purple dye of Thyatira was not taken from shellfish, but was a “turkey red” brewed from the madder root that grew in abundance in the valley.

[368](#)

On coins he is portrayed astride a horse with a battle-ax on his shoulder.

[369](#)

In a careful study of χαλκολίβανος Hemer concludes that this *hapax legomenon* probably refers to a refined alloy of copper or bronze with metallic zinc (*Local Setting*, 111-17). Sweet suggests that *burnished bronze* “may evoke the furnace of Dan. 3 in which one like a son of God walked with the three who refused to compromise” (93).

[370](#)

Bratcher and Hatton comment, “With such eyes the Son of God can see into the most distant and darkest places, and with such feet he can stamp out all opposition to his rule” (57).

[371](#)

The single σου following the grouping of four nouns suggests that they be taken together as an expansion of the preceding σου τῆργα.

[372](#)

Some, however, hold that in Revelation faith means faithfulness, in which case it would also be a result of love.

[373](#)

Swete, 42.

[374](#)

Blaiklock describes the NT Jezebel as “a clever woman with a gift of speech, who professed to interpret God’s will, offered prosperity at the price of compromise with heathendom” (*Seven Churches*, 49). Bruce explains the choice of the epithet, saying, “She is described here as ‘that Jezebel of a

woman’ because her relaxation of the terms of the apostolic decree or further compromise with paganism (cf. verse 14) placed her in the succession of the OT Jezebel, whose Baal-cult was marked by idolatry and ritual prostitution” (639). Apparently women acting in the role of prophet were causing problems in second-century Asia. J. M. Ford suggests that we may see reflected here (and in the Pastorals) the beginnings of the “Phrygian heresy” in which a number of charismatic women exercised considerable influence (“Proto-Montanism in the Pastoral Epistles,” *NTS*, 17 [1971], 338-46).

[375](#)

Le Grys places John in a less favorable light. He sees the prophet in a personal conflict with “Jezebel” regarding contact with the culture of the day, and allows a dispute that should have stayed inside the church to take on apocalyptic proportions (“Conflict and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation,” *ExpTim*, 104 [1992], 76-80). Such an interpretation is theological relativism at its worst.

[376](#)

Theologische Abhandlungen, 39-40; cf. discussion in Hemer, *Local Setting*, 117-19.

[377](#)

Gk. σου is sometimes added after γυναῖκα, (A: + τήν), 1006 1841 1854 2351 MajT^K sy; Cyp Prim.

[378](#)

Wall, 78.

[379](#)

Some take the reference in a metaphorical sense as referring to religious infidelity; cf. Jer 3:6; Ezek 23:19; Hos 9:1; etc.

[380](#)

Gk. βάλλω is futuristic present, stressing the imminence and certainty of the act.

[381](#)

Hort, 30.

[382](#)

Ramsay, *Letters*, 257.

[383](#)

That she is to be cast onto a bed of suffering “may indicate that the false teacher champions the opposite — that is, an escape from suffering.... [Her]

heresy is the ancient equivalent of the current ‘gospel of prosperity’ ” (Wall, 78).

[384](#)

The scribal conjectures (φυλαχήν, prison; *Χλίβανον*, an oven or furnace; and *ἁσθένειαν*, weakness or illness) indicate the uncertainty felt with the somewhat unusual *Χλίνην*. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 665) suggests that the glosses were introduced out of a desire to increase the threatened punishment.

[385](#)

Other manuscripts read αὐτῶν (A 1854 2329 2344 MajT^A a t vg^{cl} syP^h; Cyp), which understands the followers of Jezebel repenting of their own works.

[386](#)

So Beckwith, 467.

[387](#)

Lenski, 118.

[388](#)

Sweet, 95.

[389](#)

Gk. νεφροί are the kidneys, and are commonly used metaphorically of the will and the affections. *Χαρδία*, the heart, may designate the center of a person’s rational life, although physiological distinctions should not be pressed in theological contexts.

[390](#)

See also Rev 18:6; 20:12-13; 22:12.

[391](#)

It is possible that the apostolic decree (Acts 15:28-29) is in mind, although apart from βάρος there are no linguistic parallels: the verb is βάλλω rather than ἐπιτίθημι, and is followed by ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς rather than ὑμῖν.

[392](#)

Lilje, 86.

[393](#)

Moffatt (362) notes that to know “the depths” of a divine being was commonly claimed by Ophites, an early Gnostic sect whose opposition to the God of the OT led them to worship the serpent (Gk. *ophis*) as the great liberator of the human race (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd

ed., 984). To tamper with truth often leads to a position of complete reversal.

[394](#)

Local Setting, 124.

[395](#)

Taking *χαί* as introducing the explanatory phrase *ὁ τηρῶν*, etc.

[396](#)

Morris notes that “unto the end” reminds us that “the Christian life is not a battle but a campaign” (73).

[397](#)

Gk. *ποιμαίνω* in the LXX translates the Hebrew *רָעָה*, which means “to break, or destroy.” In Ps 2:9, the LXX, using a difficult vocalization of the original, derived it from the verb *רָעָה*, meaning “to tend, or pasture.” While the former meaning would seem preferable in that it parallels *συντρίβεται* here and *πατάξῃ* in 19:15, Hemer concludes that the context is against the idea of destroying (*Local Setting*, 124-25).

[398](#)

God is called the Father of Christ in 1:6; 3:5, 21; and 14:1.

[399](#)

Local Setting, 126.

[400](#)

Letters, 259. Hemer concludes that Ramsay’s picture of Sardis as a city in decay in NT times is overdrawn (*Local Setting*, 134).

[401](#)

Due to erosion the present summit is perhaps one-third of its size in the period of the city’s prime under Cyrus (D. G. Mitten, “A New Look at Ancient Sardis,” *BA*, 29 [1966], 55).

[402](#)

Pliny calls it the greatest disaster in human memory (*Hist. Nat.* 2.86.200).

[403](#)

Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.47.

[404](#)

Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.55-56.

[405](#)

Moffatt writes that the church at Sardis “had lapsed from its pristine vitality, just as the township of S. had by this time declined from its old historical

prestige” (364). Caird calls Sardis “a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity” (48), and Wall refers to it as “a reclamation project” (80).

[406](#)

Similarities between the letters to Ephesus and Sardis have often been noticed: both are censured for a fall from a former position (2:5 with 3:3), both are called upon to remember and repent (2:5 with 3:3), and both promise the victor ζωή under appropriate figures (cf. Hemer, *Local Setting*, 141).

[407](#)

Letters, 272.

[408](#)

Cf. discussion on 1:4. Most commentators hold them to be planetary deities (Bousset, 184-87) or the sevenfold operation of the Spirit from Isa 11:2 (first found in Justin, *Dial.* 87). Sweet contends that they are “functionally the same as ‘the Holy Spirit’ ” (98). Beckwith understands the Holy Spirit represented by symbols taken directly from Zech 4:1-10 (424-27). Roloff holds them to be “the archangels that stand before the countenance of God” (58).

[409](#)

Gk. γίνου, στήρισον, μνημόνευε, τήρει, μετανόησον.

[410](#)

Hemer notes that although the accounts of this extraordinary physical achievement differ, they all postulate a lack of vigilance on the part of the defenders (*Local Setting*, 133). Most commentators rely on Herodotus, the Greek historian, but Hemer indicates that “much of the familiar Herodotean account of Croesus may safely be pronounced unhistorical” (131).

[411](#)

Cf. 1 Cor 10:12, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

[412](#)

Swete notes that στήριζειν was a technical word in primitive *pastoralia* (49).

[413](#)

Following A C pc, which omit τὰ. The argument that σου τὰ ἔργα corresponds with the author’s normal pattern (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15) and makes better sense in context violates the canon of choosing the more difficult reading.

[414](#)

Although πως regularly indicates manner (“how”), the connection with τήρει, which needs an object, suggests that it should be translated “what” (cf. Beckwith, 474).

[415](#)

“As a means of revival” they are to “recall the wakeful receptivity and the lively readiness of the first hours when [they] heard the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ had taken root there” (Schick, 40).

[416](#)

TDNT, 4.1004.

[417](#)

Bauckham holds that the sayings in Rev 3:3, 20 and 16:15 depend upon the parable of the watching servants and the thief in Luke 12:35-40. They are examples of “deparabolization” in which the imagery of a parable is used apart from its parabolic context (R. Bauckham, “Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse,” *NTS*, 23 [1977], 162-76).

[418](#)

Charles (1.80) and others insert the parenthetical Rev 16:15 (“Behold, I come like a thief!” etc.) before 3:3c. Cf. Hemer (*Local Setting*, 145-46) for arguments against this transposition.

[419](#)

The accusative ποίαν ὥραν (“a rare classical idiom” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 314]) refers to a point of time. Ford notes that the members of Qumran studied and prayed throughout the night (1QS 6:6-8), apparently because “the messianic hour of judgment could not be known in advance” (409).

[420](#)

Cf. 11:13; Acts 1:15. Deissmann (*Bible Studies*, 196-97) shows that in the second century A.D. ὄνομα was used in the sense of “person.”

[421](#)

Without citing references, Moffatt writes that in the votive inscriptions in Asia Minor soiled clothes disqualified the worshiper and dishonored the god (364).

[422](#)

Blaiklock regards the cult of Cybele as “one of the so-called ‘enthusiastic’ religions, whose votaries worshipped by wild dancing, revel, and self-mutilation” (*Seven Churches*, 60).

[423](#)

Talbert interprets the white garments in connection with the parousia and sees them as the wedding garments that allow admission to the feast (21).

[424](#)

Ramsay, *Letters*, 282. Ford says that the speaker “is probably thinking of triumphal (perhaps messianic) procession in the Roman style” (413).

[425](#)

Gk. ἱμάτιον in 3:5, 18; 4:4; στολή in 6:11; 7:9, 13; and βύσσινος in 19:14.

[426](#)

Charles writes that the white garments are “the spiritual bodies in which the faithful are to be clothed in the resurrection life” (1.82). He finds the idea expressed in Matt 13:43; 2 Cor 5:1, 4; Phil 3:21; *Asc. Isa.* 4:16; 2 *Enoch* 22:8; and elsewhere (cf. 1.82-83).

[427](#)

Sweet notes that “in the OT ‘to be blotted out of the book’ means simply to die (Ps 69:28), but by NT times refers to eternal destiny” (100). Hughes warns that “the imagery must not be interpreted literalistically” and adds that “to blot out a name signifies that that name has no place among those who have received eternal life” (57).

[428](#)

Kiddle, 47; cf. Hemer, *Local Setting*, 148-49.

[429](#)

Walvoord, 82.

[430](#)

Caird, 49-50.

[431](#)

Ramsay says the modern name means “the reddish city” (*HDB*, 3.832), while Swete calls it “the white city” (52).

[432](#)

Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 2.86.200; Tacitus, *Ann.* 247; Strabo, 12.579; 13.628.

[433](#)

See Hemer, *Local Setting*, 153-54, for other possibilities.

[434](#)

Local Setting, 155.

[435](#)

Letters, 287.

[436](#)

Kiddle, 48.

[437](#)

Although there remain the robe reaching down to his feet, the golden sash around his chest, the hair white like wool, the voice like the sound of rushing waters, and the face like the sun shining in all its brilliance (vv. 13-16).

[438](#)

Farrer interprets the title in terms of the Isaianic reference that lies behind the rest of the verse. He writes, “In Isaiah’s text an unfaithful key-bearer is deposed and a worthy minister put in his place; so Christ here names himself the holy, the true, in contrast to the elders of the synagogue, who are false pretenders to the authority of David’s house” (80).

[439](#)

So Hort, 34; Charles, 1.85; Sweet, 103.

[440](#)

This point is stressed by Montague, who writes that “ ‘true’ means not only the quality of speaking the truth but above all fidelity: being true to one’s word and one’s name, which, in biblical terms, means loyalty to the covenant relationship” (72).

[441](#)

Blaiklock notes that a key in ancient times would be “a considerable piece of wood designed to thrust in and lift the bar which held the two leaves of a door in position” (*Seven Churches*, 68).

[442](#)

Probably due to 1:18 (τὰς **κ**λεις τοῦ θ_α) some manuscripts instead of Δαυίδ read ὅδου or the fuller τοῦ θανάτου **κ**αὶ τοῦ ὅδου. The Armenian reads τοῦ παραδείσου (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1st ed., 736).

[443](#)

Letters, 297. For the same interpretation of the open door see Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, 180-81; Charles, 1.87; Swete, 54; Hort, 35; etc. Glasson cites the translation, “a great opportunity has opened up for effective work” (34). Robbins claims “the open door symbolizes a gift of missionary opportunity and spiritual usefulness to the church by Christ” (75). Others have suggested that the door is Christ (Moffatt, 366), or perhaps a door of prayer, or immediate access to God by way of martyrdom (Kiddle, 50).

[444](#)

Roloff, 61.

[445](#)

Cf. Beckwith for a good presentation of this position (480).

[446](#)

“Human weakness is no hindrance to the power of God; on the contrary, by unmistakable contrast, it provides the setting for the manifestation and the magnification of God’s power” (Hughes, 59).

[447](#)

Wall calls this “a stunning example of the apocalyptic reversal motif,” in which the Jewish synagogue’s polemic against the church is turned upside down (84).

[448](#)

Cf. Ignatius, *Phld.* 6.

[449](#)

Moffatt, 367.

[450](#)

It will be “Christian vindication, not Jewish conversion” (Sweet, 102).

[451](#)

Caird, 51-53.

[452](#)

Bruce, 640. It is regularly noted that μου governs ὑπομον.ης rather than the entire phrase (Moffatt, 367), which stresses that the patience enjoined is that exemplified by Christ himself.

[453](#)

Gk. μέλλω with the present infinitive in the eschatological context of this letter (and especially the ἔρχομαι ταχύ that follows) points to what is about to happen rather than what is destined to be.

[454](#)

Walvoord, 87. Cf. Thomas (1.286-88) as well. For the argument that τηρήσω ex presupposes a pretribulation rapture of the church see J. L. Townsend, “The Rapture in Revelation 3:10,” *BSac*, 137 (1980), 252-66, and T. R. Edgar, “R. H. Gundry and Revelation 3:10,” *GTJ* 3 (1982), 19-49.

[455](#)

See the helpful article, “The Hour of Trial, Rev 3:10,” by Schuyler Brown in *JBL*, 85 (1966), 308-14. Brown summarizes his position by stating that “as a reward for its faithful perseverance Christ promises the church of

Philadelphia (and all faithful Christians) his special protection in the hour of universal tribulation which is to precede his return” (314).

[456](#)

Ladd writes, “Although the church will be on earth in these final terrible days and will suffer fierce persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the beast, she will be kept from the hour of trial which is coming upon the pagan world. God’s wrath, poured out on the kingdom of Antichrist, will not afflict his people” (62).

[457](#)

Charles, 1.90.

[458](#)

Inscriptional evidence is cited by Hemer, *Local Setting*, 165. He writes, “The stadium site may still be seen in Philadelphia” (268, n. 51).

[459](#)

So Charles, 1.91-92; Moffatt, 369; Kiddle, 53-54; and others. Hemer, while acknowledging this as plausible, notes that no provincial temple of the cult existed in Philadelphia until its neocorate was conferred about A.D. 213 (*Local Setting*, 166).

[460](#)

Rist’s comment that in Rev 21:22 “John forgets this prophecy,” this being an example of his “indifference to consistency in details” (395), is unnecessary. Apocalyptic imagery is sufficiently fluid to allow the figure of a temple in one vision and dismiss it in another. It is not a matter of forgetfulness or inconsistency.

[461](#)

The antecedent of the second αὐτόν could be στυλον, but it is the unexpressed subject of ἐξέλθῃ i.e., ὁ νιχῶν (“I will write on *him* ...”).

[462](#)

Moffatt, 369.

[463](#)

Ramsay calls it “a knot on the road system” and mentions additional roads that met there (*Letters*, 306).

[464](#)

Laodicea is mentioned in Col 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16, and Hierapolis in Col 4:13. One of Paul’s four prison epistles was addressed to the church at Colossae (Col 1:2).

[465](#)

Josephus reports that Antiochus III brought 2,000 Jewish families to Lydia and Phrygia from Mesopotamia (Ant. 12.3.4).

[466](#)

Strabo, 12.578.

[467](#)

Ramsay, *Letters*, 416.

[468](#)

Fam. 3.5.4; Att. 5.15.2.

[469](#)

Tacitus's dating; Eusebius and Orosius place it after the fire of Rome (cf. Hemer, *Local Setting*, 279, n. 64).

[470](#)

Ann. 14.27.

[471](#)

Men was an ancient Carian god, a god of healing who was later identified with Asklepios.

[472](#)

Letters, 309.

[473](#)

Galen, 6.439.

[474](#)

Blaiklock writes, "Such vulnerable communities must learn the arts of appeasement and conciliation" (*The Seven Churches*, 75).

[475](#)

Barclay, 1.139.

[476](#)

LXX: τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν, which implies ἰσχυρὸν rather than ἰσχυρὸν (followed by RSV). Silberman, in an article with the optimistic title "Farewell to O AMHN" (JBL, 82 [1963], 213-15), argues on the basis of a midrash on Prov 8:22 that ὁ ἀμὴν should be rendered "master workman" and that Christ is being presented as God's adviser in creation. Trudinger accepts Silberman's suggestions as essentially correct but does not feel that they imply a Semitic original document ("O AMHN [Rev. III:14], and the Case for a Semitic Original of the Apocalypse," JTS, new series 17 [1966], 277-79).

[477](#)

TDNT, 1.335-36.

[478](#)

Cf. the TCNT translation, “These are the words of the Unchanging One.”

[479](#)

Bratcher and Hatton write, “Here *faithful*, applied to Christ, refers to his reliability as a witness of God’s message, and true to the content of his testimony” (78). Ford suggests that the appositional phrase “faithful and true witness” was added to clarify for the non-Hebrew-speaking audience the meaning of “amen” (418).

[480](#)

Charles (1.94-95) calls attention to other verbal parallels (Rev 3:17 with Col 1:27 and Rev 3:21 with Col 3:1), and Hemer goes on to point out that the similarity in christological content reflects a common response to similar tendencies of thought in the local situations (Local Setting, 184-85).

[481](#)

Swete, 59.

[482](#)

The remains of a remarkable aqueduct leading from Denizli (not Hierapolis, as some hold; e.g., Ford, 418-19) are well known. Water flowing through these stone pipes would arrive at Laodicea tepid and nausea-provoking.

[483](#)

Seven Churches, 77-78. Others speak of the “moral nausea roused by tepid religion” (Moffatt, 370), and that the Laodicean Christians were “*lukewarm* toward the call to vigorous spiritual activity” (Beckwith, 490). Robbins writes that “these figurative words describe persons who are neither in earnest for God nor utterly indifferent to him” (79).

[484](#)

“The Laodicean Lukewarmness,” *ExpTim* 69 (1957-58), 176-78.

[485](#)

Rudwick and Green, 178. We can appreciate without agreeing totally with Schick’s point that “such an indecisive Christianity is in Christ’s judgment more tasteless than genuine paganism, a Christian without character has less worth in his eyes than a pagan of strong character” (45).

[486](#)

Hemer accepts the exegesis of Rudwick and Green and supplements the position with a discussion of the water supply of the district (*Local Setting*, 187-91). He concludes that “judgment is passed upon the ‘works’ of the Laodiceans, not in their lack of enthusiasm: the following verses diagnose the symptoms of their spiritual malady” (191).

[487](#)

However, Thomas is quite sure that the “simplest and most straightforward meaning of the metaphorical psychros” is “to see a picture of an unbeliever who has rejected the gospel openly and aggressively” (1.306-7).

[488](#)

2329 reads ἐλέγχω σε ἐχ (“I refute thee out of ...”) instead of μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐχ, undoubtedly to soften the expression.

[489](#)

Lilje notes that “the inevitable result of spiritual complacency and self-satisfaction is the loss of all true self-knowledge” (101).

[490](#)

Cf. Tarn and Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 3rd ed., 113.

[491](#)

Cf. Hemer, 192. Fr. Montague, a Catholic scholar, tells of one of the lax popes in a darker age of the church’s history who built up great personal wealth and was very proud of his accomplishment. Showing it to a visitor, he boasted, “You see, Peter can no longer say, “Silver and gold have I none” to which the visitor responded, “Is that why Peter can no longer say, ‘Arise and walk’?” (79).

[492](#)

Quoted by Moffatt, 371.

[493](#)

Blaiklock, *Seven Churches*, 77.

[494](#)

In 1 Pet 1:7 the same figure is used to portray the genuineness of faith.

[495](#)

Gk. χολλύριον (Latin *collyrium*) is the diminutive of χολλύρα, a long roll of coarse bread. The Phrygian powder was apparently applied to the eyes in the form of a doughy paste. Horace, in the first century B.C., reports using collyrium en route to Brundisium (*Sat.* 1.5).

[496](#)

Hughes claims that their blindness was “the self-induced consequence of their complacency” (67).

[497](#)

Ramsay, *Letters*, 318-19.

[498](#)

Verse 20 shows Christ pleading for willing hospitality in contrast to the enforced hospitality of the corrupt Roman officials, who exploited the wealth of the local citizens (*Local Setting*, 465-70). Vv. 20 and 21 are tied together by a reference to a historical incident in which Polemo shut out an invader and received a throne in reward for his resolute action (470-73, 480).

[499](#)

BAGD, 586.

[500](#)

The “unconquerable attitude of good will” has become the “most tender affection” (Barclay, 1.183).

[501](#)

Roloff writes, “Instead of the expected threat of judgment in the case of a refusal to repent (cf. v. 3b), there sounds a new tone: the church is to know that behind the rebuke stands nothing other than the love of its Lord, which seeks and goes after the lost” (65).

[502](#)

Charles mentions that “love is never cruel, but it can be severe” (1.100).

[503](#)

Barclay writes that ἐλέγχω is “the kind of rebuke which compels a man to see the error of his ways,” and adds that “the rebuke of God is not so much punishment as illumination” (1.144-45). Buchsel says that “it implies educative discipline” and means “to show someone his sin and to summon him to repentance” (*TDNT*, 2.474).

[504](#)

Bertram states that in the context of the admonitory letters of Revelation, παιδεύω has as a main emphasis the idea of rousing or stirring (*TDNT*, 5.623).

[505](#)

Barclay, 1.184.

[506](#)

There may be some intended comparison between ζήλευε here and ζεστός of vv. 15-16 (the words begin similarly but are not cognate). Sweet calls attention to the order of the imperatives (“be earnest, and repent”), which one might expect reversed, but notes that “for those who lack passion ... repentance is impossible” (108).

[507](#)

The eschatological view is followed by Moffatt (373), Swete (63-64), Beckwith (491), Kiddle (60), and others. Beasley-Murray says that taking the words as applying to the church's part in the future kingdom "is not a natural interpretation" (107). Cf. Charles, 1.101.

[508](#)

Attention is often drawn to Cant 5:2-6 as a possible background, but apart from the knock (in v. 2) the settings are distinct. In Canticles the maiden's lover has gone before she can answer the knock; in Revelation Christ has taken his stand (ἔστηκα) outside the door and knocks for decidedly less sensual reasons. Furthermore, there is no particular reason why we should agree with Caird's idea that Christ is knocking "with the imperious hammering of the divine initiative, loud enough to penetrate even the deaf ears of Laodicea" (57). It has never been the practice of God to storm the ramparts of the human heart.

[509](#)

Beckwith holds, "The symbol is altogether eschatological; there is no reference to the eucharist" (491), while Caird contends that John is using language "resonant with eucharistic associations" (58).

[510](#)

In a number of places in *1 Enoch* it is said that the elect one (the Messiah) is to sit on the throne of glory (*1 Enoch* 45:3; 51:3; 55:4; etc.).

[511](#)

Walvoord, 99-100.

[512](#)

Robbins notes that this vision is closely related to the preceding letters and "shows what power is available for the church in the struggle" (83).

[513](#)

Most commentators note that μετὰ ταυτα εἶδον introduces a new division of special importance (4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1) while other phrases mark subordinate sections.

[514](#)

The perfect participle, ἡνεωγμένη, could suggest that the door had been opened and left that way for John's arrival. Cf. *T. Levi* 5:1, "At this moment the angel opened for me the gates of heaven and I saw the Holy Most High sitting on the throne."

[515](#)

John uses the singular, οὐρανός, some fifty times in Revelation. Only in 12:12 (perhaps influenced by Isa 44:23) is the plural found. John's view of a single heaven is in contrast with the fairly widespread concept in antiquity of a plurality of heavens (cf. Rist, 401, for references in the literature of Judaism). Wilcock lists five possibilities for the "heaven" into which John looks. Unfortunately, he opts for "the sphere of spiritual reality" (66). Certainly in the vision itself John is viewing heaven as the abode of God.

[516](#)

A. Y. Collins says that the door represents "access to God" (*The Apocalypse*, 34).

[517](#)

Moffatt, 376. Swete (67) writes, "The state of spiritual exaltation which preceded the first vision ... has returned, but in greater force." Sweet says that the vision of the open door "leads to renewed inspiration" (15). Charles (1.110) takes the two visions as coming at different times and contends that vv. 1 b-2a are a link supplied by the Seer.

[518](#)

In the *Odes of Solomon* there are frequent references to visionary trips to paradise (Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 287). One example cited is 36:1, "I rested on the Spirit of the Lord, And She lifted me up to heaven" (298). Robbins's view that the call to come up to heaven means that John "was to receive greater insight into spiritual things" (83) does not do justice to the actual experience of being in the Spirit and transported to heaven.

[519](#)

While many dispensationalists see in the ascent of John the rapture of the church, one prominent spokesman, Walvoord, writes that "it is clear from the context that this is not an explicit reference to the rapture of the church" (103). He does hold, however, that the rapture may be viewed as having taken place before the events of chapter 4 and following. Thomas follows Walvoord in holding that the voice does not summon the church to heaven (1.336). It should be noted, however, that the very discussion of a "rapture of the church" lies outside John's frame of reference. He knows nothing of such a "rapture."

[520](#)

"Heaven is not pictured as a temple or a synagogue but as the throne room of a great king" (Krodel, 155).

[521](#)

“The name of God is not uttered out of reverence as it was the custom among the Jews” (Schick, 1.53).

[522](#)

Hughes writes that “the finite language of this earthly sphere is incompetent to define and depict the infinite realities that [John] saw before him. Yet it was the only language at his command; hence his use of earthly similitudes, but always with the understanding that the heavenly reality far surpasses the earthly symbol” (72).

[523](#)

Phaed. 110c.

[524](#)

Caird notes that the rainbow tells us that “there is to be no triumph for God’s sovereignty at the expense of his mercy” — a warning not to interpret the following visions of disaster as if God had forgotten his promise to Noah (63).

[525](#)

Beasley-Murray rejects the theory that the twenty-four elders have come from Babylonian astrological religion via Jewish apocalyptic (as proposed by Zimmern and Gunkel) on the basis that “there is no evidence at all that Jewish apocalyptic knew of an angelic order of twenty-four in heaven” (115, n. 1).

[526](#)

Sweet holds that they are “OT worthies who already have a place in heaven” (118), and Hughes identifies them as “the totality of redeemed mankind ... the church universal” (72). Wall says that they represent the community that the apostles founded and continue to nourish through their memories and teachings (93). Feuillet identifies them as glorified saints rather than angels (“The Twenty-Four Elders of the Apocalypse,” *Johannine Studies*, 183-214). Hartingsveld asserts that they “constitute the heavenly retinue” (26). Stonehouse discusses the issue at length in *Paul before the Areopagus*, chap. 4.

[527](#)

In 21:12-14 the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are inscribed on the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem and the names of the twelve apostles on the twelve foundations.

[528](#)

See also 7:13, where one of the elders asks the identity of the triumphant multitude in heaven (the full number of the redeemed), hardly necessary if he were part of that group!

[529](#)

Roloff writes that they are “angelic figures, specifically, the members of the heavenly council with which the Old Testament is acquainted (1 Kgs. 22:19-22; Isaiah 6)” (70). Boring maintains that they represent “a kind of heavenly counterpart to the continuing People of God on earth” (106); a “heavenly counterpart of the earthly church,” says Harrington (79).

[530](#)

In 14:14 Christ himself is crowned with a στέφανος χρυσεύς.

[531](#)

See esp. Ps 18:12-15; cf. also Ezek 1:13; Job 37:2-5.

[532](#)

A torch (RSV) was usually a stick or club with a piece of cloth soaked with pitch or resin wound tightly around one end. It was important that it burn for as long as possible.

[533](#)

According to Moffatt, the sea of glass portrays “the ether, clear and calm, shimmering and motionless” (379). Others associate it with the molten sea in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 7:23-26).

[534](#)

Sweet lists four possible meanings (decoration, temple furniture, the heavenly analogue of the Red Sea, and the abyss) and concludes that “none of these possibilities excludes any of the others” (119). For Hendriksen the “sea of glass” represents the cleansing blood of Christ (105); for Lenski, divine providence (178); and for Caird, everything that is recalcitrant to the will of God (65). Montague, rather imaginatively, suggests that the sea represents “God’s unfinished agenda — the historical chaos such as persecution and martyrdom through which the faithful must pass but through which they, like their Lord, will emerge victorious” (87). Symbolism by its very nature stirs the imagination of all who would understand its deeper meaning. But it is important to distinguish between that which in itself is a symbol and that which is only one part of a larger symbolic presentation. Interpretation is an art as well as a “science.”

[535](#)

The AV translates “beasts,” which is unfortunate in that ζῷον is used in Revelation exclusively for the four living creatures, while θηρίον (“wild beast”) depicts the hideous figures of chapters 13 and 17.

[536](#)

Brewer explains the arrangement in terms of the Greek amphitheater with its circular orchestral area containing a speaking place for the gods, an altar, and a semicircular row of carved seats (“thrones”) for dignitaries (“Revelation 4,6 and the Translations Thereof,” JBL, 71 [1952], 227-31). Although John may well have seen such marble thrones in the theater in Ephesus, his imagery is profoundly Jewish in this and other visions of Revelation. Hall conjectures that the throne was patterned on the ark and that the four living creatures were an integral part of the throne. This would allow a straightforward reading of ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου and clarify the Lamb’s position on the throne in 5:6.

[537](#)

Krodel pictures the four living creatures as “God’s pets within the heavenly court” and adds that as faithful dogs are content to live in the presence of their owners, pleasing and enjoying them, worship should be “adoration of God, whose presence is life, joy, and peace” (156-57).

[538](#)

That they are “four great constellations of stars that uphold the throne of God” (179). Lenski himself takes them to symbolize “the countless living, earthly agencies of God’s providence” (181). In a five-page discussion Charles traces three stages of development from Babylonian mythology through the OT to Jewish apocalyptic. But in that our author (according to Charles) was “wholly unacquainted” with the earliest stage (1.122), it seems fruitless to conjecture about any relationship between John’s images and the four principal signs of the zodiac (Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, and Aquarius; just how Aquarius became an eagle in John’s account has never been satisfactorily explained!)

[539](#)

Beckwith, 501.

[540](#)

1611 * 1854 2050 2053 2329 MajT^A sy^h read the nominative ἄνθρωπος, which would suggest that the third creature had the form of a human being rather than simply a human face.

[541](#)

Bratcher and Hatton, however, hold that “like a lion ... like an ox” is meant to describe only the head, not the whole creature (91).

[542](#)

Swete, 71.

[543](#)

Hendriksen, 107.

[544](#)

See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.11 (ca. A.D. 170). Cf. Barclay, 1.161, for three other arrangements. Lenski’s identification with the four places where God’s providence is carried out (lion, the wild places; ox, the cultivated spots; people, cities and towns; eagle, the air) grows out of his prior identification of the sea of glass as the providence of God (183).

[545](#)

It is of no help to read ~~Ν~~υλλόθεν with the previous clause even when ἔξωθεν καί (046 [2351] pc) is added before ἔσωθεν. Eyes “within” still poses a problem.

[546](#)

Norman Walker suggests that “Thrice-Holy” of Isa 6:3 was a conflate reading signifying “HOLY, EXCEEDING HOLY” (“The Origin of the ‘Thrice-Holy,’ ” *NTS*, 5 [1958-59], 132-33).

[547](#)

Ralph Martin cites Rev 4:8 as the most illustrious example of material in Revelation that was borrowed directly from the synagogues of the Greek-speaking Jewish world. The entire group of Jewish-Christian fragments offers praise to the “holy and righteous God of Judaism who is extolled ... in the synagogue Liturgy as Creator and Sustainer of the world, and Judge of all” (*Worship in the Early Church*, 45).

[548](#)

In Jewish and Christian writers, παντοκράτωρ is used only of God.

[549](#)

Krodel makes a point of the fact that the verbs in vv. 9-10 are future tense and refer to time yet to come when God will come to establish his power on earth. The elders do not continuously in the present lay down their crowns but *shall* surrender them in the future (158). Beckwith, however, noting that the future indicative with ὅταν is rare, judges that it should “probably be taken with a frequentative force, after the analogy of the Heb. imperfect: ‘Whenever the Living Creatures give glory ... the Elders fall’ (503). It is

certainly possible to picture the praise of the living creatures and the response of the elders as taking place at repeated intervals of great significance throughout Revelation.

[550](#)

The suggestion that these spontaneous outbursts of praise contradict the continuous worship of v. 8 represents that kind of unimaginative criticism which looks for “strict logic in the poetry of adoration” (Barclay, 1.206).

[551](#)

Harrington notes, “As vassal kings removed their crowns when coming into the presence of their emperor, these kings lay their diadems of victory before their Lord” (80).

[552](#)

In his *Annals* Tacitus reports that the vassal Parthian king Tiridates placed his crown before an image of Nero to show his loyalty to the emperor (15.29).

[553](#)

Gk. ἄξιός ἐστι; note as well the emphatic οὐ before ἔχτισσας in line 3.

[554](#)

J. J. O’Rourke holds that John borrowed from liturgical sources when he composed certain sections of the book: the doxologies in 1:6; 5:13; 7:12; the acclamations of worthiness in 4:11; 5:9, 12; and the trisagion, 4:8b (“The Hymns of the Apocalypse,” *CBQ*, 30 [1968], 399-409). His criteria are “parallelism similar to that found in Pss, solemn tone of expression apt for use in worship, and grammatical inconcinnity” (400). Cf. L. Mowry, “Revelation IV-V and Early Christian Liturgical Usage,” *JBL*, 71 (1952), 75-84.

[555](#)

Lilje, 108; cf. Suetonius, *Dom.* 13. “The acclamation, ‘Worthy art thou’ expresses a value judgment that includes the consensus of the governed subjects regarding the moral excellence of their ruler” (Krodel, 159).

[556](#)

Some manuscripts solve the apparent problem of existence before creation by reading εἰσίν for ἦσαν (1854 2050 MajT^A sa). Others (046 pc) place οὐ before ἦσαν (an “ingenious correction,” according to Swete; 75).

[557](#)

Schick calls it an “episthograph, that is, the outside and the inside of the rolled-up parchment or papyrus strip are written on, a sign of the fullness of

content” (1.58). Peterson notes that to a first-century Christian, “scroll” would mean scripture. He adds, “God’s people believe that God speaks.... He is not a *deus absconditus* but a *deus revelatus*” (64).

[558](#)

Schrenk maintains that the scroll “relates to all the judicial acts that unfold from ch. 6 onward” (*TDNT abr.*, 106). Other suggestions are the Lamb’s book of life (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27), the OT, a testament that insures inheritance for the saints, and a doubly inscribed contract deed (cf. Beasley-Murray, 120-22, for a discussion of this interpretation). Cf. Emmet Russell, “A Roman Law Parallel to Revelation Five,” *BSac*, 115 (1958), 258-64.

[559](#)

The related concept of a heavenly pattern for things on earth is seen in the instructions given to Moses concerning the tabernacle and its furniture (Exod 25:9-10; 26:30). Cf. Eph 2:10.

[560](#)

Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, 182-83.

[561](#)

MajT latt sy^{ph} bo read ἔξωθεν rather than ὀπίσθεν.

[562](#)

Writing on the reverse side (verso) of a papyrus scroll where the fibers run vertically was much more difficult than on the front side (*recto*) where they were horizontal. Roloff explains the writing on the back in reference to the practice of wrapping important documents with an outer covering on which a brief summary of the contents of the scroll was added (76-77).

[563](#)

Morris comments, “His concern is with worthiness, not naked power” (93).

[564](#)

Grammarians call this *hysteron proteron*.

[565](#)

So Swete, 76.

[566](#)

1006 1611^c 1841 2351 MajT^K; Cyp add ἐγώ to identify the subject. Since ἔχθαι is third person plural as well as first person singular, the subject could be those surveyed in v. 3.

[567](#)

Cf. Luke 19:41 for a similar use of ἔχθαι.

[568](#)

Hughes writes that “this tragic inability was attributable not to lack of physical strength but to moral incompetence” (78).

[569](#)

“To open the seals means not merely to reveal but to carry out God’s will and purpose. It is to reveal and to put into effect God’s plan for history. In the Revelation, the scroll is never read” (Robbins, 94). Preston and Hanson judge vv. 5-6 to be among the most profound in the entire Apocalypse in that “they relate Jewish Messianic hopes to the distinctively Christian good news of the advent of the Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth” (75).

[570](#)

Cf. 2 Esdr 12:31 for the Messiah as a lion.

[571](#)

Hughes holds that the title “the Root of David” points to the preexistence of Christ because it implies that “he who came after David was also before him” (79). But this confuses the active sense of ῥίζα (root that brings forth) with the passive sense (shoot that is brought forth). The title should not be understood in both ways at the same time.

[572](#)

The aorist ἐνίχθησεν stands unqualified and in an emphatic position.

[573](#)

Harrington, 87. Bauckham writes, “The juxtaposition of the contrasting images of the Lion and the Lamb expresses John’s Jewish Christian reinterpretation of current Jewish eschatological hopes” (*Climax of Prophecy*, 214).

[574](#)

It should be noted that ἄρνιον is consistently used instead of ἄμνός, the word used of Christ in John 1:29, 36 (also in 1 Pet 1:19). Of its thirty occurrences, only once is it found outside the Apocalypse (in John 21:15). Apart from Rev 13:1 (where the beast out of the earth has two horns “like a lamb”), ἄρνιον is used exclusively of the resurrected and victorious Christ. For a discussion of the data see Mounce, “The Christology of the Apocalypse,” *Foundations*, 11 (1969), 42-45; also “ ‘The Lamb’ in the Apocalypse” by Norman Hillyer, *EQ*, 39 (1967), 228-36. Cf. C. K. Barrett, “The Lamb of God,” *NTS*, 1 (1954-55), 210-18.

[575](#)

See Roloff's excursus on "The Lamb" for a good presentation of this position (78-79).

[576](#)

Cf. Charles, 1.141. Beasley-Murray writes, "Despite protestations to the contrary (notably by Traugott Holtz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes*, 1971, p. 41) there seems to be no doubt that this figure is derived from Jewish apocalyptic imagery, which represented the people of God as the flock of God out of which arises a deliverer who rescues them from their foes" (124-25). Bauckham, however, insists that "there is no substantial evidence that the Lamb was already established as a symbol of the messianic conqueror in pre-Christian Judaism" (*The Climax of Prophecy*, 183).

[577](#)

F. C. Grant, "Lamb of God," *HDB rev.*, 562. Boring rejects this interpretation (which he calls "first the lamb, then the lion") as "a retrogression from a Christian understanding of the meaning of Messiahship to the pre-Christian apocalyptic idea" (109). He argues that the Lamb is "slaughtered" not only on the cross but also on the transcendent altar, and that love was not a provisional strategy of the earthly Jesus eventually to be replaced by eschatological violence. His own position draws upon a rebirth of images in which "the 'lion' is really the lamb" (109-10). There is not, however, that much difference between the two positions unless one insists on taking the images in their most literal sense. A slaughtered lamb and a messianic warrior are not mirror opposites but ways of portraying stages in the redemptive ministry of the Messiah — first as a sacrifice for sin, then as a warrior returning in victory.

[578](#)

The horn is an ancient Jewish symbol for strength or power (cf. Deut 33:17) and is so used in Revelation (12:3; 13:1, 11; 17:3ff.). In Dan 7:7, 20 the powerful fourth beast had ten horns, and the ram of Dan 8:3 had two great horns. In Dan 8:5 the one large horn of the he-goat is replaced by four smaller ones. The portrayal of Moses having two horns stems from a confusion between the Hebrew *qāran* (to shine) and *qeren* (horn). Seven horns would indicate perfect might.

[579](#)

Zech 4:10 ("These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth") is the probable source for this image.

[580](#)

Although ἀπεσταλμένοι agrees in gender with ὀφθαλμούς, it is the πνεύματα that are sent out.

[581](#)

Thomas performs an unnecessary bit of interpretation in explaining how a lamb, an animal without hands, could take something from the open hand of the one on the throne (“The Lamb may have resumed human form,” 1.394).

[582](#)

Gk. φιάλη was a flat, shallow cup or bowl for drinking or libations (LSJ); cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 3.6.6.

[583](#)

Ladd suggests that their prayer was the age-long prayer of the church, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (89). In 2 *Enoch* 47: Iff. we read of the prayers of the righteous and their blood ascending unto the Lord of Spirits urging their vindication. This would be a more appropriate parallel to the cry of the martyrs in 6:10 than here.

[584](#)

Gk. ἄ has as its antecedent θνμιαμάτων rather than φιάλας — the gender determined by attraction to προσενχαί (N 046 1006 1841 2050 2344 pc made an understandable change to ἄ). Beckwith (512) says that the entire phrase is probably a gloss from 8:3 because the scene is heavenly, its theme is precise, and the utterances of the saints would be among those mentioned in 5:13.

[585](#)

The elders are probably joined in song by the cherubim. Even if the action of v. 8b (involving the harps and the bowls of incense) is limited to the elders, v. 9 could continue quite naturally the adoration of v. 8a.

[586](#)

The word is **Χαίνός** rather than νέος. Behm distinguishes the adjectives, noting that νέος is new in time or origin while **Χαίνός** is “what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or attraction” (*TDNT*, 3.447). Theologically “**Χαίνός** is the epitome of the wholly different and miraculous thing which is brought about by the time of salvation” (3.449).

[587](#)

Gk. σφάζω), to slaughter, is used only in Revelation to describe the death of Christ. Its use in this connection probably derives from Isa 53:7 (ὥς

πρόβατον ἐπὶ σφαγὴν ἦχθη).

[588](#)

Gk. ἀγοράζω), as in Rev 5:9.

[589](#)

Ⲭ (^s 2050 2344 sy; Hipp Cyp) MajT (lat) add ἡμας after θεω.. In v. 10, Ⲭ A 1611 * 1854 2050 2329 2344 pc latt syph.hmg co have αὐτούς, while pc gig vgcl sa; Prim Bea accept ἡμας. They carry out the identification between the elders and those for whom Christ died by reading βασιλεύσομεν instead of the βασιλεύσουσιν of N 1854 2050 2053 2344 2351 MajT^A lat co; Hipp Cyp or the βασιλεύουσιν of A 1006 1611 1841 2329 MajT^K.

[590](#)

The same four occur (but always in a different order) in 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; and 14:6.

[591](#)

E.g., Swete, 82.

[592](#)

Even if βασιλεύουσιν is read instead of βασιλεύσονιν, the reference is probably future, the verb serving as a futuristic present and imparting a tone of assurance (Moulton, *Grammar*, 3rd ed., 1.120). Krodell prefers the reading βασιλεύσιν and concludes, “In short, the present tense, ‘they reign,’ also includes the future” (167).

[593](#)

The voice is that of angels only. The genitives τῶων and τῶν πρεσβυτέρων are parallel to τοῦ θρόνου and are determined by ὡς used as a preposition (BAGD, 457). It is unnecessary for Charles to bracket the phrase as a gloss (1.148).

[594](#)

Roloff calls it a “circumlocution for an incalculably great throng” (81).

[595](#)

As in Lenski, 210.

[596](#)

In *I Enoch* 40:1; 60:1; and 71:8 the more natural order is found. Cf. the “innumerable angels” in Heb 12:22.

[597](#)

Gk. λέγοντες; although in 5:9 the elders ἄδουσιν ... λέγοντες.

[598](#)

The increase from three attributes in 4:9-11 to four in 5:13 and to seven in 5:12; 7:12 is stylistic and reflects the tendency of the Apocalypse toward progressive expansion. That all seven are governed by one article indicates that they are to be taken together as a unit.

[599](#)

Barclay calls the last term “the inevitable climax of it all,” and maintains that it is “the one gift that we who have nothing can give to him who possesses all” (1.180).

[600](#)

Although it is not listed in NA²⁷ as a variant, Charles reads ἐν τη θαλάσῃ with Sinaiticus and various versions, noting that ἐπί *cum gen.* would be impossible here (1.150). Moffatt interprets ἐπὶ της θαλάσσης as a reference to sea monsters rather than to sea-faring men (387).

[601](#)

Michaelis notes the use of Χράτος in doxologies (1 Tim 6:16; 1 Pet 4:11; 5:11; Jude 25; Rev 1:6; 5:13) and asserts that “it denotes the superior power of God to which the final victory will belong” (*TDNT*, 3.908).

[602](#)

Evelyn Underhill (*Worship*, 91-92) and others are of the opinion that the scenes of worship in Revelation reflect the liturgical practices of first-century churches in Asia Minor.

[603](#)

Metzger calls them “brilliant little vignettes of God’s judgments working out in history” (58-59). They are the “four chief components of history” (Ellul, 50). Harrington identifies them as “war and its attendant evils” — the war, strife, famine, and pestilence of the Synoptic apocalypse (91). Fiorenza holds that they “do not portray a sequence of events but instead reveal and highlight the true nature of Roman power and rule.... They function to articulate symbolically a sociopolitical critique of imperial rule” (*Revelation: Vision*, 63).

[604](#)

Lilje notes the chariot races, with the colors symbolizing the four winds that accompanied the official opening of an emperor’s reign (123-24). Cf. the description of the “apocalyptic death race” in Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, 184.

[605](#)

See Krodel's specific pairing of each seal with a corresponding prediction in the Synoptic apocalypse (170).

[606](#)

Gk. “Ἐρχοι χαλ ἴδε, **Ν** 2329 2344 MajT^K it vg^{cl} sy^{ph.h**}; Vic Prim Bea (found in AV). The suggestion that ἔρχοι is *nature*'s prayer for the return of Christ and the final redemption of creation stems from a misunderstanding of the four living creatures.

[607](#)

Gk. ἐνχρησεν, as in 6:2 (νιχλων χαλ ἴνα νιχησῃ). Cf. also John 16:33; Rev 3:21.

[608](#)

Hendriksen (113-17) lists seven reasons for understanding the white horse as symbolizing Christ. Zane Hodges identifies the first horseman as Christ and writes that the first of his many triumphs is the rapture of the church (“The First Horseman of the Apocalypse,” BSac, 119 [1962], 324-34). S. J. Considine (“The Rider on the White Horse,” CBQ, 6 [1944], 406-22) concludes that the rider signified Christ or the victorious course of the gospel (421). Hailey takes the first rider as Christ in the gospel (188-89), and the following three as results of the redemptive proclamation: persecution of the saints, discrimination against Christians, and death, the judgment against the unregenerate in which believers must necessarily share (193). Peterson understands the first rider as Christ, and the following horsemen as war (social evil), famine (ecological evil), and sickness (biological evil) (75-77). Sweet says that the white horse, crown, and conquering are all part of the Satanic parody, yet since this doesn't come into the open until chapter 13, he goes back to the ancient view that the rider is the “faithful witnesses” (138).

[609](#)

Gk. διαδήματα rather than στέφανος, as in 6:2.

[610](#)

Boring calls attention to the fact that it was Albrecht Dürer, a 15th-century theologian-artist, who in his series of woodcuts correctly saw that the first horseman belongs to the same series as the other three. This “turned the tide of interpretation of the first horseman from Christ to an agent of eschatological judgment” (123)

[611](#)

Caird, 81. Cf. the use of the phrase in connection with the occupants of the Abyss (9:1, 3, 5), the beast out of the sea (13:5, 7), and the false prophet (13:14, 15)

[612](#)

Rissi argues that the rider on the white horse is the Antichrist, whose form is depicted in Revelation in various fashions (11:7; 13:17) and is seen in action throughout the eschatological period (“The Rider on the White Horse,” *Int*, 18 [1964], 405-18). Robbins supports this identification, arguing that (1) if it is some aspect of righteousness it wouldn’t fit with the other three seals as evil, and (2) in Revelation evil always tries to imitate good (103).

[613](#)

Kraft writes, “Der Reiter symbolisiert den Sieg eines barbarischen, beritten vorzustellenden Volkes” (116). D. T. Niles notes, “When men wage war they always pretend to be fighting for righteousness” (58).

[614](#)

Others interpret the first seal as a Roman emperor, the prince of Dan 9:26 who will head up the revived Roman Empire, periods of peace granted in the providence of God, war (or even “the fearful military complex that prepares for nuclear war,” Boer, 51), divine judgment carried out in war, famine, and pestilence, or a symbol that brings together interrelated elements of false messiahs and false prophecy (A. Kerkeslager, “Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev 6:2,” *JBL*, 112 [1993], 116-21).

[615](#)

Gk. πυρρός, red (as fire — πυρ); A MajT (bo) read πυρός, wheat (perhaps because of its flame color when ripe).

[616](#)

The second rider “does not stand for external military conquest but rather for battles and misgivings that divide the citizens of a community among themselves” (Roloff, 86).

[617](#)

Hendriksen (120-22) takes μάχαρρα as the sacrificial knife in order to support his interpretation of the red horse as “religious persecution.” The use of the word in the NT fails to substantiate this meaning.

[618](#)

Gk. σφάζω means to slaughter or to murder by violence. The king of Babylon slew (ἔσφαξε) the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes (Jer 52:10). It is not the normal word for death in battle.

[619](#)

Cf. also *1 Enoch* 100:12; *2 Esdr* 5:9; 6:24; *2 Bar.* 70:2-8; 48:37 for the Jewish view.

[620](#)

John wrote in a time “when internecine strife was tearing the world apart” (Barclay, 2.5).

[621](#)

Cf. Cicero, *Verr.* 3.81.

[622](#)

Boring writes, “The wealthy continue to live as usual; the crisis hurts the poor” (122). But oil and wine were not luxuries; they were part of the basic commodities of life (cf. Deut 7:13; 11:14; Hos 2:8, 22).

[623](#)

So Lenski, 126.

[624](#)

Moffatt (390) says that this recent event “provided the seer with a bit of colour for his palette as he painted the final terrors.” Cf. the discussion in Beckwith (522) and Charles (1.167-68).

[625](#)

Gk. χλωρός is used elsewhere in Revelation to describe the yellow green of vegetation (8:7; 9:4; cf. Mark 6:39 and Gen 1:30, χόρτον χλωρός), but here it describes the pallor of death or the blanched appearance of a person struck with terror.

[626](#)

Gk. θάνατος in Rev 6:8b as well as Ezek 14:21 refers to pestilence, a particular form of death (cf. also Rev 2:23a). Schick holds that here θάνατος probably means epidemic disease in general rather than death because “death accompanies every rider, being his intrinsic terror” (68).

[627](#)

Strictly speaking, the ῥομφαία (cf. 1:16) is a large blade, perhaps of Thracian origin, and μάχαιρα is a short sword. Cf. the note on 6:4.

[628](#)

Charles, 1.169-71.

[629](#)

McIlvaine, *The Wisdom of the Apocalypse*, 133-35. It is difficult, however, to equate wild beasts with the rider on the white horse.

[630](#)

Shab. 152b.

[631](#)

Morris writes that “John’s words are a reminder that throughout history there has been a persistent hostility toward deeply committed Christians on the part of those wielding power” (105). Ladd adds that the church is called to be a martyr-people and that Jesus’ teaching that to be a disciple a man must “take up his cross” (Matt 10:38; 16:24) meant that he must be willing to suffer martyrdom (104).

[632](#)

Obviously holding this testimony would involve their own testimony as well. The two could hardly be separated. 1611^c 2351 MajT^K sy^{h**} add του.) ἁγνίου after μαρτυρία.

[633](#)

Caird translates “because of the word spoken by God and attested by Jesus” (84).

[634](#)

Boring, 125.

[635](#)

Gk. ὁ δεσπότης is a term used for the master of slaves and emphasizes the absolute power of God. In the LXX ὁ κύριος is more commonly used for God. δεσπότης is found twenty-five times. Josephus notes that the Zealots endured torture and death rather than acknowledge the Roman emperor as δεσπότης (Bell. 7.418-19).

[636](#)

Regarding the cry of the martyrs Glasson concludes, “It should be frankly recognized that this is not a Christian prayer” (49). But to those who label John’s theology of judgment and the cry of the martyrs for justice as being sub-Christian and contrary to the gospel’s demand for love toward enemies Krodel answers: (1) the Synoptic tradition, in addition to its injunction to love one’s enemies, also contains “woes” and judgments; (2) the apocalypse is not championing vindictiveness but the vindication of the oppressed (176). At issue is God’s own character — his justice and righteousness, not to mention his goodness toward those he loves.

[637](#)

De Spec. 30. Ford writes, “Retribution in the sense of punishing the wicked does enter into the picture but the idea of vengeance in the sense of personal satisfaction does not” (100). Sweet notes that “the spirit of the cry seems regrettably pre-Christian,” but points out that it is “not a matter of attitudes to people in daily life, but of God’s cause which seems to go by default” (141). Schick comments that the prayers of the martyrs express “a hunger for righteousness and the victory of truth” (70).

[638](#)

Caird, 85.

[639](#)

Since the prayer comes from under the altar, it may be that we are to understand that it is the blood of the martyrs (rather than the martyrs themselves) that cries out for vindication — not personal vengeance (Ladd, 105-6).

[640](#)

In IQH 8:19-36 the “dwellers on earth” are set over against the army of the holy ones (cf. Burrows, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 404-5).

[641](#)

Cf. Charles (1.176) and the additional note (1.184-88). Also Caird (86) and Preston and Hanson (81).

[642](#)

Gk. ἱμάτια λευκά, synonymous with στολὰὶ λευκαί.

[643](#)

Tacitus writes that “covered with skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished or were nailed to crosses or were doomed to the flames and burned to serve as nightly illumination [in Nero’s gardens]” (*Ann.* 15.44).

[644](#)

Cf. van Unnik, “Le nombre des élus dans la première de Clément,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 42 (1962), 237-46.

[645](#)

Some MSS (A pc vg^{cl}; [Prim]) add ἰδοῦ before σεισμός (“typical of the apocalyptic style,” Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1st ed., 741), but external support is inadequate.

[646](#)

Boring points out that “while this scene is no more to be taken literally than the rest of John’s metaphorical language, neither is it to be decoded in a ‘spiritual’ sense to refer to the fall of oppressive political and social

structures as though John had only dressed up his expectations of a social revolution in apocalyptic language. As a genuine apocalyptic thinker, John uses pictorial language for the end of this world to mean precisely that” (126-27). Eugene Peterson calls upon the insights of Marshall McLuhan to help the literary-oriented individual to grasp the impact of Revelation (“Apocalypse: The Medium is the Message,” *TToday*, 26 [1969], 133-41). Although it will probably take another two generations before the Christian church will overcome the “Gutenberg distortion,” the future, he thinks, looks good (141).

[647](#)

Beasley-Murray notes that only in fairly recent times have we come to appreciate that John’s symbolism constituted a language drawn from an ancient tradition yet spoke eloquently to his contemporaries (“The Contribution of the Book of Revelation to the Christian Belief in Immortality,” *SJT*, 27 [1974], 76-93).

[648](#)

Cf. *As. Mos.* 10:4; 2 Esdr 5:8; 2 Bar. 70:8.

[649](#)

The reference is to the rough cloth made from the hair of a black goat and worn in times of mourning.

[650](#)

The deep, blood-red color of the moon would result from whatever in the atmosphere caused the sun to be darkened.

[651](#)

Cf. Isa 13:10; Ezek 32:7; Amos 8:8; *As. Mos.* 10:4-5; Mark 13:24.

[652](#)

Gk. ὄλυνθοι are the green figs that appear in winter before the leaves and are easily blown from the tree.

[653](#)

Cf. Isa 34:4; *Sib. Or.* 3:83. 2 Pet 3:12 asserts that the heavens will be destroyed by fire.

[654](#)

“What sinners dread most is not death, but the revealed Presence of God,” is Swete’s oft-quoted comment (94). Hughes adds that “the dark horror of the death of the unregenerate is not simply the dying but the awareness of coming judgment” (92).

[655](#)

Only the last group (“every slave and every free man”) fails to fit this category. It was probably added to stress the idea of completeness. Schick stresses that the seven groups (symbol of completeness) cover everyone “from the highest social caste to the lowest class of society” (72).

[656](#)

A χιλιάρχος at that time was the commander of a cohort (about 600 men).

[657](#)

Caird refers to “the wrath of the Lamb” as “a deliberate paradox, by which John intends to goad his readers into theological alertness” (90). Others reject its theology entirely on the basis that for them wrath seems to be incongruous when assigned to a slain lamb. This overly sensitive concept of divine anger against sin, however, fails to understand the hideous nature of sin and the divine reaction against all that has worked against the best interests of both God and the human race.

[658](#)

As in A. T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, 159-80.

[659](#)

F. F. Bruce, 645. Torrance calls the wrath of God’s Lamb “the consuming passion of His holy love that wills to destroy all that is unloving and untrue” (49). Cf. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, for a general treatment of the subject.

[660](#)

Noting that it is God’s enemies who speak of “the wrath of the Lamb,” Montague (drawing on Caird) remarks that “it is the supreme conquest of Satan to persuade men and women that the God of love is the source of wrath” (106).

[661](#)

Some manuscripts read αὐτοῦ. (A MajT sa^{ms} bo; Prim), an understandable scribal alteration, since ὀργή in v. 16 is used in connection with ἄρνιον only.

[662](#)

Giblin holds that chapter 7 is not an “interlude” but an expansion that anticipates subsequent key events” (88). While it is certainly related to themes that follow, it is best understood as a strategic interlude, as is the section 10:1-11:14 that follows the first six trumpets.

[663](#)

John, in keeping with the rest of the NT, distinguishes clearly between “wrath” (ὀργή) and “tribulation” (θλιψίς). The people of God experience the latter (seals), but not the former.

[664](#)

Some commentators, noting that in Zech 6:5 (ASV) the four horses are said to be “the four winds of heaven,” suggest that the four winds of Rev 7:1 may be another way of referring to the four horsemen of chapter 6 (Morris, 110; Beasley-Murray, 142). Thus Rev 7:1-3 would be retrospective and relate to the earlier events. The RSV rightly translates Zech 6:5 as saying that the four chariots “are going forth to the four winds of heaven” — no identification between horses and winds is made.

[665](#)

On the basis that the four angels are said to be unable to keep the Sabbath (cf. *Jub.* 2:18ff.), some writers classify them as a lower order.

[666](#)

I Enoch 76 pictures twelve portals at the ends of the earth open to the four quarters of heaven. Through the center portal on each side blew the winds of blessing and through the outside portals blew (diagonally) the hurtful winds.

[667](#)

This seems to be the significance of the change from ἐπί with the genitive γ.ης and θαλάσσης to ἐπί with the accusative δένδρον.

[668](#)

OT verses such as Isa 2:13; 14:8; and 61:3, in which trees are interpreted as people in the targums, have suggested to some that “tree” in Rev 7:1 may be taken metaphorically for those who dwell upon the earth (cf. Ford, 115).

[669](#)

Gk. ἵνα μὴ πνέῃ, a negative purpose clause with the present subjective; cf. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 4.348.

[670](#)

The wind blowing “on the sea” could be destructive by causing huge tidal waves. Bratcher and Hatton suggest that the writer may have had in mind damage to islands in the sea (123).

[671](#)

Charles, 1.191-201, suggests two independent traditions behind 7:1-8: the first (vv. 1-3) brought in without essential alteration to introduce the second (vv. 4-8), which originally referred to literal Israel but is modified by the

Seer to represent spiritual Israel. Beasley-Murray favors the view that vv. 1-8 constituted a single Jewish apocalyptic prophecy that John adopted and reapplied to fit his own purpose (141).

[672](#)

Cf. Gen 2:8, where the garden of Eden is planted “in the east”; also Sib. Or. 3:652, “from the sunrise God shall send a king.” There is a natural connection between the place where light originates and the source of divine blessing.

[673](#)

Ford lists six things that a seal would connote to the prophet’s contemporaries (116-17).

[674](#)

The mark of Ezek 9:4 was the Hebrew *tau*, made like an X or +. Krodel notes that “to Greek Christians this sign would suggest the first letter of the name of Christ (the letter chi) or his cross” (182).

[675](#)

In passages such as 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30 it is not baptism that is the seal of the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit himself.

[676](#)

That they are not sealed before the first six seals signifies that “Christians are not to be spared the tribulations which the entire earth will experience” (Montague, 107). They are sealed from *wrath*, but *not* from tribulation. The sealing is “to secure the servants of God against the attacks of demonic powers coming into open manifestation” (Charles, 1.205).

[677](#)

Glasson holds that John has adopted the common apocalyptic view that the lost tribes were in some unknown hiding place and would return before the end (52). Walvoord accepts the passage as proving that the twelve tribes are still in existence (141). He notes that although genealogies are lost, the modern Jew can be assured that God knows in which tribe he should be classified (143). Kraft takes the 144,000 as “der heilige Rest Israels” (126) and the multitude as “die Erlösten aus den Heiden” (128).

[678](#)

Wilcock calls it a “suspiciously tidy sort of number that is much more likely to be a symbol than a statistic” (80).

[679](#)

Preston and Hanson write that in this scene we have “a picture of all the Christians who will remain faithful during the coming trial when the Beast appears” (84). Boer says the author’s purpose is “to present a perfect number of the saved in a way that any reader familiar with the Old Testament would be able to understand” (59).

[680](#)

Kiddle represents this position when he writes that the 12,000 from each tribe “represents that proportion of Christians who in the book of destiny are inscribed as martyrs” (136). Caird (97) holds that John envisaged the great martyrdom that lay ahead as a new Exodus (15:2-4) in which the martyrs were marked with the name of the Lamb if not with his blood (cf. Exod 12:23).

[681](#)

Wall writes, “While there is no indication in the text that the 144,000 enumerate the remnant of martyrs, it does make sense of the immediate context to identify this group with those who earlier cry out for vindication (6:10)” (118).

[682](#)

Kiddle (135-36) pictures the church as dwelling in the desert and thus protected from the plagues that fall on the great city where the martyrs carry out their testimony and eventually die (11:8). Yet in 12:13-17 the dragon, when unable to overtake the woman who has been taken away to the safety of the wilderness, goes away “to make war against the rest of her offspring — those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” — most certainly a reference to the church.

[683](#)

In 7:6 the Bohairic reads Δάν rather than Μανασση. In 7:5, 1854 *pc* have Δάν for Γάδ.

[684](#)

Adv. Haer. 50.30.2. Hippolytus, writing a few years later, says, “As the Christ was born from the tribe of Judah, so will the Antichrist be born from the tribe of Dan” (*De Ant.* 14).

[685](#)

Roloff, however, is of the opinion that the listing is based on “dogmatically deliberate corrections” (98). C. R. Smith explains the unusual order and content as a conscious effort to depict the church as the new Israel (“The Portrayal of the Church as the New Israel in the Names and Order of the

Tribes in Revelation 7.5-8,” *JSNT*, 39 [1990], 111-18). R. E. Winkle would understand the order as determined by a counterclockwise listing of the tribes as given in Ezek 48:31-34 (“Another Look at the List of Tribes in Revelation 7,” *AUSS* 27 [1989], 53-67), but even then Levi is out of order and Manasseh is not listed in Ezekiel.

[686](#)

Buchanan Gray, EB, 4.5208-9.

[687](#)

Boring writes that “as 7:1-8 presents the church militant on earth, sealed and drawn up in battle formation before the coming struggle, 7:9-17 presents the church after the battle, triumphant in heaven” (131).

[688](#)

These four designations occur together in Rev 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; and 14:6 (also with the modification of one member in 10:11 and 17:15). It is interesting that the order differs in each case.

[689](#)

For similar use of palms cf. 1 Mace 13:51; 2 Mace 10:7.

[690](#)

The OT roots of “salvation” go back to God’s deliverance of the children Israel in times of peril and deprivation. The outstanding example of his saving action was the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt (Isa 63:8-9) and their entrance into the land of Canaan (Ps. 44:3-4). Σωτηρία in Revelation (7:10; 12:10; 19:1) carries the OT nuance of victory (*TNDT abr.*, 1136).

[691](#)

P. Ellingworth says that σωτηρία in 7:10; 12:10; and 19:1 carries the OT idea of “victory” (“Salvation to Our God,” *BT* 34 [1983], 444-45). K. H. Schelkle calls the verse a “heavenly victory cry” (*EDNT*, 3.328).

[692](#)

The first *Amen* may be in response to the praise of the great multitude. The omission of Ἀμήν at the close of the verse (C pc t; Prim) seems to suggest that it may have been a liturgical addition (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1st ed., 742).

[693](#)

Morris calls it “the blessing above all others” (114). Preston and Hanson define εὐλογία as “that spontaneous act of thanks which men utter when they realize more vividly than ever before their happiness” (47).

[694](#)

“Thanks” in 7:12 replaces “wealth” in 5:12.

[695](#)

Cf. Jer 1:11, 13; 24:3; Amos 7:8; 8:2; Asc. Isa., 9:25-26.

[696](#)

Gk. μου is omitted by A 1611 * *pc* a gig vg^{ms} sa bo^{ms}; Cyp Prim Bea.

[697](#)

Taking οἱ ἐρχόμενοι as an imperfect participle (Charles, 1.213). The participle should be understood in a general sense to mean “such as come” (cf. Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, 56) or perhaps as a more vivid way of saying “they that have just come.” The aorist ἦλθον of v. 13 makes unlikely the idea that ἐρχόμενοι refers to some who are still arriving.

[698](#)

Hughes, 97; cf. Robbins, 115.

[699](#)

Wall, 120.

[700](#)

In 22:14 the present tense πλύνοντες may refer to a continuing practice.

[701](#)

1854 2053 2329 MajT^K read ἐπλάτυναν, “enlarged or made broad” (cf. Matt 23:5), perhaps because the figure of washing garments in blood seemed unacceptable.

[702](#)

The suggestion that John later corrects himself on this point (Swete, 104; 21:25 reads “there shall be no night there; cf. 22:5) is unnecessary. Another point said to be corrected later is the existence of a temple in the New Jerusalem: according to 21:22, there is no temple in the city (Swete, 104). But the New Jerusalem is not identical with the heavenly presence of God.

[703](#)

20:10 speaks of the devil and his cohorts as tormented in the lake of fire “day and night for ever and ever,” hardly a reference to successive periods of light and darkness.

[704](#)

When distinguished from the ἱερόν (the entire temple enclosure), the ναός refers to the inner shrine (cf. Matt 23:35).

[705](#)

Gk. λατρεύουρα (Luke 2:37). Paul speaks of the true circumcision “who worship (λατρεύοντες) by the Spirit of God” (Phil 3:3). Cf. also Rom 12:1, λογιζήν λατρείαν. In the LXX priestly service in the temple is usually indicated by λειτουργέω.

[706](#)

Morris, 115.

[707](#)

Taking χαυμα in the sense of ὁ χάσων in Isa 49:10. John’s choice of χαυμα suggests a contrast with 16:9, where, as a result of the fourth bowl being poured upon the earth, ἐχαυματίσθησαν ... χαυμα μέγα. οὐδὲ μή with the aorist subjunctive is a strong double negative.

[708](#)

The paradoxical quality mentioned by so many writers is less striking if ἄρνιον in Revelation carries the idea of messianic leadership. Cf. comm. on 5:6.

[709](#)

The figure is used by other NT writers as well; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4.

[710](#)

Gk. ποιμαίνω normally means to tend or lead to pasture, but in these verses it pictures the shepherd’s action against preying beasts.

[711](#)

Cf. Ps 2:9, LXX, πομανε λς αὐτοὺς ἐν ράβδῳ σιδηρᾷ.

[712](#)

Swete translates, “to Life’s water-springs” (105). The normal order is found in 21:6; cf. 22:1, 17.

[713](#)

Cf. Isa 25:8 as a probable source. The phrase is repeated in 21:4.

[714](#)

So Rist, 424.

[715](#)

Charles holds that the Apocalypse proper (excluding the Prologue and Epilogue) consists of seven parts. “The events in these seven parts are described in visions in strict chronological order, save in the case of certain proleptic visions which are inserted for purposes of encouragement and lie outside the orderly development of the theme of the Seer” (l.xxiii). Charles found it necessary to posit considerable textual rearrangement in view of the culprit (a “shallow-brained fanatic and celibate”) who had taken

unwarranted liberties with the text (l.lv). The other prominent exponent of a chronological sequence was Oman, who held that the existing confusion resulted primarily from an incorrect arrangement of the papyrus sheets (*The Book of Revelation* [1923]; also *The Text of Revelation: A Revised Theory* [1928]).

[716](#)

Hendriksen finds seven parallel sections each of which spans the entire dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ (25). Bowman views the book as a drama in seven acts separated by passages that he likens to “stage props” (“The Revelation to John: Its Dramatic Structure and Message,” *Int*, 9 [1955], 436-53). Farrer holds to a sequence of three topics that, without adhering to a continuous time sequence, yet attach to three periods that are in genuine historical sequence (22-23).

[717](#)

For surveys of the many approaches to the structure of Revelation cf. Guthrie, *NT Introduction: Hebrews to Revelation*, 289-94, and André Feuillet, *The Apocalypse*, 23-36.

[718](#)

The seven trumpets are an expansion of the seventh seal; and the seven bowls, after some intervening visions, follow the seventh trumpet.

[719](#)

Montague writes that “the view that has gained greater acceptance is that the series of interlocking visions ... is a literary device. It enables the author to describe the same reality from different points of view” (116-17).

[720](#)

It should be noticed that the degree of severity tends to increase within each series as well. The demonic woes of the fifth and sixth trumpets (chap. 9) are certainly more extreme than the catastrophes of the first four trumpets, as are the cosmic disturbances of the sixth seal (6:12-14) than war and its consequences in the first four seals (note also the escalating devastation of the seven bowls).

[721](#)

Lohmeyer allows the number “seven” to control his analysis of the entire book, as does Farrer, especially in his earlier work, *A Rebirth of Images*. Commenting on Farrer’s ability to fit all the complexities of the Apocalypse into his scheme, Guthrie notes that this should cause no surprise, “for the pursuer of symbols can see them wherever he chooses” (291).

[722](#)

Cf. Caird, 106. He writes that the unity of the book “is neither chronological nor arithmetical, but artistic.”

[723](#)

See Kiddle’s section on “The Literary Character of Revelation” (xxvii-xxxiii). E. F. Scott wisely remarks that a perfectly logical apocalypse would be a contradiction in terms (26).

[724](#)

Kiddle, 144.

[725](#)

Victorinus, a third-century exegete, wrote “significatur initium quietis aeternae” (cited by Swete, 107).

[726](#)

Charles, 1.223-24. The Talmud refers to angels refraining from singing during the day so that the praises of Israel may be heard in heaven (*Hag.* 12b), but this should probably be taken metaphorically.

[727](#)

D’Aragon calls the silence “a striking contrast between the hymns that go before and the crash that follows” (478). For Hughes it is a “silence of awesome expectation” (101).

[728](#)

2 Esdr 7:30 speaks of a seven-day period of primeval silence between this age and the age to come. Out of this primeval silence came the Word of God to create the world; now silence precedes the re-creation of the world (Rissi, *Time and History*, 3-6). Sweet writes that the silence may correspond to the time of prayer in the daily ritual of sacrifice in the Jewish temple (159). In reporting the siege of Jerusalem Josephus tells of a great light that appeared as a sign in the sanctuary for half an hour (Bell. 6.5.3).

[729](#)

Following the RSV. Judgment (at least in part) is to be understood as a response to the prayers of the saints (cf. comm. on v. 4).

[730](#)

Verse 7 calls them archangels. Cf. also Rev 1:4; 1 *Enoch* 81:5; 90:21-22; T. Levi 3:5.

[731](#)

Although Roloff appears to identify them with the seven spirits before the throne in 1:4(107)

[732](#)

Cf. the phrase, “As the LORD lives, before whom I stand” (NKJ) in 2 Kgs 5:16 and, with minor modification, in 1 Kgs 17:1; 18:15; and 2 Kgs 3:14.

[733](#)

Caird (108) says that John must have had this story in mind because of the appearance of the ark in 11:19 (cf. Josh 6:4, 6, 8, etc.).

[734](#)

This position is apparently accepted by Walvoord (152). Cf. Bede, Elliott, and other early commentators. Accordingly, the incense would be, as Hendriksen says, “our Savior’s intercession in heaven” (142).

[735](#)

Gk. ἐπί may indicate that he is leaning over the altar. Acts 5:23 speaks of the keeper of the prison standing ἐπὶ τῶν θυρῶν (at or before the doors).

[736](#)

Charles holds that there is no evidence in either Jewish or Christian apocalyptic of two altars in heaven (1.227).

[737](#)

The reference in 1 Kgs 7:50 and 2 Chron 4:22 may be to golden snuff dishes (*NBD*, 203). 1 Esdr 2:13 speaks of “silver censers” that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kgs 25:15).

[738](#)

Gk. λίβανωτός occurs only here in the NT. Normally it refers to the gum of the tree λίβανος (cf. 1 Chron 9:29; *Mart. Pol.* 15:2).

[739](#)

Swete thinks that the prayers of the saints are the live coals on which the grains of incense fall (108). Cf. Sweet, 160.

[740](#)

F. F. Bruce, 646.

[741](#)

The *Testament of Levi* speaks of “the angels of the presence of the Lord, who minister and make propitiation to the Lord for all the sins of ignorance of the righteous” (3:5-6). In Dan 9:20ff. Gabriel plays a mediatorial role; cf. Dan 10:12-14.

[742](#)

Gk. ἐΐληφεν is a dramatic perfect that heightens the vividness of the scene.

[743](#)

There is no way of knowing whether it is fire or burning incense that the angel casts to the earth. Since ἔβαλεν stands without an object, it may be that the censer is thrown down as well.

[744](#)

Kiddle calls this John's formula for the world's dissolution (147). Cf. comm. on 4:5. Roloff says that "the pouring out of fire is a symbol for the outbreak of divine wrath" (198).

[745](#)

Hughes, however, is sure that "the seven trumpet blasts are in effect a recapitulation of the seven unsealings of the scroll" (105), and Boring argues that "this second cycle is not a chronological continuation of the first but a retelling of the first cycle at a more intensive level" (35). Efrid questions the validity of the chronological interpretation, noting that "problems relating to chronological sequence are imported into the text "because people forget that apocalyptic writing consists of a series of self-contained visionary units" (69). What the passage teaches is blurred by a concern for chronology.

[746](#)

Rev 9:4 specifically exempts the faithful from the locust plague, and 9:20-21 implies that they are not under consideration in the second Woe (9:13-21).

[747](#)

"The first four [trumpet] plagues are supernatural, in contrast with those of the horsemen, and the last *three* are explicitly demonic" (Sweet, 162).

[748](#)

Morris says that it would be a "great mistake to read this fiery, passionate and poetic spirit as though he were composing a pedantic piece of scientific prose" (120).

[749](#)

Exodus 7-11 details the plagues of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn that preceded the Exodus. Cf. Moffatt (404) for references to the Jewish tradition concerning the disasters that were to preface the second great redemption.

[750](#)

Charles places v. 6 after v. 2 (which in turn should follow vv. 3-5) and removes vv. 7-12 as a later addition that has necessitated a change to seven

angels and trumpets from the original three (1.218-23). He holds that the sealing in 7:4-8 is not against cosmic phenomena, but against the demonic woes of 8:13 — 9:21; 11:14ff. (1.218).

[751](#)

Josephus describes the trumpet as a narrow tube about a cubit in length with a mouthpiece wide enough to admit the breath and a bell-shaped extremity (*Ant.* 3.291).

[752](#)

For a detailed study of the trumpet-plagues see Paulien's published dissertation, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets*, 1988.

[753](#)

That this passage may have been in his mind is supported by references to other eschatological features also mentioned by Joel (fire, cf. Rev 8:7, 8, 10 with Joel 2:30; and the darkening of the sun, cf. Rev 8:12 with Joel 2:31).

[754](#)

John's constant use of Jewish material makes it unlikely that his imagery here would have come from the volcanic activity of the Aegean islands. Swete refers to a blood-red rain that fell in Southern Europe in 1901, said to be the result of fine red sand from the Sahara (110).

[755](#)

The thrice-repeated *κατεχάη* lends to the verse the aura of a prophetic oracle; cf. "For three sins ... even for four" of Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, etc.

[756](#)

Ford notes that the predictions of fractions of land being affected were not unknown among the prophets (Ezek 5:12; Zech 13:8-9), the unaffected part being the remnant (132-40).

[757](#)

In this context *γη* means the land in contrast to the sea (vv. 8-9) and inland waters (vv. 10-11).

[758](#)

Gk. *δένδρον* refers quite normally to fruit trees; cf. Matt 7:17 ("every sound tree bears good fruit") and Jude 12 ("fruitless trees in late autumn").

[759](#)

Bratcher and Hatton, 137.

[760](#)

This second plague is the only one that does not correspond directly to one of the Egyptian plagues — which merely indicates that John's nemesis is

the Roman Empire, not ancient Egypt.

[761](#)

According to Lilje, Jewish writers regarded it as a divine judgment on Rome for having destroyed Jerusalem (143).

[762](#)

Cf. also *1 Enoch* 21:3ff.; 108:3-6. On the basis of these verses Rist suggests that the burning mountain of Revelation may represent a fallen angel expelled from heaven to wreak destruction on the world (428-29). Montague finds behind the reference to the falling star an ancient myth of Babylonian or Phoenician origin that explains the disappearance of the morning star when the sun rises. Heyl (the Morning Star), a lesser god, attempts to climb to the heavens to make himself king of the gods, but is driven from the sky by the rising sun (120).

[763](#)

In spite of the many specific indications that John actually “saw” the visions he recorded, Boring insists that in their present form they are literary compositions based on John’s visionary experience (27). Aune correctly holds that the Apocalypse is a literary replication of the original and unique revelatory experience of John the Seer (“The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia*, 36 [1986], 65-96).

[764](#)

Shooting stars and meteorites were considered omens of destruction in the ancient world.

[765](#)

Charles, 1.235. See Beckwith (57) and Moffatt (405) for references to the secondary literature.

[766](#)

Verse 11 indicates that it was *one-third*, rather than *all*, of the waters (which could be inferred from the final clause of v. 10) that was affected by the plague.

[767](#)

Moffatt notes that springs would appear somewhat mysterious to the ancient mind and, rising from the subterranean abyss, could have demonic associations (405).

[768](#)

Caird’s suggestion that “Wormwood is the star of the new Babylon which has poisoned by its idolatry the springs of its own life” (115) is ingenious

but overly subtle.

[769](#)

Fresh water was of prime importance in times of ancient warfare. The poisoning of water had military significance; cf. Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, 2.320-22.

[770](#)

Gk. πλήσσω (only here in the NT) is used in Exod 9:31-32 (LXX) of the devastating effects of hail upon crops standing in the field. Cf. Ps 102:4 (101:4, LXX), “My heart is blighted (ἐπλήγην) and withered like grass.”

[771](#)

The NKJ follows the MajT^A, which reads ἀγγέλου rather than ἄετο.υ. (perhaps suggested by ἄγγελον πετόμεον in 14:6) and translates “an angel.”

[772](#)

In answer to the question of how God could use an unclean bird as his messenger, Roloff notes that the eagle here is not a messenger of God but “simply has the function of announcing imminent disaster in a graphic way and portraying it beforehand” (112).

[773](#)

Gk. ἄετός may be used for the vulture as well as the eagle. Goodspeed translates Luke 17:37, “Wherever there is a dead body the vultures (ἄετοί) will flock.”

[774](#)

104 2037 *al* add τρίς after λέγοντος φωνῇ. μεγάλη (“shrieking loudly three times,” Ford, 134).

[775](#)

Cf. comm. on 6:10 for “the inhabitants of the earth” as a semitechnical designation of people in their wickedness. 9:4 indicates that the locusts are to torment only those who have not been sealed by God. 9:20 implies the same for the second Woe.

[776](#)

Taking πεπτωγότα as a dramatic perfect; cf. Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 204-5.

[777](#)

Cf. Morris, 124, for a convenient summary.

[778](#)

Some identify him more closely as Abaddon, the angel of the Abyss (9:11). Others suggest Satan.

[779](#)

Charles shows that when applied to stars symbolizing angels, “to fall” means no more than “to descend” (1.238-39; so also Krodel, 201).

[780](#)

In *I Enoch* 19:1; 20:2 it is the archangel Uriel who is in charge of the Abyss.

[781](#)

Wall refers to it as a “subterranean smokestack” (128).

[782](#)

Cf. Charles (1.240-41) for a discussion of the Abyss in *Enoch*. The background for this figure could be the volcano belching forth smoke and fire from below.

[783](#)

Krodel points out that the Abyss appears in the Bible in two senses — (1) the place of the dead, and (2) a jail for evil spirits. In the present verse “the abyss is thought to be the place of demonic beings beneath the earth” (201).

[784](#)

The LXX reads ὥσει χαπνὸς χαμίνου.

[785](#)

Gk. ὁ ἄνθρωπος in this context has no meaningful connection with Eph 2:2, which speaks of a spirit being who has control over τοῦ ἀέρος.

[786](#)

For example, Hughes reads specific meaning into the rising smoke when he writes that “the world darkened by this smoke from the abyss symbolizes the pervasive influence of Satan in human society” (109). Caird’s remark that the Abyss “represents the cumulative power and virulence of evil” (119) is another example of overinterpretation. The interpreter must be careful not to substitute homiletics for exegesis.

[787](#)

Thomas holds that the locusts are “demons or fallen angels who assume a locust-like form” (2.30).

[788](#)

Barclay notes that in 1866 200,000 people perished of famine following a plague of locusts invading Algiers (2.49-50). Cf. the excursus on Palestinian locusts in S. R. Driver’s commentary on Joel in CBSC, 82ff.

[789](#)

Moffatt envisions a shifting vision in which “the dense smoke resolves itself into a swarm of infernal demons in the form of locusts” (406).

[790](#)

Ladd (131) notes that “the scorpion, like the snake, was a creature hostile to man and so became a symbol of the forces of spiritual evil (Luke 10:19; Sirach 39:29).”

[791](#)

Kilpatrick lists 2053 pc vg arm TR as adding μόνους after ἄνθρώπους.

[792](#)

That this fifth trumpet is necessarily subsequent to the sealing that follows the sixth seal makes any precise recapitulation impossible.

[793](#)

Specifically mentioned in Exod 8:22; 9:4, 26; 10:23; and 11:7 (“Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel”). See also Wis 18:1.

[794](#)

Here as elsewhere in Revelation βασανίζω carries the idea of punishment: 11:10; 14:10; 20:10 (12:2 is an exception). The cognate noun βασανισμός has the same connotation (14:11; 18:7, 10, 15).

[795](#)

So, e.g., Beckwith, 562.

[796](#)

Ford cites an “interesting interpretation” by S. Giet in which the first four seals point to troubles preceding the Jewish War, and the five months’ period of torment by the monstrous locusts reflects “the five months during which the troops of Gessius Florus cast terror over Palestine” (149). But this is surely idiosyncratic.

[797](#)

Jer 8:3 is not relevant. Death there refers to corpses that have been unearthed, not the desire to die.

[798](#)

For the idea of death as preferable to life in the writings of Greek and Roman poets cf. Swete, 117. Barclay (2.51) quotes Cornelius Gallus as saying, “Worse than any wound is the wish to die and yet not be able to do so.”

[799](#)

Morris, 127. Robertson (*Word Pictures*, 6.363) calls φεύγει a “vivid futuristic present.” Alford (641) says that the present tense indicates the *habitual* avoidance of death in those days.

[800](#)

Because the scorpions (1) have a dreaded “sting,” (2) the judgment they bring is not final, (3) they have “blonde hair” (v. 7, “on their heads they wore something like crowns of gold”), and (4) they are represented as cavalry, some have seen in the imagery a reference to the barbarian hordes from the north. It may well be that John is playing on the Roman dread of foreign invasion. Yet Kiddle is persuasive in his remark that “John’s account is so straightforward and vivid that comment is superfluous” (158). Whatever the source of the imagery the point is perfectly clear that judgment of a demonic nature will in the end time be visited on the unbelieving world.

[801](#)

The golden crowns may have been suggested by the yellowish color of their breasts. Ford thinks that the image may have come from the bronze helmets of the Roman legionnaires, which were burnished with gold (151). The plural, χρυσοι (read by 0207 MajT^K), is rare and less strongly supported than ὅμοιοι χρυσῶ. (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1st ed., 743).

[802](#)

That both Samson (Judg 16:13, 19) and Absalom (2 Sam 14:25-26) wore their hair long should show that long hair may be a symbol of vitality rather than femininity.

[803](#)

Goliath wore a θώρακα ἀλυσιδωτόν, a coat of scale armor (1 Sam 17:5).

[804](#)

The genitives ἄρμάτων and ἵππων are not coordinate; cf. the RSV, “the noise of many chariots with horses.” Kilpatrick notes that ἵππων is omitted by 325 2031 pc. For reference to large chariot forces cf. 1 Sam 13:5 (30,000) and 1 Chron 19:7 (32,000). In I Macc 6:43 war elephants were protected by wearing coats of mail. A charge by elephants equipped in this way would make a terrible din.

[805](#)

Gk. ξέντρον is used in Acts 26:14 for the goad used in directing oxen and in 1 Cor 15:55 for the sting of death. The whip in 1 Kgs 12:11 was called a

scorpion because of the severe pain of the animal's bite.

[806](#)

Hendriksen sees the description as “the operation of the powers of darkness in the soul of the wicked during this present age” (147). Wilcox asserts that the locusts are “chronic hardship, diseases, enmities, insecurities” (98). For Hengstenberg the plague is the hellish spirit that penetrates the earth (1.429ff), and for Dana, the forces of decay and corruption that God will use to undermine the Roman Empire (126ff.).

[807](#)

Krodel says that “the locust-demons seem to reappear in new disguises and torment in forms such as alcohol and drug abuse, insatiable yearning for sexual promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, collective hysteria and subgroup tantrums, neurotic drives in diverse forms, driving passions for power, prestige, and wealth at the expense of one's own humanity, torments of psychic disorders, debilitating inability to maintain personal relationships, and other ‘locusts’ ” (200).

[808](#)

According to Prov 30:27 “locusts have no king” (cf. Prov 6:7, which says approximately the same of the ant). That is not the case with the demonic “locusts.”

[809](#)

Uriel, whose name means “Fire of God,” is “the archangel of fire and of Gehenna, where flame is the chief element” (Jewish Encyclopedia, 12.383).

[810](#)

It is parallel with Sheol in Job 26:6; Prov 15:11; 27:20; with Death in Job 28:22; and with the grave in Ps 88:11.

[811](#)

Cf. Jeremias on Ἀβαδδών in *TDNT*, 1.4. P⁴⁷ (2053) read βάττων (βάττος, the stammerer, was a king of Cyrene), and the Bohairic reads Μαχεδών, a Macedonian.

[812](#)

Farrer notes that John used *Apollyon* (Destroyer) rather than *Apoleia* (Destruction) because he wanted a concrete masculine rather than a feminine abstract (119).

[813](#)

Gk. ἀπόλλυμι, (Aeschylus, *Agam.* 1082).

[814](#)

Beasley-Murray notes that if John had in mind the fact that both Caligula and Nero aped the deity of Apollo and Domitian claimed to be his incarnation, “His last word about the fifth trumpet was a master stroke of irony: the destructive host of hell had as its king the emperor of Rome!” (162-63).

[815](#)

Hailey, 233.

[816](#)

That v. 12 ends with μετὰ ταυτα has caused considerable textual alteration. A number of MSS read the words with the following verse, either moving the initial ~~Ν~~αί or omitting it (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 669-70).

[817](#)

Gk. φωνήν μίαν means a “single or solitary voice.” Here it is appropriately used of the universal desire of the church. Textual variants indicate confusion as to the identity of the voice. λέγοντα (v. 14), read by N * A 2344 pc gig; Cyp Tyc Prim Bea, is the preferred reading; λέγουαν (P⁴⁷ 0207 1611 2053 MajT^A) would take φωνήν as an antecedent, while λέγοντος (1006 1841 1854 2329 2351 MajT^K) would take θυσιαστηρίου.

[818](#)

Understanding ex [μέου] των τεσσάρων ~~Χ~~εράτων; cf. Matt 17:45. For the horns of the altar of incense, cf. Exod 30:2, 10. External evidence is evenly divided for the inclusion or omission of τεσσάρων. The UBS committee included it in square brackets. Metzger notes that it may have been added to make an antithesis with φωνήν μίαν and a parallelism with τοὺς τέσσαρας ἀγγέλους (of v. 14) or accidentally omitted when the eye of the scribe passed over to the last letters of ~~Χ~~εράτων (*Textual Commentary*, 670).

[819](#)

P⁴⁷ omits τέσσαρας.

[820](#)

Cf. Kiddle (161-63) for arguments supporting the identification.

[821](#)

So Beckwith, 567. Cf. the “four spirits of heaven” in Zech 6:5; Dan 7:2; and the four angels with torches in 2 Bar. 6:4.

[822](#)

The Euphrates is the longest river in western Asia, some 1,700 miles.

[823](#)

Caird speaks of the “Roman neurosis about Parthia,” which began with the defeat of Crassus in 53 B.C. and deepened with the disgraceful capitulation of Vologeses in A.D. 62 (122).

[824](#)

Cf. comm. on 6:10 and 8:13.

[825](#)

Ladd, 135.

[826](#)

The GNB translates, “for this very hour of this very day of this very month and year.”

[827](#)

Gk. ἡτοιμασμένοι. Cf. Matt 25:34, where the king invites the sheep to inherit the kingdom prepared (ἡτοιμασμένην) for them, and the reference a few verses later to the eternal fire prepared (ἡτοιμασμένον) for the devil and his angels (v. 41).

[828](#)

BAGD (199) under δισμυριάς. The source of the number seems to be Ps 68:17, where the chariots of God are said to be “tens of thousands and thousands of thousands” (cf. Dan 7:10; Rev 5:11). Reference to an article in Time magazine that reported the People’s Republic of China as having a militia of 200,000,000 men and women (Walvoord, 166, n. 13) is interesting but no special help.

[829](#)

For example, Hailey tells us that we are not to think of physical armies but of “God’s death-dealing judgments as He uses the armies of time to execute His wrath” (239).

[830](#)

Gk. ὁράσει in 4:3 refers to the appearance of what is seen.

[831](#)

As Beckwith says (568).

[832](#)

Moffatt (409) notes that in the Persian heavy cavalry both horses and horsemen were clad in bright plate. Cf. also Alford (646) and Beckwith (568). The horse-shaped locusts of 9:9 had θώραχας σιδηρους.

[833](#)

Swete, 123. He notes that πύρινος is properly “of fire,” while πυρρός is “flame-coloured.” Ps 103:4 is quoted in support.

[834](#)

MM, 647.

[835](#)

Beasley-Murray says that “the picture is meant to be inconceivable, horrifying, and even revolting” (165).

[836](#)

As maintained by Hendriksen (148) and Walvoord (167). Kroll writes that John did not “predict” the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, acid rain that pollutes rivers and lakes through industrial pollution, atomic explosions and napalm bombs, or Islam as a tormentor of Christianity. He correctly concludes that “to use Revelation in this way is to misuse it” (208).

[837](#)

Moffatt refers us to Ovid’s bulls and Diomedes’s horses (409).

[838](#)

Gk. ἀδικουσιν; cf. the same verb in 9:4.

[839](#)

Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 8.35.

[840](#)

For other suggestions cf. Beckwith (569).

[841](#)

So Caird, 122-23.

[842](#)

A number of MSS read οὐ (C 1006 1841 1854 2351 MajT^K) or καὶ οὐ (2329 pc) because of the difficulty of construing οὐδέ without a corresponding clause (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 1 st ed., 744).

[843](#)

N * A pc read πονηρίας (“wickedness”) rather than πορνείας (“fornication”; BAGD has, “of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse,” 693).

[844](#)

Hughes writes, “The much vaunted civilization of our day may be free from graven images, but it is certainly not free from idolatry” (115). Romans 1:22-25 presents idolatry as humanity’s primary sin. It takes the form of exchanging the glory of God for images of mortal man and animals (v. 23) and the truth of God for a lie (v. 25). “Self-deification lies at the heart of human rebellion” (Mounce, *Romans*, 79).

[845](#)

See esp. the mocking oracle in Isa 44:6-20.

[846](#)

Gk. φάρμακον occurs only here in the NT. Moffatt (410) notes that it is used of the prevalent Asiatic vice of magic spells inciting to illicit lust.

[847](#)

Beasley-Murray (168) states that by means of the interlude John wishes to make two points unambiguously plain: the first answers the perennial question “How long?” (cf. 10:7), and the second answers a question not yet raised in the visions, “What is the task of the Church in these troublous times?” (11: 1 - 13).

[848](#)

Cf. the introductory notes on chapter 8.

[849](#)

The mighty angel of 18:21 has a different function, yet one that would also require strength.

[850](#)

Scott, 219; Seiss, 223; Richardson, 101.

[851](#)

Charles (1.258-59) suggests that the Hebrew equivalent ἰσχυρός (גבור) may be a play on the name of Gabriel (גבריאל).

[852](#)

Note the present participle, καταβαίνοντα.

[853](#)

Also Jesus’ statement before Pilate (Mark 14:62; cf. Rev 1:7).

[854](#)

GNB has “around his head,” but BAGD cites no example in which ἐπί with the accusative would carry that meaning (288).

[855](#)

Cf. the description of Jaol in Apoc. Abraham 11.

[856](#)

As χεῖρ may refer to the arm (Luke 4:11), so πούς may indicate the leg. BAGD (696) cites Lucian, *Pseudomant.* 59, ποὺς μέχρι του βουβωνος (groin).

[857](#)

See Farrer, 123.

[858](#)

Gk. βιβλαρίδιον is a diminutive of βιβλίον. 2329 pc read βιβλάριον, and (N¹) C* 1006 1611 1841 2053 2344 MajT^A al have βιβλδάριον; cf. the same

variants in vv. 8, 9, and 10 (also βιβλίδιον by P^{47c} pc in v. 10).

[859](#)

The perfect participle ἤνεωγμένον conveys the idea that the scroll, having been opened, is to remain that way.

[860](#)

For a rather full presentation of this position see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 243-57. Wall calls the association of the little scroll with the seven-sealed scroll a “reasonable conjecture” (135).

[861](#)

Less likely is the suggestion that the stance symbolizes the universality of the message (Morris, 134), or that one foot is placed on the sea to defy its instability (Swete, 127).

[862](#)

For the idea of earth and sea in this comprehensive sense cf. Exod 20:11; Ps 68:22; Rev 7:2.

[863](#)

Gk. μυῤῥόμαι is an onomatopoeic word for the mooing of cattle. The cognate noun is used for the roar of a lion by Theocritus (BAGD 529).

[864](#)

Gk. ἑπτὰ is omitted by P⁴⁷ pc. According to Beckwith the thunders are “premonitions of God’s anger about to burst forth in judgment” (578; cf. 574).

[865](#)

Note, however, that αἱ is omitted by **N*** 1611 2344 pc.

[866](#)

Less likely is the suggestion that they represent “the thunderous echoes of ancient prophecy” (Farrer, 124) or the thunder that comes from the seven planetary sphere: (Boll, *Auf der Offenbarung Johannis*, 22).

[867](#)

So Charles, 1.261-62.

[868](#)

In John 12:28-29 the voice from heaven is interpreted both as thunder and as the voice of an angel.

[869](#)

Moffatt, 412. Farrer (125) says that John seems to be skipping a part of the prefigured scheme and moving on to the climax. Citing Collins, Montague

emphasizes the more homiletical point that “God will not tell human beings everything, but only what they need to know” (128).

[870](#)

Hughes thinks it probable that “the words of the thunders are enacted in events subsequently recorded in this book” (116).

[871](#)

Erdman, 98.

[872](#)

Gk. σφραγίζω commonly connotes ownership or authenticity, but here and in 22: 10 it is used in the sense of to conceal or keep hidden (as the sealing of a scroll prevents its contents from being read).

[873](#)

There are a number of textual variants for v. 4, but none affects the interpretation of the verse to any significant degree. Metzger calls ὅσα (read by **ℵ** pc gig; Tyc Prim; for ὅτε an “exegetical modification” (*Textual Commentary*, 670).

[874](#)

Bede (the famous eighth-century Benedictine monk and theologian) wrote “mutabilis saecularium temporum varietas in novissima tuba cessabit.” This point of view is still maintained by a few contemporary interpreters, e.g., Lenski, who says that the clause means “one thing and only one, namely what we call ‘time’ shall be at an end” (317).

[875](#)

Cullmann (*Christ and Time*, 49) takes χρόνος in Rev 10:6 not as a reference to an era of timelessness, but in the sense of delay. The contrast between time and eternity is a philosophical notion and has no support in biblical theology.

[876](#)

The omission of καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ. by **ℵ*** A 1611 2344 pc gig Sy^{ph} sa^{ms}; Tyc was probably accidental, arising from homoeoarcton and homoeoteleuton Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 671).

[877](#)

Gk. ἀλλά denotes a strong contrast.

[878](#)

Gk. μέλλω with the infinitive may be used with the force of a future indicative, especially in the case of an action that is certain to take place

(Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, 36). The NEB translates, “When the time comes for the seventh angel to sound his rumpet....”

[879](#)

Gk. ἐτελέσθη may be taken as an “aorist of anticipation” or a Hebraism for τελεσθήσεται. In either case it is proleptic, as is the aorist ἥμαρτεν in 1 Cor 7:28.

[880](#)

Bornkamm writes of the essence of mystery in apocalyptic as “God’s counsels destined finally to be disclosed” (TDNT, 4.816).

[881](#)

Cf. Swete, 130; Charles, 1.265; etc. Niles’s suggestion that it is the “mystery of God’s delays” is too narrow (70), as is Kelly’s idea that it is “the wonder of evil prospering and good being trodden underfoot” (206).

[882](#)

The addition of καί after δούλους (p47.85vid N 2329 2344 pc sa) would divide the two groups.

[883](#)

Cf. 2 Kgs 17:13, 23; Jer 7:25; 25:4; Ezek 38:17; Dan 9:10 for this well-known OT designation.

[884](#)

Gk. εὐηγγέλισεν; TCNT translates, “he told the good news.”

[885](#)

The subject (φωνή) stands without a verb, and the two participles (λαλουσαν and λέγουσαν) that modify the subject are accusative, not nominative. The ASV takes φωνή as a nominative absolute and adds, “I heard it.” Another possibility is that the participles are attracted from the nominative into agreement with ἥν and an original linking verb (ἦν) was omitted. λαλουσαν and λέγουσαν are translated as finite verbs in the AV

[886](#)

Cf. ἡνεωγμένον in v. 2. That John uses βιβλίον here but βιβλαρίδιον in vv. 2, 9, and 10 indicates that the two are relatively interchangeable.

[887](#)

Alford notes that from this point on John’s principal spot of observation is the earth (653).

[888](#)

Cf. Barclay, 2.56; Morris, 139. Swete, referring back to 5:2ff., says that by taking the book John shows his fitness for the task (130).

[889](#)

2053 2329 MajT^A place John's words in direct discourse, using the imperative Δός (rather than δοῦναι and indirect discourse).

[890](#)

The compound **Ν**ατεσθίω has this stronger connotation.

[891](#)

Krodel writes, "The prophet's task is to appropriate and internalize God's message entrusted to him" (215).

[892](#)

Peterson writes, "Witnesses first become what they then say. If witness is to be anything more than gossip about God, it must be the word internalized" (107).

[893](#)

Hendriksen, 151; cf. Lenski, 322-24; Walvoord, 173-74.

[894](#)

E.g., Summers, 161-62.

[895](#)

Bruce, 649; cf. Charles, 1.260; Lilje, 158; Erdman, 99; Rist, 442. For a truly idiosyncratic interpretation see Ford (164-65), who suggests as a key to interpretation Num 5:12-31, and *Sota*, the tractate on the suspected adulteress. She conjectures that the scroll in Revelation 10 represents the parchment on which the priest's curse had been written and which was then soaked in bitter water until the writing was blotted out, after which the water was drunk by the accused woman to see if her abdomen would swell (guilty) or her beauty and fertility would increase (innocent) (164-65). See also her article, "The Divorce Bill of the Lamb and the Scroll of the Suspected Adulteress. A Note on Apoc. 5,1 and 10,8-11," *JSJ*, 2 (1971), 136-43.

[896](#)

Ν*; Prim read ἐσθη ("was filled") for επι**χ**ράνθη ("turned sour"), and others (**Ν**¹ 1854 2329 *pc* *gig* *sy*^{hmg}; Tyc Bea) follow on to add **π****χ**ρίας ("bitterness") at the end of the sentence.

[897](#)

Cf. Barclay, 2.57; Morris, 138. Rist, however, thinks that it was sweet "because the prophecies it contained were most agreeable to him," and that, unlike Ezra who was appalled by the doom awaiting the wicked (2 Esdr 7:17-25, 102ff.), John is not grieved (441-42). Caird writes that Ezekiel (in

the parallel passage) found the scroll sweet to taste “no doubt because the harshness of its contents was congenial to his austere spirit” (129-30). Both evaluations are unnecessarily severe.

[898](#)

Taking ἐπί in the sense of “to” or “about” rather than “against,” as in Acts 11:9.

[899](#)

Erdman, 99.

[900](#)

Lilje holds the book to be sweet and bitter at the same time since the commission includes both the announcement of wrath and the promise of succor (157); Beasley-Murray favors the same interpretation (175). Peterson writes of the “polarity of sweetness and bitterness” experienced by every witness (109). Others reverse the order and refer the sweetness to final blessedness (Kepler, cited by Morris, 139; Blaney, 462).

[901](#)

Roloff is certainly correct in his judgment that 10:1-11:14 is “by far, the most difficult part of the whole book” (122).

[902](#)

Cf. A. Feuillet, *Johannine Studies*, 215-31.

[903](#)

The reading λέγει in 1611 1854 2053 MajT^A it (vg^{cl} sy sa bo^{mss} Tyc Prim) is undoubtedly a scribal attempt to relieve the problem.

[904](#)

Gk. δεῖ always involves some sort of compulsion, whether of inner necessity, the demands of society, or divine decree.

[905](#)

For example, Krodel calls vv. 3-13 “the most difficult section in Revelation” (221).

[906](#)

Walvoord, e.g., holds that the two witnesses are two individuals, that during the tribulation the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and that ancient sacrifices will be carried out at the altar (174-88).

[907](#)

Kiddle, on the other hand, holds that the temple is the church, the two witnesses are that part of the church which must suffer martyrdom, and the great city represents civilization utterly alien to the will of God (174-88).

[908](#)

Charles follows Wellhausen in accepting the first fragment (11:1-2) as an oracle written before A.D. 70 by a Zealot prophet in Jerusalem (1.270-73), a theory that Caird judges “improbable, useless, and absurd” (131). Beckwith acknowledges the plausibility of an original Jewish source but understands the present author as using it to predict the repentance of the people of Israel in the last days (586-90). Roloff calls attention to the correspondence of vv. 1-2 to the actual events of the year A.D. 70 (they appear “particularly astounding”) and concludes that the segment “stems from Palestinian Jewish Christianity” (28-29). A. McNicol takes the account of the two witnesses as a Christian prophetic oracle directed against Israel following the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (“Revelation 11:1-14 and the Structure of the Apocalypse,” *RestQ*, 22 [1979], 193-202).

[909](#)

Metzger writes, “Measuring is done in order to build and repair, and John is given a measuring rod so that he can restore and revive the church” (69). Ford lists four explanations of the measuring in Rev 11:1-2: (1) rebuilding or restoring, (2) destruction, (3) preservation from physical harm, and (4) preservation from spiritual harm (176).

[910](#)

Zech 2:1-5 is often cited as an example of measuring for the purpose of protection. Jerusalem, however, will have too many people to be encircled with walls. The Lord himself will act as a protective wall around it. K. A. Strand believes that a likely background for Rev 11:1 is Leviticus 16 (“An Overlooked Old-Testament Background to Revelation 11:1,” *AUSS*, 22 [1984], 317-25).

[911](#)

Boring, 143.

[912](#)

See Hendriksen, 154-55, for six supporting arguments.

[913](#)

In agreement Talbert writes, “the measuring of the temple’s innermost parts symbolizes this protection of the faithful from apostasy” (45).

[914](#)

ⲛ 2329 *al* vg^s sy^{ph}; Vic read ἔσωθεν, which makes ἔχβαλε more understandable but helps little in the interpretation of the verse.

[915](#)

Josephus, *Bell.* 5.5.2; cf. Eph 2:14.

[916](#)

They are “those who although outwardly belonging to the church are not true believers,” according to Hendriksen (154); cf. Kiddle (189). Similarly, Robbins argues that the outer court symbolizes “the part of the professing church that is still ‘of the world’ ” (134).

[917](#)

The temple and outer court represent respectively the church in its inward being and the church in its earthly empirical existence (Harrington, 119).

[918](#)

Gk. ἔχβαλε ἔξωθεν. Most translations adopt a more metaphorical interpretation of this phrase (NEB, “have nothing to do with”).

[919](#)

Cf. Morris, 142-43. Sweet writes that “inwardly this community is preserved from Satanic attack ... outwardly it is given over to the violence of the Gentiles” (182).

[920](#)

Harrington, 119. Similarly, Bauckham writes that John is “distinguishing the inner, hidden reality of the church as a kingdom of priests (cf. 5:10) who worship God in his presence from the outward experience of the church as it is exposed to persecution by the kingdom of the nations” (272).

[921](#)

The designation of Jerusalem as the holy city is common in Jewish writing (Neh 11:1; Isa 48:2; Ps. Sol. 8:4; Matt 4:5).

[922](#)

The concept of trampling to overthrow and defile is seen in verses such as Ps 79:1 and Isa 63:18 (cf. Luke 21:24).

[923](#)

The drought in the days of Elijah lasted three and a half years (Luke 4:25; Jas 5:17). Moffatt (416) notes that originally the period reflected the Babylonian three and a half months of winter. See the helpful excursus in Glasson, 67-70.

[924](#)

Bratcher and Hatton, 166. It is not, as Robbins has it, “the entire duration of the church’s history on earth” (136) — nor is it “the interval between the two comings of Christ” (Hughes, 123). It is the final period of intense hostility against the church. It is eschatological.

[925](#)

Some early writers (e.g., Tertullian, *De Anima*, 50) understand Enoch rather than Moses since Scripture records that he was translated to heaven without seeing death (Gen 5:24; Heb 11:5). Enoch, however, does not fit the description in Rev 11:5-6.

[926](#)

Beckwith holds that they are two great prophets of the last days who come in the spirit of Elijah and Moses to preach repentance to Israel (595). Walvoord, governed by a dispensational orientation, says that they are two prophets raised up from those who turn to Christ after the rapture (179). Thomas would like us to believe that “the balance of the evidence is for an expectation of the actual return of the very same persons” (89). But, as Krodel says, “one can hardly make war against only two persons” (note the Greek of 11:7). Others, holding to two distinct individuals, suggest Zerubbabel and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, James and John, James the apostle and James the Lord’s brother, Peter and Paul. Allegorically they have been suggested to be the Law and the Prophets, the Law and the Gospel, the OT and the NT, Israel and the Church, Israel and the Word of God, the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia (cf. the list of candidates in Ford, 177-78).

[927](#)

J. S. Considine concludes that they represent “the universality of Christian preachers and teachers [whose] mission is to combat the enemies of Christ and his Church” (“The Two Witnesses: Apoc. 11:3-13,” *CBQ*, 10 [1948], 392).

[928](#)

Jesus sent out his messengers two by two (Luke 10:1; cf. Acts 15:39-40). Kraft writes, “Das es zwei sind ... kommt daher, das es Zeugen sind.... Sie müssen zwei sein, weil sie im Gericht als Zeugen Gottes gegen die Stadt auftreten werden” (156).

[929](#)

Bruce, 649. So also Beasley-Murray, who writes that “as prophetic witnesses they fulfil the role of kings (like Zerubbabel) and priests (as Joshua)” (184).

[930](#)

So Morris, 143. For Caird, their description in v. 4 as “the two lamps” (cf. the seven of 1:20) provides “the clearest possible evidence that John did not

expect all loyal Christians to die in the great ordeal” (134).

[931](#)

Note that Christ is spoken of in the third person in the same discourse (v. 8, “their Lord was crucified”; however, αὐτῶνν is omitted by P⁴⁷ *).

[932](#)

The masculine ἐστῶτες goes back to μάρτυσιν and seems abrupt after the feminine ἐλαῖαι and λυχνίαι.

[933](#)

Charles calls it a “bold and independent interpretation” of Zechariah’s symbols (1.283).

[934](#)

Swete, 135.

[935](#)

K. A. Strand holds that the two lampstands represent the word of God in the twofold sense of OT prophetic forecast and NT confirmatory proclamation (“The Two Olive Trees of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11,” *AUSS*, 20 [1982], 257-61).

[936](#)

“The ‘fire’ of God’s anger” (Kiddle, 197); the message had a “fiery aspect” (Morris, 148).

[937](#)

The NT writers follow a Jewish tradition that extended the period to three and a half years to coincide with the symbolic designation for a time of calamity. According to 1 Kgs 18:1, the promise of rain came “in the third year” (cf. vv. 41-45), which could be only a little over one full year (by an inclusive count). Josephus (*Ant.* 8.13.2) cites Menander of Ephesus to this effect. The ground had already been dry for six months when Elijah made his first announcement to Ahab (1 Kgs 17:1). “If the cessation lasted till the third month thereafter, the total period of drought would necessarily be about three years and nine months” (J. Orr, *The Bible under Trial.*, 264-65).

[938](#)

1 Sam 4:8 (LXX) reads οἱ παράξαντες τὴν Αἴγυπτον ἐν πάσῃ πληγῇ.

[939](#)

Morris, 149.

[940](#)

Gk. τελειόω is more than temporal: it carries the idea of accomplishing a goal.

[941](#)

Boring comments that “faithfulness does not deliver them from death but causes it” (147) and adds that “in John’s context martyrdom ... is inherent in the prophetic role itself” (145). According to Wall, John’s main point is that “faithfulness unto death is always the ultimate measure of the disciple’s faithfulness to God” (146).

[942](#)

Gk. θηρίον, a wild animal, in contrast to ζῷον, a living thing (unfortunately translated “beast” in the AV of Rev 4:6-9 and elsewhere).

[943](#)

Beckwith, 601. The reading of Alexandrinus (τὸ θηρίον τὸ τέταρτον) supports this reference.

[944](#)

Roloff notes that “whoever, like the prophets, delivers God’s testimony is obliged to confront the demonic adversary of God; indeed, he or she must be prepared to be defeated by him in battle” (133).

[945](#)

Gk. μάρτυς; cf. the English cognate, “martyr.” 100. Swete, 137. Ladd states as a fundamental clue to the understanding of biblical prophecy that “eschatological events are foreshadowed in historical events” (156).

[946](#)

For τῇζ πλατείας .supply ὁδοῦ. “The street” sounds as if the city had only one street. 2036 and a few other manuscripts supply the verb ἔῴσει (“he will leave”) and add ἄταφα (unburied) after μεγάλης.

[947](#)

Beasley-Murray calls it “the limit of outrage and indignity that can be accorded to the dead” (186).

[948](#)

For example, Thomas, who writes that “if language has any meaning at all, it is hard to identify ‘the great city’ as anywhere else but Jerusalem” (2.94).

[949](#)

It is also called “Babylon the great” in 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; and 18:2. Caird writes that in the Apocalypse Rome is represented by three successive symbols: (1) Vanity Fair, whose name is Sodom and Egypt, 11:8; (2) the beast, 13:1; and (3) the great harlot, chapters 17-18 (*The Apostolic Age*, 179-80).

[950](#)

Josephus, *Ap.* 1.197; Sib. Or. 5:154, 226, 413.

[951](#)

Montague notes that “‘their Lord’ was crucified *outside* the city of Jerusalem but *within* the city limits of Rome, which were understood to embrace the entire empire” (138).

[952](#)

Morris, 150. Sweet calls the city “the social and political embodiment of human self-sufficiency and rebellion against God” (187). Hughes calls it “the mounting structure of human arrogance which defies the authority of Almighty God” (127). Krodell says that while the great city was first a geographic location (historic Jerusalem), secondly it is a symbolic place — it is “every city that embodies self-sufficiency in place of dependence upon the creator, achievement in the place of repentance, oppression in place of faith” (226).

[953](#)

While ἐκ τῶν λαῶν is probably a partitive genitive, it should not be pressed to indicate a specific representative group. Cf. John 16:17 for the partitive genitive used as subject.

[954](#)

In *Psalms of Solomon* (2:30-31) Pompey’s decapitated body lay unburied on the shore, “with none to bury him, because God had rejected him with dishonor.”

[955](#)

Swete writes that their delight was “at once fiendish and childish” (138).

[956](#)

Cf. comm. on 6:10. The attempt by Charles to restrict the phrase to Palestinian Jews (1.289) is not successful.

[957](#)

Gk. εὐφραίνομαι in the NT is often used for purely secular joy. In Luke 15:23 the father of the prodigal says, “Let us eat and make merry (εὐφρανθῶμεν).” The same word is used by the elder brother a few verses later (v. 29).

[958](#)

Although πνευμα ζωης has no definite article, it is best to supply one (cf. NRSV, “the breath of life from God”).

[959](#)

In view of Ezek 37:14, in which God says, “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live,” it may well be that πνευμα ζωης in Rev 11:11 refers to God’s own Spirit. Rom 8:2 and 2 Cor 3:6 use equivalent phrases that are best understood as “the Spirit who gives life.”

[960](#)

Gk. πνεῦμα ζωῆς (Ezek 37:5), εἰσῆλθεν ἐν αὐτοῖς (a number of MSS, including P⁴⁷ and **ℵ**, read εἰς rather than ἐν in Rev 11:11), and ἔστησαν ἐπὶ τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν (cf. Ezek 37:10).

[961](#)

Ladd, who interprets the entire chapter as predicting “the preservation of the Jewish people and their final salvation” (151), understands v. 11 as indicating that “the conversion of Israel is to be accomplished by a miracle of resurrection” (158).

[962](#)

Charles explains the definite article (“*the* cloud”) by reference to a tradition recorded by Josephus that Moses was taken from his followers by a cloud as he was talking with them (1.291; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.48).

[963](#)

For the ascension of Moses see the reference in Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 6.5) to the account in a lost portion of the *Ascension of Moses*.

[964](#)

Gk. ἡ χοῦσα (P⁴⁷ **ℵ**^c MajT a gig sy^{hmg} co; Tyc Bea) is in keeping with the author’s usage (twenty-four times), but the plural is appropriate in this context.

[965](#)

Boring writes, “For the church, the experience of being called into God’s heavenly world is not escapist ‘rapture’; in John’s revelation Christians go to the presence of God through tribulation and martyrdom, not instead of it” (148).

[966](#)

Sweet says, “factually the numbers makes sense — the population of Jerusalem may well have been about 70,000” (189).

[967](#)

Krodel reasons that since a tenth of the city died in the earthquake it follows that “nine-tenths of humanity... turn to God and give him glory.” “God’s triumph in the resurrection of his faithful witnesses brings about the salvation of the rest of humanity” (228). In a chapter entitled “The

Conversion of the Nations” (*The Climax of Prophecy*, 238-337) Bauckham argues that the central message of the unsealed scroll is “the way the church’s prophetic witness to the point of death is to lead to the conversion of the nations” (284). “What judgments alone failed to effect (9:20-21), the witness of the two witnesses does effect” (279). The eternal gospel of 14:7 is a “call to all nations to worship the one true God” (288). The harvest and the vintage in chapter 14 are not predictions but “two possibilities opened by the proclamation of the angels” (296). While the line of argument is impressive, the conclusion stands in stark contrast with the historical understanding of God’s redemptive work in history.

[968](#)

Caird, 140.

[969](#)

Kiddle, 206. Phillips translates, “and acknowledged the glory of the God of heaven.”

[970](#)

Glasson, 71,

[971](#)

“The author of Rev. does not seek to comfort the persecuted Christian community with reference to past and future history, but with reference to the eschatological reality of God’s kingdom” (Fiorenza, *Revelation: Justice*, 56).

[972](#)

Charles (1.194) calls attention to the fact that the first book in which ὁ Χριστός was used as a technical reference to the messianic king was *1 Enoch* (cf. 48:10).

[973](#)

“This like all the other worship scenes in Revelation ... transpires in heaven” (Marianne Meye Thompson, “Worship in the Book of Revelation,” *Ex Auditu*, 8 (1992), 48-49.

[974](#)

Morris notes that the perfect (ἐῴληφας) may indicate that God has taken the power permanently, while the aorist (ἐβασίλευσας) points to the crisis in which he decisively dethroned evil and entered on his reign (149). The aorist is inceptive, “have begun to reign” (cf. 19:6).

[975](#)

The AV, following inferior texts (051 1006 1841 *al* vg^{cl} [bo]; Tyc [Bea]), adds καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος after ἦν. Another reading to be rejected is that of P⁴⁷ (μένουσιν for μεγάλην).

[976](#)

Lilje (167) calls the indignation of the peoples met by the holy wrath of God a “majestic antithesis.”

[977](#)

Gk. ὁ καιρός; Peterson distinguishes the two Greek words for time as follows: “*Chronos* is duration, *kairos* is opportunity. We coolly [sic] measure *chronos* with clocks and calendars: we passionately lose ourselves in *kairos* by falling in love or leaping into faith” (192). Cf. Delling’s article in *TDNT*, 3.460-62 (C.1.b), for other decisive points.

[978](#)

In Revelation there are eight references to the prophet (10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9) and, apart from a reference to false teachers at Ephesus (2:2) and another to the apostolic band (21:14), the designation “apostle” occurs only once (18:20).

[979](#)

Charles, 1.296. Beckwith says that such a division (into Jewish and Gentile Christians) is “wholly foreign to our author” (610).

[980](#)

For thunder and lightning as symbols of divine anger see 8:5 and 16:18. Earthquakes appear at 6:12; 8:5; 11:13; 16:18; and hail at 8:7 and 16:21.

[981](#)

Hendriksen sees the ark as “the symbol of the superlatively real, intimate, and perfect fellowship between God and his people” (161).

[982](#)

Walvoord, 187.

[983](#)

Kiddle, 215.

[984](#)

Morris, 150-51. Note that Morris’s “signs” correspond only in part with Kiddle’s “oracles”; it appears that the sevenfold pattern is not as clear as it could be.

[985](#)

Much has been written about the sources thought to lie behind the visions of chapter 12. Beasley-Murray (192, n. 1) calls attention to the extensive

survey of interpretation of Rev 12 by P. Prigent, *Apocalypse 12, Histoire de l'exégèse*. Cf. also A. Feuillet, *The Apocalypse*, 109-17, and A. T. Kassing, *Die Kirche und Maria*.

Charles finds two major sources: 12:7-10, 12, an original product of Judaism (even though some of its subject matter may go back to the Zend religion), and 12:1-5, 13-17, a primitive international myth applied messianically by a Pharisaic Jew about A.D. 67-69 and then borrowed and transformed by the Seer to give spiritual insight into the underlying cause of the final persecution of the church (1.298-314). That partial parallels can be found in the ancient folklore of many nations cannot be denied. In Greek mythology the pregnant goddess Leto, pursued by the dragon Python, is brought safely to the island of Ortygia (Delos, in a variant form of the myth), where she gives birth to Apollo, who then returns and kills the dragon. In Egyptian mythology, the red dragon Set-Typhon pursues Isis and is later killed by Horus her son. A Babylonian myth tells of the overthrow of Tiamat, the seven-headed water monster, by Marduk, the young god of light.

Roloff finds two very ancient mythological traditions in chapter 12 — (1) “the astrological myth of the goddess of heaven who gives birth to the sun every day, and of the dragon of darkness who pursues to devour her,” and (2) “the myth of the battle of the gods in heaven and of the defeat of Satan” (excursus on “Myth in the Revelation of John,” 142-45). In answer to the question of how and why these mythological traditions were assimilated in Revelation he concludes that “everything points to the idea that John shaped in very free fashion both myths, the basic elements of which he knew from popular tradition and whose familiarity among his readers he could assume.” His theological purpose was to show that there was no more room for Satan in heaven and that in this present age the church must endure suffering.

John undoubtedly reflects some of the mythic imagery of the thought-world of his day, but it is highly unlikely that he would consciously take over a pagan myth to explain the spiritual significance of the persecution coming upon faithful Christians. Would a writer who elsewhere in the book displays such a definite antagonism toward paganism draw extensively at this point upon its mythology? As always, John is a creative apocalypticist who, although using imagery from many sources, nevertheless constructs a scenario distinctly his own. Boring encourages the reader to realize that

“the impact of the surrealistic drama communicated in chapters 12-14 comes not by analyzing it, but by hearing it read, or reading it, with imagination and insight” (149).

[986](#)

The “stars ... of the sky” in v. 4 places the episode in the sky rather than in heaven, the place of God’s abode.

[987](#)

Krodel notes that the early church fathers did not interpret the woman to be Mary and that “only since the late Middle Ages has Mary been pictured as the queen of heaven of 12:1” (238).

[988](#)

On the basis that according to astral thinking everything that happens on earth has already taken place in heaven, Rist holds that John’s account is not an “allegorical depiction of the earthly birth of Jesus to Mary,” but relates “the birth of the heavenly Messiah to a celestial mother, possibly before creation began” (452-53). Ladd interprets chapter 12 as “a vision in highly imaginative terms of the heavenly warfare between God and Satan, which has its counterpart in history in the conflict between the church and demonic evil” (166). This leads him to insist, for instance, that the birth of a male child (v. 5) “does not refer to the birth of Jesus to Mary in Bethlehem” (169; note the same position stated less absolutely on 167-68). It is probably unnecessary to insist so strongly upon the nonhistorical nature of the visions since the antagonism of Satan toward the Messiah and the church (the offspring of the true Israel, v. 17) has, in fact, been a determining factor in the course of human history. If chapter 12 is to be consistently interpreted as a celestial and nontemporal struggle between God and Satan, there should be no direct reference to “actual Christians who constitute the empirical church on earth” (Ladd, 174) as the explanation of “the rest of her seed” (v. 17).

[989](#)

Cf. D’Aragon, 482.

[990](#)

The twelve stars may be an allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel (21:12) or the twelve apostles (21:14) — perhaps both. Apuleius (a second-century-A.D. novelist and philosopher) describes the goddess Isis in somewhat similar terms (*Met.* 11.3-4).

[991](#)

Gk. ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα goes with the preceding description and should be followed by a major break (Westcott and Hort). βασανίζω is not used elsewhere in the NT of childbirth, but as an expression of physical distress it is entirely appropriate (cf. Matt 8:6). Burton takes τεχεῖν as an objective infinitive “governed by the idea of desire implied in the preceding participles” (*Moods and Tenses*, 154, par. 389). Most often it is taken as epexegetical.

[992](#)

Kiddle, 220.

[993](#)

F. F. Bruce, “Rahab,” in *NBD*, 1074. Rist notes that “the Greeks had Python and the nine-headed Hydra; the Egyptians depicted Set-Typhon as a red crocodile; for the Persians Azhi Dahaka was three-headed monster” (453-54).

[994](#)

Homer speaks of a δρᾶχων δαφιοῖς (blood red) (*Iliad* 2.308). Some manuscripts (C 046 1611 1854 2329 2344 *pm*) read πυρός, “fire,” in place of πυρρός, “red.”

[995](#)

“The accursed one of seven heads”; cf. Bruce, 651.

[996](#)

Hendriksen, 165. The crowns are not στέφανοι but διαδήματα. Hailey comments that “Satan never wears the victory crown (*stephanos*); he wears only the diadem, for he wins no permanent victories” (270).

[997](#)

Although the imagery lends itself to that end; cf. 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; also comm. on 9:1.

[998](#)

Gk. ἔστηεν is perfect.

[999](#)

The neuter ἄρσεν stands in apposition to the masculine υἱόν and emphasizes the sex of the child; cf. Gen 1:27 (LXX), ἄρσεν καὶ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς. Isa 66:7 uses the same word for Israel reborn.

[1000](#)

Peterson comments, “This is not the nativity story we grew up with, but it is the nativity story all the same” (121).

[1001](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.5; cf. Mark 13:14. God's children have often been in flight. The nation Israel was born in the Exodus (Deut 8:2ff.). Elijah fled into hiding by the brook Kerith and was nourished there by the ravens (1 Kgs 17:2ff.). Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt to save the life of the Christ-child (Matt 2:13ff.).

[1002](#)

Gk. ἡτοιμασμένον, a perfect passive participle.

[1003](#)

Krodel, 242.

[1004](#)

Caird writes that "Michael's victory is simply the heavenly and symbolic counterpart of the earthly reality of the Cross" ("On Deciphering the Book of Revelation: I. Heaven and Earth," *ExpTim*, 74 [1962], 13). Harrington says that "the fall of the dragon is really the victory of Christ. Victory over Satan was won by Christ *on the cross*" (133). Satan's defeat in battle is "Paul's doctrine of 'justification by faith' in pictorial form" (Sweet, 199).

[1005](#)

Derwood Smith finds a three-step fall of Satan in Revelation: (1) from heaven to earth, 12:9; (2) from earth to the abyss, 20:2; and (3) from the abyss, after his release, into the lake of fire, 20:10 ("The Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ: Some Observations on Rev. 20:1-10," *ResQ*, 16 [1973], 224, n. 10).

[1006](#)

Cf. the later use of this tradition in *Adam and Eve* 1:6. Eph 2:2 speaks of Satan as "the prince of the power of the air."

[1007](#)

Although there is no word in the Greek text for "same," Paul is speaking of Satan's judgment.

[1008](#)

Paul writes that believers are in conflict with "the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).

[1009](#)

Gk. ἄγγελος, which can mean messenger, frequently designates supernatural beings both good and evil. The *Testament of Asher* speaks of "the angels of the Lord and of Satan," and Matt 25:41 of eternal fire prepared for "the devil and his angels."

[1010](#)

Barclay mentions the paid informer of Roman days (the *delator*) who made a profession of accusing people before the authorities (2.83). This notorious practice would make extremely vivid the portrayal of Satan as the Accuser.

[1011](#)

Gk. ὁ διάβολος translates the Hebrew **יָצָן** in the LXX in Job 2:1; Zech 3:1-2, etc.

[1012](#)

See 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 19:1-2, 4, 6-8.

[1013](#)

See comm. on 11:15; cf. Ps 2:8; Matt 28:18; John 17:2.

[1014](#)

Ladd writes that 12:11a “shows clearly that the victory over Satan which John has described in mythological terms actually was accomplished in history at the cross” (172).

[1015](#)

Gk. κατήγωρ occurs only here in the NT (and only in Alexandrinus; but see the minority report in Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 673); elsewhere the more common κατήγορος is found (e.g., Acts 25:16, 18). It may be a transliteration from the Aramaic, although Deissmann finds it in a fourth-century vernacular papyrus with no indication of Jewish or Christian influence (LAE, 93-94).

[1016](#)

Caird, 155.

[1017](#)

Note the emphatic pronoun αὐτοί.

[1018](#)

Gk. διά here gives the ground, not the means, of their victory.

[1019](#)

The plural οὐρανοίρανο is found only here in Revelation; the singular occurs more than fifty times.

[1020](#)

LXX, Εὐφραίνεσθε οὐρανοί.

[1021](#)

ASV margin; Gk. σκηνοῦντες. κατοιχοῦντες is regularly used throughout Revelation in connection with the pagan population of the earth (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; etc.).

[1022](#)

1 pc add τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν after οὐαί to specify that the woe is to those who dwell upon the earth.

[1023](#)

Morris observes that “the troubles of the persecuted righteous arise not because Satan is too strong, but because he is beaten” (158).

[1024](#)

Preston and Hanson, 94. They base their interpretation on Ps 90:4 (“A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday”).

[1025](#)

Gk. ἐδίωξεν may be an ingressive aorist (even though the verb is not one denoting a state or condition). One correction of the Sinaiticus supplies the more intensive ἐξεδίωξεν. P⁴⁷ (perhaps following ἀπῆλθεν ποιῆσαι πόλεμον of v. 17) has ἀπῆλθεν ἐκδιῶξαι .

[1026](#)

The articles do not refer to some specific eagle in traditional folklore (αι is omitted by P⁴⁷ **Ⲭ** 1854 2329 2344 2351 MajT^K), nor to the eagle of 8:13. ἄετός may be a vulture (as in Luke 17:37), but not necessarily. In Mic 1:16 (LXX) the reference to baldness suggests the griffon vulture.

[1027](#)

Kiddle interprets the wilderness as that state of complete spiritual detachment from the world (the great city) which is a necessary preparation for life in the New Jerusalem (238).

[1028](#)

Gk. τρέφω may be used of the rearing of children. In Luke 4:16 Nazareth is the place where Jesus was “brought up” (ἦν τεθραμμένος).

[1029](#)

Ford points out that where forty-two occurs in the OT, it is always associated with violent death (2 Kgs 2:23-24; 10:14). She concludes that “forty-two may symbolize violent useless killing” (192). The coincidence is fortuitous.

[1030](#)

Bruce, 652. This slaughter by the swollen Jordan is reported in Josephus, *Bell.* 4.433-36. Some writers think that it is part of a legend that John was using and has no particular Christian application (Glasson, 78).

[1031](#)

Preston and Hanson, 94.

[1032](#)

Giving credit to Caird, Robbins writes, “The stream from the serpent’s mouth may symbolize destructive teaching and malicious accusation” (154).

[1033](#)

In Gen 4:10-11 Abel’s blood is said to cry out to the Lord from the ground, and Cain learns that he is to be “driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive [his] brother’s blood.” P. S. Minear suggests that in Rev 12:15-16 one may find a subtle allusion to this story (“Far as the Curse Is Found: The Point of Revelation 12:15-16,” *NovT*, 33 [1991], 71-77).

[1034](#)

Herodotus had heard that the Lycus flowed underground near Colossae (Swete, 159).

[1035](#)

Talbert says that the earth swallowing the river is a “metaphor of divine help based on the Jewish belief that the created order cooperates with God either to punish or to bless His creatures depending on their sin or righteousness, so Wisdom of Solomon 16:24” (51).

[1036](#)

The use of τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς may echo Gen 3:15 (LXX).

[1037](#)

Hughes holds that these verses apply to the church throughout history but at this point a historical sequence seems to be discernible — the earth opens its mouth and swallows the river of Satanic wrath “when Saul of Tarsus, the determined leader of the original fierce wave of persecution, was suddenly converted to become Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ” (142)

[1038](#)

Swete’s comment that “obedience to the Law does not constitute sonship without faith in Christ” (160) understands Ἰησοῦ as an objective genitive.

[1039](#)

Schrenk notes that John never speaks of ἐντολαί without mentioning Jesus (*TDNT*, 2.555).

[1040](#)

Verse 18 is sometimes left unnumbered (e.g., RSV) and is often taken as part of the following chapter (so NIV). The AV follows the reading ἐστάθην (051 MajT vg^{mss} sy^{ph} co) and understands the subject to be John.

Textual evidence favors ἑστᾶθῃ (P⁴⁷ ~~Σ~~ A C 1854 2344 2351 *pc lat sy^h*), which connects the clause with the preceding verse.

[1041](#)

Charles' extended analysis of underlying sources (1.334-44) is interesting but sheds little light on the meaning of the vision.

[1042](#)

Cf. Hendriksen, 176-77. The mouth is mentioned last because it is the main point of the figure.

[1043](#)

D'Aragon writes, "The Seer has blended into one image various characteristics of the four beasts in Dn 7; the result is a monstrous creature that defies the imagination" (483). Krodel find three sources: the mythological account of the struggle of a god with a sea monster, Daniel's four beasts, and the Nero legend (247-48).

[1044](#)

Erdman, 112.

[1045](#)

Ancient people viewed the sea as the habitat of evil deities that ruled the world. Storms at sea were an expression of the wrath of the sea gods. In the Semitic world there was a belief that the sea personified the power that fought against the deity (*IBD*, 3.1406).

[1046](#)

Textual evidence is fairly evenly divided between the singular, ὄνομα (P⁴⁷ N C 1006 1841 2329 MajT^A *gig vg^{mss} sy^{ph} co*; Prim Bea), and the plural, ὀνόματα (A 051 1611 1854 2053 2344 2351 MajT^K *a vg sy^h*). Kilpatrick, NA²⁷, and UBS⁴ all print the plural, but the latter two bracket the ending (ὀνόμα[τα]). The NIV's solution uses the singular but in a phrase that retains the plural idea.

[1047](#)

The four kingdoms are Babylonia, Media, Persia, and Greece. The ten horns would be ten Seleucid rulers between Alexander the Great and Antiochus Epiphanes (the "little horn" of Dan 7:8, 24-26).

[1048](#)

As Moffatt suggests, 429.

[1049](#)

Consider the problem of locating ten horns on only seven heads! And where would the mouth (στόμα, sing., v. 2) be on a seven-headed beast?

[1050](#)

Roloff holds that to a certain extent the beast is “the dragon’s mirror image” (156). He is “the dragon’s agent or representative in human society” (Hughes, 145).

[1051](#)

Suetonius, *Dom.* 13. For the imperial inscriptions at Ephesus see Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, 185ff.

[1052](#)

For a convenient presentation of the background for understanding Revelation 13, cf. Barclay, “Great Themes of the New Testament: 5. Rev xiii,” *ExpTim*, 70 (1958), 260-64, 292-96.

[1053](#)

Sweet writes that “the beast, like the *great city* (11:8), personifies all opposition to God and his people from the beginning,” but in the time John was writing the beast was “the Roman Empire” (208). Krodell accepts the interpretation of the beast as the Roman Empire but goes on to say that it is “also an individual person in whom all evil and idolatry are concentrated” (249). Later, in the second century, according to L. Kreitzer, the beast from the sea was reinterpreted to refer to the emperor Hadrian (“Sibylline Oracles 8, the Roman Imperial *Adventus* Coinage of Hadrian and the Apocalypse of John,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*, 4 [1989], 69-85).

[1054](#)

Collins, 93-94.

[1055](#)

“For John the Roman Empire was so satanic and terrible that in itself it included all the evil terrors of the evil empires which had gone before. It was, as it were, the sum total of all evil” (Barclay, 2.109-10).

[1056](#)

Gk. πάρδαλις may be the panther (only here in the NT).

[1057](#)

Hosea mentions the same three beasts when giving voice to God’s opposition to wayward Israel (“So will I be to them like a lion; like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs”; Hos 13:7-8).

[1058](#)

Understanding θρόνος figuratively.

[1059](#)

For a good survey of the developing antagonism between the early church and the Roman Empire, cf. G. B. Caird's chapter on "Christ and Caesar" in *The Apostolic Age*, 156-80; also Roloff's excursus, "Christians and the State according to Revelation 13" (167-68). Fee finds Roman opposition in terms of emperor worship at work already at an embryonic stage in the sufferings of the church at Philippi (*Philippians*, 29-32).

[1060](#)

Bratcher and Hatton say that the expression means "had a wound that seemed to be fatal (or, mortal)" (195)

[1061](#)

Suetonius, *Calig.* 14; Dio Cassius 59.8.

[1062](#)

Josephus, *Ant.* 18.8.1.

[1063](#)

Hailey writes that "the death stroke is the death of Nero, the first emperor to persecute the church, whose policy of persecution was revived by Domitian, in whom 'the death-stroke was healed' " (286). Roloff notes that the Caesar cult "achieved its initial high point under Caligula" and later "reached a renewed intensification under Domitian" (162). Governed by a somewhat different hermeneutical approach, Hughes takes the mortal wounding of the beast to be a "reference to the phenomenal growth of the apostolic church in its earliest days" (146).

[1064](#)

Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.78; 2.8; Suetonius, *Nero*, 57.

[1065](#)

Cf. also 13:12. The second αὐτοῦ of 13:3 would normally be αὐτῆς if it referred to μία ἐκ τῶν κεφαλῶν. Minear says that it is difficult to maintain that Nero was the wounded beast because "his death did not jeopardize the power of the empire, because he died as a fugitive and enemy of the state" ("The Wounded Beast," *JBL*, 72 [1953], 97).

[1066](#)

Cf. 1 Tim 5:15, ὀπίσω τοῦ σατανᾶ; also John 12:19; Acts 5:37. Charles offers the unlikely suggestion of a corruption in the Hebrew that would allow a Greek rendition that read ἰδοῦσα instead of ὀπίσω (1.351). He supports the conjecture by parallels in 17:6, 8.

[1067](#)

Preston and Hanson (97) note that people are made to worship some absolute power and in the last analysis will give their allegiance either to the beast (whose power is that of inflicting suffering) or to the Lamb (whose power lies in accepting suffering).

[1068](#)

Cullmann (*The State in the New Testament*, 80) writes that “the author of the Johannine Apocalypse saw with astonishing acumen that the satanic element in the Roman Empire lay in this deification” (i.e., emperor worship).

[1069](#)

This is to take the **καὶ** in λαλοῦν μεγάλα **καὶ** βλασφημίας as epexegetic (“to speak great things, even blasphemies”).

[1070](#)

Gk. ποιῆσαι is used in this sense in Dan 8:12, 24; 11:28. Sinaiticus properly interprets with ποιῆσαι ὃ θέλει. 051 2329 MajT^K anticipate and read πόλεμον ποιῆσαι.

[1071](#)

In *Sib. Or.* 5 we learn of various kings who will arise, including Nero, who will return and make himself equal to God (33-34; cf. *Asc. Isa.* 4:6). Roloff notes that “the blasphemous aspect of these speeches [in Revelation] lies not in the direct slander of God but in the actual pretension of putting itself in God’s place” (157).

[1072](#)

Gk. **καὶ** is added before τοὺς by N² 046* 051 2053^{txt} MajT^A lat co; Ir^{lat} Bea. According to Metzger, the addition appears to have been made by copyists desiring to “alleviate the strained syntax” (*Textual Commentary*, 674). P⁴⁷ omits both τοὺς and σκηνοῦντας so that the final phrase reads “his dwelling place in heaven.”

[1073](#)

Josephus, *Ant.* 18.8.2. Charles takes the tabernacle as a reference to the Shekinah (1.353), the manifested glory of God, which in Jewish thought was connected with the tabernacle (Heb. *mishkān*; Gk. σκηνή — see Barclay, 2.94).

[1074](#)

Gk. **καὶ** ἐδόθη ... αὐτοὺς is omitted by P⁴⁷ A C 2053 MajT^A sa; Ir^{lat}, undoubtedly because the eye of the scribe skipped to the second **καὶ** ἐδόθη αὐτῷ. in the same verse.

[1075](#)

Swete, 166.

[1076](#)

Gk. ~~Κ~~αὶ λαόν is omitted by P⁴⁷ 051 1006 MajT^A bo.

[1077](#)

That is, the πάντες in the first clause is followed by the relative οὗ, which calls for an implied ἕκαστος to distribute the collective πάντες. The plural ὧν is read by P⁴⁷ N P 051 1006 1841 2329 *al lat*.

[1078](#)

The alternate construction separates the modifier from its antecedent by twelve words.

[1079](#)

See the apparatus in the UBS⁴ or NA²⁷, and Metzger's discussion in *Textual Commentary*, 674-75.

[1080](#)

This understanding of the text is reflected in a fifth-century manuscript, Alexandrinus (our best manuscript for Revelation," says Kroll, 252), which interprets both couplets in reference to the saints by taking the second verb as a passive infinitive and reading, "If any person is to be killed with a sword, that person is to be killed with a sword." Note that this reading requires taking αὐτόν as a corruption of αὐτός.

[1081](#)

As Charles argues (1.355).

[1082](#)

Gk. ἀπάγει, 2351 *pc* *gig* *vg*^{cl} *sy*; Ir^{lat} Prim.

[1083](#)

Gk. ἀπο~~κ~~τείνει is also read by N 1006 1611* 1841 1854 *al sy*^h. Caird lists four reasons for accepting this text: the charge of v. 9 is elsewhere used of the church, the threat of prison is meaningful to the prospective martyr, use of the sword echoes Jesus' words in Gethsemane, and the call for endurance and faith is directed to the church (169-70). The critical question, however, in choosing between alternative readings is to determine which one best explains the origin of the others. If ἀπο~~κ~~τείνει is correct, then how does one explain how Alexandrinus made something that plain so obtuse?

[1084](#)

Barclay, 2.127.

[1085](#)

See also 2 Esdr 6:49-52; 2 *Bar.* 29:4. Both monsters are referred to in Job 40:15-41:34.

[1086](#)

Bruce, 653.

[1087](#)

Moffatt, 432.

[1088](#)

This would normally call for τῷ ἄρνίῳ.

[1089](#)

Charles, although acknowledging that he can make nothing of the clause, builds a case for a corruption in the Hebrew original that yields, “But he was a destroyer like the dragon” (1.358).

[1090](#)

Harrington identifies the beast as the “imperial religion in the service of Rome” (143).

[1091](#)

Ford tentatively identifies the second beast as Flavius Josephus (227-30), noting that in Rev 13:11-18 “the author of Revelation has depicted the monstrous behavior of Josephus and others like him who led his countrymen to submit to and honor Rome” (230). But this speculation has almost nothing to commend it.

[1092](#)

Wilcock, 127.

[1093](#)

Reference to the dragon and the two beasts as a “Satanic trinity” goes back to an early nineteenth-century physician who wrote using the pseudonym Jung-Stilling.

[1094](#)

Peterson, 127.

[1095](#)

“The earth and its inhabitants” is a comprehensive designation for the totality of the human race.

[1096](#)

1 Kgs 18:38; cf. 2 Kgs 1:10. The sons of Zebedee requested Jesus to perform this spectacular feat in punishment upon the Samaritans who would not receive him (Luke 9:54).

[1097](#)

See also *Sib. Or.* 3:63-70, where an Antichrist figure shall even raise the dead.

[1098](#)

Bruce, 653.

[1099](#)

Cf. 6:10; 11:10; etc. In 13:8 and 17:8 they are identified as those whose names are not written in the book of life.

[1100](#)

Gk. διὰ τὰ σημεῖα: the distinction between the accusative and genitive has all but disappeared here; cf. 12:11.

[1101](#)

Sinaiticus and others (1006 1611 1841 2053 2329 2351 2377 MajT^K a vg) read ὅ to correspond with the neuter θηρίν. Along with the Byzantine text it omits τήν before πληγήν, which makes less likely any specific reference to Nero's suicide.

[1102](#)

In its three other occurrences in Revelation the aorist of ζῶ means “to come to life” (2:8; 20:4, 5). Even if that were the sense in 13:14, it could be used metaphorically of the return to health from a serious setback. It is not necessarily a reference to Domitian as Nero returned from the grave to begin again his persecution of Christians. Beckwith takes ζῶ in the sense of ἀναζῶ and argues that it was the miraculous revivification of the slain head that the priesthood used to urge the worship of the emperor (640-41).

[1103](#)

For εἰς ὧν in the latter sense see Luke 20:24.

[1104](#)

Probably πνεῦμα ζωῆς, as in 11:11. “As the giver of breath, the second beast is the satanic counterpart of the Holy Spirit, who is the ‘breath of life from God’ ” (Robbins, 164).

[1105](#)

Clementine Recognitions 3.47. See Charles (1.361) for further references by Theophilus and Athenagoras.

[1106](#)

According to Harrington, “speaking statues were engineered in various ways, e.g., by hiding somebody in a hollow statue or by use of ventriloquism” (143).

[1107](#)

Charles writes that “none can evade the inquisition and none the dread alternatives of worship or death” (1.361). This theory of universal martyrdom is shown implausible by I. Howard Marshall, “Martyrdom and the Parousia in the Revelation of John” (*SE*, 4 [1968], 333-39).

[1108](#)

Cf. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 675-76) for the UBS committee’s decision about ἵνα in the final clause.

[1109](#)

Caird, 177.

[1110](#)

See Pliny’s letter to Trajan 10.96.

[1111](#)

A runaway slave who was caught and branded was a στιγμας (cf. the English word “stigma”). Paul referred to the wounds received in the course of his ministry as τ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (Gal 6:17).

[1112](#)

According to Plutarch (*Pericl.* 26) the Samians branded Athenian prisoners with an owl. See also Herodotus 7.233.

[1113](#)

See Lucian, *Syr. Dea* 59; Herodotus 2.113.

[1114](#)

In 13:16 and 14:9 the mark is on the brow or the hand. In 20:4 it is on both.

[1115](#)

Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 242; LAE, 341.

[1116](#)

Ford notes that, ironically, the mark on the right hand and on the brow would be “an obvious travesty of the practice of orthodox Judaism which required the faithful to wear phylacteries on the left hand and the head; Deut 6:8” (225). Montague calls it “a demonic reversal of the Jewish practice” (158).

[1117](#)

Ramsay, *Letters*, 110f.

[1118](#)

Preston and Hanson, 99. In Ezek 9:4 the mark was a Hebrew *tau*, which in Greek would be written as a cross — X, a symbol for Χριστός.

[1119](#)

Hailey understands it in more figurative terms as “the stamp of paganism impressed upon the character and conduct of idolaters” (296). It is hard, however, to understand how such a “mark” could be used to determine if a person could take part in daily commercial transactions.

[1120](#)

If $\chi\alpha\acute{\iota}$ is read (as in P⁴⁷ $\aleph$ AC 1841 2351 *al*), v. 17 is coordinate with v. 16b, and both depend on ποιεί. If $\chi\alpha\acute{\iota}$ is omitted (as in $\aleph^*$ C 1611 *al* vg^{mss} sy co; Ir^{lat} Prim), the restriction against buying and selling is the specific purpose of the mark.

[1121](#)

E. A. Judge writes that the available information suggests that when those about to enter the market learned they had to receive the mark of the beast they thought of it in terms of a mark in ink on the wrist or on the forehead, as in Ezek 9:2-6 (“The Mark of the Beast, Revelation 13:16,” *TynB*, 42 [1991], 158-60).

[1122](#)

Gk. ἥ is here roughly equivalent to τοῦ ἑστίν. That the scribes were puzzled by this syntax is clear from the alternatives offered: it is the mark ἥ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θηίου (P⁴⁷ pc gig vg^{cl}; Bea), the mark τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ θηπίου (C pc a vg^{ww} sy; Ir^{lat}), the mark τοῦ θηρίου τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ($\aleph$ pc vg^{ms} co).

[1123](#)

Deissmann, LAE, 277.

[1124](#)

$I = 10$, $H = 8$, $\Sigma = 200$, $O = 70$, $Y = 400$, $\Sigma = 200$.

[1125](#)

Cf. Barclay (“Revelation 13,” *ET*, 70 [1958], 295-96) and Sanders (“The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13,18,” *JBL*, 37 [1918], 95-99); also Evert Bruins, “The Number of the Beast” in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 23 (1969), 401-07.

[1126](#)

Gk. ψηφίζω occurs only here and in Luke 14:28 in the NT. In Luke it is used in connection with counting the cost of building a tower.

[1127](#)

This takes ἀνθρώπου as case-specific rather than generic. The NIV (“it is man’s number”) goes in another direction.

[1128](#)

L'Apocalypse et L'histoire, ad loc.

[1129](#)

Stauffer, *Coniectanea Neotestamentica*, 11.237ff. Baines writes that coins issued in A.D. 72 bear a legend around Vespasian's head that, when placed into Hebrew, would yield the sum of 666 ("The Number of the Beast in Revelation 13:18," *Heythrop Journal*, 16 [1975], 195-96).

[1130](#)

For a short summary see Ruhle's article in *TDNT*, 1.464. The interpretation was later adopted by Lohmeyer, 114f.

[1131](#)

Bauckham understands v. 18 to say that "the number of the beast is *also* the number of a man" and that when the Greek word for "beast" (θηρίον) is translated into Hebrew it has the numerical value of 666. He concludes that "the gematria does not merely assert that Nero is the beast: it demonstrates that he is" (*Climax of Prophecy*, 389). Krodel agrees that the most plausible interpretation of 666 is Caesar Nero and lists the advantages as: (1) it fits the context of chapters 13 and 17, where the Nero legend is most certainly used, (2) it explains the variant reading of 616 in the Western text MSS, and (3) the numerical value in Hebrew of the Gk. θηρίον ("beast") is also 666 (258-59).

[1132](#)

616 is better accounted for as a deliberate attempt to identify the beast with Caligula. His name in Greek (Γαίος Καῖσαρ) totals 616.

[1133](#)

M. Topham, however, does supply us with an example. When *ho Nikolaïtes* is translated into Hebrew characters the numerical equivalent adds up to 666 ("Hanniqola' ites," *ExpTim*, 98 [1986], 44-45).

[1134](#)

Omitting the ' from קיסר (for Καῖσαρ). This defective spelling is attested in a Qumran document dated by reference to "Nero Caesar."

[1135](#)

Hendriksen, 182.

[1136](#)

Torrance writes, "This evil trinity 666 apes the Holy Trinity 777, but always falls short and fails" (86).

[1137](#)

Farrer, 161: based on the assumption that “virgins” are simply girls who are “still sexually innocent.”

[1138](#)

It is worth noting that the NEB, by including v. 12 with vv. 9-11, presents chapter 14 as composed of seven short oracles of the end of the age (Beasley-Murray, 221).

[1139](#)

Gk. εἶδον καὶ ἰδοὺ also occurs at 4:1; 6:2; 6:5; 6:8; 7:9; 14:14 (cf. 19:11) — all highly dramatic scenes.

[1140](#)

2 Esdras has an interesting parallel to our text in which Ezra sees upon Mount Zion a great crowd singing hymns of praise to the Lord. In their midst is a tall young man who places crowns on their heads. Upon inquiry Ezra learns that it is the Son of God whom they acknowledged in mortal life (2 Esdras 2:42-47). According to 2 Esdras 13 the Jews expected the Messiah to appear on Mt. Zion with a great multitude (vv. 35, 39-40); cf. Mic 4:6-8; Joel 2:32; Isa 11:9-12.

[1141](#)

Sweet points out that while Satan stood on the sand (13:1), the Lamb is standing on the rock (221).

[1142](#)

For Palestine as a place of refuge, see 2 Bar. 29:2; 71:1.

[1143](#)

Kiddle calls it “the celestial pattern of the once sacred site of Jerusalem” (263). See Ladd (189-90) for the opposite view. Krodel’s position is that “Mount Zion” is not a geographic location but has become “a symbol of the persevering, conquering church.” It is “wherever the Lamb is with his followers on earth” (261).

[1144](#)

For example, Walvoord, 213-14. This, however, is not exegesis but forcing the text into a prior interpretive mold.

[1145](#)

Barclay lists five different things in the ancient world for which a mark could stand (ownership, loyalty, security, dependence, safety), and finds in each some truth concerning the followers of the Lamb (2.102-3).

[1146](#)

Charles links this clause with the previous one, explaining that the Greek is a literal reproduction of a Hebrew idiom and should read “harpers harping ... and singing” (2.7).

[1147](#)

See, e.g., Kiddle: “In John’s opinion the married Christian is further from the godly ideal than the unmarried” (268), a questionable position to say the least in view of the high esteem in which Scripture holds the family.

[1148](#)

Gk. παρθένος is occasionally used of men who have not had intercourse with women; in the apocryphal *Joseph and Aseneth* (3, 8) it is so used of Joseph; also of Abel, Melchizedek, and the apostle John (cf. BAGD, 627, for references).

[1149](#)

Kiddle would explain John’s exalted view of celibacy as in part a recoil from the lax morality of pagan life, noting that the Seer “would have been almost more than human if his zeal had not taken him to the verge of fanaticism” (269-70). A more common tack is to suggest that this part of the verse was originally a marginal note of some monkish scribe and later copied into the text by mistake. No manuscript evidence supports this conjecture. Charles (2.9-11) holds that the interpolation of this “monkish glosser” runs from ἀπὸ τῆς γς (v. 3) through γῆορςσθησαν (v. 4).

[1150](#)

Susan Garrett laments the use of women as a metaphor for idolatry and fears that the Apocalypse’s “implicit disparagement of women will keep the book from accomplishing its purpose of encouraging faith” (377-82).

[1151](#)

Carrington thinks that these verses refer to those who have not entered into sexual rites with temple prostitutes such as those at Ephesus (337-40). Cult prostitution was far more serious than common harlotry (IDB, 3.932).

[1152](#)

Caird arrives at much the same conclusion, but he finds the source of John’s imagery in the Deuteronomic regulations for holy war (Deut 20; 23:9-11). The ceremonial purity that the soldiers were required to maintain symbolized the moral purity of the redeemed in not going after the great whore of Babylon (179). Cf. Sweet, who maintains that believers, seeing themselves as metaphorically on military and priestly service, in view of the imminent Day of the Lord, “may have lived as celibates where possible ...

in order to be at the Lord's disposal without distraction" (222). So also Beasley-Murray, 223.

[1153](#)

Beckwith places the action in the past tense (he proposes ἦσαν rather than εἰσίν for the missing verb) in order to correspond with the main verbs of the other two clauses and reads, "these were followers of the Lamb in all his ways" (652).

[1154](#)

Charles notes that ἀπαρχή renders ראשית in only nineteen of the sixty-six occurrences in the LXX (2.6). P⁴⁷ **Ⲭ** pc t; Prim Bea read ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, "from the beginning," rather than ἀπαρχή.

[1155](#)

051 1611 2351 MajT^K sy^{h**} add ὑπὸ 'Ιησοῦ before ἡγοράσθησαν.

[1156](#)

Swete's comment is that "after purity truthfulness was perhaps the most distinctive mark of the followers of Christ" (180).

[1157](#)

MSS that add γάρ after ἄμωμοι (P⁴⁷ **Ⲭ** (051) 1 1006 1611 1841 2329 2351 MajT^K a t vg^{cl} sy^{ph.h**} co Or) imply that the 144,000 do not lie *because* they are without blemish.

[1158](#)

Gk. ἄμωμος: Eph 1:4; 5:27; Phil 2:15; Col 1:22; Jude 24. Rev 14:5 is a possible exception. Metzger notes that several MSS followed by TR add ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ after εἰσιν (*Textual Commentary*, 677).

[1159](#)

Gk. ἄλλον is omitted by P⁴⁷ **Ⲭ*** MajT sa; Or Vic. Bruce notes that ἄλλος in a sequence like this is used for both "one" and "another" (654). It is used six times in vv. 6-17.

[1160](#)

Gk. ἐπί; not used elsewhere with εὐαγγελίζομαι.

[1161](#)

A051 pc abo; Bea read χατοχϣοϣντας instead of χαθημνους. Charles conjectures that an early scribe may have substituted the more neutral χαθημανους because χατοιχοϣντας as elsewhere used by our author consistently carries a bad connotation (2.12-13).

[1162](#)

This would normally call for the article before εὐαγγέλιον. Roloff finds here an ancient Palestinian Jewish-Christian idiom that reaches back behind the Pauline understanding and relates directly to Isa 52:7 in which the εὐαγγέλιον is the message of God's coming to judgment and salvation (174-75).

[1163](#)

Ladd takes the eternal gospel to be the announcement of the end itself (193; so also Ford, 236). Jeremias understands it as a special eschatological ministry of angels resulting in a widespread salvation among Gentiles (*Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, 22).

[1164](#)

Translating **Ν**αί (after τῆς γῆς as "even." For the four terms, see comm. on 5:9.

[1165](#)

Swete notes that the basis of the appeal is pure theism: "It is an appeal to the conscience of untaught heathendom, incapable as yet of comprehending any other" (182).

[1166](#)

Gk. δεῦτερος is omitted by 69 pc vg. For other variations see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 678.

[1167](#)

In 2 Bar. 11:1; 67:7 and *Sib. Or.* 5:143, 159, 434 (probably 1 Pet 5:13 as well) Rome is called Babylon.

[1168](#)

Swete, 183.

[1169](#)

Schick, 2.36.

[1170](#)

BAGD, 365. Note, however, that they are somewhat undecided between this and a translation that takes θυμός as anger or wrath.

[1171](#)

So Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, 161ff.

[1172](#)

Bratcher and Hatton suggest the translation, "She made all the nations drink the wine of her immorality, the wine that brings God's anger" (212).

[1173](#)

Robbins writes, “According to a law of life, the object of a man’s devotion transforms him into its character” (170).

[1174](#)

The present tense (προσ~~κ~~υνεῖ) may mean, “If any person *continues* to worship the beast” in spite of the call for repentance (in v. 7).

[1175](#)

Gk. καί introduces the apodosis. Do not read, “He too [as well as Babylon] shall drink....” Ford translates, “That man will drink also . . .” (231). She comments, “The author probably means that one cannot drink one cup and not the other for both are linked; the consequences of drinking Babylon’s cup is the inescapable necessity to receive the Lord’s” (237).

[1176](#)

Gk. θυμός; contrast with ὀργή (used in the following clause), which refers more to the settled feeling of righteous indignation. θυμός occurs seven times in the second half of Revelation for the “white heat of God’s anger” (Swete, 185). Cf. William Klassen (“Vengeance in the Apocalypse of John,” *CBQ*, 28 [1966], 300-311) for a balanced appraisal of the wrath of God in Revelation. He rejects extreme views such as those of W. D. Davies (toward political authorities the Apocalypse discloses “an abortive hatred that can only lead, not to their redemption, but to their destruction” [“Ethics in the New Testament,” *IDB*, 2.176]) and C. G. Jung (“a veritable orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury” [Answer to Job, 125]), and concludes that “it is doubtful that the Ap views the wrath of God any differently than do the other writers of the NT” (311). Sweet comments that the wrath of God in the NT is “not a feeling of passion in God, but his reaction against sin, and the effects of that reaction” (227).

[1177](#)

Sulfur burns with an intense heat and produces an unpleasant smell (Bratcher and Hatton, 214).

[1178](#)

Cf. 1 *Enoch* 91:9; 100:9; 2 *Esdr* 7:35; etc. The Qumran community expected the wicked to be judged by fire (1QS 2:2; 4:13; 1QH 17:13).

[1179](#)

1 *Enoch* 27:3 speaks of “the spectacle of righteous judgment in the presence of the righteous for ever,” and 4 *Ezra* 7:36 describes the day of judgment when “the furnace of Gehenna shall be made manifest, and over against it the Paradise of delight.”

[1180](#)

A pc bo; Spec omit ἁγίων, while the MajT^k adds the definite article τῶν. Beasley-Murray maintains that it is possible for “holy angels” to form a periphrasis for God (226).

[1181](#)

Note the comparison with the ceaseless worship of the four living creatures in 4:8.

[1182](#)

Glasson labels as “sub-Christian” and “impossible to reconcile with the teaching of Jesus” the idea that those who had fallen into the sin of emperor worship should be punished day and night forever (86). Barclay follows the same line of thought, but counsels us not to condemn it until we have gone through the same sufferings as did the early Christians (2.113). Boring distinguishes between objectifying and confessional language and says that, taken in the former sense, it would be “cruel beyond imagination” but in the latter sense it is “intended not to describe the fate of outsiders but to encourage insiders to remain faithful” (170-71). See also his reflection on “Universal Salvation and Paradoxical Language” (226-31) in which he attempts to show that some texts in Revelation portray or imply universal salvation — an attempt that, according to Talbert, “must be termed a failure” (119, n. 30). Preston and Hanson reinterpret the scene of torment as a symbolic way of portraying the suffering of people who deliberately turn away from the highest Good. Their torment consists precisely in refusing to be members of the Lamb; it is eternal in the sense that God will never violate the human personality (102-3).

[1183](#)

Beasley-Murray calls v. 12 the “punch line” for the oracle of judgment in vv. 9-11, the train of thought being, “If such be the fate of the adherents of the beast, Christ’s people must at all costs continue to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (227).

[1184](#)

Gk. Ἰησοῦ is an objective genitive; cf. τὴν πίστιν μου in 2:13.

[1185](#)

“Death is not the end,” writes Schick, “but a transition from the temporal to what is final” (2.38).

[1186](#)

Gk. γράψον is regularly used in the command to write to each of the seven churches (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Cf. 19:9; 21:5 and contrast μὴ γράψῃς in 10:4.

[1187](#)

This prospect of eternal blessedness is, according to Kiddle, a “positive motive for heroic loyalty” (283). Sweet observes, “When the veil of time is removed God must be either man’s supreme joy or his supreme torment” (228).

[1188](#)

This omission has the support of P⁴⁷ N* pc. It also makes possible the conjecture of ἀπ’ ὧρτι for ἀπ’ ὅρτι (“Certainly, saith the Spirit, they may rest ...”). Cf. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 678) for a discussion of the variants for ναί, λέγει. Farrer, acknowledging the uncertainty of the text, is nevertheless sure that the meaning is “Blessed from the moment of their death” (164).

[1189](#)

“Throughout history from John’s day to ours oppressive governments have been wary of that Christian commitment which sees no human institution as its absolute and final authority” (Jeske, 97).

[1190](#)

In Pirke Abot 6:10 Rabbi Jose ben Kisma is quoted as saying, “In the hour of a man’s death it is not silver or gold or precious stones or pearls which accompany him, but Torah and good works alone.” Cf. 2 Esdr 7:77; 2 Bar. 14:12.

[1191](#)

Gk. στέφανος χρυσοῦς; worn also by the twenty-four elders in 4:4, 10 (cf. the στέφανοι ὅμοιοι χρυσοῖ worn by the demonic locusts in 9:7). The most appropriate headdress of a ruler was the διάδημα (cf. 19:12), but the two ideas of victory and royalty often merge.

[1192](#)

In any case, this is arbitrary, since there is very little that holds the visions together otherwise.

[1193](#)

Krodel discusses four different approaches to this vision (272-73) and concludes that “John’s vision presents a preview of salvation (grain harvest) and of judgment (vintage harvest)” (273). Beasley-Murray (228) maintains that this view is difficult to accept because (1) the two visions are rooted in

the double parable of judgment in Joel 3:13, and (2) the imagery of the visions is parallel. The two harvests of 2 Esdr 4:28-32 are interesting but not determinative (the first harvest being of the wicked in this age and the second of the righteous in the age to come).

[1194](#)

Beckwith correctly says, “The figure is comprehensive, including in a word the whole process of the winding up of the ages, and the recompense of both the good and the bad” (662). Collins writes that in Joel 3:13 “the harvest is a metaphor for the final battle of God against the nations. Here, the harvest of the earth has the same meaning” (105). Caird holds the harvest and vintage to be variations on a single theme, but interprets both as portraying the impending martyrdom of the elect (191-94). Montague takes the first as the harvest of the elect and the second as the blood shed by the martyrs. By combining the two John is saying that “the harvest of the elect has been won by the shedding of Martyrs’ blood” (167-68).

[1195](#)

The fact that he was seated indicates that he is a judge with the authority to hear and decide cases (Roloff, 173).

[1196](#)

The δρεπανον was a curved blade used both for cutting grain and for pruning and cutting clusters from the vine.

[1197](#)

Charles removes any apparent confusion that could arise from so many angels in these verses by removing vv. 15-17 as an interpolation suggested by the poetic parallelism of Joel 3:13 (2.18-19, 21). Such textual surgery is unnecessary.

[1198](#)

Gk. ξηραίνω (v. 15) means to dry out or wither. ἀρχιμάζω (v. 18) means to be at the prime; the idiom ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἀρχιμῆς (on the razor’s edge) meant “at the critical moment” (LSJ, 51).

[1199](#)

Swete (190) writes of the “delicate beauty” in assigning the work of death to a minister of justice, while Jesus the Savior appears “unto salvation” (Heb 9:28).

[1200](#)

Gk. τὸν μέγαν stands in apposition to τὴν ληνόν. The change in gender is explained by Beckwith as due to the fact that John had in mind that which it

symbolized, ὁ θυμὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (664). In Gen 30:38, 41 ληνός is masculine. Sinaiticus (also 1006 1841 1854 2053 *al* gig sy^{pn,hmg}) reads τὴν μεγάλην to correct the gender, and P⁴⁷ 1611 pc sy^h have τοῦ μεγάλου, which may be translated, “the winepress of the great wrath of God/of the wrath of the great God.” Other MSS (181 424 468 *al*) omit the adjective altogether.

1201

Walvoord holds that a flow of blood this deep is impossible and takes it to mean a liberal splattering of blood (223). This, of course, fails to grasp the hyperbolic nature of the metaphor.

1202

2036 reads χιλίων ἑξ;N* pc syph read χιλίων διαχρισίων(1200), “probably because this numeral lends itself better to symbolic interpretation” (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 679).

1203

In the *Itinerarium* of Antonius, Palestine was said to be 1664 stadia from Tyre to El-Arish (on the borders of Egypt).

1204

1,600 has also been taken as representing the whole earth or as the square of forty, the traditional number for punishment (cf. Num 14:33; Deut 25:3).

1205

Moffatt, 449. On p. 442 he refers to the entire vision of judgment as a “poetic expansion of Lev xxvi.21” (“If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve”).

1206

The seven bowls of judgment may well be the third Woe announced in 11:14.

1207

Montague’s understanding of the wrath of God as “the inevitable effects of sin” (173) is hardly enough to account for the intensity and finality of the seven last plagues.

1208

“Great” means “incredible, important,” and “marvelous” means “impressive, amazing, astonishing” (Bratcher and Hatton, 223).

1209

Gk. ἐν αὐτὰς ἐτελέσθη ὁ θυμὸς τοῦ θεοῦ does not mean that the plagues exhaust or bring to an end the wrath of God. The devil, the beast, the false

prophet, and all whose names are not found in the book of life are yet to be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15).

[1210](#)

Caird mentions “the plagues, the crossing of the sea, the engulfing of the pursuers, the song of Moses, the giving of the law amid the smoke of Sinai, and the erection of the Tent of Testimony” (197).

[1211](#)

Kiddle understands a “heavenly Red Sea” through which the martyrs have come and which is about to submerge their enemies (300-301 Others take the reference to fire as a symbol of judgment.

[1212](#)

Gk. ἐπί could be “by” (as in 3:20), but taking the sea to be a solid surface allows the more customary translation “on” (cf. 10:5, 8; 12:18).

[1213](#)

Gk. νιχῶντας ex is an unusual construction and seems to connote deliverance from (or out of) the great ordeal prompted by emperor worship. Bruce suggests that it imitates a Hebrew construction that is translated “prevailed over” in 1 Sam 17:50 (655).

[1214](#)

051 MajT^A add ἐκ τοῦ χαράγματος αὐτοῦ χαί before ἐκ τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ.

[1215](#)

So Beckwith, 676-78.

[1216](#)

Moses is designated the servant of God in Exod 14:31; Josh 14:7; 1 Chron 5:49; Dan 9:11.

[1217](#)

Note the use of ὁ ι three times.

[1218](#)

In the NA27 only ὅτι μόνος ὁστος, ὅτι and the final clause (ὅτι τὰ διχάσματα σου ἐφανερώθησαν) are not italicized.

[1219](#)

The NIV (cf. ASV, REB, AT) translates αἰώνων (found in P⁴⁷ ~~Σ~~^{*}.2 C 1006 1611 1841 pc vg sa^{mss}). NA²⁷ and UBS⁴ read ἐθνῶν (~~Σ~~¹ A 051 MajT gig (h) sy^{hmg} bo; Prim). At issue is whether John wrote “King of the ages,” which later scribes conformed to Jer 10:7, or “King of the nations,” which later scribes conformed to 1 Tim 1:17. The UBS committee chose ἐθνῶν

on the grounds that (1) $\nu\omega\nu$ could have been introduced by a copyist recollecting 1 Tim 1:17, and (2) $\acute{\epsilon}\theta\nu\tilde{\omega}\nu$ is more in accord with the context. The reading of the TR ($\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{\iota}\omega\nu$) has very slender support and arose from a confusion in Latin (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 680).

[1220](#)

The three parallel $\omega\kappa$ clauses that follow the rhetorical question in v. 4 provide three reasons why God is to be feared and glory brought to his name. By not translating the second $\omega\kappa$ the NIV ill-advisedly turns the second clause into a declarative statement for which the final $\omega\kappa$ clause supplies the reason.

[1221](#)

Beckwith (675) notes that the holiness of God refers not to his sinlessness, but to his unapproachable majesty and power (cf. Ps 99:3, 5, 9). Accordingly, Barclay refers to the entire song as “a lyric outburst on the greatness of God” (2.120).

[1222](#)

Some interpreters take $\delta\iota\chi\alpha\acute{\iota}\omega\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$ as judicial sentences (Charles, 2.36; Morris, 184), but it is the victorious activity of God that here results in universal praise.

[1223](#)

Krodel says that here as in 11:13 John “took up the Old Testament promise of the pilgrimage of Gentiles to Mount Zion,” and that not all Gentiles will perish in the apocalyptic upheavals but their future “worship” shows that they will become part of the one people of God after general judgment (279). Rist, however, reminds us that the line, “All nations will come and worship before you,” is thoroughly out of harmony with the idea expressed elsewhere in Revelation that the nations stubbornly refuse to repent. He offers as solutions: (1) John used a Christian hymn without changing the line on the final repentance and conversion of the heathen, (2) worship did not involve conversion but only acknowledgment of his power and might, and (3) John is not consistent here (479). If in fact a problem were to exist, Rist’s second solution would be preferable.

[1224](#)

Beckwith writes that “the sanctuary meant here is defined by the following appositional gen.” (678). The complete expression would be, “the temple, that is, the tent of witness.”

[1225](#)

Gk. ἐχ τοῦ ναοῦ is omitted, however, by the Byzantine text.

[1226](#)

The variant λίθον (“stone”; A C 2053 2062 *pc* *vg*st *sy*^{hmg}) is accepted by some scholars, perhaps on such grounds as (1) Ezek 28:13; (2) the fact that it is the more difficult reading; (3) it is a possible reference to the breastplate of the high priest. Charles suggests a mistranslation of 𐤇𐤍 as λίθος instead of βύσσινος (Gen 41:42; Exod 28:39) and points to Rev 19:8, 14 for support (2.38-39). Although λίνου (read by P [~~λ~~] 046 *pc* a *gig* [h]) rather than λίνον is the normal designation for a garment made of flax, the latter is occasionally used (cf. BAGD, 475, for examples).

[1227](#)

The φιάλη was a wide, shallow bowl rather than a narrow-necked vial as the AV translation suggests. Its contents were quickly and easily poured out.

[1228](#)

Cf. Josephus, Ant. 3.143.

[1229](#)

The boils of the first plague are still active at the time of the fifth plague (v. 11).

[1230](#)

Krodel is correct in his conclusion that the second and third series “recapitulate, not pedantically, but artistically, prophetically, from different perspectives and with greater intensity the day of wrath, which was present already in the sixth seal” (280-81).

[1231](#)

Dale Davis suggests a plan in which each series is primarily sequential (the fifth seal overlaps the trumpets), but all three series end simultaneously (“The Relationship between the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls in the Book of Revelation,” *JETS*, 16 [1973], 149-58).

[1232](#)

Boring stresses that throughout this section the wrath of God is to be understood forensically, not emotionally (175).

[1233](#)

Farrer makes the interesting suggestion that since God is named in the third person, the voice is not a personal utterance of God but a sort of thunder that expresses his mind (175).

[1234](#)

Gk. μεγάλης φωνής; elsewhere in the chapter we find the normal Johannine order: **Ν**αύμα μέγα (v. 9), τὸν ποταμὸν τὸν μέγαν (v. 12); also in vv. 14, 17, 18, 19, and 21.

[1235](#)

42 a^{*}; Bea read **ἐ****Ν** τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (apparently because ναοῦ was taken as a contraction of οὐρανοῦ; cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 680). **ἐ****Ν** τοῦ ναοῦ is omitted by MajT^K, perhaps because it seemed inappropriate for such a stem command to come “out of the temple.”

[1236](#)

Krodel (277) notes that the sequence of the three angelic announcements of judgment in chapter 14 are now reversed: judgment on the worshipers of the beast (16:1-21 with 14:9-10), judgment on Babylon (17:1-19:10 with 14:8), and general judgment (20:11-15 or 19:11-20:15 with 14:6-7).

[1237](#)

Lilje, 214.

[1238](#)

Gk. **ἐ**λ**Ν**ος; the same word is found in Rev 16:2 as in Exod 9:9-11 (LXX). Deut 28:27 (LXX) speaks of God smiting the disobedient with the boil (**ἐ**λ**Ν**εῖ) of Egypt in the seat (εἰς τὴν **ἐ**δραν) — a case of hemorrhoids! See also Deut 28:35.

[1239](#)

Gk. ἀπ^τῆλθεν occurs only with the first angel but is assumed with the other six.

[1240](#)

Gk. Ψυχὴ ζω^τῆς (A C 1006 1611 1841 pc sy^h) has occasioned several scribal alterations: P⁴⁷ N 046 O51 1854 2053 2062 2344 MajT^A lat sy^{ph} co read ζω.σα; 2329 reads ζώων. The AV follows the reading of P⁴⁷ N MajT latt sy^{ph} co, which omits the article τ^ο and states that “every living soul died in the sea” — a rather different (and unacceptable) idea.

[1241](#)

The first Egyptian plague (Exod 7:19ff.) is distributed into two bowl plagues (second and third).

[1242](#)

“In contemporary thought,” writes Sweet, “spiritual powers represented and controlled earthly realities” (244).

[1243](#)

There is some (but not much) merit in the suggestion that the “angel in charge of the waters” is simply the angel of the previous verse who poured out his bowl upon the waters (Lenski, 469).

[1244](#)

The righteous acts of God speak of his saving activity. Since redemption and justice are two sides of a similar reality, these two songs echo each other.

[1245](#)

Peter Staples argues against H. D. Betz that the world of Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism is not the most plausible background for Rev 16:4-6 (“Rev. XVI 4-6 and its Vindication Formula,” *NovT*, 14 [1972], 280-93). Betz’s article is translated in “Apocalypticism,” *JTC*, 6 (1969), 134-56.

[1246](#)

The AV incorrectly reads “and shalt be,” perhaps mistaking ὄσιος for the future participle ἐσόμενος (Bruce, 656). ὁ ὄσιος is taken as vocative in nearly all recent translations. P⁴⁷ 2329 pc read ~~Ν~~αί instead of ὁ, taking ὄσιος as an adjective parallel to δι~~Ν~~αίος.

[1247](#)

At issue is the question of the ὅτι (in v. 6) that introduces a dependent clause. But what is it dependent on? It could explain the last line of v. 5 (as the NIV apparently has it), or offer a second, parallel reason to that line in response to God’s righteousness. In that both the first and the last clause of v. 5 speak of God’s judgments, both alternatives tend to communicate the same message.

[1248](#)

Some take the two ὅτι clauses as parallel or the second as an explanation of the first. The alternative tentatively accepted above understands ~~Ν~~αί in the sense of “even.”

[1249](#)

There is a “grim appropriateness in this plague: those who shed Christian blood must now drink blood” (Glasson, 92).

[1250](#)

Gk. δέδω~~χ~~ας (A C 1611 2329 pc). P⁴⁷ N 051 MajT read ἔδω~~χ~~ας.

[1251](#)

For ἄξιος in a somewhat ironic sense see Luke 12:48 (“worthy of stripes”) and Rom 1:32 (“worthy of death”).

[1252](#)

This use of **καί** to identify a particular person or class within a larger group is clearly seen in passages such as Mark 16:7 and Acts 1:14.

[1253](#)

See comm. on 9:13.

[1254](#)

15:3 speaks of **ὁδοί** rather than **χρίσεις** and has **ἀληθινὰ** and **δίκαλα** in reverse order. Rev 19:2 corresponds to 16:7.

[1255](#)

Gk. **κρίσις** tends to express action, while **κρίμα** refers more often to a judicial verdict.

[1256](#)

Somewhat curiously the first three angels pour out their bowls *into* (**εἰς**, 9:2, 3, 4), and the following four *upon* (**ἐπὶ**, 9:8, 10, 12, 17). Lenski suggests that John would have us divide the plagues into groups of three and four rather than the customary four and three (471), but that is to make too much out of prepositions.

[1257](#)

“The sun, which is such a blessing, becomes a curse” (Roloff, 186).

[1258](#)

Taking **ἡλίον** rather than **ὁ τέταρτος** as the antecedent of **αὐτῷ**.

[1259](#)

Cognate accusative; **ἐκαυματίσθησαν ... καυμα μέγα**; cf. Matt 2:10; Luke 11:46. Cf. Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 7.26, where it is warned that God will stop the sun for three days and the wicked will be punished by excessive heat.

[1260](#)

Kiddle, 320.

[1261](#)

Just as the striking of the Nile was distributed by John into the second and third bowl judgments, so the Egyptian plague of darkness (Exod 10:22ff.) is the background for both the fourth and fifth bowl judgments.

[1262](#)

Cf. Satan’s **θρόνος** in 2:13 and the **θρόνος** that the dragon gave to the beast along with his power and great authority (13:2).

[1263](#)

Taking the fifth bowl as in some sense an abbreviation of the first Woe, Charles (2.44-45) conjectures that the kingdom of the beast is made dark by the smoke from the pit (9:2). Holding the darkness to be “wholly

insufficient to explain the agony experienced by the adherents of the Beast,” he infers that “after ἔσχατος μὲν several clauses have been lost,” which would explain both the darkness and the sufferings of humankind (2.45). Again, this is a totally unnecessary expedient.

[1264](#)

Kiddle interprets the darkness as “the darkness of civil strife” (321), while Caird understands it as “the total eclipse of the monster’s imperial power” (204). He goes on to call the last three plagues a “triad of political disaster” — internal anarchy, invasion, and irreparable collapse (204). As the first four plagues fell on the elements of nature, the last three are “directed against the forces of deception and persecution” (Sweet, 246).

[1265](#)

Gk. μασάομαι, “to bite or chew”; Job 30:3 speaks of people who “gnaw dry roots” (GNB) in search of food.

[1266](#)

Wilcock writes that “the plagues poured out of the Bowls are total, because the opportunity for repentance has gone” (144).

[1267](#)

The closest literary parallel is Isa 11:15-16, where the River (Euphrates) is broken up into seven streams so that people may cross dryshod and a highway leads from Assyria to Israel for the returning remnant (cf. Jer 51:36; Zech 10:11; 2 Esdr 13:47).

[1268](#)

Hist. 1.191. 1.

[1269](#)

Walvoord, 236.

[1270](#)

The relationship between “Armageddon” and the Gog and Magog conflict at the close of the millennial period will be treated in the commentary at 20:7-10.

[1271](#)

From this point on the second beast is called the false prophet. “This defines his role as the spokesman of the first beast, with the task of misleading people with his message” (Bratcher and Hatton, 35).

[1272](#)

Swete identifies the beast as “the brute force of the World-power represented by the Roman Empire,” and the false prophet as the “false

spiritual power which made common cause with the temporal power in doing Satan's work" (206).

[1273](#)

Lev 11:10 classifies the frog ("anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales") as an unclean animal. "In the religion of the Persians who dwelt east of the Euphrates ["the kings of the east"] frogs were considered to be the instrument of Ahriman, the god of darkness" (Schick 2.51).

[1274](#)

Beckwith favors the construction that translates, "For there exist spirits of demons which work miracles," and takes the clause as explaining the power of the spirits (684).

[1275](#)

Charles rejects as "wholly unsatisfactory" ἃ ἐχπορεύεται and concludes that it was changed from ἐχπορευόμενα when the marginal gloss ὡς βότραχοί ... σημεια was incorporated into the text (2.48). P⁴⁷ N* 051 1006 1841 MajT^A read ἐχπορεύεσθαι.

[1276](#)

Gk. ἡ οἰχουμένη ὅλη is universal in scope.

[1277](#)

Swete writes, "There have been times when nations have been seized by a passion for war which the historian can but imperfectly explain. It is such an epoch that the Seer foresees, but one which, unlike any that has come before it, will involve the whole world in war" (208).

[1278](#)

051 MajT sy sharpen the reference by adding ἐχείνης after ἡμέρας.

[1279](#)

Charles, holding that the faithful have already been removed from the earth, judges v. 15 to be an intrusion that originally belonged between 3:3a and 3b (2.49). Caird objects to this kind of surgery and views it as an admission that the evidence does not support the theory (208). Sweet agrees — "Arguments ... for displacement from 3:3 miss the point" (249).

[1280](#)

N * pc sy^{ph}; Prim Bea put the warning in the third person (ἔρχεται).

[1281](#)

"According to the Mishnah, the captain of the temple in Jerusalem went his rounds of the precincts by night, and if a member of the temple police was caught asleep at his post, his clothes were taken off and burned, and he was

sent away naked in disgrace” (Bruce, 657). In the context of v. 15 ἄσχημοσύνη is probably a euphemism for “private parts” (as in Exod 20:26 and Deut 23:14; cf. BAGD, 119).

[1282](#)

NBD, 505.

[1283](#)

NA²⁷ reads Ἀρμαγεδών, which is found in **Ⲭ** A E and about 95 minuscules (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 681).

[1284](#)

Farrer, 178. See W. H. Shea, “The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16,” AUSS, 18 (1980), 157-62, for the position that the “mountain of Megiddo(n)” in Rev 16:16 is Mt. Carmel. Several years later in the same journal R. E. Loasby argues that the underlying Hebrew was *har mo‘ed* and that the reference is to Mount Zion (“ ‘Har-Magedon’ according to the Hebrew in the Setting of the Seven Last Plagues of Revelation 16,” AUSS, 27 [1989], 129-32).

[1285](#)

Beckwith, 685.

[1286](#)

This conjecture takes Πλ (transliterated “Ap) as the equivalent of Π”Υ (“city”); cf. Charles’ reference, 2.50. Metzger notes that the usual English spelling, “Armageddon,” is based on one form of the late Byzantine text; but most manuscripts give no information about the breathing (*Textual Commentary*, 681). An alternate form that drops the first syllable is Μαγεδών or Μαγεδδών (1611 2053 2062 MajT^K vg^{mss} sy^{ph.hmg} bo^{mss}). Cf. Metzger for other orthographic variations.

[1287](#)

Boring (calling attention to Rissi, *Time and History*, 84-85 and Eller, 150-51) asserts that this solution fits the context (177), but Sweet holds that it “is philologically dubious” (250).

[1288](#)

Caird, 207; cf. Kiddle, 329-31.

[1289](#)

Jeremias has a good summary in “Har Magedon (Apc. 16:16),” ZNW, 31 (1932), 73-77.

[1290](#)

Robbins says that the term is used symbolically much as we use the expression “Waterloo” today. While that is true as far as it goes, his assertion that “it will occur at no particular time; it is occurring all the time” (191) discounts the fact that Armageddon, while always in process in one sense, will culminate in one great and final conflict between God and the evil forces of Antichrist. Even Waterloo took place at a decisive point in history!

[1291](#)

There is probably no intended reference here to the air as the abode of demons (cf. Eph 2:2).

[1292](#)

Some manuscripts read οὐρανοῦ. for ναοῦ. (O51 * 1854 MajT^K gig); others have the longer substitution ναοῦ. τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. (051^c MajT^K). Sinaiticus replaces ἀπὸ τοῦ θρόνου with τοῦ θεοῦ, while 2027 pc add τοῦ θεοῦ after θρόνου. Apparently the scribes found some awkwardness with the concept.

[1293](#)

Moffatt, 449.

[1294](#)

A free rendering of Dan 12:1?

[1295](#)

Some have taken “the great city” to be Jerusalem on the basis that later in the verse Babylon the Great (Rome) appears to be mentioned separately (cf. 11:8). Morris removes the city from any geographical setting, identifying it as “civilized man ... ordering his affairs apart from God” (201; cf. Kiddle, 332, and Bruce, 657, for similar interpretations).

[1296](#)

Gk. καὶ may be understood “and so” (cf. Matt 23:32; 2 Cor 11:9).

[1297](#)

BAGD, 365. Cf. 19:15 (“the winepress of the fierce anger of God”) and comm. on 14:8, 10. Commenting on 16:19, Lenski says that the wine is “the wrath that is hot with anger” (485).

[1298](#)

For example, Caird, 209.

[1299](#)

For example, Kiddle, 335.

[1300](#)

John, by means of his impressionistic pictures of the last things, “depicts the unspeakable grandeur of the awe-fulness of the revelation of God’s judgments and deliverances at the end of history” (Beasley-Murray, 247).

[1301](#)

The τάλαντον varied in weight among different peoples and at various times. The range seems to be from about sixty pounds to something over a hundred. Alford notes that Diodorus Siculus (19.45) speaks of hailstones of a mina each in weight as enormous, and the talent contained sixty minae (4.704).

[1302](#)

Gk. σφόδρα; only here in Revelation.

[1303](#)

Note the similarities between the two passages: καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἐπιτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἔχόντων τὰς ἐπιτὰ φτάλας ... καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ’ ἐμου. λέγων, Δευρο, δείξω σοι (17:1 and 21:9); ἀπήνεγκέν με ... ἐν πνεύματι (17:3 and 21:10).

[1304](#)

Caird, 212-13. J. E. Bruns holds that Valeria Messalina (wife of the emperor Claudius) was in the Seer’s mind when he described the great harlot (“The Contrasted Women of Apoc 12 and 17,” *CBQ*, 26 [1964], 459-63). “There can be no doubt that at this period the Roman world recognized in one woman [Messalina] the epitome of all that was rotten and corrupt in the empire” (461; cf. the following page for quotations from Juvenal and Tacitus in support of this position).

[1305](#)

Rist argues that the harlot is not only Rome and the empire, but *Dea Roma* (the personification of the divine state) herself, who along with the emperors and the seven-headed beast is accorded divine worship (488-89 and throughout the exegesis of chap. 17). Ford tries to build a case for Jerusalem rather than Rome as the harlot of Rev 17 (283-86), but without much success.

[1306](#)

Gk. ἐπί with the genitive may mean “by” or “near”; John 21:1; Acts 5:23 (BAGD, 286).

[1307](#)

Taking the ὧν clause in v. 8 as appositional.

[1308](#)

Cf. the same imagery in Rev 14:8 and 18:3.

[1309](#)

This judgment is carried out in v. 16 and then portrayed using other figures and in greater detail in the following chapter.

[1310](#)

Gk. ἐν πνεύματι refers to the Seer's ecstatic state rather than the instrumentality by which he was carried away (in which case the reference would be to the Holy Spirit).

[1311](#)

Sweet writes, "The wilderness has many associations.... It is the place of demons and temptation and of spiritual perception and preservation" (254).

[1312](#)

Boer says that it is clear that the beast on which the prostitute sits is identical with the prostitute (Rome), yet it is equally clear that the beast represents far more than the city of Rome. He concludes that "the harlot is a *temporary* manifestation of the beast as a *constant* reality" (118-19).

[1313](#)

Charles, 2.64.

[1314](#)

In Rev 13:1 the names were on his seven heads. The masculine participles γέμοντα and ἔχων (though some MSS use the neuter γέμον; cf. N² 051 MajT) reflect an understanding of the beast as an intelligent being.

[1315](#)

Gk. χεχρνωμένη χρυσίῳ does not necessarily mean that she gilded her body (Swete, 216). The καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῃ that follows argues for the meaning "to adorn." Cf. 1 Tim 2:9, where adornment with gold, pearls, and costly attire is frowned upon, and Ezek 28:13, where the king of Tyre is adorned with precious stones set in gold.

[1316](#)

Gk. καὶ may be taken epexegetically, in which case τὰ ἄκαθαρτα describes further the meaning of βδελυγμάτων. The accusative (τὰ ἄκαθαρτα) is to be accounted for as the object of ἔχουσα or perhaps similar to γέμοντα ὀνόματα of v. 3.

[1317](#)

1611 1854 2030 2053 2062 2329 MajT^K gig; Hipp (Cyp Prim) read πορνείας της γης (ⲛ sy^{h**} [co] have αὐτης καὶ της γης), probably due to the

influence of v. 2, where those who dwell on τὴν γῆν are intoxicated with the wine of the harlot's πορνεία.

[1318](#)

Gk. βδέλυγμα is used in the LXX of the moral and ceremonial impurity connected with idolatrous practices. The expression βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρῆμώσεως in Mark 13:14 comes from Dan 12:11, where it denotes the desecration of the Jewish temple by an image or altar of Zeus (*TDNT*, 1.600).

[1319](#)

Seneca, *Controv.* 1.2; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.123. Ford, however, doubts that there is sufficient evidence to support this claim (279).

[1320](#)

“In the biblical and Pauline tradition in which John stands, ‘mystery’ does not mean ‘puzzle’ but insight revealed through God’s prophets” (Boring, 180). Or, as Wilcock writes, “The ‘mysteries’ of the New Testament are open secrets to every Christian” (153).

[1321](#)

T. R. Edgar stresses that the prostitute Babylon is not so much a political or religious power as she is an economic force (“Babylon: Ecclesiastical, Political, or What?” *JETS*, 25 [1982], 333-41). Thomas, on the other hand, asserts that the only viable identification is that Babylon is “Babylon on the Euphrates.” His argument is based on the view that “the OT prophecies of Babylon’s destruction in Isaiah 13 and Jeremiah 51 are yet unfulfilled and are awaiting the future Day of the Lord for that fulfillment” (2.307). Wall identifies Babylon as “the ‘global village’ of godless power, which determines daily life for every person at any time in human history” (202).

[1322](#)

Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44. Seneca calls Rome “a filthy sewer” (cf. Barclay, 2.145). Seebass suggests that the title “mother of harlots” may reflect Cybele, the Magna Mater, worshiped in Rome with her orgiastic cult since 204 B.C. (*DNTT*, 1.142).

[1323](#)

Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.114.32.

[1324](#)

In *1 Enoch* 62:12 it is the sword of the Lord that is drunk with the blood of oppressors. Cf. Isa 34:5; 51:21.

[1325](#)

Suetonius, *Tiber.* 59; Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 14.28; Josephus, *Bell.* 5.8.2.

[1326](#)

Barclay comments that she “took a fiendish delight in hounding Christians to death” (2.189).

[1327](#)

Tacitus tells of Nero’s infamy in placing the blame for the fire upon the Christians and subjecting them to “the most exquisite tortures.” They were “covered with the skins of beasts ... torn by dogs ... nailed to crosses ... burned to serve as a nightly illumination” (*Ann.* 15.44).

[1328](#)

A designation for God’s eschatological people based on Dan 7:18 (“saints of the Most High”). Some critics discover here an earlier Jewish document referring to martyrs in the war of A.D. 66-70 that a Christian redactor reapplies by adding the second clause — an unlikely conjecture.

[1329](#)

For a somewhat similar dialogue see 7:13-14.

[1330](#)

The comparison is “between the beast as a falsification of the divine image, and the Lamb as a true offprint of it” (Farrer, 184).

[1331](#)

Note the present tense (ἀναβαλνον) in 11:7 as well as in the present verse (ἀναβαίνειν). Coming up from the Abyss is an essential characteristic of the beast.

[1332](#)

Gk. παρέσται, παρουσία.

[1333](#)

Charles translates, “Here is needed the intelligence which is wisdom” (2.68).

[1334](#)

Moffatt renders the statement, “Now for the interpretation of the discerning mind!” (*The NT: A New Translation*).

[1335](#)

Virgil, *Aen.* 6.782; Martial 4.64; Cicero, *Att.* 6.5; and many others.

[1336](#)

Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, 391-94; Ladd, 227-29.

[1337](#)

According to Kiddle, the number is “suggestive of the world-wide domination exercised by the Roman order of things.... The Beast’s power is universal, stretching as far as Roman institutions” (348-49).

[1338](#)

Boring lists three problems that immediately emerge: (1) With which emperor should we start counting? (2) Which emperors should we count? and (3) Did John intend the number “seven” to be taken literally? (182-83).

[1339](#)

Suetonius, *Vesp.* 1; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.2.2; *Sib. Or.* 5:12 (in cryptic form). It is commonly pointed out that other writers consider the empire to have begun with Augustus (e.g., Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.1; *Hist.* 1.1). In any case, the evidence is divided and provides no firm basis for omitting Caesar.

[1340](#)

Galba assumed power in June of A.D. 68 but was murdered seven months later. Otho, who followed, committed suicide in April of 69, and Vitellius was killed before the end of the same year.

[1341](#)

Suetonius, *Vesp.* 1.

[1342](#)

Josephus, *Bell.* 9.9.2.

[1343](#)

Charles, 2.69.

[1344](#)

By starting with Caligula, who first provoked a crisis over emperor worship and by ignoring the three short reigns, it is possible to arrive at Domitian as the sixth ruler (see Krodel, 297). J. H. Ulrichsen (who begins his count of heads with Caligula) notes that the ten horns also represent Roman emperors and that, beginning with Caligula and including Galba, Otho and Vitellius, one once again arrives at Domitian, in whose reign Revelation was written (“Die sieben Haupter und die zehn Horner. Zur Datierung der Offenbarung des Johannes,” *ST*, 39 [1985], 1-20). By counting only those emperors who had been apotheosized by the senate, Rist also arrives at Domitian as the ruling emperor (495).

[1345](#)

Alford, 4.710-11. Thomas, following Walvoord, lists the same secular Gentile kingdoms but understands the seventh to be “the future kingdom of the beast” (2.297).

[1346](#)

Hendriksen, 204; see also Ladd, 229.

[1347](#)

It is βασιλεύς, not βασιεία. The argument for kingdoms is usually built upon Dan 7:17, where the four beasts are said to be four kings although they do in fact stand for four kingdoms. Note, however, that the LXX and Theodotion have βασιελαι for יָרְבֵּן.

[1348](#)

For an excellent excursus leading to this conclusion, see Beckwith, 704-8.

[1349](#)

Cf. 2 *Baruch* 56-74 for the interpretation of the vision of the black and bright waters that symbolize the span of time between Adam and the coming of the Messiah.

[1350](#)

Caird writes, “The one point John wishes to emphasize is that the imperial line has only a short time to run before the emergence of a new monstrous Nero, an eighth who is one of the seven” (219).

[1351](#)

This would normally call for εἰς ἑχ τῶν ἑπτά.

[1352](#)

Krodel writes of Nero that “as a historical emperor he was one of the seven, but as Antichrist he will appear as an eighth” (296).

[1353](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.20; Tertullian, *Apol.* 5; Juvenal 4.37-38; Martial 11.33.

[1354](#)

Suggested by Zahn and followed more recently by Ladd (228-31).

[1355](#)

Cf. Luke 19:12 for this use of βασιεία.

[1356](#)

Beckwith, 700.

[1357](#)

Sweet says that “one hour” (v. 12) is “an Aramaism better translated ‘for a moment.’ ” The judgment of Babylon comes in “one hour” (Rev 18:10, 17, 19).

[1358](#)

Swete interprets this to mean that the beast can count not only on the actual military power of the kings, but on the moral force that belongs to their position as well (223).

[1359](#)

Cf. *1 Enoch* 63:4; 84:2; 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 1:5; 19:16.

[1360](#)

Moffatt (454) notes that success depends not only upon their divine election but also upon their corresponding loyalty (Rev 13:8; 12:11).

[1361](#)

See comm. on 5:9. It is used both of the church (5:9; 7:9) and the heathen world (10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15: the alteration of one member in 10:11 and 17:15 is inconsequential).

[1362](#)

Invasions by foreign powers are spoken of under the figure of floods (Isa 8:7; Jer 47:2) but are not the point here. Nor is any “impious parody” of the Lord who “sits enthroned over the flood” (Ps 29:10) intended (as suggested by Alford, 4.712).

[1363](#)

Kiddle brings up a small difficulty by noting that John did not tell us that in his vision he saw any waters. He suggests that to “see” a vision is to arrive at an inspired conviction, which may then be clothed in familiar apocalyptic terms (356-57). It is perhaps simpler to assume that John’s account of the experience is less complete than the actual vision. It is our view that John received his revelation through visions (Rev 1:11, 18) rather than prophetic insight that he then translated into apocalyptic narrative.

[1364](#)

Lilje, 229. Hughes quotes Oscar Wilde as saying that “all men hate the thing they love” (188).

[1365](#)

Morris, 206. The concept of internecine warfare as God’s method of destroying his enemies is seen in such OT passages as Ezek 38:21; Hag 2:22; Zech 14:13.

[1366](#)

The plural σάρκας refers to portions of flesh.

[1367](#)

Cf. Jer 10:25; Mic 3:3; Zeph 3:3 for similar uses of the figures.

[1368](#)

Farrer ties together the three clauses that describe their punishment by commenting that as a prostitute she is exposed, as a victim of the lion-jawed beast her flesh is devoured, and as a city she is burned down (186-87).

[1369](#)

Charles brackets *καὶ ποισαὶ μίαν γνώμην* as an early gloss from v. 13 (2.73), but there is no reason why their common agreement cannot be understood as part of his will. God's will is their unanimous decision to give their kingdom to the beast.

[1370](#)

Note the recurring *ὁ/ἃ/ἣν εἶδες* in vv. 8, 12, 15, and 18.

[1371](#)

Schick's words on symbol and history are worth repeating. "As almost always in Revelation the symbol reaches beyond the unique historical situation and becomes a criterion valid for all ages. History does not repeat itself. It is precisely the nature of history that it deals with a unique occurrence in unique circumstances. But despite all concrete uniqueness, on another more fundamental level, something similar can occur every time. There runs parallel with the process of history — so revelation sees it and it is essential to its concept of history — a reality which is present in each transitory manifestation; it harbors within it the real event behind any event. This process in depth is however not immediately discernible, it can only be grasped and represented by way of symbols" (2.58).

[1372](#)

Moffatt, e.g., conjectures a Jewish Vespasianic source that "breathed the indignant spirit of a Jewish apocalypticist against the proud empire which had won a temporary triumph over the city and people of God" and was taken over by John for the purpose of making Rome responsible for the persecution of Christians (455).

[1373](#)

See the summary of criticism of chap. 18 in Beckwith, 722-25.

[1374](#)

Such as that by Charles, who finds a Vespasianic source written soon after the destruction of the temple, apparently in Hebrew but found by John in Greek translation;

2.87-95!

[1375](#)

The funeral dirge in Semitic culture was primarily a lamentation for the dead. It could be a brief cry, such as David's lament for his son ("O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son!" 2 Sam 19:45), or more commonly an extended expression of sorrow (such as Nahum's woe to Nineveh [3:1-19] or the book of Lamentations). Prophets regularly used dirges in connection with the calamities that fell on Israel as well as other nations.

[1376](#)

Cf. 7:2; 8:3; 10:1; 14:6, 8 (where the angel proclaims the same basic message as in vv. 2-3 of the present chapter), 9, 15, 17, 18; 18:1.

[1377](#)

"So recently has [the angel] come from the Presence that in passing he flings a broad belt of light across the dark Earth" (Swete, 226).

[1378](#)

Gk. ἐξουσία is used in the sense of capability in Rev 9:3, 10, and 19 as well. Note reference to his "mighty voice" in v. 2.

[1379](#)

Gk. ἔπεσεν is a proleptic or futuristic aorist (as in Rom 8:30). The LXX of Isa 21:9 uses the perfect (πέπτωκε, "has fallen").

[1380](#)

The same creatures are found in the judgment pronounced upon Edom in Isa 34, with the night hag (perhaps a reference to the Assyrian female storm god Lilitu; Heb. לילית), hawk, porcupine, owl, and raven added. Deut 14:12-18 identifies the raven, ostrich, hawk, and owl as unclean birds.

[1381](#)

The AV, NIV, and RSV (among others), following the witnesses C 051 MajT a vg sy^{ph} bo; Bea, omit καὶ φνλαχὴ παντὸς θηρίου ἀκαθάρτον. UBS⁴ and NA²⁷ include it in brackets (following A 1611 2329 *al* gig sy^h [sa]; [Prim]) since each of the three elements involves an allusion to Isa 13:21; 34:11 and probably belonged to the original text of Revelation (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 683). The inclusion may be further argued on the basis that (1) it is difficult to imagine someone creating a third line, and (2) John sets out much of the material in this section in triplets.

[1382](#)

The primary meaning of φνλαχὴ is "prison," although Swete points out that in Hab 2:1 (cf. Bar 3:34) it may designate a watchtower (227). The picture would be one of evil spirits perched in a tower like vultures waiting for their prey.

[1383](#)

Reading πεπότιχεν (2042 pc), the form that occurs without variants in the parallel passage, 14:8. πέπω~~χ~~αν (1006^c 2329 pc latt sy^h) would say that Babylon has fallen because the nations have drunk the wine of her adulteries. πεπτω~~χ~~α(σί)ν (~~✱~~ A C 1006* 1611 1841 2030 Maj^K) makes Babylon fall because the nations have fallen.

[1384](#)

See comm. on 14:8 for this phrase. The five alternatives listed in NA²⁷ indicate how difficult the phrase was for early copyists. Cf. Jer 25:15-17, 27 for a similar mingling of the two ideas of drunkenness and divine judgment. Cf. also Jer 51:7; Rev 17:2.

[1385](#)

Gk. στρηνος occurs only here in the NT. Beckwith notes that, along with the verb form στρηνάω (Rev 18:7, 9 only), it contains the idea of “excessive luxury and self-indulgence with accompanying arrogance and wanton exercise of strength” (713).

[1386](#)

Cf. also Isa 48:20; Jer 50:8; 51:6, 9. Cf. 2 *Bar.* 2:1.

[1387](#)

“Come out of her” is “a figure for moral separation, as at 2 Cor. 6:17,” writes Sweet. “Moral co-existence and toleration of the Nicolaitans can only lead to complicity in sin, which is about to recoil upon the sinners” (268).

[1388](#)

Kiddle, 364.

[1389](#)

Gk. ~~χ~~ολλάω in this context suggests the joining of sins one to another until the pile reaches to heaven. Holtzmann conjectures the gluing together of leaves in a scroll upon which the sins of Rome are recorded. If unrolled, it would reach to heaven (cited in Moffatt, 457).

[1390](#)

051 MajT^A gig vg^{cl} add ὑμῖν after ἀπέδωχεν, which would make those addressed in vv. 6 and 7 the people of God to whom the previous verses (4 and 5) were directed.

[1391](#)

Preston and Hanson write, “Zeal for the vindication of God’s righteousness and O.T. prophecy have run away with John here” (117).

[1392](#)

Beckwith, 715 (cf. Jer 16:18; 17:18).

[1393](#)

See Morris, 211.

[1394](#)

The verb form ὑβρίζω, when used of overfed horses, meant “to neigh, snort, or prance” (LSJ, 1841).

[1395](#)

The RSV is probably right to put a full stop after v. 7a and begin a new sentence with “Since in her heart she says,” carrying it on through to the end of v. 8. διὰ τοῦτο, with which v. 8 begins, is stylistic and refers back to all that follows ὅτι in the preceding verse. The NIV divides vv. 7 and 8 into four sentences.

[1396](#)

Caird (223) remarks of the proud city that “her fault is not mere arrogance, but an unquestioning faith in her own inexhaustible resources, unaccompanied by any sense of a deeper lack (cf. iii.17).”

[1397](#)

Gk. ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ does not designate a span of time, but like μι ὥρᾳ in vv. 10, 16, and 19 it is a symbolic term for suddenness. Some MSS (69 pc sy^{hmg}; Cyp Spec Prim) have ὥρᾳ in 18:8. Cf. Isa 47:9.

[1398](#)

Charles rearranges the plagues and corrects a conjectured corruption in the Semitic original. He finds an allusion to the approach of the Parthians under Nero that would cut off food supplies (famine), lead to pestilence (death), and prepare for destruction (mourning) by fire. It is much more the style of the Seer to join together words and phrases for their rhetorical impact than to introduce some carefully designed schema that organizes the future.

[1399](#)

Gk. χύριος is omitted by A 1006 1841 2053^{com} pc a vg, perhaps because of the preceding ἰσχυρός. Cf. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 1st ed., 760) for other variants.

[1400](#)

“[As] in an ancient tragedy, they give expression to their shock in three choirs” (Schick, 2.70).

[1401](#)

Lilje, 235.

[1402](#)

Gk. στρηνάω may mean to live sensually (cf. BAGD, 771).

[1403](#)

Gk. ἄλαιω is used of any loud expression of pain or sorrow; hence, “to sob openly” (cf. the less vivid δακρύω, “to shed tears”). In the middle voice, ἄλπτω (“to cut”) is used of beating one’s breast as an act of mourning. In vv. 11, 15, and 19 πενθέω replaces κόπτομαι.

[1404](#)

Caird observes that “the one hour of persecution [17:12-14] is balanced by the one hour of retribution” (226).

[1405](#)

In terms that sound quite contemporary, Krodel identifies the merchants as “the big international import-export wholesale merchants whose profits rose through Rome’s exploitation of the provinces” (304).

[1406](#)

Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 6.26; Aristides, *In Rom.* 200.

[1407](#)

See Barclay (2.158) for a discussion on the excessive luxury of Rome.

[1408](#)

Qidd. 49.

[1409](#)

Beckwith makes seven groups by adding the choice fruits of v. 14 (716). Ladd arrives at seven by placing slaves in a separate group (240). The number of items in each group seems to be determined to a large extent by rhetorical considerations.

[1410](#)

Josephus, *Bell.* 7.5.4.

[1411](#)

Martial, 14.85; Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 13.96.

[1412](#)

Thyine wood was from the tree that in Latin was called *citrinus*. The change in the Greek text from genitives to accusatives is stylistic. After eight genitives modifying γόμον the text turns to accusatives until it arrives at ἵππων in v. 13. The last item, Ψυχάς, is once again accusative.

[1413](#)

A 1006 1841 pc a vg read λίθον (“stone”) for ξύλου (“wood”).

[1414](#)

Gk. ἄμωμον; omitted by $\aleph^2$ 1006 1841 2030 2053 2062 MajT^K vg^{cl} sy^{ph}; Prim. 046 (1611) 2030 pc omit οἶνον (“wine”).

[1415](#)

In Luke 10:34 the Good Samaritan places the wounded man on his own ἵππῳ to take him to the inn. Paul rides from Jerusalem to Caesarea on a ἵππῳ (Acts 23:24).

[1416](#)

Gk. ῥέδη, only here in the NT. The word entered Greek by way of Latin authors (cf. BAGD, 734).

[1417](#)

Gk. σώματα. A slave merchant was called σωματέμπορος. In Gen 36:6 Esau left Canaan with his wives, sons, daughters, and all the σώματα τοῦ οἴκου αὐτοῦ — his slaves (cf. Tob 10:10; Bel 32; 2 Macc 8:11). Sweet notes that *slaves* came early in Ezekiel’s list (27:13), but “here they come at the end of a list which is in descending order of value” (272). Or the placement could be for rhetorical effect. For a good discussion on the list of cargoes see Bauckham, 350-71. Earlier he notes that it is no accident that the list comprises twenty-eight items because 4 (the number of the world) times 7 (the number of completeness) equals 28, making the list “representative of *all* the products of the whole *world*” (31). He also holds that the final clause, being in an emphatic position, is a comment on the entire list of cargoes. “It suggests the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome’s prosperity and luxury rests” (370-71).

[1418](#)

Gk. בְּנֵי אָדָם; Ezek 27:13; Num 31:35; 1 Chron 5:21 (Swete, 235). Harrington adds that “ ‘human livestock’ would refer to slaves destined for the amphitheatre or for prostitution” (180).

[1419](#)

Metzger, 86.

[1420](#)

Bauckham translates, “slaves, that is, human persons,” and adds that John is “pointing out that slaves are not mere animal carcasses to be bought and sold as property but are human beings” (*The Climax of Prophecy*, 370). Bengel suggests that the *bodies* are slaves used for carrying goods and the *souls of men* are slaves considered as merchandise (2.916), which has the advantage of linking σωμάτων with the genitives that precede it and allowing the awkward shift to the accusative Ψυχάς.

[1421](#)

Charles removes v. 14 to a place after v. 21, holding that it forms the opening stanza of the Seer's dirge over Rome (2.108), but it is hardly necessary to carry out such relocations since the fruits that Rome lusted after are certainly those that have just been listed in detail in the two previous verses.

[1422](#)

Gk. λαμπρά ("glistening things," *EDNT*, 2.339).

[1423](#)

Note the poetic quality of πάντα τὰ λιπαρὰ καὶ τὰ λαμπρά.

[1424](#)

Gk. κυβερνήτης rather than ναύκληρος; cf. Acts 27:11, where both words are used. Cf. the Latin *gubernare*, "to guide."

[1425](#)

Gk. ναῦται; cf. Acts 27:27, 30. Ezek 27:27-29 designates the προρεὺς (the lookout man who stood at the ship's head to give signals to the pilot), the ἐπιβάτης (the soldier on board), and the ῥωπηλάτης (the rower).

[1426](#)

One conjecture substitutes "upon the sea" for "to a place," but that is a bit repetitive ("on the sea traveling by sea"). 2073 pc; Prim read πόντον for τόπον. Metzger (*Textual Commentary*, 684) lists five additional readings. The UBS text reads ὁ ἐπὶ τόπον πλέων, "he who sails for [any] part," and evaluates the reading as "B" (almost certain).

[1427](#)

Lenski, 527.

[1428](#)

Beckwith, 718.

[1429](#)

There is no necessity of careful delineation between the three groups. Some texts (C 051 2329 MajT^A a gig vg^{cl}), by omitting the second καὶ οἱ, read οἱ ἅγιοι ἀπόστολοι ("holy apostles"). Note also that all three may be vocative as well as nominative.

[1430](#)

Caird, 228-30.

[1431](#)

The double negative οὐ μή with the aorist subjunctive expresses emphatic denial for the future (see Moule, *Idiom Book*, 156). The addition of ἔτι in

each case strengthens the negative affirmation.

[1432](#)

Caird joins these three references and suggests that the appearance of a third marks the consummation of the contents of both scrolls (230-31).

[1433](#)

Blaney, 498.

[1434](#)

The μύλινος μέγας is to be compared with the μύλος ὄνιχος (the donkey millstone, i.e., the one turned by donkey power) of Mark 9:42. Sinaiticus reads λίθον (a second time) instead of μύλινον (an understandable reading in view of the similarity of λίθον and [μύ]λιθινον and the fact that λίθον ὡς λίθον μέγαν makes reasonably good sense. 051 MajT gig; Prim read μύλον.

[1435](#)

Bratcher and Hatton note that the Greek word translated “violence” means “with an impulsive rush” (269).

[1436](#)

Gk. μουσιχος means skilled in music. In the present context the noun form refers either to instrumentalists or vocalists (Swete, 239). Charles translates “singers” (2.109-10).

[1437](#)

Juvenal 6.249.

[1438](#)

Without the grinding of grain there would be little to sustain normal life in antiquity.

[1439](#)

Both clauses begin with ὅτι although the first ὅτι is omitted by 2030 MajT^k co. Swete favors taking the second ὅτι clause as explaining the first (240-41), while Beckwith holds them to be coordinate (719).

[1440](#)

Gk. ἔμπορος is from πόρος, a journey; thus οἱ ἔμποροι may well be those merchants who dealt in foreign imports and exports.

[1441](#)

Gk. οἱ μεγιστάνες. The ἔμποροι of Tyre were called ἔνδοξοι ἄρχοντες της γης (Isa 23:8).

[1442](#)

Cf. *Sib.* Or. 5:165.

[1443](#)

Caird, 231.

[1444](#)

“This harlot of anti-God secular power is guilty of all the bloodshed that has disgraced and defiled the history of mankind, starting with the blood of Abel shed by his brother Cain” (Hughes, 195-96).

[1445](#)

In Rev 16:6 the order is reversed. Cf. 17:6 and 19:2.

[1446](#)

Continuity with the preceding paragraph is stressed by those MSS that add **Ναί** as the first word in v. 1 (051 2344 MajT^A sy^{ph} bo).

[1447](#)

The angels in 5:12 and 7:12 sing of power, riches (thanksgiving in 7:12 replaces riches in 5:12), wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing, but not of salvation. Blaney (499) interprets the great multitude more inclusively as “the accumulated celestial personnel of 7:9-12.” In 4:11 the twenty-four elders sing a similar song, but there the praise is based on God’s creative activity rather than his role as judge.

[1448](#)

Swete observes that the transliteration into Greek must have been used by Hellenistic Jews prior to the Christian era and was taken over from the Hellenistic synagogue by the apostolic church (242). Note the occurrence of “Hallelujah” in Tob 13:18 (usually dated about 200 B.C.).

[1449](#)

Roloff writes that it originally was a call to praise God but gradually developed in Judaism into an independent formula of praise (210-11).

[1450](#)

The second **ὅτι** clause does not justify the first **ὅτι** clause — the righteousness of divine judgment needs no justification or human approval — but is parallel to it and supplies a specific example of the more general truth.

[1451](#)

The Gk. **ἐκ χειρὸς αὐτῆς** (lit., “from her hand”) here means “upon her.” Cf. the parallel in the LXX of 4 Kgs 9:7, which Moffatt says represents the Hebrew idiom meaning “to exact punishment from a murderer” (462).

[1452](#)

Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 6.447-48. He also notes that **εἰρηχάν** is not aoristic perfect for “they say” but a dramatic perfect (as in 5:7) that

describes a fact in an unusually vivid manner (cf. Dana and Mantey, *Grammar*, 204).

[1453](#)

So Charles, 2.120.

[1454](#)

Sweet calls this “a ghastly contrast with the incense of heaven (5:8; 8:4)” (278). On the basis that the earth on which Rome is situated is soon to disappear (cf. 20:11; 21:1), Rist warns that the prediction about smoke rising forever and ever “should not be taken too literally” (506).

[1455](#)

Prostrating oneself before God is more often connected with the twenty-four elders than with the four living creatures (4:10; 5:14; 11:16: both may take part along with the angels in 7:11) — a good example of employing literalism when convenient.

[1456](#)

If **Χαί** is read before *oi φοβούμενοι* (as in **Ⲭ** 051 0229 MajT latt sy bo), it should be translated as “even.” The servants are those who fear God; **Χαί** is omitted by **Ⲭ** C P *pc sa bo*^{ms}. See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 684-85.

[1457](#)

Krodel, 211.

[1458](#)

For similar phrases see Ezek 1:24; 43:2; Dan 10:6; Rev 1:15.

[1459](#)

Gk. *ἔβασίλευσεν* is an inceptive aorist, “has taken up his reign.” Against most commentators Lenski takes the aorist as historical and constative, looking back over all past history and seeing how the Lord God has ever reigned (540).

[1460](#)

Suetonius, *Dom.* 13.

[1461](#)

Some manuscripts (A 1006 1841 *pc t sa*^{mss} *bo*; Cyp) omit *ἡμῶν*, perhaps because it is not found in the other instances of *Χύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ* in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 21:22). It may have been felt inappropriate with the title as well (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 685).

[1462](#)

The following clause (“and give him glory”) reflects the human race’s appropriate response to God (cf. Rom 1:21; 4:20). According to the

Westminster Shorter Catechism, the chief end of every person is to “glorify God, and enjoy him forever.”

[1463](#)

Four women are mentioned in Revelation: Jezebel (2:20), the radiant woman of chapter 12, the infamous prostitute of chapters 17-18, and the bride of Christ (chaps. 19-20). Talbert notes that two are faithful and two unfaithful (86-87).

[1464](#)

Note ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ; cf. Matt 1:18-20.

[1465](#)

Hughes writes that the righteous acts in question are “performed by those who are already redeemed and justified in Christ. They are evidence of the bride’s sanctification” (200). Roloff, however, says that although Christians receive the garment of salvation as a gift, “everything depends on their keeping it white and pure, that is, on their remaining obedient and not relinquishing the salvation they received” (213).

[1466](#)

Swete writes, “Corporately the whole Church is seen to be attired in the dazzling whiteness of their collective purity” (247).

[1467](#)

If οἱ is added before ἀληθινοί (as in Ape), the clause would read, “These true words are of God.”

[1468](#)

So Boring, 194.

[1469](#)

Gk. ὅρα μή understands a following ποίσης.

[1470](#)

Cf. Josh 5:14; Judg 13:20; *Asc. Isa.* 7:21-8:5.

[1471](#)

In keeping with her thesis that Revelation 12-22 was probably written by a disciple of John the Baptist (3, 28-37), “fellow servant” is said by Ford to suggest a circle of prophets around the Baptist (312).

[1472](#)

Erdman, 148.

[1473](#)

Morris, 228.

[1474](#)

Beasley-Murray, 276. Ford writes that “Rev 19:10d is a succinct reference to the return of prophecy as a sign of the New Covenant with Jesus as Lord” (“ ‘For the Testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy’ [Rev 19:10],” *ITQ*, 42 [1975], 291).

[1475](#)

As suggested by Beckwith, 730, 742.

[1476](#)

It is difficult to understand how a statement this clear can be taken to mean that the seer “had insights which were beyond earthly reasoning, events, and circumstances” (as Robbins writes, 216). In apocalyptic language symbols were used to portray real events that happened in the vision, not to place in metaphorical language truth that otherwise could not be grasped. Granted, symbols present a golden opportunity for assigning meaning, but that by no means validates such a subjective approach.

[1477](#)

Peterson quotes Bishop Aulén, who writes that “no form of Christian teaching has any future before it except such as can keep steadily in view the reality of evil that is in the world and go to meet the evil with a battle song of triumph” (163; from *Christus Victor* by Gustav Aulén, 176). A page earlier he quotes Doris Lessing, who observes that people have the habit of dismissing large parts of the Bible because “Jehovah does not think or behave like a social worker” (162).

[1478](#)

Beckwith, 730-31.

[1479](#)

It reads in part, “With a rod of iron he shall break in pieces all their substance. He shall destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth.” Cf. *T. Dan* 5:13; *Sib. Or.* 5:108-10; *2 Bar.* 39:7-40:4.

[1480](#)

Schlatter, *The Church in the NT Period*, 283.

[1481](#)

The placement of *χαλούμενος* after πιστός (~~✕~~), before πιστός ([1006] 1611 1841 1854 2030 2053 2062 MajT^K vg^{cl} sy; Ir^{lat} Or), or its omission (A 051 MajT^A; Hipp), makes little difference unless one assumes that its inclusion suggests that the rider was merely *called* “Faithful and True,” highly improbable in a context such as this! Metzger holds that the reading of Sinaiticus best explains the others, although the UBS text follows the

Byzantine text, placing χαλούμενος between brackets to indicate some uncertainty (*Textual Commentary*, 685-86).

[1482](#)

Moffatt holds that the two words are a description of the Messiah's character and function, rather than a title (467). He translates, "His rider is faithful and true" (*The NT: A New Translation*).

[1483](#)

Ladd, 253. In Jer 10:10 the "God of truth" is the God who can be trusted to keep his covenant.

[1484](#)

A 1006 1841 *al latt sy sam*^{ss} *bo*; Ir^{lat} Or read ὥς before φλόξ, undoubtedly due to the influence of 1:14 and 2:18. The UBS text places it in brackets.

[1485](#)

The two crowns that Ptolemy wore symbolized his kingship over Egypt and Asia (1 Macc 11:13).

[1486](#)

Farrer thinks that the name is mentioned after reference to the diadems because the high priests wore the tetragrammaton on a gold plate upon the forehead (198).

[1487](#)

Rist tentatively concludes that the secret name is "Jesus" and discerns martyrological overtones (513).

[1488](#)

Lilje, 244.

[1489](#)

Gk. βεβαμμένον has stronger manuscript support (A 051 MajT) and can account for the variants better than any of the six forms of ῥαίνω or ῥαντίζω listed in the UBS apparatus.

[1490](#)

Krodel, however, is of the opinion that "the blood is his own, the Messiah's Mood . . . the blood that either redeems (1:5-6; 9:9-10) or condemns" (323).

[1491](#)

Schick concludes that "if Christ brings the bloody robe with him from heaven before he has held judgment, then the blood on the robe can only be his own" (2.81). Charles maintains the blood is that of the Parthian kings already destroyed (2.133), while Caird takes it as "the indelible traces of the death of his followers" (243).

[1492](#)

Roloff correctly holds that “The blood is not the actual blood of Jesus which he poured out for sinners, but rather the blood of God’s enemies” (218).

[1493](#)

A few writers take the Word as the preaching of the gospel (e.g., Harrington, 197).

[1494](#)

Beasley-Murray calls the armies “angelic attendants” who do not engage in mortal combat but accompany the Lord in his parousia to witness their Commander exercise authority in judgment (281).

[1495](#)

The δίστομος of 1:16 and 2:12 is added here by 1006 1841 1854 2030 2329 MajT^K vg^{cl}sy^{h**}; Ambr Prim.

[1496](#)

Swete says that the figure represents the smiting of nations “not by judgements only, but by the forces which reduce them to obedience of faith” — hence the expansion of Christianity and ultimately the conversion of the world still being worked out in our time (254). Yet the war is eschatological and results in massive slaughter (v. 21). Ladd’s counsel is apropos, “The radical spiritualization of this concept which sees a conflict of human ideologies in human history and the triumph of Christianity does not accord with the nature of apocalyptic thought” (256).

[1497](#)

Gk. ποιμαίνω in Rev 7:17 has the sense of gentle care, but elsewhere in Revelation (2:27; 12:5; 19:15) it connotes punishment.

[1498](#)

Gk. θυμός, ὀργή; see note on 14:10. Hahn notes that “this thought of the future wrath of God is unfolded on a massive scale in Rev.” (*DNTT*. 1.111).

[1499](#)

“The doubling of the name ‘King of kings’ was a practice of the Persians and Parthians to emphasize the supremacy of their royalties” (Thomas, drawing on Moffatt, 2.391). Patrick Skehan computes the dual name to add up to 777 when placed into Aramaic (“King of Kings, Lord of Lords (Apoc. 19:16),” *CBQ*, 10 [1948], 398), an interesting yet speculative possibility

[1500](#)

Taking χαί exegetically, a common interpretation.

[1501](#)

Charles lists several instances of names and inscriptions on the thighs of statues (2.137). Bruce (661) refers to a conjecture that (assuming a Semitic original) *regel* (leg) has replaced an original *degel* (banner).

[1502](#)

Barclay, 2.184. In the same vein Sweet calls it a “ghastly parody of the marriage supper of the Lamb” (285), and Roloff judges it to be an “exceedingly crass image” (220).

[1503](#)

Beasley-Murray correctly observes that “all men” here indicates “all kinds of men” (283).

[1504](#)

The armies of the kings of the earth are in fact the armies of the beast. A pc sa have αὐτοῦ for αὐτῶν after στρατεύματος.

[1505](#)

Schick holds that there is no trace of combat because the battle was fought at the death of Jesus and decided in victory through his resurrection (2.84). While it is true that the crucial victory took place at the time of Christ, Armageddon is still an eschatological battle that draws human history to a close.

[1506](#)

Gk. πιάζω rather regularly means “to lay hold of with hostile intent”; cf. John 7:30, 32; Acts 12:4; *Ecclus.* 23:21.

[1507](#)

Cf. 2 Esdr 7:36; 1 *Enoch* 27:2; 48:9; 90:26-27; 103:8; *As. Mos.* 10:10; 2 *Bar.* 59:10.

[1508](#)

The NT distinguishes sharply between ἄδης (the temporary abode of the ungodly in the period between death and resurrection) and γέεννα (the place of eternal punishment following the last judgment). See Jeremias, “γέεννα,” *TDNT*, 1.657-58.

[1509](#)

Because elsewhere in Revelation there is no indication of an intermediate reign, Schnackenburg thinks that 20:1-6 may be an interpretive doublet of 19:11-21 (*God’s Rule and Kingdom*, 339-47).

[1510](#)

Gk. ἄβυσσος was originally an adjective meaning “bottomless” or “unfathomed.” Franzmann refers to the Abyss as “that dark abode of impotence” (130).

[1511](#)

In *I Enoch* 88:1 a fallen angel is bound hand and foot and cast into an Abyss that is “narrow and deep, and horrible and dark.”

[1512](#)

Probably to bind the hands: ἄλυσις in Mark 5:4 is coupled with πέδη, “fetter” (cognate with πούς, ποδός, foot), and in Acts 12:7 the ἀλύσεις fall off Peter’s hands. Perhaps some sort of handcuffs is intended.

[1513](#)

Gk. καὶ εἶδον; 32 times in Revelation. Bratcher and Hatton note, “As with the first sentence of many of the chapters in Revelation, the writer indicates that the events that he is seeing in the present chapter follow immediately after events in the previous chapter” (285).

[1514](#)

Gk. κρατέω (from κράτος, “strength,” “power”) has the basic idea of exercise of power. In Matt 26:50 it means “to take into custody.” ἐχράτησεν is translated “overcame” in the NJB.

[1515](#)

Representative of this position is the very readable commentary by Hendriksen; see 226.

[1516](#)

Walvoord is perhaps the best exponent of this position; see 291.

[1517](#)

Krodel says the point where he disagrees most with modern interpretation is on the subject of John’s millennium. For John the millennium is first of all the devil’s millennium, “between his temporary residence beneath the deep blue sea... and his permanent abode in the frying pan.” Second, it is the saints’ “reward and precedence over against ‘the rest of the dead.’ ” And third, “it is the beginning of their eternal reign with Christ.” He concludes, “In short, the millennial reign depicts in the form of a vision what is stated in the tradition: ‘the dead in Christ will rise first’ ” (70).

[1518](#)

Ostella argues that discontinuance of deception in Rev 20:3 is a critically decisive exegetical point and “ultimately demands the conclusion that the millennium involves an extension of redemptive history subsequent to the

parousia” (“The Significance of Deception in Revelation 20:3,” *WTJ*, 37 [1974-75], 236-38).

1519

Summers maintains the number does not represent a period of time at all but should be understood as a way of saying that the devil will be completely restrained (204). Harrington notes that the thousand years “has no chronological value but serves to symbolize the blessedness of the victors and the helplessness of Satan in their regard (199). According to Love, Satan is bound whenever believers surrender their lives to Christ, and the end of the thousand years is the sphere outside the utterly surrendered life (116). Robbins has the novel idea that during the thousand-year period Satan is bound in regard to the redeemed but loosed in regard to the unredeemed. He concludes that “the binding and the loosing describe two events that occur contemporaneously” (224). For Franzmann the thousand years represents a period of time when Satan “lost the aura of invincibility that was his before the Messianic child was born” (130). In spite of these varying opinions Thomas is sure that “the only exegetically sound answer to the issue is to understand the thousand years literally” (2.409), an incredible way to treat numbers in apocalyptic!

1520

So Moffatt, who holds that the reference to nations in 20:3 is probably to those outlying nations on the fringe of the empire who had not shared in the campaign of the Antichrist, 471.

1521

Bratcher and Hatton comment that often in the Bible “judgment” means “rule” and “as the end of the verse makes clear, they were given the right to rule with Christ for a thousand years” (287). While BAGD shows no such meaning for κρίμα (450-51), the underlying OT term (*mishpāt*) carries the double sense “to rule” and “to judge.” “God’s *mišpāṭ* is part of his rule” (*TDNT abr.*, 469, 471). After discussing judgment scenes in the Bible and extrabiblical literature T. F. Glasson arrives at a highly symbolic understanding of the “last judgment” as a pictorial representation of transcendent reality (“The Last Judgment — in Rev 20 and Related Writings,” *NTS*, 28 [1982], 528-39).

1522

The Aramaic text reads לַקְדִּישִׁי (LXX, ἁγίοις), which could mean “to the saints” (cf. וְלֵה in Dan 7:14 and לְעַם in Dan 7:27, where ‘7 indicates the

indirect object rather than signifying “on behalf of”).

[1523](#)

Charles holds that the one way to “restore sanity to the text” is to connect the opening words, “and I saw,” with “souls of them that had been beheaded” and move the intervening words to a position after “upon their hand” (2.182-83). (supply *καὶ εἶδον* before *θρόνους*). His view is that John died after finishing 1:1-20:3 and the remainder of the book was put together from documents he left by a faithful but unintelligent disciple (2.147). Gaechter studies the thesis with care and concludes that the editor did not grasp the original sequence because John gave him no written documents and he had to rely wholly upon his memory (“The Original Sequence of Apocalypse 20-22,” TS, 10 [1949], 485-521).

[1524](#)

Taking *τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ* as a subjective genitive (as in 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10).

[1525](#)

“The main point is that the souls under the altar (6:9-11) at last have their reward” (Sweet, 288).

[1526](#)

The verb *πελεχίζω* occurs only here in the NT. It is derived from *πέλεχς*, a double-edged ax, which was the instrument of execution in republican Rome (Diodorus Siculus xix.101; Josephus, Ant. 14.7.4).

[1527](#)

Barclay, 2.192. Swete calls the second group confessors and those who remained faithful in persecution (262).

[1528](#)

Gk. *ὅστις* often introduces a relative clause that emphasizes a characteristic quality of its antecedent; cf. Matt 7:15, *προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασι προβάτων*; Rom 1:25; Acts 10:47. In this case *καί* would serve as an explicative (“namely”); cf. Matt 8:33; 1 Cor 15:38.

[1529](#)

Jeske concludes, “So the millennium is not for everyone, not even for every Christian. It is a special time for Christ and his martyrs” (114).

[1530](#)

Note that *ἀνίστημι* (used quite regularly in the Gospels for bodily resurrection; Matt 20:19; Mark 12:25; Luke 12:46; etc.) can also mean “to

erect, cause to be born, stand up, appear, get ready” (BAGD, 70). ἐγείρω may mean “to wake, lift up, restore, bring into being, appear” as well as “to raise from the dead” (BAGD, 214-15). ἀναζάω is found only twice in the NT (and not at all in the postapostolic fathers or the Apologists): in Luke 15:24 of the return of the prodigal son, and in Rom 7:9 of sin springing to life at the coming of the commandment. ζάω, on the other hand, is found more than 140 times in the NT scattered through a wide range of contexts, each of which determines its specific meaning in that instance.

[1531](#)

Alford, 4.732. Krodel writes that “coming to life can only refer to their ‘bodily’ resurrection from the dead, not to some spiritual immortal life of souls” (335)

[1532](#)

The attempt to attribute to Paul a belief in the millennium on the basis of 1 Cor 15:20-28 is unconvincing. See Beckwith (98-100) for an excellent treatment of this claim. He concludes that although millenniaums may be conceived to intervene between steps in the progress of the kingdom toward completion, in Paul's view what lies ahead is simply the absolute triumph of the kingdom and the inheritance that awaits the Christian.

[1533](#)

See Beckwith, 735. Ford says that "in earlier writings Israel contemplated a new historical and national era, but eventually developed a more transcendental hope which included the concept of new heavens and a new earth.... It was, perhaps, in order to harmonize these divergent views that the belief in an interim messianic period arose" (352). See the excellent treatment of this development in Roloff's excursus, "The Thousand-Year Kingdom" (223-26). See also Talbert's discussion of the attempt to synthesize two very different eschatologies in ancient Judaism (93-94).

[1534](#)

Charles, 2.142. But Krodel notes that "Charles, like many before and after him, failed to see that John's millennium is not a preliminary messianic interim but the beginning of the eternal kingdom of God and of his Messiah" (327). His hypothesis is that "John was aware of messianic interim kingdom speculations and that he modified them by undercutting them in his millennium vision" (332). Krodel's view is that the millennium is not a preliminary kingdom to be followed by an eternal kingdom but is "the beginning of the consummated kingdom of God and his Messiah" (330). It is "nothing other than the *special* resurrection of Christians that precedes the *general* resurrection of the dead" (336).

[1535](#)

For a summary of rabbinic views on the duration of the messianic age see Str-B, 3.823-27.

[1536](#)

See Beasley-Murray (288-89) for further references illustrating the wide variation of belief concerning the ultimate future that existed in contemporary Jewish and Christian literature; also Ford, 352-54.

[1537](#)

Justin, *Dial.* 80.

[1538](#)

Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.32.

[1539](#)

See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.33.3; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39. The quotation is given in Barclay, 2.189 as well. It is paralleled in 2 *Bar.* 29:5-8 and in the rabbinical tradition.

[1540](#)

Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.38.

[1541](#)

Hist. Eccl. 7.24.

[1542](#)

Origen, *De Princ.* 2.11.2-3.

[1543](#)

Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 20:7ff.

[1544](#)

Lilje notes that “the modern rejection of chiliasm is usually based on dogmatic considerations, not on biblical exegesis” (252).

[1545](#)

Beckwith, 738. For a convenient summary of the two millennial interpretations (literal and allegorical), see Erdman, 154-62.

[1546](#)

While acknowledging that the question of why Satan will be released remains unanswered, Roloff stresses that the central concern of the scene is to show that “the entire world in all its regions [will be] free of resistance to God” (228).

[1547](#)

V. S. Poythress discusses four levels at which Rev 20:1-6 may be read and concludes that the most sensible interpretation is that the passage refers to a heavenly vindication of martyrs (“Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6,” *JETS*, 36 [1993], 41-54).

[1548](#)

Beckwith, 736-38; for the underlying argument see the earlier section entitled “Permanent and Transitory Elements in the Apocalypse Distinguished,” 291-310.

[1549](#)

Beckwith states his confident belief in the final realization of the divine ideal revealed, but he does not look for anything like a literal fulfillment of

the predictions shaped by the conditions of a transient period of history (301).

[1550](#)

Only if the martyrs of the first resurrection are taken as symbolic of the church universal would the second resurrection be limited to the ungodly.

[1551](#)

It is omitted by N 2030 2053 2962 2377 MajT^K syP^h; Vic Bea.

[1552](#)

Ford suggests that it is probably best to understand “first resurrection” in the sense of “the first group to enjoy resurrection” (350). Meredith Kline argues from the use of *πρωτος* that the first resurrection is the death of the Christian (“The First Resurrection,” *WTJ*, 37 [1974-75], 366-75). Norman Shepherd takes the first resurrection as the resurrection of Christ (“The Resurrections of Revelation 20,” *WTJ*, 37 [1974-75], 34-43); see also Philip Hughes (“the true bodily resurrection of the incarnate Son”; 213-14). James Hughes claims that there is no mention in Rev 20:4-6 of a bodily resurrection, let alone two bodily resurrections (“Revelation 20:4-6 and the Question of the Millennium,” *WTJ*, 35 [1972- 73], 281-302).

[1553](#)

Farrer, 206.

[1554](#)

One Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, “bridge builder.” The role of the priest is to establish a bridge between God and humankind.

[1555](#)

See also Daniel 11; Zechariah 14; Isaiah 66:15-23; 2 Esdr 13:5ff.

[1556](#)

Glasson, 112.

[1557](#)

Gk. *τελέω*. Note that the Byzantine text reads *μετά* for *ὅταν τελεσθῇ*, which tends to present the *χίλια ἔτη* as a more definite period of time.

[1558](#)

MSS that add *χαί* before *συναγαγεῖν* (N 051 MajT^A sy) understand a parallel syntax.

[1559](#)

Meshech and Tubal are not the original forms of Moscow and Tobolsk! (They are the Hebrew names of the East Anatolian groups known to classical historians as the Moschi and the Tibareni.)

[1560](#)

“By John’s time, Jewish tradition had long since transformed ‘Gog of Magog’ into ‘Gog and Magog’ and made them into the ultimate enemies of God’s people to be destroyed in the eschatological battle” (Boring, 209).

[1561](#)

Kuhn, *TDNT*, 1.791.

[1562](#)

Josephus identifies Magog with the Scythians (*Ant.* 1.6.1).

[1563](#)

Caird, 257.

[1564](#)

Morris says that the expression signifies people who have willingly placed themselves under the dominion of God (233). Bruce maintains that the “city [God] loves” is not a walled city but “a community of the true Israel” (662).

[1565](#)

The UBS text lists five variant readings for ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ involving changes in the preposition and/or addition of (or change to) θεοῦ. The reading of A 2053^{com} vg^{ms} cop^{bo} mss^{eth} Augustine^{2/3} Primasius is chosen and labeled “A” (certain).

[1566](#)

Harrington finds it difficult to take this passage as anything other than “a symbol of annihilation” (198) — “the absolute end of anything, or anyone, not fit to be present in the New Jerusalem” (205). While it may be difficult, it is nevertheless crucial that we take the text as it is rather than as what we might like it to be. To impose contemporary sensitivities on an ancient text does not produce good history.

[1567](#)

Ladd, 270-71.

[1568](#)

Gk. λευχός may mean “bright, gleaming” (see Matt 17:2). *1 Enoch* 18:8 says that a certain mountain “reached to heaven like the throne of God, of alabaster” (a fine-textured stone, white and translucent).

[1569](#)

2 Esdras expresses the traditional view of Judaism that God alone will bring about the consummation (6:1-10; 7:33ff.).

[1570](#)

Beasley-Murray asserts that the language here (and in 6:1ff. — which is parallel if one subscribes to a view of recapitulation) does not imply the destruction of the physical universe but belongs to the traditional language of cosmic signs, and is here employed to identify the parousia and expose the terror of messianic judgments (300-301).

[1571](#)

Hough notes that literature treats fully the motif of character becoming destiny and cites Dante's *Divine Comedy* in which "men are seen permanently fastened to the central meaning which they have given to their lives" (IB, 4.525).

[1572](#)

In Dan 7:10 the judgment of the court apparently rests upon the evidence of books that were opened. *1 Enoch* 90:20; *2 Bar.* 24:1; and *2 Esdr* 6:20 all speak of books in which the deeds of people are recorded for judgment.

[1573](#)

Krodel writes that John did not "relieve the tension between personal accountability and divine election but depicted it by juxtaposing two kinds of books.... Divine election and human responsibility may not be balanced on the same ledger" (340).

[1574](#)

Farrer, 210.

[1575](#)

For other references in apocalyptic literature to the "giving up of the dead" see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 56-61.

[1576](#)

1 Enoch 61:5 speaks of the elect "who have been devoured by the fish of the sea."

[1577](#)

Charles holds that an original τὰ ταμεῖα was deliberately changed into ἡ θάλασσα in order to introduce the idea of a physical resurrection. The earlier text taught a resurrection of persons, not dead bodies (2.196). Kiddle calls this emendation "both arbitrary and illogical" (407).

[1578](#)

Jeremias, *TDNT*, 1.146-49.

[1579](#)

Beasley-Murray argues that the lake of fire does not signify annihilation, but "torturous existence in the society of evil in opposition to life in the

society of God” (304). Although this statement would seem to indicate a concurrence with the conviction of some exegetes (such as Rissi, *Time and History*, 123ff., and *The Future of the World*, 36ff., 67ff.) that John anticipated that those who had rejected the role of God would ultimately make it into the New Jerusalem, he adds, “Candour compels us to state that John has given no clear indication of any such teaching” (304).

[1580](#)

Moffatt, 477.

[1581](#)

Bratcher and Hatton define the second death as “the final, eternal death of the wicked, as opposed to the temporal death of all living beings” (295).

[1582](#)

Alford writes, “As there is a second and higher life, so there is also a second and deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death (ch. xxi.4), so after that death there is no more life” (735-36).

[1583](#)

Ladd, 275; cf. Glasson, 115.

[1584](#)

Mention should be made of Charles’s rather extensive rearrangement of the text of chapters 20-22. In a section entitled “XX.4-XXII. The Text Incoherent and Self-Contradictory as it Stands” (2.144-54), Charles conjectures that John died when he had completed his text up through 20:3. The remaining materials were for the most part ready in a series of independent documents that a faithful but unintelligent disciple placed in the order he thought to be correct. In reality the material contains two distinct and separate visions of two different heavenly cities. The first is the millennial capital of the Messiah’s kingdom (21:9-22:2, 14-15, 17), which should have followed immediately after 20:3. The second (21:1-4c; 22:3-5) is an eternal city. Few commentators have followed Charles’s reconstruction. Sweet writes, “It is better if possible to listen to what the text is saying than to rearrange it according to our canons of consistency” (297). Preston and Hanson, however, hold that “some such theory becomes almost essential” (129). They argue that the millennial city is a picture of the church militant as she should be, and the eternal city is a picture of the church as she will be when time and space are no more (129-33).

[1585](#)

Scholars often discuss whether the new order of things is to be a renovation of the old or a distinctly new creation. Neither the language employed nor rabbinic commentary on relevant passages such as Isa 65:17ff. will supply a definite answer. Beasley-Murray writes, “We cannot be sure how he viewed the new heaven and new earth, but the context of this statement suggests that his real concern is not with physical geography, but to describe a context of life for God’s people which accords with the great and glorious purpose God has in mind for them” (308).

[1586](#)

Swete notes that here *Χαινός*, as the opposite of *παλαιός*, “suggests fresh life rising from the decay and wreck of the old world” (275). This is the *παλιγγενεσία*, the new world, of which Jesus speaks in Matt 19:28.

[1587](#)

Egyptians apparently regarded the sea, not as a part of nature, but as alien and hostile (see Plutarch, *De Isid.* 7-8, 32).

[1588](#)

Swete, 275.

[1589](#)

In the *Sibylline Oracles* (5:158-59) a great star falls from heaven and burns up the deep sea. Elsewhere in apocalyptic literature the waters dry up at the judgment (*T. Levi* 4:1; cf. *Sib. Or.* 5:447).

[1590](#)

Boring is insistent that though John had visionary experiences, his portrayal of the new Jerusalem is not a description of what he “actually saw” but “is his literary composition as the means of expressing, in symbolic terms, the meaning of his revelation of the nature of God’s goal for this world” (215). It has been the position of this commentary that in each of the 32 instances of *Χαὶ εἶδον* in Revelation John does in fact report what he “actually saw.”

[1591](#)

Roloff writes that prophetic faith spoke of a fundamental eschatological renewal of Jerusalem and that “beyond that, apocalyptic developed the idea ... according to which the new Jerusalem was preexistent in heaven in order to come from there to earth at the end time” (235).

[1592](#)

Cf. 2 *Bar.* 4:2-6; 2 *Esdr* 13:36; 1 *Enoch* 90:28-29.

[1593](#)

For example, Walvoord, 313. Ladd makes it the dwelling place of departed saints between death and resurrection, which in the consummation descends from heaven to settle permanently in the new earth (276).

[1594](#)

For example, Lilje (259), who takes it as the church universal, the biblical counterpart of the political unity of the Roman Empire.

[1595](#)

Kiddle writes that the heart of the symbol is a community of men: “It is a city which is a family. The ideal of perfect community, unrealizable on earth because of the curse of sin which vitiated the first creation, is now embodied in the redeemed from all nations” (415-16). Hunter says that “the consummation of the Christian hope is supremely social. It is no ‘flight of the alone to the Alone’ but life in the redeemed community of heaven” (*Probing the New Testament*, 156).

[1596](#)

Note: it is ἐκ του οὐρανου. and ἀπὸ του θεου..

[1597](#)

Or, as Bratcher and Hatton suggest, “the man she is going to marry” (297).

[1598](#)

“Revelation as a whole may be characterized as *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the sub-title, *The Harlot and the Bride*” (Beasley-Murray, 315).

[1599](#)

A number of MSS (051^s MajT gig sy co; Ambr Prim) read οὐρανοῦ, an assimilation to ἐκ του ου.ρανου. of v. 2.

[1600](#)

Although they belong to unrelated linguistic families, the consonants are the same, and σχηνή often translates the Hebrew שֶׁנִּי in the LXX.

[1601](#)

Metzger confesses that it is extremely difficult to decide between λαοί and λαός. Chiefly on the basis of slightly superior manuscript evidence (N A 046 2030 2050 2053 2062^{txt} 2329 MajT^A a; Ir^{lat}), the committee preferred λαοί (*Textual Commentary*, 688).

[1602](#)

The NIV follows those MSS that add θεὸς αὐτῶν (051^s [1854] MajT^A) or αὐτῶν θεός (A 2030 2050 2053^[txt 2062] 2329 *al* vg; Ir^{lat}) and translates, “and be their God.” The UBS text follows A (αὐτῶν θεός) but encloses the words within square brackets and indicates that the Committee had

difficulty deciding which variant to place in the text. Farrer prefers, “And God-with-Them himself shall be their God,” which he understands as an allusion to the name Emmanuel (212; cf. Bratcher and Hatton, 298).

[1603](#)

Walvoord, 315.

[1604](#)

For the contemporary view of Jewish apocalypticism about the coming destruction of death see 2 *Enoch* 65:10; 2 Esdr 8:53; 2 Bar. 21:23.

[1605](#)

Gk. τὰ πρωτα. Metzger calls attention to the absurd reading of the original version of Sinaiticus (τὰ πρόβατα) as “an example of what nonsense scribes can produce” (*Textual Commentary*, 689, n. 1). The final clause of v. 4 is made causal by the MSS that read ὅτι before τὰ πρωτα. The evidence for omission is strong (A 051 1006 1611 1841 2030 2053 2062 2329 2377 MajT^A), but both NA²⁷ and the UBS⁴ text include it.

[1606](#)

Cf. Isa 42:9; 2 Cor 5:17 for changes that prefigure this final and glorious transformation.

[1607](#)

God had spoken in 1:8 and probably in 16:1, 17 as well. Farrer holds that 21:5 is not an utterance by God that John actually heard, but a report of what God had formerly said (212-13).

[1608](#)

Boring observes that “God does not make ‘all new things,’ but ‘all things new’ ” and reasons that “the advent of the heavenly city does not abolish all human efforts to build a decent earthly civilization but fulfills them” (220).

[1609](#)

Gk. ὅτι does not introduce the following clause (as direct discourse) but supplies the reason why John is to write as directed.

[1610](#)

Hence the perfect, γέγοναν: “they have come to pass.”

[1611](#)

Caird writes that before John “attempts to summon up the full resources of language to depict what is beyond language and thought, he leaves us with the first indelible impression that heaven is belonging to the family of God” (267).

[1612](#)

Roloff notes that it is striking that the list does not begin with the traditional vices of paganism but mentions first cowardice and faithlessness. He reasons that “aim is taken at the conduct of those Christians who become weak in the midst of persecution and hardship and retract obedience to their Lord” (238). The “cowardly” are those who “fear the threats of the beast more than they trust the love of Christ” (Beasley-Murray, 314). Krodel notes that the cowardly are not those who fear persecution but those “who choose personal well-being over faithfulness to the testimony of Jesus” (351).

[1613](#)

Bratcher and Hatton, 301.

[1614](#)

“To swerve into disloyalty through cowardice or lack of trust was ... to align oneself for ever with the enemies of God” (Kiddle, 422).

[1615](#)

Gk. ἐβδελυγμένοι, LXX.

[1616](#)

In earlier writers πόρνος designated a male prostitute (BAGD cites Aristophanes and Xenophon, both fourth century B.C.; 693), but the word had developed a more general meaning by NT times.

[1617](#)

Sweet writes that “*pseudes* means more than ‘liar’: one who has no standing in the truth, and hates it” (300).

[1618](#)

Gk. δεῦρο is an adverb commonly used as an imperative (cf. Matt 19:21; John 11:43; Acts 7:3).

[1619](#)

See Gundry’s article, “The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People,” *NovT*, 29 (1987), 254-64.

[1620](#)

The only difference in the first twenty words is the insertion of an explanatory clause in 21:9 (των γεμόντων ... ἐσχάτων). The antecedent of γεμόντων is probably φιάλας (1 1006 1611 1841 1854 2030 2377 MajT^K latt sy read γεμούσας) rather than ἄγγέλων, although this appears to be a grammatical error. According to Beckwith, the error results from the prominence of των ἐπὶ ... ἔχόντων (756).

[1621](#)

For a convenient presentation of the parallels and contrasts between Babylon (17:1-19:10) and the City of God (19:11-21:8) see Krodel, 352-54.

[1622](#)

So Barclay, 2.208.

[1623](#)

See the critical apparatus in Nestle for variations in the dual designation.

[1624](#)

For that matter, γυνή may refer to any adult female (Matt 9:20; 1 Tim 2:11), and in some contexts it may mean bride (Gen 29:21, LXX; Matt 1:20).

[1625](#)

Swete, 284.

[1626](#)

Bratcher and Hatton state that “holy” both here and in v. 2 has the basic meaning of “belonging to God” (303).

[1627](#)

Gk. φωστήρ properly means “a light-giving body,” but it may also indicate “splendor or radiance.” In the NT it is found elsewhere only in Phil 2:15.

[1628](#)

BAGD ask if perhaps the older meaning of χρύσταλλος, “ice,” is not to be preferred. A precious stone would shimmer like a sheet of ice (454).

[1629](#)

Gk. πυλών properly denotes a gateway and should be distinguished from the actual gate (ἡ πύλη) (Jeremias in *TDNT*, 6.921). Since names cannot be inscribed upon an opening, the designation here refers either to the gate itself or the tower that rises above the city wall over the gateway. City gates in antiquity were places of “communication, deliberation, and administration” (Roloff, 242).

[1630](#)

For the wall as a metaphor of security see Isa 26:1; Zech 2:5.

[1631](#)

Levi is assigned a gate, and Ephraim and Manasseh are combined in Joseph.

[1632](#)

In the directions for encampment the order is east, south, west, north (Num 2). John’s order follows that of the measuring of the temple area in Ezek 42:16-20.

[1633](#)

Caird, 272. A *pc* vg^{ms} sa change the order of νότου and δυσμῶν, which would reverse the entire direction of the zodiac (E N W S).

[1634](#)

In 1 Cor 15:5 the resurrected Jesus appeared to “the Twelve” although Judas had already committed suicide. Numerically there were only eleven disciples at that time. Cf. John 20:24.

[1635](#)

Cf. the golden crowns of 4:4, the golden incense bowls of 5:8, the golden altar of 9:13, etc.

[1636](#)

It is not immediately apparent why 051^s 1854 2377 MajT^k omit καὶ τὸ τεῖχος αὐτῆς, especially since the wall is in fact measured in v. 17.

[1637](#)

Like Babylon (Herodotus 1.178), Nineveh (Diodorus Siculus 1.3), Nicea (Strabo 12.4.7), and other ancient cities; note that 2329 vg^{mss} omit ὕψος.

[1638](#)

Cf. BAGD, τετράγωνος, 813.

[1639](#)

William Hoste, *The Visions of John the Divine*, 178; Lilje, 267.

[1640](#)

A στάδιον is about 607 English feet; thus the city would be about 1,400 miles in each direction.

[1641](#)

TCNT translates “as men measure, that is, as the angel measured.”

[1642](#)

Farrer notes that a cube has twelve edges, so that when the city is measured 12,000 furlongs along each edge, the sum would be 144,000, the sacred number of God’s Israel (217).

[1643](#)

Cf. Charles, 2.164; Swete, 289.

[1644](#)

Beckwith, 760.

[1645](#)

M. Topham emends “stades” to “cubits” and takes 12,000 as the total perimeter of the city, which then turns out to be about 3½ miles (“The Dimensions of the New Jerusalem,” *ExpTim*, 100 [1989], 417-19).

[1646](#)

Gk. ἐνδῶμησις means “interior structure” or “substructure” (*EDNT*, 1.452).

[1647](#)

Josephus, *Bell.* 5.5.6.

[1648](#)

Walvoord writes that “the constant mention of transparency indicates that the city is designed to transmit the glory of God in the form of light without hindrance” (325).

[1649](#)

John’s list omits four included in the LXX (Exod 28:17-20) — ἄνθραξ, λιγύριον, ἁχάτης, and ὀνύχιον — and includes four additional stones — χαλκηδών, σαρ-δόνυξ, χρυσόπρασος, and ὑάκινθος. Part of this difference may be accounted for by the uncertainties of translation. The order in the two lists is totally distinct.

[1650](#)

In an extended discussion Charles suggests that when the stones are placed around a square in the order given in 21:13 (E N S W) and compared with the twelve signs of the zodiac, it will be seen that the order will be the exact reverse of the actual path of the sun through the signs (2.165-69). He concludes that the author was familiar with current astrological thought, and that by reversing the order he intended to stress that the holy city has nothing to do with ethnic speculations regarding the city of the gods (2.168). In essential agreement with Charles, Roloff writes that it is “hardly accidental” that “the sequence of the jewels named in vv. 19-20 appears to correspond in reverse order to the signs of the zodiac” (244). In the first edition of his commentary Morris followed Charles’s suggestion that by reversing the order John “expresses the thought that in the end God reverses human judgments” (252). But in the second edition he follows Glasson’s lead in concluding that Charles’s view is untenable and concludes, “we should probably say no more than that the stones point to the high priest’s breastplate” (245).

The identification of the stones with the signs of the zodiac on Egyptian and Arabian monuments is furnished by Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* 2.2.177ff. Both Philo and Josephus interpret the stones on the high priest’s breastplate in this way (*Vit. Mos.* 2.124; *Ant.* 3.7.7). W. W. Reader says that the stones have theophanic, ecclesiological, protological, and eschatological significance (“The Twelve Jews of Revelation 21:19-20: Tradition History

and Modern Interpretations,” *JBL*, 100 [1981], 433-57). But Glasson notes that he has been in touch with several Egyptologists and no one is aware of any zodiac/jewel scheme such as Kircher set forth (“The Order of Jewels in Revelation XXI.19-20: A Theory Eliminated,” *JTS*, n.s. 26 [1975], 95-100). His own position is that if Revelation was written in exile, then the gems and their order would have been based on the Seer’s memory (100).

[1651](#)

From ἁ-μεθύω. For further material on all these stones see Marshall’s article in *NBD*, 631-34; see also Una Jart, “The Precious Stones in the Revelation of St. John xxi.18-21,” *ST*, 24 (1970), 150-81.

[1652](#)

Baba Batra 75a; *Sanh.* 100a.

[1653](#)

Gk. πλατεῖα is an adjective and understands ὁδός. It probably refers to the one broad street characteristic of Oriental cities. Since the entire city was pure gold (21:18), all the streets would be of gold. There is no necessity of taking the singular, πλατεῖα, as generic.

[1654](#)

This title is used liturgically in 4:8 by the living creatures, in 11:17 by the twenty-four elders, in 15:3 by the martyrs, in 16:7 by the altar, and in 19:6 by the great multitude.

[1655](#)

See Beckwith, 769; also 51ff.

[1656](#)

Lenski calls them the glorified saints mentioned in 5:9 and 7:9 (644), and Kiddle says that they are the redeemed who belong spiritually but not racially to the twelve tribes (439). Walvoord finds here references to a body of saved Gentiles distinct from the church (327). Note that the NKJ (following TR) has without any substantial support (variants are not even suggested in Kilpatrick, NA²⁷, or UBS⁴) added “of them which are saved” after “nations.”

[1657](#)

After gathering together a sizeable list of prophetic promises that all nations shall come to God, Barclay concludes that John was “foretelling the consummation of a hope which was always in the hearts of the greatest of his countrymen” (2.216-19). Caird agrees. He writes, “Nowhere in the New

Testament do we find a more eloquent statement than this of the all-embracing scope of Christ's redemptive work" (280).

Rist holds that in Jewish messianism and apocalypticism it was often held that in time Gentiles would convert to Judaism. There existed, however, an opposing concept more characteristic of apocalyptic literature, that the wicked would be punished forever. Rist accounts for this "glaring inconsistency" by conjecturing that John, in using Isa 60:3, 11, "failed to modify them to suit his own severe and unrelenting views concerning the fate of the nations" (539-40).

[1658](#)

See Beckwith, 769-70.

[1659](#)

For the Lamb's book of life, see comm. at 13:8. Note also Exod 32:32-33; Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1; Phil 4:3.

[1660](#)

Cf. Zech 14:8 for somewhat the same idea; also Joel 3:18, where a fountain in the house of the Lord is to water the valley of Shittim.

[1661](#)

Swete, 298.

[1662](#)

Ladd, 286.

[1663](#)

Barclay, 2.221.

[1664](#)

NIV, NRSV, NEB ("down the middle of the city's street"). The TR separates vv. 1 and 2, with a full stop after 'Απρίου.

[1665](#)

Cf. Caird, 280; Walvoord, 329-30; Lenski, 650; Beasley-Murray mentions (without necessarily approving) a tree in the middle of the street situated at a point where the river diverged into two branches (331). It is possible to take ξύλον as a collective term and read "the trees of life," in which case the apparent problem disappears (cf. Beckwith, 765; Metzger, 102).

[1666](#)

Most commentators mention that apocalyptic thought tends to unite the end of history with its beginning. Rist observes that we are not surprised to find predictions of a reconstituted Garden of Eden in apocalyptic speculation:

“Apocalypticism in positing a new age frequently taught that it would reproduce the newly created beginnings of the first” (541).

[1667](#)

Hughes comments, “This is the height and summation of all blessedness, not only to be in God’s presence but actually to see his face” (233).

[1668](#)

Some have suggested as a background for the metaphor Exod 28:36-38, which says that Aaron wore upon his forehead a golden plate inscribed with the phrase “HOLY TO THE LORD.” In this case the thrust of the metaphor would be “entire consecration to **the** service of God” (Swete, 301).

[1669](#)

Charles, 2.211.

[1670](#)

Kiddle, 447.

[1671](#)

Schick writes that “the main concern of the epilogue is to testify to the absolute trustworthiness of the revelation contained in the book” (2.115). Roloff insists that the epilogue is “by no means an inconsequential appendage” and lists four important functions it serves (249).

[1672](#)

See Beckwith, 771-72, for a further development of this point of view; see also Krodel, 368-69.

[1673](#)

Swete, 303.

[1674](#)

Bratcher and Hatton note that the phrase in question is related to 19:10 and means that “Christian prophets are inspired, or controlled, by the Holy Spirit as they proclaim their messages” (316-17).

[1675](#)

Gk. καί requires some continuity with what precedes, in this case an angelic announcement. Perhaps the words of Christ come through the mouth of the angel. The RSV connects v. 7a with v. 6 and then opens a new paragraph.

[1676](#)

Gk. ταχύ used as an adverb may mean “quickly” in the sense of “at a rapid rate,” although this usage does not fit the context of the five occurrences of ἔρχομαι ταχύ in Revelation (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). Cf. BAGD, 807.

[1677](#)

Sweet writes that “John’s falling to worship the angel expresses his overwhelming conviction of the divine authority of his message, and the angel’s rebuke emphasizes the personal insignificance of any vehicle of revelation” (315). Cf. the response of Cornelius to Peter, the messenger of God in Acts 10:25-26.

[1678](#)

MajT^A; Prim omit χαί after προφητῶν, which further identifies the prophets as those who obey the revelation. 2020 a vg^{cl}; (Tyc) add προφητείας after λόγους.

[1679](#)

Charles cites a number of passages in support of this (2.224-25).

[1680](#)

Cf. also Justin, *Apol.* 1:6.

[1681](#)

Cf. *I Enoch* 1:2, in which the knowledge revealed by God was not for his generation but “for a remote one which is to come”; also *2 Enoch* 33:9-11.

[1682](#)

Schick makes the interesting observation that while the historian finds in the past clues that help him understand the present, “the prophet explains the present with the aid of the future by taking into account the final goal of the historical process” (2.117).

[1683](#)

“In the Christian doctrine of the Last Things, however, the imminence of the end is moral rather than chronological” (Bruce, 665).

[1684](#)

Walvoord, 334.

[1685](#)

Ladd, 291-92.

[1686](#)

Gk. ῥυπαρός literally means “filthy,” but it is used here in the sense of morally defiled.

[1687](#)

Hendriksen refers to the “let of withdrawal” rather than the “let of positive exhortation” (251-52), but this nomenclature could hardly be applied to the two final clauses, which use the same imperative with reference to those who do right and those who are holy.

[1688](#)

Erdman writes that “the deliberate choice of each man has fixed his unalterable fate” (178).

[1689](#)

Cf. also Prov 24:12; Isa 59:18; 2 Cor 11:15; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 2:23; 18:6; 20:13.

[1690](#)

Charles notes that the last of the three phrases is an abbreviated form of an ancient Orphic saying first recorded in Plato (Leg. 4.7) and well known in the first-century Palestinian world (2.220).

[1691](#)

Gk. ἔπλυναν, 7:14; πλύνοντες, 22:14. MajT gig sy bo; (Tert) read ποίου- ντες τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ., an understandable variant but undoubtedly a scribal emendation (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 690). The author uses τηρεῖν with ἐντολή in its two occurrences, 12:17; 14:12.

[1692](#)

Caird writes that “those who wash their robes” are “those who face martyrdom in the confidence that the Cross is the sign of God’s victory over evil without and evil within” (285).

[1693](#)

Cf. the kinds of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God according to 1 Cor 6:9-10, and the shorter, more general list in Rev 21:27 of those to be excluded.

[1694](#)

Moffatt supplies an imperative and translates, “Begone, you dogs...” (Kiddle, 453).

[1695](#)

Charles says that according to an inscription in the temple of Astarte at Larnaka “dog” was the technical term for a WTR or male prostitute (2.178).

[1696](#)

In 1:1 the revelation is διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ., and in 22:16 Jesus calls the angel τὸν ἄγγελόν μου.

[1697](#)

D. E. Aune writes that the ὑμεῖς of 22:16 probably refers to the prophets of 22:9 (“The Prophetic Circle of John of Patmos and the Exegesis of Revelation 22:16,” *JSNT*, 37 [1989], 103-16).

[1698](#)

“Root” is here used in the sense of that which comes from the root — a shoot (Bratcher and Hatton, 322).

[1699](#)

For an astral interpretation of Jesus as the brilliant morning star see Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys*, 249-51.

[1700](#)

Bruce notes that “in the Qumran texts Num 24:17 is a recurring *testimonium* of the messianic warrior of the endtime” (666).

[1701](#)

Kiddle, however, takes the spirit as a collective reference to the prophets, personifying the gift that distinguishes them from their fellows (456).

[1702](#)

Aune notes that “John had not been unopposed in the past (Rev. 2:14-15, 29-30), and it is presumably for the purpose of overcoming any reluctance to accept and act on his message that he so carefully articulates the divine authority which stands behind his message” (*Prophecy in Early Christianity*, 208).

[1703](#)

Letter of Aristeas, 310-11. Cf. *1 Enoch* 104:10; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 5.20.2.

[1704](#)

Moffatt, 492.

[1705](#)

Charles takes vv. 18b-19 as a later interpolation on the basis that (1) the passage presupposes a considerable lapse of time before the second advent, (2) the style is not John’s, and (3) the penalty is temporal rather than eternal (2.222-23). None of these arguments is convincing. The message could easily have been altered (in theory) by the first person to hear the book.

[1706](#)

See Ladd, 295-96; Walvoord, 338.

[1707](#)

Only in Matt 28:8 does ταχύ mean “quickly” in the sense of “at a rapid rate” (and even there it may indicate that the departure was immediate rather than calling attention to the rate). Elsewhere it means “at once” or “in a short time” (Mark 5:25; Luke 15:22; and the five Revelation passages in which it is used of the coming of Christ: 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).

[1708](#)

Cf. Did. 10:6, μαρὰν ἁθᾶ.

[1709](#)

“Christianity is not a faith which bids us look for a gradual upward march of man till he reaches an ideal state of civilisation” (Preston and Hanson, 145).

[1710](#)

It is included in ~~Σ~~ 051^s MajT vg^{cl} co but omitted in A 1006 1841 pc a gig vgst (difficult to explain if present originally, Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 691).