



Revelation

In general, people have one of two opposite and extreme approaches to Revelation – they either become obsessed and preoccupied with it or they avoid it as much as they possibly can; they either become caught up with, and even dogmatic, about the interpretation of the symbolic nitty-gritty and detail, or they find the whole thing so perplexing and confusing that they simply keep away.

Yet, as Paul tells Timothy, “All Scripture is...profitable” and the main means by which God makes the believer “competent...equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16) There should be no ‘no go’ areas in the Bible, for the Christian, and that includes Revelation.

Today we’re going to work our way through this last book of the Bible and try and make sense of its complex structure and contents and do so in a way that will be edifying and spiritually profitable.

I want to begin with a word of encouragement. It comes from the very name of the book: **Revelation**. The name itself reminds us that something is being revealed to us, through the first century Apostle John; *revealed* and not *concealed*. This book is not intended to mystify and bewilder us; it is intended to enlighten and reassure us.

Some people seem to view Revelation a bit like Winston Churchill viewed Russia in his day. He said, “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” But actually the full, original, quote is very interesting. What Churchill said in full was, “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

In other words, if you identify the key, you can unlock the riddle that’s wrapped in a mystery within an enigma.

I want to suggest to you that in order to unlock Revelation we need to identify the key and there are I believe actually three keys which we need to use simultaneously to turn the lock and reveal the treasures inside.

Now, a word of qualification. By using that analogy, I do not for a moment want to suggest that in some way Revelation is written in a cryptic code and you need to get the spiritual equivalent of GCHQ to come and unlock it for you. This is not an enigma code that only a professional expert can unlock. Every true believer has the ability and right to dig into this book for themselves and ask for the indwelling Holy Spirit to open it up to them. I don’t want to suggest that I have an expertise that you don’t have. My job as a Bible teacher is to show you the keys that are there for you to use and discover the truths for yourself.

And actually, the three keys you need to unlock are the same three keys you need to correctly unlock and understand any book or passage of the Bible.

Key 1: What type of literature is this book / passage?

Key 2: Why was this book / passage written?

Key 3: Who is this book / passage about?

Key 1: What type of literature is this book / passage?

The text itself tells us that Revelation is prophecy (1:3), but it is really a special sub-section of prophecy, and one that’s worthy of its own classification, namely **apocalyptic** literature. If you try to read Revelation and don’t read it as apocalyptic literature then I need to tell you now that you are beaten and confused before you even begin.

The word apocalyptic comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means *uncovering* or *revealing* or *revelation*. (See Revelation 1:1). However, it is a fundamentally Jewish form of literature.

My own definition of apocalyptic literature would be: **a genre of revelatory literature, composed during oppressive conditions, in which a revelation is mediated, either by an otherworldly being or through a dream or vision, to a human recipient, disclosing spiritual realities, both in terms of eschatological salvation, and another, supernatural world.**



In apocalyptic literature, two worlds merge, as it were.

- The 'here' and now – the flesh and blood, physical and material world that we are part of and which we see all around us
- The 'there' and now – the spiritual, non-material world which is also all around us but of which we are largely unawares most of the time. But this spiritual dimension has a massive impact on the here and now, and actually helps us make sense of what is going on in the physical realm.

It's a bit like a drama being played out on a stage; the actors and scenery are all there, but then we draw back the curtains, and we see behind the stage another world, all of which is making possible and even determining what is going on visibly on the stage.

And apocalyptic literature has a number of key characteristics:

Visions and Dreams

Much of the message is conveyed through the human channel experiencing visions and dreams rather than, as is common among the prophets, messages directly given by God. Sometimes the writer, like John, has visions which he relates; sometimes there is an engagement with an angelic or other supernatural messenger who shows, reveals and/or explains certain things.

Symbols

Symbols and imagery feature prominently in apocalyptic literature. The use of symbols is not, of course, uncommon, in the Scriptures, but elsewhere the symbols tend to involve very real, tangible images, for example senseless doves (Hosea 7:11), salt (Matthew 5:13) or vultures (Luke 17:37). However, in apocalyptic literature the imagery is mostly truly fantastic, such as locusts with "*human faces....women's hair.....lions' teeth.....tails and stings like scorpions*" (Revelation 9:7-10); or a "*woman clothed with the sun*" (Revelation 12:1), or a beast "*with ten horns and seven heads*" (Revelation 13:1).

Numbers

Within the symbolic aspect of apocalyptic literature there is a considerable use of numbers. In Jewish writings, the number 70 is very common, but we also frequently find the numbers 3, 4, 10 and 12 used. In Revelation in particular, the number 7 regularly appears, not to mention 666.

Literary Form

It's very important to bear in mind that, unlike most of the prophetic writings which were originally given in verbal form, apocalyptic material is originally literary, with its own structure and form. For example "*Write therefore the things that you have seen*" (Revelation 1:19). This gives it quite a stylised structure with a tendency to divide time and events into neat packages.

Perspective

We have already briefly noted this. Apocalyptic literature focuses not so much on what God is doing at this present moment in time, but on a time in the future when God will bring history – his-story – to a pre-ordained climax with a final triumph of right over wrong. Apocalyptic literature, more than any other genre of Scripture, shows us history from God's perspective; human history is being orchestrated from God's heavenly throne room.

Key 2: Why was this book / passage written?

What we are trying to discover here is what was in the biblical author's mind and heart as he put pen to paper? What was his purpose in writing? There are different ways in which we can answer that question in relation to different Bible books, but there are, it seems to me, two key verses in Revelation that spell out for us the reason behind the message of Revelation.

- i. Revelation 1:19, "*Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.*"

The exalted and glorified Christ instructs John to write down what he has seen in the vision, and notice the two dimensional time frame: "*those that are*" and "*those that are to take place after this*".



One of the most common mistakes people make when they try and make sense of Revelation is that they are looking for information and predictions about the future. But that's only half the story of Revelation. The message of Revelation is to explain the present as well as expose the future.

Never forget, that like every book of the Bible, Revelation was written not only for us but, in the first place, for real people who lived in real places at a specific time in history. We can't understand what it means for us until we first ask what it would have meant for them.

- ii. Revelation 14:12, *"Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus."*

Remember that Revelation is apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic literature is written to vulnerable, oppressed, marginalised believers facing great danger and threats, encouraging them to persevere because God is in control and will ultimately destroy their enemies.

Key 3: Who is this book / passage about?

All Scripture is ultimately about the Lord Jesus. As we read Revelation, just as when we read Genesis or Psalms or Isaiah, we need to keep asking ourselves how this portion of Scripture contributes to our understanding of who Christ is. Revelation is not primarily about me/us, it's about Christ.

So, we have established that

- Revelation is apocalyptic
- it's written to enable persecuted and hard-pressed Christians make sense of their present as well as the future
- its central character is Christ

You probably don't need me to tell you that few books of the Bible have given rise to such a broad spectrum of interpretations as has Revelation and this has often resulted in believers being reluctant to study the book for themselves and learn from it, fearing that somehow they lack the insights and skills to rightly interpret the book. Even John Calvin admitted that he wasn't sure what to do with the book of Revelation and therefore did not write a commentary on it, even though he had completed volumes on almost all of the rest of the New Testament.

Summary of Main schools of interpretation

- i. **Preterists (Partial and Full):** The events of Revelation were largely fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
- ii. **Historicists:** Revelation is a symbolic account of church history, and the prophecies are fulfilled in various historic events.
- iii. **Futurists:** Revelation predicts events that will take place in the future, up to an including the return of Christ.
- iv. **Idealists:** Revelation describes in symbolic terms the battle throughout history between God and Satan, between good and evil.

There is another range of opinions related to the subject of the **Millennium**, and this arises from Revelation 20, because that's where the millennial period of 1,000 years is mentioned; though it's worth mentioning that it's the only place in the Bible where it's mentioned. But how you view the millennium will, in many ways, affect how you interpret much of the rest of Revelation.

All are in agreement that

- there will be a future, visible and personal return of Christ
- every individual will be bodily resurrected
- everyone will appear before the judgement seat of Christ
- the righteous will spend eternity in heaven and the unrighteous in hell

But, in areas of difference, there are three main views on the millennium:

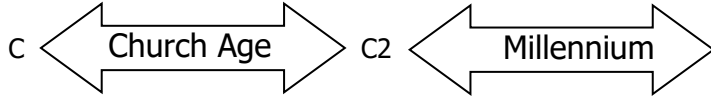
- pre-millennialism
- post-millennialism
- a-millennialism



Here is an extremely brief summary of each of those three views.

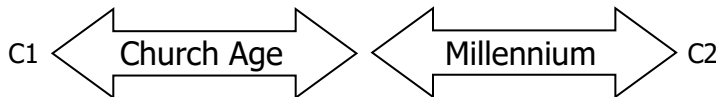
Historic and Dispensational Premillennialism

At the end of the Church age, Christ will return and establish a glorious millennial kingdom on earth. Dispensational Premillennialism, like its Historic namesake, also sees a return before the millennial kingdom but also teaches that the Church will be raptured from the earth seven years before the beginning of the millennium.



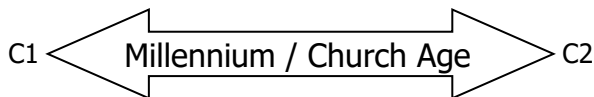
Postmillennialism

The future, glorious, millennial kingdom, in which the world will become Christianised and governed by the reigning saints, will follow the present Church age and will itself be followed by the return of Christ.



Amillennialism

The millennial kingdom is the church age, beginning with the first coming of Christ and ending with his second coming.



In a one day study of Revelation there is no way I can possibly give you all the different views and interpretations of every passage as we go through the book, as I would when, for example, I teach Revelation over 20 hours at College. In such a brief period of time, I can only give you my conclusions and tell you that my own position is that I would describe myself as an **Idealist**, believing that Revelation describes, largely in symbolic terms, the battle between God and Satan, between good and evil, throughout history. I would also hold to an **A-millennialist** position, understanding the millennial kingdom to be the church age, beginning with the first coming of Christ and ending with his second coming.

How to read Revelation

Let me give you a number of principles which, if you follow them, will enable you to get more out of the book and help prevent you falling into some of the extreme errors that others have fallen into.

i. Read with humility

Revelation is not easy! Reading Revelation with a humble mind means that we understand the difficulties involved in reading the book and being willing to admit that our interpretation could be wrong.

ii. Read through the eyes and minds of the original readers

This is a priority with any book of the Bible. Our tendency with Revelation is to ignore the first century Christians and jump directly to God’s message for us. What was John trying to communicate to his audience? If our interpretation would have made no sense to the original audience, we have almost certainly missed the meaning of the passage.

iii. Read seriously but not always literally.

The picture language of Revelation, with its symbols, images, and figures, is intended to convey literal truth and to describe literal events. Remembering that Revelation is apocalyptic, we should read carefully, not taking apocalyptic imagery literally. We can actually pervert the author’s intended meaning by forcing a literal interpretation on something that the author intended to be understood figuratively.

iv. Read through the lens of the Old Testament and history

One of our problems is that at times we may know what Revelation is saying, but we may not know what it means or what it is referring to! Answers will generally be found in the first-century historical context out of which John is writing and the Old Testament. Although there are no explicit Old Testament quotations in Revelation, the book is filled with echoes and allusions to the Old Testament.

Revelation contains more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book. It has been calculated that there are references or allusions to the Old Testament in almost 70% of Revelation's verses, while John also draws heavily on Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah.

v. Don't read in a strictly linear fashion.

Don't look for or expect a strict chronological roadmap of future events. Revelation does not necessarily advance in a neat linear fashion. The book is filled with prophetic-apocalyptic visions that serve to make a dramatic impact on the reader rather than to present a precise chronological sequence of future events.

That leads us into one more thing we need to consider before we get into the text of Revelation itself, namely

The Structure of The Revelation

As with interpretative views, there is no shortage of choice when it comes to deciding on the structure of The Revelation. This study follows the **Parallelism or Recapitulation** structure which identifies a two-fold division of the book, within which are seven parallel sections, each spanning the entire Church age while seeing the unfolding drama from a different perspective.

a. Two Sections

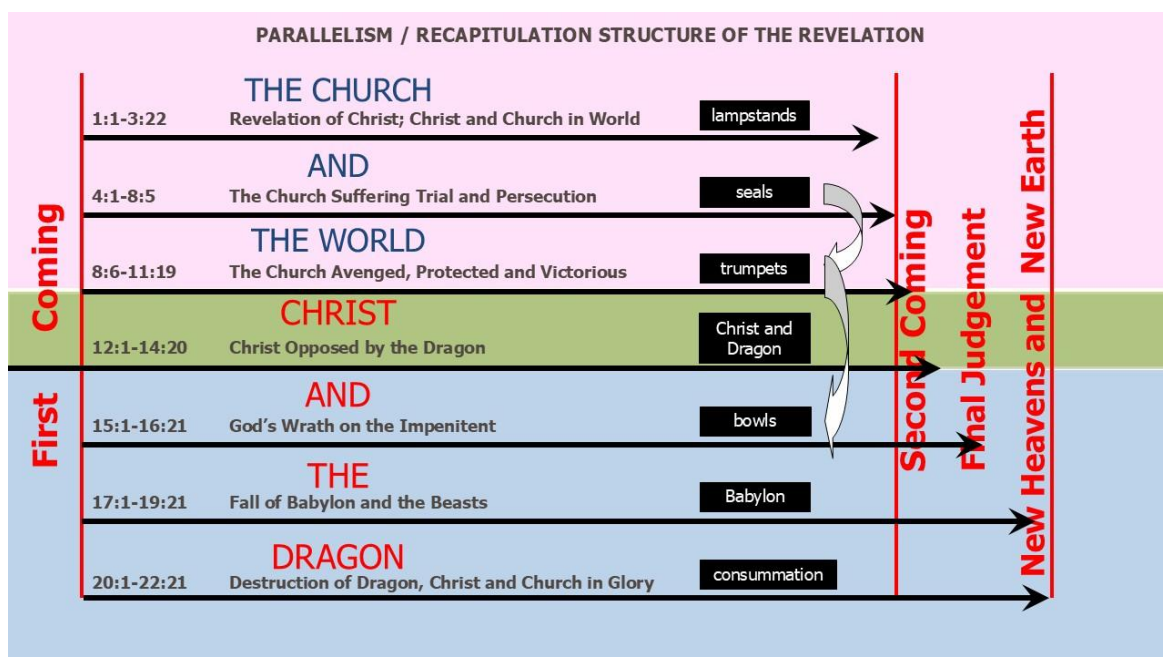
- I: 1 - 11 The Church and the World**
- the Church, indwelt by Christ, persecuted by the world
- II: 12 -22 Christ and the Dragon**
- the Conflict between Christ and the Dragon

These two sections, like the seven, are parallel not sequential. Section 2 reveals the spiritual background to the physical reality of Section 1.

b. Seven Sections

- I: 1:1 - 3:22 The Christ indwelt Church in the world**
- II: 4:1 - 8:5 The Church suffering trial and persecution**
- III: 8:6 - 11:19 The Church avenged, protected and victorious**

- IV: 12:1 - 14:20 Christ opposed by the Dragon**
- V: 15:1 - 16:21 God's Wrath on the impenitent**
- VI: 17:1 - 19:21 The Fall of Babylon and the Beasts**
- VII: 20:1 - 22:21 Destruction of the Dragon, Christ and Church in glory**





Evidence for seeing each of these sections as parallel can be seen in the fact that:

- a. Each section covers the same period of time
e.g. 8 - 11 covers "42 months" or "1,260 days" (11:2-3)
12 - 14 covers "1260 days" or "a time and times and half a time" (12:6,14)
- b. Each section ends (or begins) with the coming of the Lord in judgement
e.g. 15 - 16 "assemble them for battle" (16:14)
17 - 19 "gathered to make war against him" (19:19)
20 - 22 "to gather them for battle" (20:8)
- c. The picture of judgement revealed in the breaking of the sixth seal (6:12-17) is so final that the next sequence of events, from 8:6 onwards, and symbolised in the trumpets must be recapitulating in time.
- d. Similarly, the depiction of a great judgement and the statement that "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15-19), echoed again in 20:12, means that the events in the section that runs from 12:1 – 14:20 must be parallel and not subsequent.

The argument for this seven-fold parallel structure is strong. John, as we have noted, frequently uses the number 7. There are 7 letters to 7 churches (1 - 2), 7 seals (6 - 8), 7 trumpets (8 - 11), 7 plagues (15).

He also frequently arranges his 7s in groups of 3 and 4 or 4 and 3. In this outline of the book, the seven parallel sections are grouped in two sections of 3 and 4. (*See structure in diagrammatic form at end of notes*)

NOTES:

Section 1:
Revelation 1:1 - 3:22 The Christ Indwelt Church in the World The Seven Lampstands

Background to Revelation

According to Revelation 1:9, when he received this revelation from God the Apostle John was on Patmos, a small island in the Aegean Sea, off the western coast of Central Asia. The small volcanic island of Patmos lies about sixty miles off the Asian port of Ephesus and is about 7.5 miles (12 km) long from north to south and at its widest is just 6 miles (10 km) from east to west.

John, probably aged around 90, had been banished here by the Emperor Domitian, probably because he had transgressed Roman law by refusing to worship the emperor. Banishment to Patmos usually carried a life sentence, but John was released after about a year or two under Domitian's successor, who allowed him to return to Ephesus, probably in late AD 96 or early 97. According to Irenaeus, John lived into the reign of the next Emperor and Jerome tells us that he died "worn out by old age ... in the sixty-eighth year after our Lord's passion" (i.e. in AD 98).

These three chapters provide converse sides of the one truth, reinforcing the concept of seeing events from a two-fold perspective:

- ch.1 emphasises Christ in heaven, operating through the Church on earth
- chs. 2-3 emphasise the Church on earth functioning for Christ in heaven

1:1-3 The Prologue

- **v1:** Note the chain of revelation: God – Jesus – angel – John – readers.
- **v2:** cp.1:9; 6:9; 20:4 – "*all that he saw*"; this is a book of visions; not the working out of an argument, but a series of pictures
- **v3:** The first 2 of 8 beatitudes – cp.14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14.
- The "prophecy" of v3 is not a set of predictions but, "in the biblical tradition, a word from God calling for obedient response in the lives of believers." (Greg Beale). This is a necessary reminder to us that prophecy is more about forth-telling than fore-telling and calls for action not speculation.

1:4-8 Greetings

- **v4:** To 7 churches; 7 signifying completeness and perfection; therefore these churches represent the Church.
- Each letter, addressed to an individual church, concludes with an address to all the churches.
- The Holy Spirit is "*the seven spirits...*", a reference to the Holy Spirit in all his fullness.
- **v5-6:** Christological doxology to Christ for his work on the cross.
- **v7:** Draws on two Old Testament texts (Daniel 7:13; Zechariah 12:10; cp Matthew 24:30), with a universal fulfilment and application; repentant Gentiles are now part of true Israel.
- **v8:** "*the Alpha and the Omega*", the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; in all Eastern countries, the first and last letters of alphabets signify the fullness of something, the beginning and the end.

1:9-16 Vision of Christ

- **v9:** John enduring persecution, banished to exile on Patmos, reminds his readers he shares their experience of tribulation.
- **v10:** "*in the Spirit...on the Lord's day*"; the only example of this expression in the New Testament; the day consecrated to the Lord. The phrase was used in Asia Minor of the first day of the week in the early second century; just as there were special days set apart for the Emperor, so Christians set apart a special day for Christ.
- **v11:** John is to write down his revealed messages; a reminder here that apocalyptic literature is primarily literary rather than verbal.
- **v12:** 7 golden lampstands, the main motif of this first section of Revelation, representing the churches (1:20).
- In the Old Testament the lampstand, with 7 branches and lamps, stood in the Holy Place, the light representing the presence of God. Now each of the 7 churches is a lampstand, therefore representing all churches of all time.
- **vv13-15:** Christ among the churches – "*Son of Man*" – both human and divine; as OT priest tended the lamps, so Christ tends the NT lamps.
- "...the entire picture, taken as a whole, is symbolical of Christ, the Holy One, coming to purge His churches (2:16, 18, 23), and to punish those who are persecuting his elect (8:5ff)" (William Hendriksen).
- **v16:** "*seven stars*" (see on v20 for explanation) in Christ's hand; he controls them.
- A sword in his mouth – a symbol of his judicial authority, over the church (2:16) and the world (19:15).



1:17-20 John's Response

- **v17:** Christ is the one in whom everything began and in who it will all come to its conclusion; the language of divine attributes, signifying complete sovereignty of God over human history.
- **v18:** He has the power of life within himself, so death could not hold him and there is no need for his people to be afraid; "*keys of Death and Hades*" - Jesus rules even over death.
- **v20:** 7 stars are the "angels"; the word occurs 79 times in Revelation, everywhere else clearly referring to supernatural messengers, therefore surely must mean the same here, though exactly what that means we can't be sure; an alternative meaning would be the human leaders, pastors of the churches, and the ones to whom each of the letters is addressed.

2:1 – 3:22

The seven churches addressed by John in Revelation 2 - 3 are all located along an important route taking in the most populated and profitable region of the Roman province of Asia. The distance between each city on the Roman road network varies from between 25 and 100 miles; the total circuit covers 350 miles. Geographically, the selected churches lie on an arched shape route which would take the message bearer from south to north to east and south east.

Each letter follows a common pattern:

- "*The words of...*" a self-revelation of Christ, referring to attributes especially relevant for the individual's situation, and often drawn from the vision in 1:12-20.
- "*I know...*" a statement of Christ's knowledge of the church, first, where applicable what is good, then, where applicable, what is wrong.
- An encouragement to persevere or a call to repent with attending blessings and threats.
- "*To the one who conquers...*" a specific and appropriate promise to those who persevere.
- "*He who has an ear...*" a reference to the Holy Spirit as speaking to the churches which is designed to gain the attention of true, spiritually-minded, believers. The expression is based on Isaiah 6:9-10; cp Jeremiah 5:21; Ezekiel 3:27; 12:2.

The letters form a chiasmic structure in the original text:

Ephesus (in serious spiritual trouble)
 Smyrna (proven to be faithful)
 Pergamum (commended but in danger)
 Thyatira (commended but in danger)
 Sardis (commended but in danger)
 Philadelphia (proven to be faithful)
 Laodicea (in serious spiritual trouble)

The significance of this is that the Christian church as a whole is perceived as being in poor condition, since not only are the healthy churches in a minority, but also the literary pattern points to this emphasis, because the churches in the worst condition form the literary boundaries of the letters, and the churches with serious problems form the very core of the presentation. All of the letters deal with the theme of faithfulness to Christ in the midst of an often-threatening pagan culture.

Ephesus (2:1-7) Loyal but Loveless

Ephesus was the largest of the 7 cities to which letters were sent and the Christian church there was possibly the largest of the churches. This was also the church where John himself served as Pastor for many years.

Smyrna (2:8-11) Crushed but Crowned

The shortest of the letters, just 4 verses, is to Smyrna, a city now known as Izmir, which was about 35 miles north of Ephesus and was also a large and prosperous city. Smyrna is one of only two of the seven churches for whom God has no words of condemnation, the other being Philadelphia. The name Smyrna means myrrh, a highly valued spice which, when crushed produced a fragrant perfume and oil which was used in the holy anointing oil for the Tabernacle (Exodus 30:22-33).



Pergamum (2:12-17) Suffering and Seduced

Located 50 miles north of Smyrna, Pergamum was the capital of the province of Asia. Constructed on mountain terraces and surrounded by natural theaters with spectacular views of the valley below, the city was reputed to be one of the most beautiful places in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. A small town called Bergama still stands on the plain below the acropolis of the ancient city.

Thyatira (2:18-28) Good at Loving, Bad at Hating

To Thyatira, the smallest of the seven cities, and situated 38 miles southeast of Bergama (Pergamum) is sent the longest of the seven letters. Present day Akhisar stands on the same site. The first known Christian convert in Europe was a businesswoman from Thyatira named Lydia (Acts 16:14, 15, 40).

Sardis (3:1-6) Reputation without Reality

The letter to Sardis is one of the shortest and simplest of the seven letters. Inland from Smyrna and halfway from the coast to Laodicea, the small village of Sart preserves its name today. Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, which was then conquered, first by the Greeks and then by the Romans. Importantly, for our understanding of the letter, on both occasions, despite the apparently impregnable location of the city, high on a mountain, they were taken by surprise by their enemy; once because they were complacent, and once because the sentry slept. The church in Sardis has a reputation for life but God knows the reality and it is very different. Like the city which had once been glorious and prosperous but was no longer so, the church is in a similar state and was far from flourishing and close to death; the only one of the seven churches so described.

Philadelphia (3:7-13) Little Power, Big Promises

Philadelphia was situated near the upper end of a broad valley that led down through Sardis to the sea near Smyrna. It lay at the threshold of a very fertile tract of plateau country, from which much of its commercial prosperity derived. Philadelphia was renowned for the number of its temples and religious festivals. The city, whose name means *brotherly love*, was founded by Eumenes, king of Pergamum, in the 2nd century and named after his brother Attalus, whose loyalty had earned him the name Philadelphus. There is no word of condemnation for the church in Philadelphia, and as Philadelphus was renowned for his loyalty to his brother, so the church, the true Philadelphia, inherits and fulfils his character by its steadfast loyalty to Christ.

Laodicea (3:14-22) Smug and Sickening

The ruins of the city of Laodicea are on the outskirts of modern Denizli, about 11 miles west of Colosse. In AD 60, a terrible earthquake flattened the prosperous city, but the people of Laodicea refused all offers of financial help, despite large sums being offered by the Roman Senate. It was an important centre of banking and exchange but had a major disadvantage in that it lacked a permanent supply of good water. Water was piped to the city from the hot springs at Hierapolis, some distance away, but these would have been lukewarm by the time they reached Laodicea.

One of the sources of Laodicea's great wealth was a textile industry that was based in both Colosse and Laodicea. One product was a glossy black wool, and the strain of long-haired black sheep bred for the trade were common right up until the 19th century. Laodicea also had a medical school that was famed for developing the Phrygian eye powder which was known throughout the ancient world.

NOTES

Section 2:

Revelation 4:1 - 8:5

The Church Suffering Trial and Persecution

The Seven Seals

Before the terrible conditions on earth are detailed and described, God gives John a vision of the incomparable and eternal majesty of God the Creator and Sovereign. "After this" indicates the completion of the first vision and the commencement of the next. This is the sequential order in which John saw the visions, but not necessarily the historical order of the events they depict.

Chapters 4-5 depict one breath-taking and glorious picture of the universe as seen by and controlled from heaven.

4:1–11 The Throne Room

What he saw (v1)

- "an open door" in heaven, a common image in prophetic writings and visions; "heaven" here refers to the 'dwelling place of God', where he is acknowledged and worshipped as King.

What he heard (v1)

- "the first voice" – the voice of Christ, who calls John, in the vision, to enter heaven and see "what must take place after this".

Where he was (v2)

- John is immediately raptured, caught up by the Spirit of God into the very presence of God; almost certainly a spiritual rather than a physical transportation

What he saw (v2)

v2: The throne is in the centre of the universe, but in heaven, the sphere of God's dwelling, and not on earth.

- Note the repeated use of "like", "had the appearance of" and "as it were"; these visions brought likenesses to mind, meaning that John is saying that what he saw reminded him of something and it should caution us against an over literal interpretation and being overly concerned and fascinated with some of the symbolic imagery.
- The word "throne" occurs 17 times in these two chapters; fifty percent of all occurrences in Revelation as a whole, and the throne is in the true Holy of Holies, clearly based on biblical symbolism.

v3: The one sitting on the throne is God the Father.

v4: 24 thrones surround the throne, occupied by 24 elders, probably signifying the entire church of old and new dispensation – i.e. 12 patriarchs and 12 apostles.

v5: "flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder" – expressing the awesome power and sovereignty of God, with perhaps an echo of Mt Sinai; "seven torches of fire..." – identified as the "seven spirits of God", i.e. the Holy Spirit; "sea of glass" - could have echoes of the bronze sea/laver in Solomon's Temple.

v6-8: "four living creatures" - these are (a) the cherubim one of the highest orders of angelic being, frequently referred to in the Old Testament in connection with God's presence, power and holiness and who guard the holy things of God, (b) the seraphim, as in Isaiah 6.

v9-11: The elders join the living creatures in their worship of him "who lives for ever and ever" - drawn from Daniel and is in contrast to the temporary reign of evil earthly kings; God is also "our Lord and God", similar to the title claimed by the Roman Emperors: "dominus et deus noster".

5:1-14 The Scroll and the Lamb

The unsealing of the scroll represents God's ongoing dealings with mankind, in cycles of war, martyrdom, and judgement which recur throughout history.

v1: The scroll represents God's judgements as revealed in the subsequent chapters; the scroll is full - unusually for those days, and so it catches John's attention – with writing on both sides, and is closed with seven seals.

v2: The "strong angel" is not named, but could refer to Gabriel whose name means 'strength of God'; the angel asks for someone who is worthy or has the authority to open the book and break its seals.

- Roman wills were witnessed and sealed by 7 witnesses, and sometimes the content was summarised in writing on the outside of the document allowing, as in John's vision, individual seals to be opened and its contents revealed one at a time; a trustworthy executor had to be found to put the will into effect.

v3-4: But no-one in the entire universe is worthy and able to do it; this causes great weeping on John's part since if it is not opened God's people will not be rescued and the wicked will not be judged.



- v5:** One of the Elders tells John not to weep because there is one worthy – “*the Lion of the tribe of Judah*”, “*the root of David*”; titles emphasising and affirming Jesus’ Messianic qualifications.
- v6:** The Lion is, in fact, a Lamb, a title used for Christ 28 times in Revelation.
- John sees the Lamb “*as though it had been slain*”; alive but still bearing the marks of crucifixion and death.
 - In true apocalyptic fashion, an ‘ordinary’ symbol is heightened in dramatic intensity - horns signify strength, so 7 horns signify omnipotence; eyes signify knowledge, so 7 eyes signify omniscience, a mark of sovereign deity; seven spirits are a further reference to the Holy Spirit.
- v7:** Christ receives the scroll from the Father, showing his authority and sovereignty.
- v8:** This prompts a great outpouring of praise, this time directed to the Son, just as it had been directed to the Father (4:9-11).
- In the Greek it is only the elders who have the harps and golden bowls, reflecting the Levitical priestly ministry, and the worship is accompanied by incense, representing the prayers of the saints which are precious to God.
- v9-10:** The ‘old song’ praised God for his creation work (4:11); the new song praises the work of redemption.
- Christ’s rule and dominion over the entire universe is a reward for his suffering and death; the redemption is universal in scope, embracing every nation, tribe, people and language.
- v11-14:** The elders and living creatures are joined in their praise by an innumerable number of angels, and then by every creature in the universe.

6:1 – 8:5 The Seven Seals

Although part of the preceding vision, the account of the seven seals also begins a series of three visions - seals (6:1 – 8:5), trumpets (8:6 – 11:19) and bowls (15:5 – 16:21) which are also connected, because the seventh seal *is* the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet *is* the seven bowls.

Note a structure which John will employ in different ways several times in Revelation:

- **Four:** the first four seals are all similar (6:1-8 cp 8:6-12; 16:1-9)
Later there is an interval before the next two judgements (8:13)
- **Two:** then follow two more seals (6:9-17 cp 9:1-21; 16:10-16)
Then there is an interval – a dramatic interlude – in anticipation of the final seal (7:1-17 cp 10:1-11:14)
- **One:** The final seal – which reveals the next cycle of judgements (8:1-5 cp 11:15-19 and 15:5-8; 16:17-21)

As Christ breaks open each of the seals he unleashes a new demonstration of God’s judgement on the earth.

6:1-8 The first four seals belong together, each represented by a horse of a different colour but together symbolising judgement; they represent the universal sequence of conquest, war, famine and death (Ezekiel 14) which are often repeated in history.

- These destructive events are brought about *by* Christ both *for* redemptive and judicial purposes.
- In keeping with the structure of Revelation, the four expressions of judgement occur simultaneously rather than consecutively
- The four horsemen, four representing universality, cover the whole earth and their judgements affect a quarter of the entire world’s population. The divine purpose behind all this tribulation and suffering is to punish unbelievers and purify believers.

The first four seals portray the tribulations on earth from the divine, heavenly, perspective, while the fifth and sixth highlight the human response, with two key questions being asked – 6:10 and 6:17.

6:9-11 The fifth seal reveals the martyrs under the altar, the place where the blood of the Old Testament sacrificial victims was poured out. The reference to their being under the altar is probably to stress partly the sacrificial nature of their suffering, but also their security in the presence of God. The call of the martyrs is not for revenge but for vengeance and justice, no doubt out of jealousy for the honour of God. They cry “*how long?*” and are told it will get worse before it gets better; though God assures them of ultimate vengeance.

6:12-17 The sixth seal. It does seem difficult to understand these verses as referring to anything less than the beginning of the end of the universe as we know it, such is the scale of the disruption being spoken of, e.g. “*every mountain and island*”. This must be the last judgement because we have just been told (6:11) that these things won’t happen until the final number of suffering saints is completed.

These events are heaven's answer to the martyrs' question and now final punishment is being visited on the enemies of God and his people. Everything that can be shaken is being shaken, evidencing the instability of the physical universe, with a description of the complete break-up of the cosmic system. Those under God's judgement cry, "*who can stand?*", i.e. in the face of God's righteous wrath.

7:1-17 No doubt partly for dramatic effect, there is an 'interlude' before the opening of the seventh and final seal. However, the interlude serves its own important purpose in that provides the immediate answer to the second question, voiced in 6:17. The answer is: those who can stand are those who are sealed.

There are actually two visions in this interlude

- 7:1-8, prefaced with, "*After this I saw*"
- 7:9-17, prefaced with "*After this I looked*"

These two visions explain how believers will be kept safe during the tribulations of the church age.

7:1-8 Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth, i.e. the whole earth. Their task is to temporarily prevent the horsemen going about their business until "*the servants of our God*" have been sealed. The true servants of God are sealed with a mark, almost certainly the name of God on their foreheads, marking them as safe from the judgement. This mark is in contrast to, but the equivalent of, the mark of the beast given to unbelievers. Believers, who at the moment of conversion become identified with Christ and are given his name, are given power not to deny his name and to persevere through the final tribulation, where Christ's revelation of God's name to believers means that they now share in God's protective presence. They are enabled to resist the harlot and refuse the mark of the beast and, though they may suffer and even die in the process, they cannot lose their spiritual lives or salvation.

Who are the 144,000 of 7:4-8?

I take this to be a symbolic number indicating the true church of all time. If Satan puts his mark of ownership on *all* his followers, as we will see (13:6-7; 14:9-11), surely God does the same. The context of this passage links it to 5:9 where the Lamb is said to have purchased believers from every nation, language, people and nation, and in 14:3-4, the 144,000 – surely the same company – are described as being purchased "*from the earth*" and "*from mankind*".

144,000 is the sum of completeness. In 21:13-14 the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles together form the foundational structure of the new Jerusalem. 12 times 12 equals 144 which, multiplied by the largest number then known, the equivalent of infinity, indicates completeness.

Notice, too, that John doesn't **see** the 144,000, he **hears** the number of them (v4). He sees the "*four angels*" and "*another angel*" but "*heard the number*". That will help us as we take a look at the second vision in this interlude.

7:9-17 Who are "*the multitude that no one could number*"?

They have to be the 144,000, previously sealed on earth but now glorified in heaven. Having **heard** the number of 144,000, John now **sees** the crowd. This great multitude cannot be counted because they are the promised, innumerable seed of Abraham. They are no longer on earth but in the throne room of heaven, having persevered and proved faithful throughout the tribulation.

An elder reveals their identity to John as those who have come out of "*the great tribulation*", with a definite article, clearly referring to Daniel's prophecy (12:1). As in Daniel's view (11:30-39, 44; 12:10), the believers are persecuted for their faithfulness to God, although some fall away – as in some of the seven churches of Asia – and the tribulation continues throughout the age of the Church.

8:1-5 The opening of the seventh seal is a moment of high drama with a dramatic silence. Heaven is in awestruck silence, anticipating the completion of God's purposes. Often in the Old Testament, silence is associated with judgement, with silence being ordered before the executing of divine judgement.



In v2 we are introduced to seven angels who may be the seven angels associated with the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. They herald a new cycle of judgements, but that is not recorded until v6. Verses 3-5 form a bridge concluding the judgements of the seals and introducing the judgements of the trumpets.

Another angel appears and stands at the altar, holding a golden censer. This is the same altar as in 6:9. To this angel is given, i.e. by God, "*much incense*" to add to the prayers of the saints. From the altar, the smoke goes up with the prayers of the saints, incense always accompanying worship. The now emptied censer is filled with fire from the altar which is thrown on earth for judgement, because God has heard the cries of his people, and his judgements are his answer, leading to the next section which describes the nature of the judgements, as symbolised by the seven trumpets, which parallel 6:12-17.

Therefore, as 6:12-17 ushered in the last great judgement of God, so 8:6 onwards, and the seven trumpets, takes us back to the build up to that climactic event. There can't be another last great judgement. What follows has to be another take on the same event.

What has become clear is the parallel, or recapitulation, structure of Revelation.

- Revelation 1 - 3 gave us an overview of the entire church age, first, in ch.1, from the perspective of heaven, with the vision of the glorified Saviour, and then, in chs 2 - 3 from the perspective of the local church on earth.
- Revelation 4:1 – 8:5 gives us the same time span, first, in chs 4 - 5, from the throne room, and then, in chs 6:1 - 8:5 with the vision of the outpourings of God's judgements on earth, culminating in the final judgement at the end of time.
- The opening of the seventh seal (8:1-2) reveals the seven angels with trumpets who are the instruments of the next cycle of judgements; so the seventh seal *is* the seven trumpets and, as we shall later see, the seventh trumpet *is* the seven bowls, the third cycle of judgements.

NOTES

Section 3:
Revelation 8:6 – 11:19 The Church Avenged, Protected and Victorious The Seven Trumpets

The breaking of the seventh seal (8:1-2) reveals the next cycle of judgements – the seven trumpets. As with the seven seals of chapters 6 - 8, the seven trumpets reveal the partial, ongoing judgements of God which serve as warnings of the final great judgement (ch 20). The trumpets are of greater intensity (“*a third*”) than the seals (“*a fourth*”), but not as destructive as the final bowls of judgement will be.

8:6-12 The First Four Trumpets

The first four trumpets herald disastrous judgements, pictured as great natural catastrophes being used by God. They are partial, since only a third of the earth are affected.

8:7 1st trumpet: hail and fire mixed with blood, signifying disasters on the land.

8:8-9 2nd trumpet: burning mountain thrown into sea; sea becomes blood, signifying disasters at sea.

8:10-11 3rd trumpet: wormwood pollutes the rivers and springs, signifying disasters in inland waters.

8:12 4th trumpet: a third of the sun, moon and stars darkened, signifying disruption in the heavenly bodies which will have major effects on the earth.

8:13 Interlude: The Eagle

The purpose of the literary division and the vision is to highlight the harsher aspect of the remaining trumpets and to heighten the sense of anticipation. John sees an eagle, a bird of prey, which issues a warning that the last three judgements will be worse than the first four, partly because they are spiritual by nature rather than physical and involve the direct activity of demonic forces.

9:1-21 The Fifth and Sixth Trumpets

The fifth and sixth judgements, now called “*woes*”, lay the basis for the seventh and final judgement. They directly target the unbelieving wicked who did not repent in the wake of the first judgements and the torment they experience foreshadows their final and eternal torment.

9:1-12 The fifth trumpet - demonic forces unleashed upon the earth.

- The most natural, and consistently biblical interpretation of the “*star fallen from heaven to earth*” is that it speaks of Satan, who is also called here “*king over them*”, “*the angel of the bottomless pit*”, “*Abaddon*” meaning destruction, and “*Apollyon*” meaning destroyer.
- Satan is given the key to “*the shaft of the bottomless pit*” or “*abyss*”, literally meaning *without depth*, i.e., *boundless* or *bottomless* and in Romans 10:7 it is a reference to the abode of the dead.
- The abyss is the origin of the beast and the place of Satan’s temporary incarceration, while here it appears to be the realm of the demonic hosts.
- Satan is given power to unleash evil on the world.
- John stresses the sovereignty of God, even over the demonic forces, in that Satan is *given* the key.
- Demonic-like creatures, portrayed as locusts, emerge from the pit and are given power to torment but not to kill unbelievers, though such is their suffering that those afflicted would prefer death.
- The torment they inflict is likened to that of a scorpion when it stings a man, and the word *torment* is used in Revelation for spiritual, emotional, or psychological pain and for the pain or torment of eternal punishment, and it is this meaning that perhaps best explains v6.
- They will afflict everyone except those protected by the seal, and “*...five months*” is the usual life cycle of a locust, but is probably used symbolically here to indicate a sovereignly imposed time limit on their activity.

9:13-21 The sixth trumpet

- An order comes from the golden altar, so it is probably the voice of Christ, and once again John is stressing the sovereign control of God over all these events; they happen at his word and on his authority; it also reminds us that wickedness is not only allowed by God but it is also restrained by God.
- The timing is very precise to emphasise God’s sovereign control.

- The number of these demonic horsemen is immense and, surely, symbolic; literally “double myriad of myriads”; “myriad”(Greek = myrias = ten thousand) is an innumerable multitude, similar to our infinity and, unless prefaced by a numerical adjective, it always means a vast, innumerable number.
- They wage war against humankind, killing a third of them.
- The graphic, hideous, descriptions underlines the ferocious and demonic nature of these creatures.
- Rather than being softened by these partial judgements which are warnings of worse to come, unbelievers remain unrepentant, continuing in their practice of idolatry and related sins.

10:1 - 11:14 Interlude: Two Visions

Following John’s structure, after the group of four and the group of two there is an interlude of two visions, as there was in chapter 7; the effect is to emphasise the importance of the 7th trumpet.

10:1-11 The Angel and the Scroll

The angel is Christ or a ‘special envoy’, while the scroll contains prophecies of worldwide significance.

- We might consider this a New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Christophanies, appearances of “the angel of the LORD”.
- The mighty angel holds a “*little scroll open in his hand*” which John eats (vv9-10) and then prophecies from (v11), and it concerns “*many peoples and nations and languages and kings*” (v11); a formula that will be used in subsequent chapters for multitudes who undergo judgement.
- There are many similarities between this scroll and the scroll in chapter 5, and it is reasonable to come to the conclusion that they are one and the same.
- John hears a loud cry and sound of “*the seven thunders*”, which are often indicators of judgement.
- The mighty angel stands with one foot on the land and one on the sea, demonstrating God’s sovereignty over, and ownership of, both because his message is for the whole universe.
- John is commanded to eat the scroll, symbolising his reception of God’s Word into his deepest being; it is both bitter in the stomach and sweet in the mouth, meaning the sweetness of God’s Word and the bitterness of judgement.

11:2-3 42 months / 1260 days

Before we look at John’s second interlude vision that precedes the seventh trumpet, we need to give some thought to the repeated time references of “*42 months*” (11:2; 13:5), “*1,260 days*”(11:3; 12:6) and “*a time, and times, and half a time*”(12:14). Our conclusion about this will affect how we interpret some of the key aspects of the rest of the Revelation. The background of this timeframe lies in Daniel 7:25; 12:7,11-12. Forty-two also became symbolic for periods of judgement, as during Elijah’s ministry (cp Luke 4:25; James 5:17).

My view is that the most biblically consistent and logical interpretation is that these three time references all refer to the one period of time and are intended to symbolise an indefinite period of time that spans the entire age of the Church, from the resurrection and Pentecost until the second coming of Christ.

11:1-14 The Two Witnesses

This chapter is generally the subject of more interpretive disagreements than any other in the book of Revelation. It is also one of the more important chapters in determining the overall purpose of the book. Having had his prophetic commission renewed in chapter 10, the focus in chapter 11 shifts to the prophetic message John is charged with. It is a message of judgement on those who reject the persevering witness of believers and who persecute them. The judgement is the first explicit answer to the saints’ prayer for vindication (6:10).

11:1-2 The Measuring of the Temple

The measured temple represents the protection and ‘sealing’ of the true Church, comprised of regenerate believers. God knows the precise number. The unmeasured outside court and the holy city refer to visible but unregenerate church members.

11:3-14 The Two Witnesses

For a period of time equal to the trampling of Jerusalem, two witnesses clothed in sackcloth will prophesy. While some see this as subsequent to the period of the trampling the most natural sense is that it is the same period of time that is being referred to and these things are occurring simultaneously. This is also the same period of time of the preservation of the woman pursued by the dragon (12:6, 14) and of the continuing blasphemies of the beast (13:5).

My view is that they symbolise the Church in its missionary and prophetic role throughout the entire Church age. "If the seven lampstands [in 1:20] are churches, so must be the two lampstands. But it would be better to say that, if the seven lampstands are representative of the whole church, since seven is the number of completeness, the two lampstands stand for the church in its role of witness, according to the well-known biblical requirement that evidence be accepted only on the testimony of two witnesses. They are not part of the church, but the whole church, insofar as it fulfils its role as faithful witness" (R Bauckham).

They are protected from "*harm*" (v5) as a result of their having been "*measured*" (v1); they may undergo bodily, economic, political, or social harm, but their eternal covenant status with God will not be affected. Though they may suffer and even die, they will invincibly and successfully carry out the spiritual mission for which they have been "*measured*" and commissioned.

When the ministry of the witnesses is complete, they will be killed by "*the beast that rises from the bottomless pit*" (v7). This is the first of 36 references to the beast in Revelation, and we will consider its identity when we get to chapter 13.

- Taking the 1,260 days as signifying the entire Church age, what is being described here clearly indicates that these events take place at the end of history; the picture is of saints being killed and the Church suffering such intense opposition that it even appears to have been destroyed, as a result of which the world gloats.
- It will appear as if the public and official witness of the Church has been smothered; the previous influence of the Church will have diminished and be treated with indignity, which is surely the point of their bodies being left unburied (vv8-9).
- In the Greek, the first occurrence of "*their dead bodies*" (vv8-9) is actually in the singular – "*the body*"; again confirming that they represent one collective body, the Church.
- On every other occasion in Revelation "*the great city*" (v8) refers to Babylon which came to represent the world in rebellion against God.
- The apparent demise of the Church will captivate the attention of the unbelieving world, but only for a brief season (v10).
- The supposed victory of the beast and its followers is brief and insignificant in comparison to the victorious testimony of the witnesses.
- The happiness and merriment of the earth-dwellers in v10 is due to their belief that the message of the Church, which brought them so much discomfort and emotional anguish, has been silenced.
- The rejoicing of the world will, however, prove to have been premature for the witnesses / Church will be revived and restored and taken to glory (vv11-12).
- The witnesses' testimony is vindicated, both by their own resurrection but also by the destruction of their enemies
- Four events happen (v13):
 - i. "*a great earthquake*" - the beginning of the last judgement as in the sixth seal and the seventh bowl
 - ii. "*a tenth of the city fell*"
 - iii. "*7,000 people were killed*"
 - iv. "*the rest were terrified and gave glory*" - while this could mean mass repentance and conversion, the word terrified is never used that way in Scripture and refers to the human emotion of dread and fear

11:15-19 The Seventh Trumpet

Just as the seventh seal revealed the seven trumpets of judgement, so the seventh trumpet reveals the seven bowls of final judgement. "*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*".

This trumpet heralds the final consummation of the reign of God and pictures a scene in heaven after the judgement, revealing what the judgement signifies for the rebellious world and for Christ's own people.

- John uses the past tense here, taking us into future when the kingdom *has been* established and heaven's praise resounds in response, with echoes of the visions of chs.4 – 5.
- Note the change in designation of the Lord (v17) – "*who is and who was*" but is no longer the one who is to come for he has come at this stage.
- From the temple comes lightning, thunder and an earthquake; always indicators in Revelation of the final judgement.



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Notes

Section 4:

Revelation 12:1 – 14:20

Christ Opposed by the Dragon

Christ and the Dragon

Having described the seven trumpet judgments, but before explaining the seven bowls, John inserts three parenthetical chapters (12 - 14). These three chapters move us into the second main division of the book and are absolutely pivotal, not only in the structure of The Revelation but in helping us makes sense of all that has gone before and all that is still to come.

The visions of ch.12 provide the theological key for the entire book showing Satan's frustrated attempts to thwart the eternal purposes of God by destroying the promised Son who will come and destroy all the works of the Devil and establish God's Kingdom. At the heart of its message is that, although Satan is the principal source of the persecution of God's people, he has been decisively defeated by Christ, a victory in which we now share even in the midst of suffering and martyrdom.

The Structure of the Passage

The chapter consists of three scenes: 12:1-6, 12:7-12 and 12:13-17. These three sections are thematically parallel in that they tell the same story over again but as seen from different perspectives. The first and third of these each portrays the conflict between Satan and God's people together with the sovereign spiritual protection of the latter. The middle section provides the central interpretation and theological underpinning of the first and third. The overall emphasis is on the protection of God's people, despite their suffering, based on Christ's victory over Satan on the cross.

12:1-6 The Woman, her Child, and the Dragon

vv1-2 The most probable interpretation is that the woman symbolizes what we might call the believing messianic community; both OT Israel and NT Church. Later in the chapter we read that when the woman is persecuted she flees into the wilderness and has other children who are described as faithful Christians. In other words, the woman is both the community of faith that produced the Messiah and the community of faith that subsequently follows and obeys him. John clearly envisioned an organic and spiritual continuity between OT Israel and the Church. They are one body of believers.

vv3-4 John then sees another "sign" in heaven: a great red dragon with seven heads, seven diadems, and ten horns. The word dragon is used in the OT for the evil sea monster that symbolizes kingdoms that oppose and oppress Israel, especially Egypt and Pharaoh. But here the dragon is more than an evil kingdom. It stands for Satan (v9), the one who both represents and energizes all individual and corporate opposition to the kingdom and persecution of the people of God.

The picture of the dragon sweeping away one-third of the stars of heaven is believed by many to refer to the proportion of angels who originally fell with Satan. However, since this is almost certainly an allusion to Daniel 8:10, 24 and 12:3, the stars here more likely represent the faithful covenant community being persecuted, and must, in some way, be linked with v1.

vv4-6 The dragon is determined to kill the woman's child, the Messiah at birth. Clearly Herod's slaughter of the infants is in view, as are all the attempts to thwart Jesus' ministry and redemptive work on the cross, not to mention the Old Testament accounts of opposition to the people of God, since if Israel could be wiped out, the Messiah could not come. Without doubt, the male child is Christ and in one verse his entire life and ministry is viewed. The deliverance, being "caught up to God", points to his resurrection and ascension.

12:7-12 War in Heaven

As a result of Christ's victorious work on the cross Satan is cast out of heaven in the sense that he is now no longer able to accuse the brethren before the throne of God. However, he continues to do so on earth. Satan's sphere of activity appears to have been curtailed because of Christ's death and resurrection. cp Colossians 2:15



It has sometimes been thought that what was in view here was the judgement on Satan at the time of his initial rebellion in heaven, and without totally ruling out that possibility, it seems from the context here that a further degree of judgement occasioned by Christ's atoning death and resurrection is the more likely. Notice, for example, that Satan himself realises that his activities have been further curtailed (12:13).

It would seem, for example from the account of Job, that after his judgement at the beginning of time, in some sense Satan still had access to God in the heavenly places, hence his opportunity to accuse Job to God (cp Revelation 12:10). Now that privilege has been withdrawn and he is able to operate only in the earthly and spiritual realm and not in heaven, as in the dwelling place of God. This further judgement was apparently foreseen by Christ when he heard the reports of the seventy-two evangelists (Luke 10:17-18) and when he spoke of the effects of his own forthcoming death (John 12:31-33).

- The war in heaven between Michael and the dragon would therefore appear to be the heavenly backdrop and counterpart to the war being fought on earth between Christ and his enemies.
- Michael and his angels are given the task of expelling Satan consequent to the victory of Jesus at the time of his first coming.
- Satan's power was broken through what happened on the cross so that he can no longer successfully bring accusations against God's people. Prior to the cross the accusations and slander of Satan had legal force, for the sin of those against whom he spoke had not been fully dealt with. But now, because of the cross, "*there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1).
- Satan's ongoing accusatory work is now countered by the ongoing and effective intercessory ministry of Jesus.
- Satan is described here not only as "*the great dragon*", but also as the "*serpent*", the "*devil*" (*diabolos* - used 34 times in Scripture and means *slanderer* or *accuser*), "*Satan*" (*satanas* - used 52 times in Scripture and means *adversary* or *the one who opposes*), "*the deceiver of the whole world*" and "*the accuser of our brothers*".
- The heavens and its hosts are called on to share in the rejoicing over the defeat of Satan, since they will no longer be affected by him, but the earth is warned of his continuing destructive work, fuelled by his awareness of impending, final, defeat.

12:13-17 The Woman in the Wilderness

These verses pick up where vv. 6 and 12 leave off. Failing to destroy the "*child*" (Jesus), Satan turns his destructive attention to the "*woman*", i.e., the people of God, the church. The devil, having failed to destroy Christ, now seeks to destroy his followers. Unable to destroy the church as a whole, he makes war on individual believers. Through all of this, God protects his people.

- The devil's persecution of the church is described in the vivid imagery of water pouring forth from the serpent's mouth in an effort to drown the woman.
- By opening the earth to swallow the opposition, God is symbolically portrayed as saving the church from such dangers, just as he preserved Israel from apostasy.
- The point of the imagery is to remind us that no matter how grim may be the prospect, the persecution of the church by Satan will never ultimately prevail.

13:1-18 The Two Beasts

It would appear that Revelation 13 is concurrent with 12:6, 13-17 and explains in more detail the precise nature and extent of the dragon's (Satan's) persecution of the people of God. This chapter describes, once again from the earthly perspective, the political, economic and individual powers of the earth through which Satan works to harass and oppose God's people, collectively and individually, despite his defeat (12:7-12).

13:1-11 The Beast from the Sea

The first beast is the any governmental system at any time that opposes the kingdom of God. By combining the characteristics of Daniel's four beasts (7:1-7), this vision seems to indicate all antichristian governments.

a. Its Description

- It is explicitly stated that the beast from the sea receives "*his power and his throne and great authority*" from the dragon of Revelation 12 (13:2).
- The "*blasphemous names*" on his seven heads probably represent the beast's arrogant claims to divinity/deity.
- John sees the beast with a wound on one of his heads. The word translated *wound* is used 11 times in Revelation and refers to the *plagues* that God inflicts on an unbelieving world. This would therefore suggest that God is the one who strikes this blow in judgment against the beast. Compare 13:14 with Isaiah 27:1.

- Accepting a figurative interpretation, John appears to portray the beast as an imitation or satanic parody of Christ - both were slain and rise to new life, both have followers with their names written on their foreheads, both have horns, both have swords, both are given authority – the dragon (Satan) gives the beast his power, throne and authority, while the Father gives to the Lamb all authority and a place on his throne, both have authority over “*every tribe and people and language and nation*”, both receive worldwide worship, both have a final coming, though one to destruction and the other to eternal victory.
- The dragon is so convincing at making his defeat appear as victory that the whole earth is amazed and give it and the beast their allegiance, mockingly using words speaking of the incomparability of God.

b. Its Identity

- Most evangelicals today, especially those who embrace the futurist perspective on Revelation, refer to the beast as the eschatological or end-time Antichrist, a literal human being who will deceive the world and persecute the church during the closing few years preceding the second advent of Jesus. He is also generally identified with “*the man of lawlessness*” who Paul describes in language very similar to Daniel.
- It has to be said that nowhere in Revelation is the beast ever called *antichrist* and the only place in the New Testament where the word *antichrist* appears is in John’s first letter, not in Revelation.
- The issue of the identity of the beast is affected to some degree by the reference to the duration of its reign, since the beast is said to make war with the saints for a period of 42 months, a variation of 1,260 days and of “*a time, times, half a time.*”
- If these all refer to the entirety of the present church age, the beast cannot be merely an individual living at the end of human history, but rather a symbol for the system of Satanically inspired evil and opposition to the kingdom of God - whether political, economic, military, social, philosophical, or religious.

c. Its Activity

The beast is given authority over all unbelievers and it wages war against Christians, all the time uttering blasphemies.

- In New Testament times, blasphemy was defined as making oneself equal to God and claiming to have the authority to forgive sin
- The multitudes throughout the earth who worship the beast do so because their names have not been written in the book of life, even before the foundation of the world; they are deceived into worshipping him because they do not have the eternal life-giving protection granted those whose names are in the book.
- The beast will be allowed by God to massacre many believers, and God’s people are called to endure to the end since their suffering is part of God’s sovereign purpose and plan and under his control.
- 13:10 is a paraphrase combining Jeremiah 15:2 and 43:11. John’s point is that believers are not to offer physical or violent resistance to their persecutors but are to faithfully submit to whatever destiny awaits them as they persevere in their trust in Jesus.

13:11–18 The Beast from the Land

This is false religion in whatever forms it manifests itself; it is a figurative portrayal of the presence and influence of false teachers, particularly false prophets, throughout the course of church history. This earth-beast is later called “*the false prophet*” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), and together with the dragon and the sea-beast forms the unholy trinity of the abyss.

a. Its Description

- John sees a second beast appear, this time out of the land, and this also seems to be something of a parody of the Messianic Lamb, though with two horns, unlike the Lamb which has seven.
- While this second beast may not have been as ferocious as the first, its apparently innocuous appearance proves to be misleading.

b. Its Identity

- Later in Revelation (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), this beast is identified as “*the false prophet*”, symbolising false teachers and prophets who infiltrate the church, claiming to be mouthpieces of God but who are actually emissaries of Satan himself.

c. Its Activity

- Like the first beast, this one is given the full authority of the dragon.
- The aim of false prophets is to mislead the people of God, to divert their devotion from Jesus to idols.

- All the followers of this beast are “*marked*”; the word was used for the Emperor’s seal on business contracts and for the impress of the Roman ruler’s head on coins.
- There was also an ancient practice of branding or tattooing, on the one hand, disobedient slaves or soldiers, and on the other loyal devotees of gods.
- So, whatever the nature of the mark, its significance is that it gives, as it were, the ‘stamp of approval’ to the followers of the beast.
- Those not submitting to receiving the mark are unable to buy or sell, when economic measures are directed against Christians.
- This mark is the Satanic opposite of the seal given to all true believers and is almost certainly therefore invisible and figurative.

d. Its Mark – The Number of the beast (13:18)

The meaning of the number 666 has puzzled and fascinated students of the Scriptures almost since the day John first wrote 13:8. Without explaining all the various, and often fanciful interpretations, each digit in the number 666 falls short of the symbolic number of perfection, so this is the number of a man, since 666 symbolises imperfection.

Triple sixes are merely a contrast with the divine sevens in Revelation and signify incompleteness and imperfection. 777 is the number of deity and 666 falls short in every digit. The number is not intended to *identify* the beast, rather to *describe* it, referring to its character.

14:1-20 The Lamb and the 144,000

As the current cycle of visions comes to a conclusion, a stark and welcome contrast is provided by the next scene John describes. After two chapters focussing on the persecution of believers by Satan and his two allies, now we are shown the final reward of the persecuted faithful and the final punishment of the beast and those who follow him.

As with the previous cycles, the drama builds up and moves forward to the final defeat of Satan and the final victory of the Lamb.

14:1-5 The 144,000

The 144,000 are the same company as in Revelation 7, now providing a reassurance that all those on whom God has placed his seal will be saved. As “*firstfruits*”, they are an offering to God.

- John sees Jesus standing on Mount Zion, in a forceful contrast with his vision of the dragon, Satan, standing on the shifting sands of the seashore.
- With the Lamb are the 144,000, who are surely the same group described in 7:1ff since, in both cases, it is said that they received the seal of God on their foreheads, and they were purchased for God from the earth and from among men.
- Additionally, these 144,000 are called the “*servants*” (*douloi*) of God, and whenever the word is used in Revelation it refers to the entire community of the redeemed.

14:6-13 The Three Angels

Three angels are commissioned to warn mankind about the coming final judgement which will come on those who throw their lot in with Satan and his agents, the two beasts.

The first angel (vv6-7): Opinions are divided over whether this is the gospel of salvation, calling on sinful mankind to repent before it is too late, or a special message to be delivered just before the end time.

The second angel (v8): Babylon is a symbol for human society organised against God. This is the first mention of Babylon, which had come to symbolise the pride of man since Genesis 11. The language in this text is drawn from Isaiah 21:9, and the repetition of the verb fallen is probably intended for emphasis, to highlight the certainty of Babylon’s judgment. The judgements that will be detailed in ch.18, are described here, in the past tense, paralleling that cycle of visions.

The third angel (vv9-13): Nowhere in Scripture is there a more graphic or vivid depiction of the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment. The imagery is drawn from the judgement of Edom in Isaiah 34:9-10.

a. The nature of the punishment

- i. Those who “*drink of the wine of the passion of her (Babylon’s) sexual immorality*”(14:8) will, appropriately, be forced to “*drink of the wine of God’s wrath*”(14:10), i.e. the wine which is his wrath.
- ii. They will be “*tormented with fire and sulphur*”(14:10). The combination of fire and brimstone (or sulphur) as a means of torment occurs four times in Revelation, and, while the nature of the *torment* is primarily spiritual and psychological, the addition of fire and sulphur to the imagery adds a physical dimension and makes it exceedingly intense.
- iii. Their suffering takes place in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. Those who have denied the Lamb will be forced to acknowledge him as they are being punished in his presence.

b. The duration of the punishment

- i. The “*smoke of their torment*”, that is of the fire and sulphur, “*goes up forever and ever*”, literally “unto the ages of the ages”. The picture is one of a perpetual and unending smouldering testimony to the consequences of sin and the justice of God’s wrath.
- ii. In addition, “*they have no rest, day or night*”. In 4:8 the same terminology occurs with regard to the duration of worship on the part of the four living creatures.
- iii. The reference is clearly to hell, elsewhere called the lake of fire, the torment of which is unbearable, ceaseless and eternal.

“Had John wished to convey the impression that the punishment of the wicked was only of limited duration, he could hardly have chosen a more misleading phrase to describe it.” (G B Wilson)

14:14-20 The Harvest of the Earth

This is the third picture of the final judgement at Christ’s coming (cp 6:12-17; 11:15-18). There is a lack of agreement as to the nature of the first reaping, though all agree that the second relates to the judgement of the wicked.

v14: “*one like a son of man*” - the descriptive language fits most accurately with Christ

14:15-16 The First Reaping

Some see this as a redemptive reaping, while others see it as a reaping for judgement. My own preference is for the redemptive interpretation because there is no reference here to the metaphors of threshing and winnowing which are common biblical images of judgment, and, apart from anything else, there appears in John’s relating of these visions, a clear distinction between the two harvests, the second one clearly being for judgement and related at much greater length and in much more detail.

14:17-20 The Second Reaping

There appears to be no disagreement over the nature of this second reaping and, given the biblical language, that is hardly surprising.

- The image of treading a wine press is, without exception, a metaphor of divine judgment in the Bible.
- In the only other occurrence of the image in Revelation (19:15), it also refers to judgment.
- The wine press was trodden “*outside the city*”, almost certainly a reference to the holy city, since that is the way the term is used some 15 times in Revelation, and this may be considered a form of poetic justice since Jesus himself was executed outside of Jerusalem.
- The language of blood rising “*as high as a horses’ bridle*” is often used in ancient sources of the last battle in which sinners will destroy one another on an unprecedented scale, and so should not be taken in some physically literal way.
- It is possible that the measurement of “*1,600 stadia*” has some symbolic importance, since 1,600 is the square of the familiar biblical number forty, which is the number of judgment in the OT.
- The overall picture is of a slaughter so great, as it were, as to produce a lake or sea of blood; that the enemies of the church would be completely and finally overthrown, and that the church, therefore, delivered from all its enemies, would be triumphant.

NOTES

Section 5:

Revelation 15:1 – 16:21

God's Wrath on the Impenitent

The Bowls

As he has done before, John again uses the stylistic device known as interlocking, as he begins this next section of the book. In 15:1 he introduces the seven bowl judgments, then changes subject in 15:2-4, looking backwards, before returning to the bowls in 15:5-8. The effect of this is to conclude the preceding section and introduce the subsequent one, with the intervening paragraph serving as a parenthetical transition. This is how he also began the vision of the seven trumpets in chapter 8.

15:1 The 'last' plagues

John once again sees seven angels, (cp 8:2), this time with "*seven plagues*" which, as we will see are the seven bowls of judgement. These are either the last judgement acts in history, i.e. at the end of time, or they are final, in the sense that God's patience with unrepentant sinners is now exhausted.

15:2-4 The song of Moses and the song of the Lamb

The scene here is clearly the throne room of heaven as John, as it were, looks back to the theme of final judgment in 14:14-20, portraying the defeat of the beast which the victorious and vindicated saints now celebrate in song. They sing either one song or two, depending on how the original language is interpreted. Either way, Moses' victory is a foreshadowing of Christ's victory and the words of the song(s) are drawn from various parts of the Old Testament.

15:5-8 The seven angels, bowls and plagues

- John sees "*the sanctuary of the tent of witness*" open, establishing a direct connection between the heavenly temple and its Old Testament, wilderness foreshadow. It's being filled with smoke prior to the outpouring of the bowls surely draws on the times when the Shekinah glory of old filled the tabernacle so that no-one could enter or minister there.
- Now, no-one can enter, the meaning probably being that no-one can intercede with God in order to turn away his wrath and also that until the plagues are over, God's presence is not endurable.
- Since the angels come from the sanctuary, and therefore from the presence of God, we are being reminded that they are under divine orders and have been commissioned by God to execute the judgements that are to come.

16:1-21 The seven bowls

There are clear similarities between the seven bowls and the seven trumpets. In some respects, what the trumpets unleash is described in figurative language whereas the effect of the bowls is stated much more plainly.

The trumpets and the bowls present the judgements or plagues in the same sequence: earth, seas, inland waters, sun, the realm of the wicked and the whole world in the final judgement, and this similarity and parallelism is due to the fact that both sequences are modelled on the plagues of Egypt. On the other hand, whereas each of the trumpets affected a third of whatever they touched, the bowls produce complete ruin and destruction. The former were intended as warnings, the latter are final punishments.

16:1-2 The first bowl

- With the first bowl, the earth and its inhabitants who worship the beast are afflicted with sores; literally a wound producing a discharge, a sore or an ulcer.

16:3 The second bowl

- With the pouring out of the second bowl, the sea again becomes blood, but now *everything* dies, indicating the full, or universal, expression of this judgment. As with the second trumpet, this results in great suffering because of famine conditions and economic deprivation.

16:4-7 The third bowl

- With the third bowl, the rivers, springs, and waters are affected, this time without limitation. People die from drinking and there is a direct reference to the deserved nature of the retribution against the enemies of God.

16:8-9 The fourth bowl

- With the fourth bowl, as with the fourth trumpet, the sun is the focal point, but now, instead of bringing darkness a worse judgment is inflicted, people are scorched.

16:10-11 The fifth bowl

- The judgements of the fifth bowl are poured out "*on the throne of the beast*", i.e. on his sovereignty; described in this way because, in 13:2, Satan is said to have given the beast his throne.



- A symbolic interpretation of the darkness is necessary, since literal darkness of itself cannot account for the intense pain that leads to the gnawing of their tongues. This pain could well include both emotional as well as physical anguish, the former in particular being the result of their experience of spiritual darkness and the realisation of their separation from God.
- Once again, despite the severity of the judgement, there was no repentance of the sins that brought it.

16:12-16 The sixth bowl

- With the sixth bowl the great river Euphrates is dried up and three demonic spirits gather the people for the final battle, Armageddon.
- We need to take care not to read this or indeed any of the Scriptures through western eyes and mindsets, but from the perspective and thought patterns of the original middle eastern readers. A strong feature of Old Testament prophetic literature is to use the imagery of geographical and astronomical upheaval to convey a spiritual and theological message.
- There are three geographical references here which we need to note and interpret carefully and biblically. We believe all these geographical references are meant to be taken figuratively, for the following reasons:
 - **Babylon** cannot be the literal Babylon of the Old Testament because there are numerous Old Testament prophecies which said that Babylon, destroyed by God in judgement in the latter days of the Old Testament, "*will be desolate forever*" and "*not rise again*".
 - The **Euphrates** was, of course, linked with Babylon of old, but also became a shorthand term for "*many waters*", "*sea*", "*river*" etc which occur frequently in Revelation in association with the dragon the beast and their followers, and especially with the Babylonian harlot who "*sits on many waters*".
 - Since Babylon cannot be understood literally, then neither can the Euphrates whose drying up is a picture of the disenchantment with Babylon which will be a prelude to 'Babylon's judgment and the final judgment itself.
 - **Armageddon** (Hebrew – *Har-Magedon* – the mountain of Megiddo) is the site of this final, eschatological conflict (16:16), but once again this cannot be understood literally, since there is actually no such place as the mountain of Megiddo mentioned in either Old Testament or Jewish literature. Megiddo was an ancient city and Canaanite stronghold, located on a plain in the southwest region of the Valley of Jezreel or Esdraelon, about two days walk north of Jerusalem.
 - Although situated on a *tell*, an artificial mound about 70 feet high, it was certainly not a *har* which is always used for a mountain.
 - The valley of Megiddo was the strategic site of around 200 significant battles in history and naturally become a lasting symbol for the cosmic eschatological battle between good and evil which John himself says would occur directly outside the city of Jerusalem.
- Put simply, the most natural reading of this passage is that of prophetic symbolism for the whole world in its collective defeat and judgment by Christ at his return. The imagery of war, of kings and nations doing battle on an all-too-familiar battlefield (Megiddo), is used as a metaphor of the consummate, cosmic, and conclusive defeat by Christ of all his enemies - Satan, beast, false prophet, and all who bear the mark of the beast - on that final day.
- The imagery of kings coming from the east, from the direction of the Euphrates, was familiar Old Testament prophetic language for the enemies of Israel coming to invade and destroy.
- vv13-16 give us greater detail about the nature and effects of the sixth bowl. Now we see again 'the unholy triumvirate' - Satan, the first beast, and the false-prophet, clearly the second beast, now so designated in this way for the first time.
- Their deceptive influence is portrayed through the imagery of three unclean spirits, a term which, in the New Testament always refers to demonic spirits and this is confirmed in v14. They appear in the form of frogs, a clear allusion to the frogs in the Exodus plague.
- In ancient Jewish literature, frogs were viewed as ceremonially unclean and they come out of the mouth because of the traditional connection in ancient literature between evil spirits and the mouth or nostrils as a passageway for entering or leaving a person.
- The primary target of their deception is the kings of the earth, that is the political leaders and authorities who align themselves with the principles of the beast in opposition to God.
- They are specifically gathered together for "*the war*". The use of the definite article points to a well-known war; the eschatological war often prophesied in the Old Testament between God and his enemies. (cf. Joel 2:11; Zephaniah 1:14; Zechariah 14:2-14).
- v15 is an exhortation to believers to be vigilant lest they be caught unprepared on that great day. The picture is of a person who stays spiritually awake and alert, clothed in the righteous garments of Christ. The image of physical nakedness, symbolising spiritual shame, caused often by idolatry, is an Old Testament one.



16:17-21 The seventh bowl

- John describes the final judgment that will come against the individual and collective resistance to the kingdom of God and His Lamb. In a manner that is typical of Old Testament prophetic literature, he uses the imagery of geographical and astronomical upheaval to make the point
- The imagery of "*lightning, sounds, thunders, and a great earthquake*" points to the final, consummate judgment at the end of the age (see 8:5 and 11:19).
- Further dissolution of the universe is described in v20 in words which are very similar to earlier passages.
- We understand this displacement of islands and mountains figuratively, bearing in mind that mountains are often symbolic of evil forces or earthly kingdoms, and islands often represent Gentile nations or kings.
- They are also portrayed in the Old Testament as being displaced, cast aside, shaken, moved, etc. as a result of the presence of the Lord and the manifestation of his judgments.

Section 6:

Revelation 17:1 – 19:21

Fall of Babylon and the Beasts

Babylon

This section provides a more in-depth revelation of the sixth and seventh bowls, and involves the destruction of "Babylon the great" which has already been referred to in previous parallel sections – cp 14:8 and 16:19

17:1-6 The Great Prostitute

a. Her description

- The angel describes her to John as "*the great prostitute*" (v1), an image designed to emphasize the sensual and seductive appeal by which she seeks to lure people away from Christ.
- She is "*seated on many waters*", the waters signifying "*peoples and multitudes and nations and languages*" (17:15), and her being seated is, in Revelation, a reference to sovereignty and authority.
- The prostitute is sitting on "*a scarlet beast*" which, by the similarity of description, is clearly the beast out of the sea of 13:1, who operates with all the authority of the dragon, Satan.
- She holds a gold cup full of "*abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality*", a grossly wicked contrast to the beauty of her appearance and apparel.

b. Her wickedness

- The crime of the great prostitute is that the kings of the earth "*committed immorality*" (porneia) with her (v2).
- Almost certainly it is being used here figuratively, as it was frequently in the Old Testament, referring to spiritual unfaithfulness and idolatry.
- While the nations are intoxicated with her enticements, the great prostitute is intoxicated with the persecution of those who believe in and witness to Jesus.

c. Her identity

The text itself explicitly identifies the great prostitute as "*Babylon the great*" (v5,18; 18:1-24), but the question remains - who or what is Babylon? We understand Babylon to be the world system which seduces the godly. Its destruction at the end of time is depicted in terms of its current manifestation in John's time, i.e. the Roman Empire. Given that Babylon is explicitly stated to be "*the mother*" of prostitutes and abominations, it is difficult to see how we can identify it with any one church or state, but rather should see it as representative of all entities, primarily religious and commercial, which are in opposition to God and to his people and purposes.

17:7-18 The Beast

a. Its description

We have already considered the description of the beast, see 13:1ff, and the terms here are unsurprisingly similar. It is also here described as the one who "*was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit*" (v8). This is an unmistakable and deliberate parody of Christ who, on several occasions, has been described as the one "who was and who is and who is to come" (1:4, 8; 4:8).

We should not miss a striking contrast between the parallel sections of chapters 13 and 17.

- In ch 13 we see the apparent *success* of the beast. Although struck down by divine judgment, he miraculously recovers, wages war on the saints, and appears to gain the victory over them (13:7).
- In ch 17, on the other hand, the actual *destruction* of the beast is depicted.

b. Its identity

This is a difficult passage to interpret and, as usual, there is no shortage of options on offer. The uncertainty revolves around the meaning of the seven heads of the beast as "*mountains*" (v9) and "*kings*" (v10), and the "*ten horns*" (v12).

As in 12:3 and 13:1-2 the emphasis here is on the fullness of oppressive power and the seven mountains / kings represent the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages. Think of our use of the idiom, 'the seven seas' by which we mean all the seas of the world. In John's day, the particular manifestation of the beast was, of course, Rome and this may well have been what influenced him to use the figurative number seven, because of the reference to its hills, although he would have insisted that the beast is far more than Rome.

b. Its Activity

The precise identity of the heads / kings / horns may be uncertain but what is unambiguous is that collaboratively, under the leadership of the beast, they “*make war*”(v14) on the Lamb who will, of course, ultimately triumph.

But there is another activity depicted here, one that is astonishing in its nature (vv16-17):

- At the end of time the ten horns / kings (the godless nations and powers of the world), in partnership with the beast will turn on the great prostitute and destroy her.
- If the great prostitute is, as we suggest, the apostate church, this means that the political wing of the universal godless system will turn against and destroy the religious / economic wing of that system. The apostate church and every false religious system will be destroyed by a coalition of political / military powers.
- But note - the ten kings are prompted and energized to do this by God (v17)! This incredible internal conflict between the religious and political factions of the godless system is so foolish, short-sighted, and ultimately self-destructive that only the hand of God could account for it.

Revelation 18:1 – 19:5

In Revelation 17, John was promised that he would be shown “*the judgment of the great prostitute*” though initially he was only given a brief glimpse of that (v16). Now, in Revelation 18, the full story is told, followed by the judgement on the beast in 19:17-21.

18:1-3 Prediction of Babylon’s fall.

This is a detailed description of that which was promised by the angel in 17:1.

18:4-8 Exhortation to God’s people to separate from Babylon before the judgement comes.

“*...to come out*” of Babylon does not require local removal from the place itself (see for example, 1 Corinthians 5:10), but is rather a demand to the churches for complete moral separation from her iniquities so that they do not participate in her plagues.” (G B Wilson)

18:9-19 Lamentation of those who co-operate with Babylon.

The note of mourning is taken up now, describing how those who prosper from their cooperation with Babylon will mourn when they see the destruction of that on which they have come to rely for their happiness and prosperity.

a. 18:9-10 The lament of the kings of the earth

The principal emphasis here is despair over economic loss. We must not forget the close association in John’s day between idolatry and economic prosperity in Asia Minor, where the churches to whom he was writing were situated. They “*weep*” and “*wail*” and stand “*far off*” (v10), both because of the fearful sight of her sudden judgment and the fear that such a destiny will soon be their own.

b. 18:11-17a The lament of the merchants of the earth

Since Babylon has been the principal source of their material prosperity (v15), her end means the end of their wealth and riches. Their lament is not sympathetic but entirely self-centred: they can only think of their personal financial loss.

c. 18:17-19 The lament of the mariners

These verses focus in on a particular group of merchants, “*shipmasters and seafaring men*”, who, like the others, profited from their economic association with Babylon.

18:20 The Call to Praise

In stark contrast to the mourning and lamentations of those who have previously benefitted from Babylon, now saints and angels are called to rejoice. There is here an allusion to Jeremiah 51:48. Just as the judgment of historical ancient Babylon was the cause for great celebration, so too will be the judgment of eschatological Babylon. The reason for this celebration is found in a difficult statement at the close of v20. This verse could be understood as “God pronounced on her the judgment she passed on you.” It may even have its roots in the Old Testament law of malicious witness (Deuteronomy 19:16-19), which demanded that if a man had been found to have borne false testimony against his brother, he would be punished with the very penalty that he intended for his brother.

18:21-24 Explanation of the judgement

Based on the judgment of ancient Babylon (cp Jeremiah 51:63) and Tyre (cp Ezekiel 26:12), the end of eschatological Babylon will be like that of a giant millstone flung into the sea to sink into oblivion (v21).



From all of this, John would have us not miss two important features of this judgement on Babylon:

First, its suddenness:

- "*in a single day*" (18:8)
- "*in a single hour*" (18:10,17,19)

Secondly, its finality:

- "*never to be found again*" (18:14)
- "*into the sea*" (18:21)
- "*no more*" (18:21,22,23,

19:1-5 Jubilation of the faithful once judgement is complete

a. 19:1-5 The Chorus of Praise

Now the call to rejoice (18:20) is taken up by "*a great multitude in heaven*" (v1).

- The most natural understanding here would be that this involves all the inhabitants of heaven, both angelic and human, of all time.
- This occurs after the actual judgement of Babylon that was announced and executed in the previous chapters. This takes place at the consummation of history (vv1-3, 5b-8).
- The familiar word "*Hallelujah*" literally means "*praise Yahweh*" and, somewhat surprisingly, occurs only four times in the New Testament, all here in Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, 6.
- God is to be praised, and all power and glory ascribed to him, precisely because he "*his judgements are true and just*" and he has "*judged the great prostitute*" (v2).

Once again, in response to the prayer of the martyred saints in 6:10, God has vindicated both the honour of his own name and the righteousness of those who were killed for the testimony of Jesus.

We need to comment here on the chronology of chapter 19. It seems likely that 19:6-10, which describes the marriage supper of the Lamb, actually occurs after the judgement of the beast described in 19:11-21, so we will study the passage in chronological rather than biblical sequence.

Judgement on the Beast (19:11-21)

This is the second coming of Christ, for the final conflict with Satan's forces, as a result of which the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire and their followers killed.

Whatever the purpose or timing of this event, few dispute the fact that the rider on the white horse is Christ and certainly all the language of the passage would indicate that:

- He is called "*Faithful and True*" (v11), "*The Word of God*" (v13) and "*King of kings and Lord of lords*" (v16).
- He is crowned with "*many diadems*" (v12), in contrast to the dragon who has seven and the beast who has ten.
- He wears in a "*robe dipped in blood*" (v13); either his own blood, shed at Calvary, or the blood of the martyred saints, or, bearing in mind frequent Old Testament images, the blood of his defeated enemies.
- He will tread "*the wine press of the fury of God's wrath*" (v15), an image drawn from Isaiah 63:2-6 which predicts God's last great act of judgement.
- He is followed by "*the armies of heaven*" (v14) which usually in the New Testament speak of the angelic hosts who accompany Christ from heaven in executing the final judgement. However, in this context, it seems more likely that these are Christian believers, martyrs and others in the intermediate state, who accompany him. In Revelation, with just one exception (15:6), it is believers who wear white garments.

Another angel appears, announcing the impending destruction of the beast, the false prophet, and their followers. So certain is the victory of Christ over his enemies that the call goes out even before the slaughter occurs. If our parallel understanding of Revelation is correct, then we have here another view of Armageddon as depicted in 16:14, 16 (cp 20:8).

"*The war*" (16:14; 19:19; 20:8).

- In the original of all three texts, the same Greek phrase (*ton polemon* = the war), including the definite article, is used, indicating not *any* war but a well-known war, the eschatological war often prophesied in the Old Testament between God and his enemies.
- The judgment comes in two stages, though it is interesting to note that there is no reference to or description of the actual battle, just of its outcome.
- First, the beast and false prophet are "*captured*" and "*thrown alive*" into the lake of fire (19:20), the place of eternal and conscious torment (Revelation 20:10), and then, "*the rest*", i.e. their followers are killed and devoured by the birds of prey, though 20:15 tells us that they too will be thrown into the lake of fire.



- Notice how this feast for the birds is called "*the great supper of God*" (19:17), in stark contrast to the "*marriage supper of the Lamb*" (19:9)
- "At the end of history there will be two great suppers, at one of which all people will attend. Either you will eat or be eaten! Either you are a guest who dines, or you are the dinner!" (Sam Storms)

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:6-10)

With the destruction of the great prostitute, the beast and the false prophet complete, John now describes for us the arrival of the marriage of the Lamb to His bride. It is a wonderful and fitting metaphor to describe the relationship between the Lamb and his people.

The bride is, of course, the church, who has "*made herself ready*" (19:7) and been "*granted...to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure*" (19:8). The "*fine linen*" is then said to symbolize "*the righteous deeds of the saints*" (19:8). This could be a reference to the faithfulness of the saints who "*hold to the testimony of Jesus*" (19:10), in other words, bearing a faithful witness in both word and deed, despite their trials and sufferings. Another possibility is that it could be a reference to God's vindication of his saints, the fine linen being the final reward for having lived righteously.

It might seem strange that John should fall at the feet of an angel, however mighty or glorious, "*to worship him*" (19:10). By way of possible explanation, Greg Beale is probably right when he says, "this passage presents an example of how easy it is to fall into idolatry, for which the judgment described throughout ch 19 comes into play". In other words, if even someone like John, who has been the recipient of the amazing revelations and experiences of Revelation, can be susceptible to this temptation, how much more should we be on our guard.

NOTES

Section 7:

Revelation 20:1 – 22:21

Destruction of Dragon; Christ and Church in Glory

Consummation

The Millennium 20:1-3

John sees an angel descending from heaven, in possession of a key, with which he locks Satan in the bottomless pit, or abyss, for 1,000 years in order to prevent him deceiving the nations. My view of this passage is that, as elsewhere in Revelation, the phrase "*then I saw*" refers to the sequence in which the visions John sees are presented rather than their fulfilment. The language of these verses is, like much of Revelation, to be understood symbolically; so the thousand years represents the Church age, starting at Pentecost and culminating at the return of Christ. Satan's being bound refers to his inability to resist the forward advance of the gospel.

The nature and extent of Satan's binding must be understood both in the immediate sense of the words in verse three, but also in conjunction with vv7-8 which speak about what will happen after Satan is briefly released from his "*chains*". In vv7-8 Satan is freed to do that which he was prevented from doing during the thousand year period, namely to "*deceive the nations...to gather them for battle*".

The Millennial Reign 20:4-6

These verses appear to picture the blessedness of the saints in heaven after death but before the resurrection at the end of time. John's language in 20:4 is almost exactly the same as in 6:9. In the latter case, virtually nobody disputes that John is referring to those who have suffered martyrdom for the sake of Christ and are in a temporary, disembodied state, in the presence of God and awaiting the bodily resurrection.

Another issue contained in these verses, and which will also affect and guide our interpretation, is the reference to "*thrones*". This appears to be a parallel to Daniel 7:9-11, where the angelic court pronounces judgement on Satan. Both the language and the context would appear to conclusively fix the setting of this scene in the heavenly, rather than a physical realm in an earthly millennial reign

The Release and Defeat of Satan 20:7-10

What is described here is a brief period of indeterminate duration at the end of the Church age, during which Satan will be permitted to organise global resistance against the people of God. As we have already noted, his intention and desire was to deceive the nations into collaborating to annihilate the Church.

Before the nations can destroy the Church, for "*the camp of the saints and the beloved city*" is surely a reference to the worldwide Church, fire descends from heaven and destroys them. Whether or not the fire is to be understood literally doesn't detract from the clear significance of what we are being told, i.e. God will deliver his people by judging and destroying their enemies. Satan, the instigator of the rebellion is now judged.

The Great White Throne 20:11-15

The judgement and the end of the physical universe as we currently know it are clearly linked in terms of time and not separated by a period of 1,000 years. The presence of the Book of Life seems to indicate the presence of the righteous along with the unbelievers. The repeated teaching of Scripture is that the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected at the same time and face judgement on the same occasion (see, for example, Matthew 16:27; 25:31ff; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Romans 2:5-10), and there is no reason to view these verses in any other sense. All the dead, regardless of the time or manner of the death, or the disposal of the bodies, will be raised from their 'resting' place and raised to judgement (20:13).

It is sometimes argued that the righteous would not be present at the judgement at the great white throne since there is now no condemnation for them. However, that is to misunderstand the obvious nature of this final judgement. This is not a judgement, such as we are familiar with, where the case for the prosecution and defence is put forward, evaluated and assessed, and the presiding judge comes to a conclusion. This is a judgement where the outcome has already been decided and determined and now it is being proclaimed and executed. For the unbeliever, based on the records of "*the books*", it is a judgement unto damnation; while for the believer it is a judgement to reward.

Notice, that the dead, i.e. both believing and unbelieving, are judged "*by what was written in the books, according to what they had done*". If indeed this includes believers it is not contradictory to the clear teaching of Scripture that salvation is not attainable through works, e.g. Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5. Scripture is equally clear when it teaches that the genuineness of a person's faith will be evidenced by their works, just as a non-Christians spiritual state is revealed by their deeds, e.g. James 2:15-18; Titus 1:16; 2:14. Christians who are saved by grace through faith – and there is no other sort – will be proven to be so as the result of an examination of their works (Matthew 16:27; 25:31; 1 Peter 1:17).

The New Heavens and Earth 21:1 – 22:5

A New Heaven and Earth (21:1)

The first heaven and the first earth having passed away (20:11), John now sees a new world coming into being. It is important to note that the word translated *new* is the Greek word *kainos* which means new in quality or essence rather than new in time, for which the word would have been *neos*. Indeed, we could translate it as a *renewed* world.

It would seem that 21:1 serves as an introductory and summary statement for everything that follows up to 22:5. It may reflect a Hebrew style of writing in which an overview is given, after which the author returns to his subject, giving more detail about certain aspects of it.

The Dwelling Place of God with Man (21:2-8)

a. What John sees (v2)

John sees the “*new Jerusalem*”, using words from Isaiah, descending from heaven, dressed as a bride coming to her husband. This equating of the new Jerusalem with the bride of Christ, namely the Church, is explicitly reinforced in 21:9. In other words, while in one sense the people of God will *dwell in* the New Jerusalem, in another sense the people of God *are* the new Jerusalem.

b. What John hears (vv3-4)

John hears a loud voice emanating from the throne which could be that of a cherubim, or of God himself. The words he hears further explain the image of the city and the bride in terms that emphasise the intimate communion which God and his people will have with one another. In this new, perfected creation and relationship, all those things that characterised the old creation and earthly experience will be no more. All the causes of mourning and crying that are part and parcel of our present existence will have been removed, and indeed destroyed because “*the former things have passed away*”

b. What John is told (vv5-8)

Now John is addressed directly by Christ from the throne, who reiterates his work of renewal and commands John to write down what he is about to hear, stressing the reliability and truthfulness of the words. God, through John, is assuring his persecuted believers that just as he brought the first creation into being so will he assuredly bring it to a conclusion and bring about the new creation.

By contrast, those who are not found to be among God’s people will be judged by exclusion from the presence of God and the experience of “*the second death*”. As we read this list, describing those who are excluded from the presence of God, we are surely meant to understand that this not only speaks of those who were always outside of the visible church, but also those who in some way identified themselves with believers but were found to be not in the faith. Their eternal fate is now spelled out again with “*the second death*” indicating perfected and eternal punishment.

Of course, though in a way we probably can’t begin to get our heads around, since in this new world there is no longer any death or pain or suffering, the place of eternal torment must be outside the ‘geography’ of the new universe.

The New Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)

a. The City (21:9-27)

When you compare the introductions to the two visions, there is an obvious and intended contrast between the vision of the harlot in 17:1-3 and this one of the bride in ch21. The description of the city is based on Ezekiel’s vision of the temple and city and John’s prophetic experience “*in the Spirit*” is a clear allusion to Ezekiel’s own experiences.

As to whether what is being described is literal or symbolic, the language, for example the dimensions given, would strongly suggest that it is symbolic, although that doesn’t mean that it isn’t real. A symbol is simply a way of directing our attention to something that is true and real, but using words and images that everyday literal language could never achieve.

- The city is said to have “*the glory of God*” (v11). Just as in the Old Testament, the Tabernacle and then the Temple was where God’s glory resided and was manifest, so in the new creation God’s presence, i.e. his glory, will abide in and with his people, since they are the holy city in which he dwells.



- On the “*twelve foundations*” of the wall were written the names of the twelve apostles (v14). The 24, the sum of the 12 tribes and 12 apostles, has already occurred in 4:4 and emphasises the one people of God, comprised of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, who together equally inherit all the promises.
- When John says that he saw no temple, he means, of course, no physical, literal building such as existed during the time of the Old Testament. There is certainly a temple in the new heavens and new earth - God and the Lamb are themselves the temple!
- The incomparable glory of God makes redundant any other source of light.
- The absence of night (v25), points to the unhindered access to God’s glorious presence as well as the fact that there will be no darkness to dim the brilliance of God’s glory.

b. The River of Life (22:1-5)

- This picture is clearly drawn from Ezekiel and Zechariah, but the idea can be traced even further back, all the way to Eden. This is one of several examples in these closing verses where John links the end of history with the beginning. In the consummation are features which characterized the beginning of time. It is not that the end is a reversal to the beginning, “but the circumstances of the beginning are viewed as prophetic of the nature of God’s purpose in history. In all respects, however, the last things surpass the first in overwhelming measure, as we see in this paragraph” (G Beasley-Murray).

D. The Epilogue (22:6-21)

These verses serve as a conclusion to the book and are linked with 1:1-3 by a number of verbal similarities. However, we should not miss the fact that whereas the introduction to Revelation pronounced a blessing on all who obey the words of this book, the conclusion declares a curse on all who disobey.

What is striking is the emphasis on encouraging holiness on the part of the people of God. There are eight such references in these closing verses, in the form of exhortations to holiness, the promise of blessing on holiness, or warnings of judgement for unholiness.

a. Exhortation 1 (vv6-7)

- An angel affirms the authenticity, accuracy and truthfulness of what John has seen and heard. There is, not for the last time, an echo here with Daniel; in this instance, Daniel’s prophecy was about things in the distant future while the angel’s message is about something that “*must soon take place*”.
- God is the one who controls and inspires the spirits of his prophetic messengers.
- Jesus himself speaks, restating his future return and pronouncing a blessing, God’s favour and approval, on those who heed the book’s message.

b. Exhortation 2 (vv8-13)

- This passage is almost identical to 19:10.
- There is an interesting contrast with instructions given to Daniel (12:4). While Daniel was commanded to seal up what had been revealed to him for a future time, John is told not to seal these revelations because the time of their fulfilment is at hand.
- But how are we meant to understand the language of imminence, both here and also in 1:3? After all, 2000 years have passed since these words were first written down.
- It is difficult to satisfactorily resolve this dilemma, but we would probably prefer an interpretation that refers to a swift and unexpected return of Christ, as so often intimated by the Lord himself.
- The certain, but unexpected, time of Christ’s return is a strong biblical motivation to Christians to live holy lives. By contrast, unbelievers persist in their sinful rebellion in defiance of the coming accountability and judgement.

c. Exhortation 3 (vv14-17)

- Here, in the seventh and final beatitude in Revelation, believers are seen clothed in the righteousness given to them by God because of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. As a reward for their perseverance of faith they are blessed with salvation blessings, described in terms of the privileges of the new creation.
- The punishment of being cast outside the garden, which was begun in Genesis 3:23-24, continues for the unbeliever into eternity on a heightened scale.
- The bride, the true and glorified people of God, issue an invitation to “*Come!*” through the power of the Holy Spirit, though what is not perfectly clear is who the invitation is addressed to. But it is probable this is a threefold call to individuals, and is perhaps best understood in the following way - the first invitation is given by prophetic leaders through whom the Spirit speaks, while the second is given by individual believers “*who hear*”, either to other believers who are still dull of hearing or even to unbelievers as a final call to repentance.

d. Exhortation 4 (vv18-19)

These verses are clearly built on Deuteronomy 4:1-2 and 29:19-20, but the question is, what does it mean to “*add*” to or “*take away*” from the words “*of the prophecy of this book*”? At the very least, there is a clear prohibition against amending or altering the teaching of Revelation. Although the immediate application is to Revelation in particular, it has widely been held by believers that as these are the closing verses of the entire Bible the same principle would apply to Scripture in its entirety.

e. Benediction (vv20-21)

The closing benediction is typical of New Testament letters, most frequently penned by Paul. Jesus’ own, frequently occurring, affirmation of his return is restated emphatically and John responds with an Amen, a statement of trust.

NOTES



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Recommended Reading on Revelation:

Kieran Beville *Developing Healthy Churches: A Case Study in Revelation* Christian Publishing House, 2014
Richard Brooks *The Lamb is All the Glory* Evangelical Press, 1993 (devotional / pastoral)
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