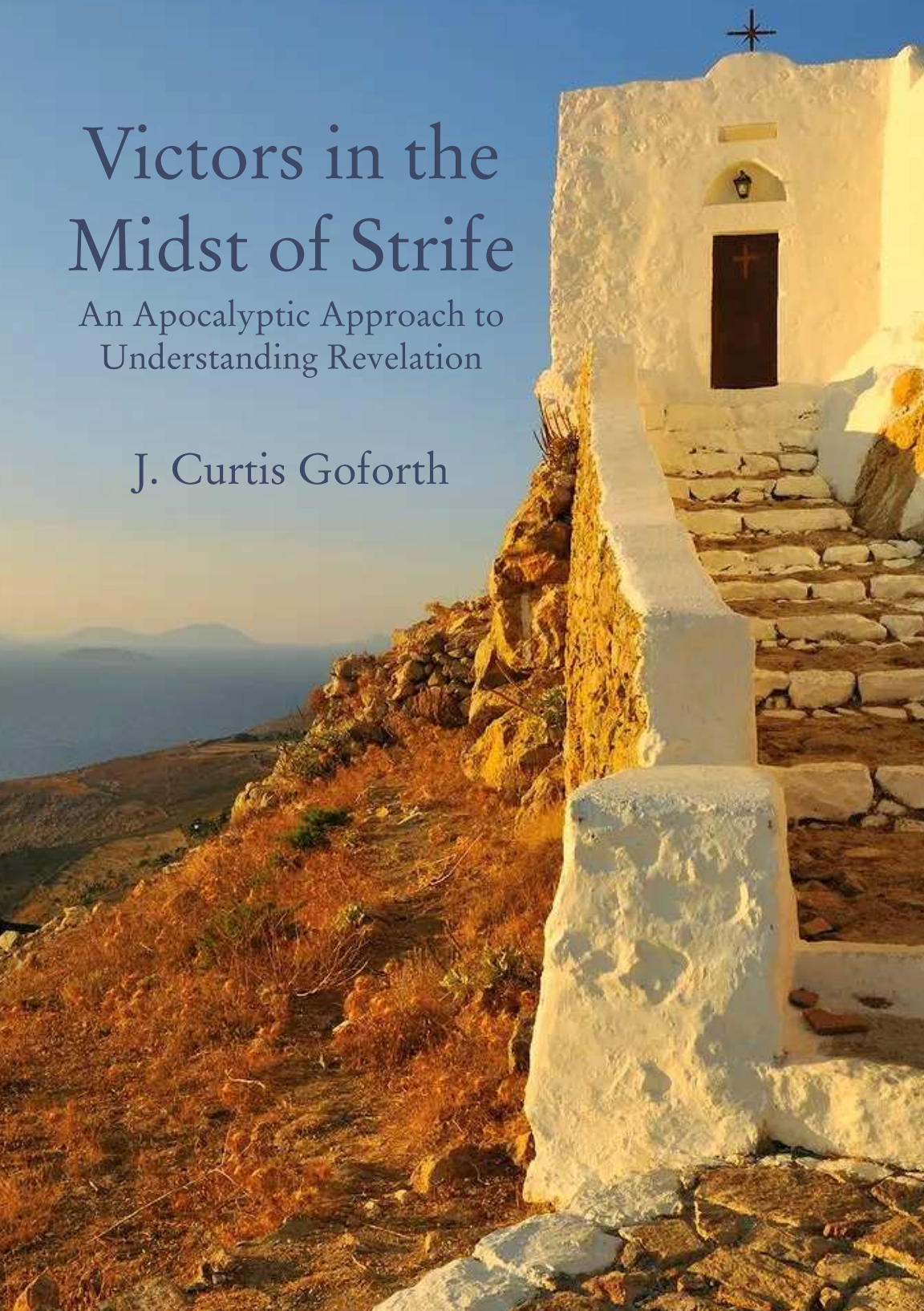


Victors in the Midst of Strife

An Apocalyptic Approach to
Understanding Revelation

J. Curtis Goforth



Victors in the Midst of Strife:

An Apocalyptic Approach
to Understanding Revelation

by The Rev. J. Curtis Goforth

Table of Contents

Preface (page 2)
Chapter 1: Introduction (page 6)
Chapter 2: The First Vision (page 20)
Chapter 3: The Letters to the Seven Churches (page 32)
Chapter 4: The Heavenly Worship (page 56)
Chapter 5: The Seven Seals are Opened (page 76)
Chapter 6: The Vision of the Seven Trumpets (page 94)
Chapter 7: The Beast (page 112)
Chapter 8: The Seven Bowls/Armageddon (page 140)
Chapter 9: The New Jerusalem (page 160)
Chapter 10: Summary and Conclusions (page 180)
Excursus on Darbyism (page 187)

Preface

The book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, has always been for me a book of great mystery. I was privileged to study under the late Dr. James Efird at Duke University Divinity School, where he taught me Greek and where I was able to devote a semester to the study of Revelation and to engage in a lot of Greek exegetical work on the letter to the church in Laodicea found in Revelation 3:14-22. This time of study led me to so many other disciplines and served to increase my interest in the subject to continue my inquiries even after my degree requirements were met.

Since that time, I have been keen to read most of the major commentaries and other books on the subject that have come out in my quest to discover what this apocalyptic and mysterious book could mean for Christians in our own day and age.

As with most of the topics in the Bible, for every one question I find a satisfactory answer for, I inevitably discover ten new questions for which I am nowhere close to finding the answer. Though I will never claim to understand the mystery of Revelation fully, I take solace in the fact that I have at least been able to discover some of what the book *doesn't* mean!

As a pastor engaged in parish ministry for the last twenty years, I was surprised that I couldn't find any studies on Revelation that were written in such a way as to make them accessible to those without an extensive theological education. This book is my effort to close

that gap.

When I was a freshman Religion and Philosophy major at Berea College, one of my professors, Dr. John Wallhausser, had a unique way of taking extremely complicated and difficult to understand writings and making them accessible to us all. I recall reading Friedrich Schleiermacher's Speeches on Religion to Its Cultured Despisers at least ten times and not being able to grasp what had been written. Then, during the class lectures and discussion, Dr. Wallhausser would make it come alive. I approached him after class and asked him how it was that he was able to explain such lofty writings in such simple terms and he said to me, "Mr. Goforth, if I can't take the most advanced writings and explain them in such a way that the average person I'd meet on the sidewalk could understand them, then I don't understand them myself!"

Sadly, most of the books on Revelation that feature sound scholarship are not written in such a way that clearly communicates the difficult subject matter, and the books that are written in accessible language and content are usually of questionable or terrible scholarship. I hope you find this book to be both of sound scholarship and written in accessible language.

The Rev. J. Curtis Goforth
Forest City, NC

“Mortals, join the mighty chorus
which the morning starts began;
love divine is reigning o’er us,
binding all within its span.
Ever singing, march we onward,
victors in the midst of strife;
joyful music leads us sunward,
in the triumph song of life.

-Henry Van Dyke (1907)
“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” verse 4

Chapter One

“An Apocalyptic Approach to Understanding Revelation”

Apocalyptic as a Genre

There are many different genres of film and literature in the world: comedy, horror, satire, mystery, romance, biography, science fiction, pantomime, cartoons, fairy tales, etc. And the reader or viewer must know the rules of the particular genre to understand what is happening.

Can you imagine what it would be like to watch a Looney Tunes cartoon and not understand that all the violence in it is non-lethal? Children would be horrified if Elmer Fudd had actually been killed in one of his many hunting accidents. The rules of nature and science do not have the same authority in cartoons. Animals can converse with people and rabbits can outwit a stuttering anthropomorphic pig by dressing up as an attractive woman. Gravity does not equally apply either. A coyote trying to catch a roadrunner does not begin to fall off the cliff until he realizes that he is no longer running on solid ground. Then in midair he turns to the viewer, gets a concerned look on his face, and waves goodbye before he plummets hundreds of feet to what should be his painful death. However, in the world of cartoons it turns out to be nothing more than a temporary setback, and in the next scene the viewer is shown an injury-free coyote strapped to an Acme rocket ready once more to

laugh in the face of science and reason.

Every genre has its own rules. In a mystery, the killer is almost never the character that seems the most obvious culprit. Rather, the point of a mystery is for the reader or viewer to be able to pick up on obscure clues along the way that point to the real killer's identity. In mysteries, the lackluster authorities are also usually quick to finger the wrong suspect and the quick-witted, famous detective or lawyer is the only one who can solve the mystery and explain the intricacies of how and why.

Every genre has its own rules and culture, and those rules are specific to that particular genre alone. One cannot watch cartoons the same way they would watch a mystery movie, and one cannot read a satire with same rules that apply to fairy tales. The book of Revelation is part of a very ancient and peculiar genre known as apocalyptic literature. And, like Looney Tunes cartoons, it has its own set of rules that have to be taken into consideration if the reader is to understand its original meaning.

Rules for Reading Apocalyptic Literature

If the reader is aware of the rules for interpreting the genre of apocalyptic literature, the bizarre and outlandish creatures and visions suddenly become intelligible and begin to make a lot of sense. After all, we still use many such symbols in our everyday life in the modern world. Apocalyptic literature is an ancient literary genre characterized by:

1. Other-worldly visions.
2. An extremely high degree of symbolism.
3. The presence of numerology, that is, numbers used in many different ways.
4. A certain level of eschatology, that is, language that speaks about the end of something.

Visions

One of the most important characteristics of apocalyptic literature is a strong presence of other-worldly visions. These visions are individual, self-contained units and they are not chronological in order. Since they are not chronological, they do not build upon one another. In other words, one vision does not have to happen before another vision can happen. They are meant to be understood on their own. The reader must keep in mind that all the chapter divisions in the Bible are artificial and a single vision may span more than one chapter. This elevated number of visions is important, but their presence is not what makes a piece of literature apocalyptic. All apocalyptic writings must have visions, but all writings that have visions are not apocalyptic.

Also, in apocalyptic works, the person who sees the vision(s), usually the writer of the book, cannot interpret or understand the visions on his own. Someone else, usually an angel (or someone else from the heavenly realm), has to explain the meaning of the visions to him.

Symbolism

Symbols are also very prominent fixtures in apocalyptic texts. All apocalyptic writings must have a high degree of symbolism in them, but not all symbolic writings are apocalyptic. One of the ways that symbolism is woven into the fabric of apocalyptic writings is by the presence of certain animals.

Animals

If one were to read a political cartoon in a magazine or newspaper in December of 1991 that showed a drawing of an eagle pecking out the eyes of a bear, the reader would instantly know that this is not a cartoon about the behavior of animals in the wild. Rather, the reader would easily see that this is most likely a product of American media about the fall of the Soviet Union. Implicit in this political cartoon would be the assumption that capitalist market system of the United States (represented as the eagle) was superior to the political and economic systems in the former Soviet Union (represented as the bear). Similarly, in apocalyptic literature, nations are represented as animals and the leaders of those countries are depicted as heads or horns on the animal.

Colors

Colors are also an important component of apocalyptic writings. There are four main colors at play in this genre:

1. White. This color is used in modern, Western cultures to represent one of three things: purity, surrender, or “the good guy.” However, none of these meanings are present in the world of apocalyptic writings. In apocalyptic writings, white is the color used to symbolize victory. It does not mean purity or goodness. It does not represent the traditional “good guy” who will oppose the “bad guy.” It most certainly does not symbolize surrender, quite the opposite. It simply indicates victory. When the reader encounters the white horseman in Revelation (or other apocalyptic writings), one is to understand that its rider is victorious, not necessarily good or pure. [White = Victory]

2. Red. Red is the color associated with blood and anger. Whenever the color red is present in apocalyptic texts, it indicates violence, war, bloodshed, etc. [Red = Bloodshed]

3. Black. In apocalyptic works, black is the color that signals a lack of something. It does not indicate something that is inherently bad or evil--only that something will be lacking. Oftentimes this takes the form of a lack of life or a lack of food or other necessities. [Black = Lack of Something]

4. Pale Green. This is the color used in apocalyptic writings to indicate death since this is the color people tend to turn when they expire. However, the meaning of pale green is not as consistent across apocalyptic writings as

white, red, and black. The reader would do well to glean the meaning of this color from the context of the story in which it is placed. There are other colors as well that show up from time to time in apocalyptic writings, but their meanings can only be determined from context.

Numerology

Another key component of apocalyptic symbolism is the somewhat unorthodox use of numbers. This is often referred to as “numerology.” All this means is that numbers are used in strange and uncommon ways that might seem out of place with the way numbers are traditionally used. There are several numbers that have special significance in apocalyptic writings.

- 1 Singularity (God, in monotheism)
- 2 Duality (light and dark, good and evil)
- 3 God's Actions
(3 heavenly visitors, the 3rd day, etc.)
- 3.5 Something Incomplete (half of 7)
- 4 Created Order (4 winds, 4 directions, 4 elements,
4 major world empires)
- 6 Human Effort / Incompletion (not yet 7)
- 7 Completion (7 days in a week, Sabbath rest)
- 8 Day of Circumcision / Day of Resurrection
(this number is not found in Revelation
but is present in other apocalyptic writings)
- 10 Another Number of Completion
(10 fingers, 10 toes, also serves
as the basis of most numbers systems)
- 11 Incompletion (only 11 disciples after Judas)
- 12 People of God (12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples)
- 42 Incompletion (number of months in 3.5 years)
- 144 Perfect Completion (12×12)
- 360 Days in a Lunar Year
- 365 Days in a Solar Year
- 616 Number of the Beast (variant reading)
- 666 Number of the Beast (standard reading)
- 1000 Completion ($10 \times 10 \times 10$) \
- 1260 Incompletion (number of days in 3.5 years)

As one can tell, these numbers have their basis in Scripture and in everyday use, but in apocalyptic writings they are given special significance that is largely lost on most modern readers. The most common mistake a reader of apocalyptic literature can make is to read these *symbolic* numbers as though they were *literal* numbers instead.

These numbers are often combined as well to lend double meaning or intensity to the symbolism. For example, if one were writing an apocalyptic text and the writer wanted to symbolize the entire world (the created order), they would use a number that had multiples of 10 (to express completion) and 4 (to indicate the created order). Thus, a number like 4000 might be used to suit the purpose.

Another example that actually shows up in Revelation is a situation where the writer John is trying to symbolize all the people of God from all time (the people of Israel and the Church). The number 12 would be used because it symbolizes the people of God both in the Old Testament (the 12 tribes of Israel) and in the New Testament (the 12 disciples). The best way to make that relationship explicit would be to use a number that multiplied 12×12 which would equal the number 144. Then to make that number even more complete symbolically, it is multiplied by 1,000. Thus, the number that would represent all the people of God from all time would be a number like 144,000. This number is not meant to be literal but symbolic. It is not as though there is an angel in heaven with a counter in his hand ready to turn away number 144,001 from the kingdom of heaven. Such an idea that there is a maximum occupancy number for heaven runs contrary to the point that the vision is trying to get across.

Eschatology

The fourth and final definitive characteristic of apocalyptic literature is that it focuses on eschatology. This may seem like a big word, but it is really very simple. It simply refers to the study of the end of

something. This phrase is pregnant with various different connotations and conspiracy theories, but the reader should be cautioned against thinking about “the end” as the destruction of the world. In apocalyptic writings, the end (also known as the eschaton) refers to the end of a particular age, not the end of existence. The best way to think about it would be to think back to one’s high school graduation. Graduation is the end of a time in life, not the end of the world.

Author

The author of Revelation was a man named John. John, in ancient and modern times, is a very common name. Precious little is known about this John who penned Revelation except what he tells us here in the first chapter of the book:

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw” (Revelation 1:1-2).

“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9).

One should not assume that this was the same John as the one whose name adorns the fourth gospel of the New Testament. The author’s name was John, and he was most likely in exile on a tiny, Greek island off the west coast of modern-day Turkey. He was there because

of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” By his own admission, he was an evangelist of sorts, but it is unlikely that he was the same John that was one of the twelve disciples. John of Patmos (as we shall call him) had intimate knowledge of the cities and people of western Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). His knowledge of this area was so good that it is likely he had been a key evangelist of large portions of that area, and that he was quite famous in his own right. His office was probably what would become known in the Church later on as that of a bishop. And, like many of those early followers of Jesus and leaders of the Church, he was persecuted for his beliefs and his testimony. It is a mystery as to why he was not executed, but for some reason he was simply punished by the Roman Empire with what amounted to a life sentence under house arrest on this isolated island.

On Patmos, he could not do much harm, and he would not go down in history as a martyr. John of Patmos must have been an extraordinary figure and it is unfortunate that we cannot know much more about him. But, perhaps that is part of the greatness of this book! It speaks volumes that such an influential book could have been written by a person with such little formal education who was simply doing all he could do to be a faithful witness to Jesus in the middle of nowhere.

However, John makes himself known to the reader not just by *what* he writes, but by *how* he writes it. John would have failed Greek if he had taken it at a university. His Greek is clumsy, inarticulate, and frequently grammatically incorrect. His vocabulary is

so limited that many times when he does not know the appropriate Greek word to use, he simply takes a Hebrew word and writes it in Greek letters!

Yet, in the midst of his terrible skills as a writer of Greek literature, he reveals something to the careful and attentive reader. His first language was Hebrew and he only learned Greek later in life, with great difficulty. One would not be out of line to assume that John of Patmos was an ethnic Jew living in western Turkey writing to Christian communities that included many different ethnicities, but certainly a large sampling of Jewish Christians. Otherwise, he would not have adopted his writing to the style of apocalyptic, which was a peculiarly Jewish style of writing. If there were no Jewish Christians in the community, the whole book would have been lost on them.

So, what can we say with authority about who John of Patmos really was?

1. He was in exile on Patmos
for spreading the gospel.
2. His first language was Hebrew.
3. He was not well-educated,
but he was well-versed in the Old Testament.
4. He was well-known in western Turkey
and western Turkey was well-known to him.

Occasion

Apocalyptic literature is a very peculiar genre that is written only in extreme circumstances where the people of God are being persecuted in order that they might be

given some hope. This is the point of Revelation and of all apocalyptic writings. It is not a blueprint for what will happen in the future, it is written to give persecuted people hope in the present. The writer, John of Patmos, was persecuted for sharing the gospel, but it was not he alone that was a victim of persecution for his faith.

During the final decade of the first century, Rome and the emperors who ruled her, did not take kindly to its citizens and subjects in the empire pledging allegiance to any king or god other than the emperor himself (who thought he should be worshiped and thought of as a god). During the reigns of Nero and Domitian, Christians were killed or deprived of the means to sustain life if they did not worship the emperor as “dominus et deus” or “Lord and God” in the pagan temples appointed for such purposes. In the letter to the church at Pergamum, John writes:

“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives” (Revelation 2:13).

John was writing to a group of Christians intimately acquainted with persecution. A number of the faithful had been killed for their refusal to worship the emperor. John gives us a glimpse into their situation and encourages them, reminding them of how faithful they have been even though their friend Antipas had been executed.

In the sixties A.D. Nero was emperor of the Roman Empire. Nero was famous for his persecution of Christians. A great fire broke out in Rome and destroyed much of the city, and Nero blamed this fire on the Christians. As punishment, he rounded up as many of the Christians as he could find who would not deny Christ, coated them with tar, set them on a pole, and burnt them alive to light the streets at night. A few decades later, the emperor Domitian (who ruled from 81-96 A.D.) revived this persecution against Christians. It was to this context that John writes the book of Revelation about 94 A.D. at the height of this renewed persecution.

“Who, except cranks and lunatics, reads the Book of
Revelation?”
-H.G. Wells

Chapter Two

“Introduction and the First Vision”

Reading the Text Revelation 1:1-8

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

7 Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

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

Commentary

These first two verses bring to light a number of important points that the reader is to consider before interpreting the words of this book. John tells us that this book is the “revelation” of Jesus Christ, or literally translated the “apocalypse” of Jesus Christ. We are dealing with an apocalyptic book and the author makes that clear by placing it at the beginning of the text. We must know the genre of this book before we can understand it properly. And, like all apocalyptic literature, it was made known to our writer by “sending his angel to his servant John” (1.1). Remember, the person who receives an apocalyptic vision cannot understand the vision apart from the help of an interpreter who is usually an angel. John then testifies to the apocalypse that he saw.

The third verse clues the reader in on the historical context of the situation to which John was writing. It is a blessing on the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy (and a blessing on those who hear and keep these words). Why would John include such a strange blessing? The reason behind this is because in a world where the vast majority of people were illiterate and scrolls were costly and rare, the public reading of the letter was a necessity. But the reason for the blessing goes much deeper than this. In a world where Christians were being persecuted for their beliefs and their worship, it would have been dangerous to attend such a meeting, and even more so to be the one who read these words aloud. The person who read these words aloud would have been labeled a traitor for pledging allegiance to anyone but the Emperor

Domitian. Such a voice would have been silenced in the most gruesome of ways. This is the true reason for the blessing, both on the reader and the hearer of the words. It was dangerous to be a Christian at the time and place to which this book was written.

But there is still another important element John mentions here. At the end of verse 3 we read, “for the time is near.” This book was written to show the Christians of Asia Minor what “must soon take place,” (1.1) for “the time is near” (1.3). This was not a message originally intended for a post-industrial, literate, and Western audience of Christians.

This was not a message intended to chronicle how the end of the world would unfurl in two thousand years, nor was it meant to predict what would happen even so much as a few centuries on. This book was written to give hope to a struggling people who were being persecuted for their faith in Christ at that present moment toward the end of the first century A.D.

The next three verses tell us a little more about the author. Since most of his details were discussed already we need not repeat what has been said apart from a few important points. John of Patmos, our author, was not John “the beloved disciple” and author of the fourth gospel of the New Testament. This would have been impossible since the Greek of John of Patmos is deplorable and crude, and the Greek of John the disciple is eloquent and masterful. But, even apart from such obvious conclusions, we must remember that the writers during this time in the world had no concept of copyright infringement and it was quite common to use

someone else's name as a tribute to that person. This happened frequently in apocalyptic writings. For instance, there is an Apocalypse of Moses. Moses could not have written an apocalypse because it was a literary genre that wasn't invented until around the time of the Babylonian Captivity in 586 B.C. This was an extremely long time after Moses (about the same difference in time as the Medieval period was from the time of Jesus!). If we are to understand this book, we have to temporarily forget about our own worldview and adopt the worldview of John's audience. Revelation was written towards the end of the first century, and most scholars agree that it was written around 94 A.D. This would have made John the disciple over 100 years old.

We are also told in verse 4 that this was written to the seven churches that are in Asia, or what we would now think of as Turkey. The number seven has special significance in apocalyptic and if you remember, it is symbolic of completion. The number ten also symbolizes completion, but ten carries with it a slightly different connotation that emphasizes inclusivity. If the number 10 symbolizes 100% of something, then the number 7 symbolizes 95% of something. This book was not written simply to the seven churches mentioned by name. We know that there were many more churches than that in the area at the time. It is a way of addressing the letter to all the churches in that region of Turkey. It would have been circulated around and read aloud in different places. It even gets adopted into the liturgical language of the early church and continues quite prominently to the present. John didn't write this letter to the ten churches that are in Asia because he believed the Church was still growing and would continue to grow.

The salutation continues in much the same way that Paul addressed his letters to churches. It was the standard form of writing letters in the first century A.D. The book of Revelation is closer in style to a Pauline epistle than the style of a gospel. The salutation begins with the standard “grace to you and peace” and it continues “from him who is and who was and who is to come” (1.4). Later on in verse 8 we read, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last letter in the Greek alphabet. This would correspond to the English equivalent of Jesus saying, “I am the A and the Z, the beginning and the end.” You may have noticed these symbols in the church before representing these verses:



Reading the Text Revelation 1:9-20

9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. 14 His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. 19 Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven

churches.

Commentary

We are given deeper insight into John's background and into the background for the book of Revelation in verse 9 and following:

"I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

John was exiled to this small island because of his role in spreading the gospel. The authorities didn't want to make him into a martyr and so they put him onto this small Greek island and held him there under something that would be similar to house arrest, closely monitoring his every move.

It is interesting to note this somewhat strange phrase in verse 9, "who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance." The persecution and the kingdom are linked. There is a popular book written by Rabbi Harold Kushner that takes its title from the age-old question "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The Bible has different answers to that question:

The first part of the Old Testament (Exodus and Deuteronomy for instance) answer the question by saying, "You violated the covenant and brought it upon yourself. In essence, God is punishing you for your sins and you aren't really all that good of a person after all." This is called the Deuteronomistic perspective.

In other parts of the Old Testament popularly known as the Wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job), the question is answered much like, “We don’t exactly know why bad things happen to good people. God is God, and you are not. The answer will come to you in time.”

However, apocalyptic literature answers this question in the most straightforward of ways possible. Apocalyptic writings answer this question as, “Bad things happen to good people precisely *because* they are good people. We live in a fallen world, a world that is at odds with God, and since we are not of that world but belong to the kingdom of God, bad things will happen to you as long as you are in the human world.”

Remember, a key characteristic of apocalyptic literature is that there is no gray area. Everything is either black or white, good or bad, and you are on one side or the other. This clues us in to the next part of verse 9 which links the persecution with the kingdom and with patient endurance. The entire book of Revelation can be summarized in this one verse. It is saying, “Keep fighting the good fight on the side of good (even if the bad side is winning). The bad side will fall eventually, and you don’t want to be on it when it falls.”

John tells us that he “was in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1.10). Being “in the spirit” means being in a state of consciousness that is utterly different than the life in the human realm on earth. This is an apocalyptic way of saying that the seer is having a vision. The writer in apocalyptic literature is almost in another world entirely when he sees a vision because he is in the spirit

world. He also mentions that this happened to him “on the Lord’s day.” That is an old way of saying that this happened on Sunday, the day the Lord rose from the dead. We can already begin to see semblances of differences between Christianity and Judaism by this time. Christians were already worshipping on Sunday instead of Saturday. This clues us in on the fact that Revelation had to have been written sometime toward the last part of the first century.

The voice that John hears in verse 10, who commands him to write the vision down and send it to the churches, is like a trumpet. John turns to see who this being is that is speaking these words to him and he tries to describe the indescribable. Notice how many times the author uses the word “like” in these next few verses in trying to describe what he saw. This word is used five times in four verses!

In the vision itself, John reports that he saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the seven lampstands he saw one like the Son of Man. He tries to describe this Son of Man, which is an obvious reference to Jesus and is even the words which Jesus uses throughout the gospels to refer to himself. John falls at the feet of Jesus but Jesus tells him not to be afraid but to write “what [he] has seen, what is, and what is to take place after this” (1.19). Then Jesus himself tells John what the symbols in the vision mean.

If you think back, the number seven is a symbolic number for completion (7 days in a week, etc.) and it is also the literal number of churches John is to write to which is itself a very symbolic act. We are to understand

that this number seven would refer to all the churches in the area to which John is writing. Jesus tells him, “The seven lampstands are the seven churches.” A lampstand is an important symbol in apocalyptic literature. Light is always symbolic of “the good guys.” These churches are like lampstands in the dark world in which they are situated. These lampstands are examples providing metaphorical light to the dark and evil world. And, Jesus is standing in their midst. He too was killed, but he is now alive forevermore. This is a way of Jesus telling his people who are being persecuted that they are not alone. Jesus is with them, even in their midst. They are not suffering alone. God himself is suffering with them, and has already suffered for them. This is a very powerful message to a people who are being persecuted. But not just that, Christ is dressed in white, and it is the whitest of white that he is clothed in. This means that Christ has overcome the evil and the dark already because white is the apocalyptic color for victory.

There is still another important image in this vision. The feet of the Son of Man we are told were “like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace” (1.15). This is to call to mind the story of the fiery furnace in another apocalyptic book, Daniel (chapter 3). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were placed in a fiery furnace and yet survived. They too were persecuted for their faith, and yet they patiently endured. Fire is always a symbol for testing and purification.

“It is between fifty and sixty years since I read it (i.e. the Book of Revelations [sic]), and I then considered it merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherence of our own nightly dreams.

-Thomas Jefferson

Chapter Three

“The Letters to the Seven Churches”

General Introduction to the Seven Letters

The second and third chapters contain individual letters to the seven churches of ancient Turkey previously mentioned in the last chapter. John is intimately acquainted with each of them as we shall see from his precise descriptions of the churches and the cities in which they are located. There were certainly more than seven churches in this part of ancient Turkey, but these letters were intended to be circulated and read by all who could hear their message, not just the ones mentioned by name. They are mentioned by name so that the other churches may learn from their particular message.

Also, these churches are all along the same ancient road. There is around 25-50 miles in between the different churches, and the order in which they are mentioned is the order in which you would come to them if you were traveling along this same road. These letters are distinctly different from the rest of the book, but that should not lead one to think that they were originally separate from the rest of the book. They are included in every ancient manuscript of the book and one should not think they are meant to be read in isolation from the other letters or the rest of the book of Revelation.

Apart from their placement on the same road, other key

similarities exist between these different churches and their respective letters. Each letter is written in basically the same form: salutation, commendation (if applicable), condemnation (if applicable), and the closing, offering a reward for patient endurance. Not every letter has every part of this structure, some churches have no commendation, some churches have no condemnation, but they all follow the same basic structure.

There is actually an interpretation of these letters to the effect that each of these churches mentioned by name corresponds to an “age” of the church universal and that naturally the churches of the present day are the church of Laodicea, the last church mentioned and the worst of all the churches! This is a horrible misunderstanding of Scripture and is a good example of what can happen in the church when we examine Scripture without the proper gear for the job. A brief look at the historical context of the churches mentioned here will show how tightly bound these individual churches are to their respective places in time.

Reading the Text Revelation 2:1-7
(The Message to Ephesus)

1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

2 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Commentary

The letter to the church in Ephesus is a good letter to look at first because it has every one of the parts mentioned in the general introduction to the letters. It begins with a salutation from the heavenly Christ of the vision in chapter one with the focus being on some particular attribute of him. Christ is mentioned as walking among the seven lampstands (churches) and this image would be of great comfort to a persecuted people. In verses 2-3 the church is commended for what they are doing right. The church in Ephesus cannot tolerate evildoers, they find out the false apostles, and they are for the most part patiently enduring their hardships.

However, in verses 4-5 Christ condemns them for abandoning the love they first had and urges them to get it back or risk their lamp being removed from its place. It seems the church in Ephesus had let their earnest desire for right things in the church consume them. They were very good and finding out false apostles and people whose messages were not truly Christian, but they had let their hatred for wrong and evil conquer their love for right and good. Christ tells this church that they must get their love back or risk losing their church altogether.

There is a peculiar group of people mentioned in this letter, the Nicolaitans. There is not a great deal known about these people apart from their mention here in Revelation. The term itself means someone who is a follower of Nicolaus, whose name is Greek and is derived from the words *nike* which means “conqueror”

and laos which means “people.” So, the name literally means “conqueror of a people.” The Hebrew equivalent of this term would be Balaam. Most scholars speculate that this group of people went about trying to persuade people in the church to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and to engage in sexual practices associated with the worship of pagan fertility gods. This type of people typically taught that the spirit was divorced from the body and what one did physically had no bearing on what one did spiritually. The technical term for such a group of people is Libertine Gnostics.

In verse 7 we first encounter the typical way in these letters in which John ends with the phrase, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” This means that everyone who has heard this message should act accordingly. Notice also that the word “churches” is plural and not singular. This further signifies that each of the letters was intended not just for the church specifically named, but for all the churches. The letter ends with the offer of a reward of eating from the tree of life from Genesis 2:9 to anyone who endures.

Reading the Text Revelation 2:8-11
(The Message to Smyrna)

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

9 “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Commentary

In verses 8-11 we encounter the letter directed towards the church in Smyrna. Smyrna is modern day Izmir, about 35 miles north of Ephesus. During the first century A.D. it was a center for the worship of Caesar and Rome. A large temple was erected there about 70 years prior to the writing of this letter to the worship of the emperor Tiberius. It would have certainly been difficult to keep a low profile as a Christian if you did not worship in this pagan temple.

This letter to the church has nothing but positive things to say about them. They are commended for their patient endurance, and they receive no condemnation for their actions. The Christians in Smyrna were certainly being persecuted economically as well as religiously, but this letter tells them that they are rich where it counts. We also encounter here a note about problems between the Christians and the Jews in the city. The Jews were usually given exemption from worshipping in the pagan temples. However, it is obvious that the Christians are a somewhat distinct group from the Jews by this point, and the Jews may be experiencing a bit of persecution themselves because of the opposition these Christians are putting up to worship in the pagan temples. The Christians are upsetting the status quo, and the Judeo-Christian relations are tense in the city. However, John writes that it is the Christians who are the true Jews.

In verse 10 the church is told that some of them will definitely suffer and be thrown into prison. Prison in this historical context was not a place for punishment as

it is in our day. If you were jailed, you were placed there for a length of time until the authorities could get around to killing you. The church is told that some of them will be jailed and will face affliction for 10 days. Think back to your knowledge of apocalyptic numbers and you will recall that 10 is a number of inclusivity and completion. By John telling the church that some of them will be afflicted for ten days means that they will be afflicted the remainder of their lives. They will even be put to death for the cause of Christ. John writes, “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Some of the community will undoubtedly lose their lives, but they will not die forever. They will live eternally with Christ in the kingdom of heaven. They will be martyrs and will be spared the second death. The pagan authorities can only kill their bodies, but they cannot harm their souls. (Note to self: Never move to Smyrna!).

Reading the Text Revelation 2:12-17
(The Message to Pergamum)

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

13 “I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.

14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. 15 So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Commentary

The letter to the church in Pergamum tells us many things about the geographic location of the city as well as the church. This information further reinforces the point that John knew the cities well and could recall important points about each city and how these points related to the church there. The city of Pergamum is referred to as “Satan’s Throne.” There was a terraced hill in the city that had a huge altar to Zeus on top, and the whole thing looked like a gigantic throne. A revolving team of priests made sure that sacrifices were offered up there 24 hours a day so that the people as they glanced at the resulting pillar of smoke would be reminded of the power of Zeus.

We are told in verse 13 of a Christian named Antipas who was martyred as an example to others in the city of what happens when someone is a Christian and worships a god other than the official ones of the state.

The church here is also chastised for the opposite thing the church in Ephesus is rebuked for—the Nicolaitan problem. Here they are referred to by their Hebrew name which would suggest a strong Jewish presence in the city. We also are given further clarification of what these people were teaching. Basically, they were teaching the people that they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and that they could engage in acts of sexual immorality (associated with the fertility rites of the pagan temples). It seems that the church in Pergamum is at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of where they stand with the Nicolaitan problem. In Ephesus, they hated the teaching of the Nicolaitans (almost too

much if one can do such a thing), but in Pergamum they didn't guard themselves enough. This should serve to remind modern Christians just how narrow the safe path is between the sin of tolerance and the sin of intolerance!

“To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” (2:17).

According to Jewish legend, some manna had been hidden in the golden jar in the holy of holies and would reappear from heaven at the coming of the messianic age. A white stone, symbolic of victory, would have been understood to be an admission ticket of sorts to a heavenly banquet. During this time in history, an engraved stone was sent as an invitation to an important banquet. Those who patiently endure are offered a seat at the heavenly banquet, something Christians still look forward to every time Holy Communion is celebrated.

Reading the Text Revelation 2:18-29
(The Message to Thyatira)

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

19 “I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. 20 But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. 22 Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; 25 only hold fast to what you have until I come.

26 To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; 27 to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered—28 even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. 29 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Commentary

The church in Thyatira in verses 18-29 was located in a city closely associated with the god Apollo and named after the sun god Tyrimnos. This god was depicted on their coinage and the emperor can be seen grasping his hand. The city was very well known for its metallurgy and its many craft guilds. Thus, God is depicted (from the vision in chapter one) as having feet like burnished bronze and eyes like a flame of fire. God is contrasted with the city itself and its worship of the sun god Tyrimnos. Every resident Christian of the city and its surrounding villages would have picked up on this obvious slander of the pagan deities.

The church itself is commended for its good works and for the fact that they have increased in their devotion to God, but they have the same basic problem as the other churches in the area that we have earlier termed the Nicolaitan problem. It seems this same basic theology of giving too much ground to the pagan influence has many names around western Turkey despite the theological similarities. The problem with the church here is couched in the metaphor of adultery, one of the most common metaphors for worship of other gods in the Bible. The people are symbolized as adulterers who are cheating on their spouse God with a prostitute named Jezebel (a name taken from I Kings 16:31 meaning to suggest anyone who is a false prophet or idolatrous queen). The people are urged not to be drawn into her bed of pagan worship unless they are ready to face the consequences. Those who do not compromise themselves and patiently endure will be rewarded with ruling over the nations with an iron rod,

another reference back to the metallurgy of the city.

Reading the Text Revelation 3:1-6
(The Message to Sardis)

1“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. 4 Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

5 If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. 6 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Commentary

The church in Sardis is not a good example of the way in which Christians who are living amidst persecution should be living. There is no external threat that can be blamed for the problems this church is encountering; rather, it seems their problem is internal. They bear the name of Christ, but their lives do not show it. The metaphor used by John here is one of a person being asleep. This is a common metaphor that Jesus (while he was on earth) used. While sleeping a thief comes in the night (Matthew 24.42-44). John knows the city so well and again the message to this church is tailored to the external city. The acropolis at Sardis had never been taken by force. It had only a narrow approach from the south, and it was virtually impenetrable. However, although the acropolis had never been taken by force, it had twice been taken by stealth, and without resistance. This happened once by Cyrus in 546 B.C. and once by Antiochus the Great in 218 B.C. On both occasions, the invader came like a thief in the night.

Like the metaphor of adultery, another popular image of unfaithfulness to God was that of getting your clothes dirty. Those who had soiled their clothes had gotten them dirty with the filth of religion that is not from God. White robes here serve the double duty of meaning purity and victory. Here we also have the very important introduction of an object that is central to the study of Revelation—the Book of Life. The names of the saints were recorded in this book, and whoever’s names were recorded here would receive eternal life because Christ would confess their names before the Father and before the angels. The only way your name

could be removed from this book is if you yourself blotted your name out of it by choice. There is an intriguing parallel here between God's people on earth confessing his name and Christ in heaven confessing the names of the faithful. It is a delightful image of Jesus actually confessing our names, a striking reversal from the standard order. This image is picked up by Charles Wesley in many of his 166 hymns on the Lord's Supper as Christ pleading for the repentant sinner.

Reading the Text Revelation 3:7-13
(The Message to Philadelphia)

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens:

8 “I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. 11 I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

12 If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

13 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Commentary

Before we even start to think about what this text might mean for us, we must remember that this letter is meant first and foremost for the church in Philadelphia and not for us! Care must be taken not to impose something on the letter that is not there. We cannot read this book in general or this letter in particular with the perspective of 21st century urban Westerners. To do so would be to misconstrue its original meaning and to thus render its worth for us empty. Many interpreters of this passage are tempted to see in this letter a scene that predicts a time of “tribulation” wherein those “left behind” after “the rapture” will have to endure a number of things in order to get to heaven. It is also tempting to see in this letter a backing for anti-Semitism and hatred of Jews. The truth of the matter, much to the disappointment of many fundamentalist groups, is that this letter is about neither of these things.

When it says in verse 9, “the synagogue of Satan,” those “who say they are Jews and are not” it is meaning those who are treating the Christians in Philadelphia harshly are not Jews themselves. Christianity sees itself as the true Israel and the true Jews, a religious group not bound by ethnicity but by a common profession of faith in the God of Israel. But, it also says in Romans 9-11 that we are simply branches grafted onto the tree of Judaism. To read anti-Semitism into this letter is a grave mistake and not a faithful reading of Scripture! God urges the church in Philadelphia to use the “open door” he had given them to witness to the Jews.

The language of verse ten is problematic for many

because it has been taken so far out of its original context by so many for such a long time that it is hard to see it as it originally was meant to be seen. The language of “I will keep you from the hour of trial” simply means that the church will be saved from ultimate death. It is the same basic message as the ending message to the church in Smyrna (“whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death”) albeit in slightly different language. And we have to keep them in context and not allow our imaginations to take over. Remember, apocalyptic is highly symbolic. We must not read this letter with a literal and modern mindset, but with an ancient and symbolic mindset.

If one reads this letter literally, one must conclude that the reward of the faithful (in verse 12) is to be made into an architectural load-bearing structure in heaven scribbled with graffiti! This is not the intent of the letter, and we must not read it literally but symbolically and with the utmost of care. This is one of the best examples of how important it is when reading Revelation to read what is actually written on the pages and not what someone on television or the radio has told us it means. One cannot pick and choose which portions of Scripture to take literally and which portions to take symbolically.

Reading the Text Revelation 3:14-21
(The Message to Laodicea)

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

15 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. 20 Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

21 To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Commentary

Like the message to the church in Sardis, there is nothing good to say about this church. Their actions are not commended in any way, but yet they are not blotted out entirely from the Book of Life.

In order to understand this message fully, we need to know something about the historical context and geographical setting of the city. John has very intimate knowledge of this city (like the other cities to which he writes). It becomes very evident that this is a message meant for the people of Laodicea at the end of the first century A.D. and not for us as an “age” of existence in the church universal as many fundamentalist interpretations wish it was.

Laodicea during this time was a very prosperous city renowned throughout the world for a famous eye salve that was produced there, for its luxurious, shiny black wool that came from a certain breed of sheep that only lived in that city, and for its thriving banking centers. The city was built on a major trading route and it received a large amount of wealth from the taxes it was able to impose on the traders there. The city was so rich that when it was destroyed by an earthquake, the city was able to rebuild itself and even refused financial assistance from Rome to aid in the recovery. But the city had one major weakness—it had no water supply. Laodicea relied on a group of hot water springs in the mountains some four miles away for all of its water. An aqueduct was constructed to bring the water from these hot springs into the city, but the water was still lukewarm when it arrived in the city. To this day, the

city has to store its water in jars on the sills of the windows to cool before they can tolerate drinking it.

It is to this context that John tailors his message. He compares the actions of the Christians in the city to its pitiful drinking water. The Christians actions, like the water, are neither hot nor cold, neither good nor evil. Their moral temperature is compared with the factors of their day-to-day life. They think they are rich (with all their taxes and wealth from thriving industries) but they are spiritually poor. They think they are clothed with the finest cloth (from the luxurious wool made in the city), but they are spiritually naked. They think they can see better than anyone in the world (with their famous eye salve), but they are spiritually blind.

Christ finishes by telling them to open the doors of their heart to his message that they might be rewarded for their endurance. One can instantly see that these letters, especially the letter to Laodicea, is bound to its particular historical context.

“Throughout the ages, Christians have adapted John of Patmos's visions to changing times, reading their own social, political and religious conflicts into the cosmic war he so powerfully evokes. Yet his Book of Revelation appeals not only to fear and desires for vengeance but also to hope.”
-Elaine Pagels

Chapter Four

“The Heavenly Worship and The Scroll and the Lamb”

Reading the Text Revelation 4:1-11 (The Heavenly Worship)

1 After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” 2 At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! 3 And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. 4 Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; 6 and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and

inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing:

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

Commentary

Unlike the previous chapters that deal with the conditions of the churches here on earth to which this apocalypse is written, chapter four deals instead with a vision of heaven and a throne room. In the past three chapters, John has given us an introduction to the apocalypse: a note about who wrote it, a note about who it was written to, etc. The past few chapters we might view as something like an appetizer for the banquet of apocalyptic literature. But this chapter and the following chapters we can see as the first part of the main courses of apocalyptic writings. In the previous few chapters there was a certain level of apocalyptic imagination at work, but from here on out the message is one of full force apocalypticism. Everything we read will have to be understood symbolically and with great imagination in order to understand what Revelation is telling the ancient Church and thus what it is telling us today.

As was mentioned earlier, John of Patmos did not have the best grasp of the Greek language, but that is not to say that he doesn't utilize the basic elements of Greek with great purpose. Greek is very different than English, and there are some nuances in ancient Greek that simply cannot be translated into idiomatic English. We encounter such a nuance here in verse 1, "After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'" The word "open" here is written in such a way in ancient Greek that it signifies an on-going or repeated action. This door stands open

continually. This tells us that what was disclosed to John in his vision is open for everybody else to see also. We are also beckoned to enter that open door with John and view the heavenly scene that is about to unfold.

When John enters this open door, he sees a throne room and someone seated on the throne. There isn't even a way in ancient Greek or any other language to describe the vision he sees of the One seated on the throne, so John is forced to use symbolic language. John writes that the One seated there looks like "jasper and carnelian." Precious stones have always inspired mortals and have always been supremely expensive, just ask anyone who has proposed to his girlfriend recently. Perhaps that is why John uses this metaphor to describe the One on the throne. Note, the One on the throne is not a precious stone. This book's message cannot be understood if taken literally! There are those interpreters who believe that certain parts of this book (and other books of the Bible) are to be understood with a great deal of literalism, but those who take this book literally pick and choose which parts of it are to be understood literally and which parts are not. They do so at their own whim and without a logical framework with which to operate.

In verse 4 we find that there is not just one throne in this heavenly space, but 24 other thrones with elders seated on them dressed in white and sporting golden crowns on their heads. Remember that in the apocalyptic symbolism associated with certain numbers that the number 12 is symbolic of the people of God. The "people of God" is somewhat vague, on purpose, because it brings to mind the number of disciples of

Jesus, the number of tribes of Israel, and even the number of Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. But why are there 24 and not just twelve? The use of 24 (12 + 12) is symbolic of all the people of God from various times.

Continuing the apocalyptic symbolism, these 24 elders are all dressed in white (symbolic of victory) and are wearing golden crowns on their heads. These symbols show that the persecuted Christians are the truly victorious ones and that they are likewise the ones who truly rule. The pagan authorities and the power, victory, and authority they have are all illusory. The structures of this world are false and are passing away. The powerful rulers of the pagan world are not really powerful at all. True reality is not dependent upon this world, but upon the heavenly realm. It is a shame that modern Christians have lost this understanding and this distinction between “the world” and the kingdom of God.

In apocalyptic, there is a great divide between those of the world and those of the kingdom of God. Although the world may not be persecuting Christians in the same way now as it was during the time Revelation was written, the distinction still exists. Christians are still opting to be on the side of the world and not the side of the kingdom of God. Granted, the specifics are different today than in ancient times, but the result is the same. Many Christians still try to become powerful by worldly standards. The world says that people should strive to be rich and powerful, to have the nicest homes and cars, to have the most disposable income, to have the smartest and most attractive children; but the

kingdom of God says that people should strive to help others by giving of their time, money, and resources. This typically means sacrificing worldly power, influence, wealth, and prestige. The great divide between those of the world and those of the kingdom of God still exists, it is just that most people are blind to it.

We encounter some strange creatures in this heavenly vision in verse 6 drawn from Ezekiel with their heads full of eyes in front and behind with faces resembling a lion, an ox, something like a human, and a flying eagle. They each have six wings and they sing the same song eternally. Heavenly creatures and earthly creatures in apocalyptic texts are to be understood differently. These heavenly creatures are usually taken from other biblical sources and are not symbolic of nations and rulers like those creatures who are not heavenly. These creatures are to be understood symbolically and not treated as though they were “the beasts” of other parts of apocalyptic. Heavenly creatures do not symbolize the kingdoms of the earth, but the kingdom of heaven. So, in a sense, these heavenly creatures do symbolize nations, but the nation they symbolize is the nation of heaven.

These heavenly creatures are quite strange looking if we try to picture them literally. It might be fun to try to draw a literal representation of one of these creatures. Let’s look at what these creatures might represent in apocalyptic terms.

In verse 8 we are told that these creatures have eyes all around the front and back of their heads. Again, we have to understand their appearance in apocalyptic

terms. The presence of eyes all over their head would have symbolized to the persecuted Christians hearing this message that heaven sees all that is happening in the world. Heaven sees their persecution and the injustices they are suffering. One day things will be as they should be if they just patiently endure. The multiple eyes of heaven are not blinded to their plight.

Apart from the all-seeing eyes of heaven, we are told that these creatures sing the same song of praise day and night without ceasing: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” In addition, the 24 elders also sing a similar hymn to the One seated on the throne, falling before him and casting their crowns before him, saying: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

The American author Mark Twain, a devout agnostic, wrote a satire about this scene and the popular image of heaven where the devout sing the same hymn over and over on their clouds in heaven. It is entitled Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven, and the basic message is that if all one does in heaven is sing the same song over and over to God like an exaggerated version of worship in church, then he doesn’t want to go there. Who can blame him? This literal depiction of heaven doesn’t seem particularly rewarding for those who endure sadistic persecution. And, the book would not have been passed down to us today if that were its message. The true message is a symbolic and deeply apocalyptic message reflecting the simple fact that everything these heavenly beings do is in a sense in worship of God.

Worship is so much more than just singing hymns to God and eating a small piece of bread or a small wafer and having a sip of wine or having water poured over one's head. This vision of heavenly worship is telling the reader that life is in a sense sacramental, that worship can be seen as the actions we do each day, the things we say to others, and the way we live our lives. Worship is not just something Christians do at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. It may be the most recognizable dimension of worship, but worship does not end at twelve o'clock on Sunday.

But we should not skip over the words of this heavenly hymn the elders sing as they cast their crowns before the throne. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." The words of their hymn are very important. There is a part of this hymn which would have had very special meaning and relevance to the plight of the persecuted Christians hearing the words of this hymn. The phrase, "Lord and God," or in Latin, "Dominus et Deus," was the title by which the Roman emperor Domitian demanded to be worshipped.

In many cities he had temples erected to his glory where he was depicted by a statue of him seated on a throne. Anyone during this time who refused to worship Caesar by this phrase was subject to persecution and even death. There has been much speculation as to the specific nature of this persecution arising from refusing to worship Caesar as such, but the specifics are not essential to understanding this message. The point is that those who refused to worship Caesar as Dominus

et Deus would be persecuted. This hymn reveals so much about both heaven and earth.

The words of hymns are deeply important. The words we choose to use in our worship are just as important today as they were when Revelation was written. There is a disturbing trend in many churches of choosing music based on their appeal to the unchurched without much thought as to the words of these songs. A prevalent catch-phrase of many supporters of such movements is that “church is for the person not in the pew” or that “church is for the unchurched.” A main emphasis of this movement is that people who come to church to worship should receive something from the experience. This idea could not be more contrary to the message of Revelation! Heavenly worship, as depicted in this scene, is for the person who patiently endures persecution, who worships at the expense of their lives. For those persecuted Christians who patiently endure the suffering brought on by true worship, it is not about receiving something from the experience but about giving something. Worship for this group of persecuted Christians is not focused on what the individual worshipper receives from worship but about what they give. The Christian who worships Christ as “Lord and God” in this context is choosing death in this life and giving up entirely any thought of what they might receive in this world from the worship experience. All this is not to say that the person who worships does not receive something from the experience of offering themselves in the service and worship of God, but the emphasis is on giving to God, not receiving from God.

We should not, however, assume that just because a

hymn is new or different from the ones that have been sung since the 19th century that they are inappropriate for worship. Worship style is not the point, but worship content is. One must remember that the hymns most people would classify as “traditional” were somewhat “contemporary” in their time. The introduction of the organ into worship was a deeply controversial matter in its time, probably much more so than the introduction of guitars or drums in our own time. The message from Revelation is mainly that the words we use in our worship matter and worship is not something designed to “feed” those who are worshipping.

Rather, worship is about offering up ourselves in service of God by our words, our actions, and our lives. This is a thought echoed in many communion liturgies by the phrase or its equivalent:

“And so,
in remembrance of these
your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ’s offering for us,
as we proclaim the mystery of faith...”
(The United Methodist Hymnal, “A Service of Word
and Table I,” p.10).

This scene of heavenly worship tells us much about how we should worship on earth, both in and out of church. It tells us that our words are important, and one should not assume that any particular style of worship is being promoted. However, there are some key ideas about the meaning and purpose of worship that this

scene violently opposes. This scene also reminds us that Christians cannot confuse God and Caesar. There is no place in heavenly worship for Caesar, whatever his name may be or whatever his country may be called.

Reading the Text Revelation 5:1-14
(The Scroll and the Lamb)

1 Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; 2 and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. 4 And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

6 Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. 8 When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you
ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language
and people and nation; 10 you have made them to be a
kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will
reign on earth.”

11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

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

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

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

Commentary

In chapter 5 the scene changes a bit. The previous chapter sets the stage for what is about to happen here. It introduces the “characters” of the apocalyptic drama, but there isn’t a whole lot action in chapter 4. However, this shifts in chapter 5 when John’s attention becomes focused on a scroll in the right hand of the One seated on the throne. It was written on the front and back and sealed with seven seals. However no one in heaven (angelic figures) or on earth (living mortals) or under the earth (deceased mortals) was found who was worthy to open the scroll and break its seven seals.

Many translators when they come across the word for “scroll” will translate it as “book.” This is anachronistic and should be ignored if you have a translation that interprets the Greek this way. Scrolls are still used and still made in the Jewish traditions.

The Rabbis have attendants who will roll the scroll to its appropriate reading for the day in their worship services in the synagogue. Scrolls are very cumbersome and costly and have largely fallen out of use since the invention of moveable type and modern printing methods. Scrolls have always been very costly because they are made from leather that has undergone an extensive process to make it suitable to write on. Due to the large amount of time and money it takes to produce a scroll, only one side is conditioned appropriately to receive ink. Scrolls are not meant to be written on both sides, but if the author had a lot to say and it was extremely important, he would write on both sides of the scroll. Such is the case here. The scroll mentioned

here that the One on the throne is holding in his right hand was also sealed with seven seals. Seven is an apocalyptic number symbolizing completion. This simply means that the scroll was completely sealed and could not be opened. However, there is another dynamic going on in this scene. God is holding this scroll in his right hand. Apart from religious writings, various historical documents were also written on scrolls. And, the right hand has always been the symbolic instrument of power. This image would have communicated to the Church that God is in control of history. God has been there for his people in the past and God will be there with his people in the future. Even this seemingly insignificant matter of the hand the scroll is held in serves to comfort the persecuted. And remember, giving hope to those who are being persecuted is the central message of Revelation.

So, John begins to weep bitterly because this scroll can't be opened and its message can't be received since nobody is worthy to open it. John weeping bitterly because a scroll can't be opened seems like a bit of an overreaction to trifling problem. But, to those being persecuted, of which John was one, the word of God to them was no small matter. They could not hear this word because nobody was worthy to reveal it to them.

Finally, one of the elders told John not to cry because there was one worthy enough to open it—The Lion of Judah! Lions have always been the animal symbol of ultimate power and might, even nicknamed “the king of the jungle.” It would naturally take an animal with such strength to rip into something that no one else could. So, John sees this Lion of Judah, but it is not what he

was expecting.

To his astonishment, the brute beast was not a lion at all but a wimpy lamb that looked as though it had been slaughtered. If a lion is viewed traditionally as the strongest and most fearless of animals, a lamb is viewed as the weakest, most fragile, and frightened of creatures. It is not uncommon for sheep to jump over other sheep out of fear when a sheep dog barks at them! This idea of a lamb, even a slaughtered lamb, as the strongest of creatures turns the whole world upside down and reminds the persecuted Christians that they are members of a different world order.

We expect God to play by the rules of the world, but God expects us to play by the rules of the kingdom of God. Our rules say that the strongest is the best. He with the most firepower, the largest army, the biggest stash of nuclear weapons, the one that can kill the largest number—that is the one the world says is the strongest. However, God is God and we are not. God's rules turn the world's rules on its head. God's rules say that the weakest is the strongest and the strongest is the weakest; the poorest are the richest and the richest are the poorest, the least is the greatest and the greatest is the least. God is God and we are not. It is a simple truth that every Christian believes in their heads, but it is a truth that many don't understand. Most modern Christians expect God to reward those who do good and to punish those who do evil. Most modern Christians expect God to take his holy hand grenade and blow the enemy to shreds. But instead, God lets the enemy kill Himself like a little sissy! It is not up to God to conform to our rules; it is up to God's people to

conform to God's rules.

John is telling us that our trust should be in the slaughtered Lamb and not the mighty lion. After all, it is by death that death was conquered. Do we modern Christians put our trust in the strength of our worldly power structures of military might or do we put our trust instead in the weakness of the cross? Do we worship the slaughtered Lamb of God or do we worship the prowess and power of the lion? To whom do we as Christians pledge our allegiance—to God or to Caesar?

Well, the slaughtered Lamb, which is an obvious reference to Christ, is worthy to take the scroll and open it. When the Lamb took the scroll, the four creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb and worshipped him. The elders have harps and golden bowls full of incense which we are told represents the prayers of the saints.

Incense is something which most Protestants don't like, but it functioned as an essential ingredient for worship for centuries, and still does today even though it is only used in the more liturgical churches. Incense rises like the smoke of the altar when a sacrifice was offered. It thus became symbolic of the prayers of the saints rising like smoke to heaven. Finally, in verse 10 we are given an extraordinary image of the people of God. The saints, the people of God, are said to have been made into a kingdom themselves. This kingdom of the saints stands in stark contrast and opposition to the kingdoms of the world. It is to this new nation of the saints that the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll written on both

sides.

“Revelation: a famous book in which St. John the
Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done
by the commentators, who know nothing.”

-Ambrose Bierce

Chapter Five

“The Seven Seals are Opened”

Reading the Text Revelation 6:1-17 (The Seven Seals)

1 Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” 2 I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, “Come!” 4 And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword.

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, “Come!” I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, 6 and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, “Come!” 8 I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the

earth.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” 11 They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.

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

Commentary

Before we begin thinking about the text of chapter six, a brief note needs to be said about how this section relates to the book as a whole. There are three cycles of seven in the book of Revelation—seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Remember that we are dealing with apocalyptic writings and that all visions are individual, self-contained units that are not chronological. So, for instance, the seven seals don't necessarily have to be opened before the seven trumpets can be sounded. They are basically three different ways of communicating a very similar message in a slightly different way.

We are finally getting into some of the headlining figures of the book as we first come across the figures of the infamous four horsemen of the apocalypse. The first seal is broken and in verses 1-8 one of the four creatures tells John to come and see. John sees a white horse whose rider was carrying a bow and wearing a crown, conquering and to conquer. Remember that in apocalyptic white is not the color of good guys and purity, but rather it signifies the one who is victorious. This victorious person or being can be either good or evil. Their moral character is not what is important; rather, it is the fact that the one in white is the victorious one. This wearing of white would have been the ancient equivalent of someone holding a trophy high and pouring champagne or Gatorade all over his fellow teammates. The rider of the white horse in 6:2 is not the same as the rider on the white horse in 19:11. This white horse rider in chapter six is not a good guy, but he is victorious, whereas the rider of the white horse in 19:11 is a good guy who is victorious.

The second seal is opened in verse 3 and the second horseman of the apocalypse is revealed to us. This horse is bright red, and its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, carrying with him a large sword. It is vital to note the language that is employed here. The rider of the red horse is permitted to take peace from the earth. This figure of war and violence is powerless unless he has permission from the Almighty. We will discuss this important point a little later on in the book, but remember that God is all-powerful even though evil may seem that way in the present. God allows or permits evil to gain a temporary upper hand for the simple reason of allowing sinners more time to repent.

The third seal is opened in verse 5 and the rider of the black horse emerges onto the scene with a pair of scales in his hand. Just as white is not a signifier of a good guy, black is not a signifier of a bad guy. Black symbolizes a lack of something, not something evil. But what is lacking that this rider symbolizes? An answer to this question lies in the statement echoed by a voice coming from the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine.” This may seem confusing. A day’s wage was a denarius. A denarius could buy enough wheat or barley to keep an adult male alive for one day when made into bread (barley does not make as good of bread and it takes a little more). So, these amounts of wheat or barley were the required amounts to keep one male barely alive. It has been suggested that men were allowed to purchase only these amounts of wheat or barley each day without worshipping Caesar. A Christian male could keep himself alive, but not his

family on such rations. Regardless of whether this is true, the obvious message given to John in this vision is that there will be a lack of food or a famine in the land. However, the last part of the sentence uttered by the voice from in the midst of the four living creatures said, “but do not damage the olive oil and the wine.” Olive oil and wine were luxury items. This seems to suggest that it is only the poor people who would be harmed by this famine. From archaeological records of the time, the price of wheat and barley was about eight times what it would have been normally.

The fourth horseman appears in verse 8 riding a horse that is pale green in color. It is symbolic of the logical end the other three horsemen would bring. A conqueror on the white horse, a red horse rider bringing violence upon the earth, a black horse rider symbolizing a famine—all these horses together spell doom for the people afflicted by them. These horsemen are all symbolic of Caesar. Caesar has been given the authority to kill some of the faithful with the sword, to kill others with famine or pestilence, and to kill others by feeding them to the wild beasts (verse 8). The Romans were renowned for killing those who dared to stand against them in vile and spectacular ways ranging from simply killing them with the sword to depriving them of food to feeding them to wild animals in the Colosseum as entertainment for the citizens of Rome.

This may seem strange to us, however, if one was a persecuted Christian during this time, they would have seen the underlying message quite plainly and clearly. So, if God is allowing evil to gain the upper hand for a time, the question erupting from the mouths of the

saints would have to be the words from verse ten, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” How long will God allow this persecution and this injustice to continue? The saints are crying out from under the altar. These victims of the persecution are given a white robe, perhaps to remind them that they have already conquered. Victory was already won by Christ on the cross. However, these saints under the altar are told to wait a little longer while the saints on earth are told that the persecution was not yet over.

The sixth seal is opened in verse 12 and there is a great earthquake, the sun became blackened and the moon became like blood. The stars fell to earth, and the sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up. The mountains and the islands are removed from their places. The natural order is not as it is supposed to be. This is not meant to be taken literally. This is meant to be understood as a symbolic way of saying that God is intervening in the affairs of the natural order and is finally going to bring judgment on the evil ones. The message to the persecuted Christians is clear: A time is coming soon when the evil ones will be overthrown, they will try to hide but they cannot. Nobody can hide from God’s judgment, even if the future looks dim right now, it will be brighter. Good will win. God will intervene and conquer. God will reward and God will punish. Be patient and endure and the white robes will be yours. This highly symbolic vision would have been understood as a message of great hope to the persecuted. It would never have been understood as a blueprint for the end of time. Revelation is written to

give hope to persecuted people, not to satisfy the theological wonderings of Christians two thousand years later. If you were among those persecuted Christians at the end of the first century, you would need a message of hope to get you through the hard days ahead and to remind you of your place in God's kingdom. This voice of hope is the central message of John's apocalypse.

Reading the Text Revelation 7:1-17
(The 144,000 Sealed)

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, 3 saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.”

4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel: 5 From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor and power
and might be to our God forever and ever!
Amen.”

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16 They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17 for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Commentary

Chapter seven, like most chapters in Revelation, can be a bit confusing. We must remember that these chapters and verses are artificial ways of marking space within the book. The original authors never imagined that there would be versification and chapterization of their writings. The original text was written in Greek in all capital letters with no spacing or punctuation marks to separate them. Even the way the paragraphs and sentences are broken up is artificial. The ancient scribes who copied this text had no chapters, verses, spacing, or punctuation. Do not be fooled into thinking that this is not part of the same series of seven seals.

One might expect the seventh seal to be opened immediately and conclude the series, but the seventh seal doesn't get broken until chapter eight, and even then it simply serves as an interlude for the next cycle of seven—the seven trumpets. So really, the sixth seal being broken is the ending of this first cycle of seven.

In this chapter, the people of God are sealed. There are four angels (not to be confused with the four living creatures of the previous vision) which are chosen to represent the natural order. These four angels are holding back the winds and they have been given power to damage the earth and sea. However, they have been restrained until the people of God can be sealed. Every baptized Christian is sealed at their baptism. The minister, after pouring the water over their head, is to make the sign of the cross on their forehead. This important symbolic act has lost its importance over the years, but originally this bold move was a way of saying

that we belong to God. Just as earrings were used to mark slaves as belonging to someone, the sign of the cross on the forehead was the sign that the newly baptized Christian belonged to God.

Now the reader gets to have some fun. The infamous number of 144,000 creeps up into the text here. This number is simply taken because when the 12,000 people from each of the twelve tribes of Israel were gathered it numbered 144,000. This does not refer to a literal number. By now it should be clear that whenever apocalyptic literature uses numbers it is to achieve a symbolic image designed to convey a deeper truth and not a literal figure.

This number, being multiples of 12 (the people of God) and 10 (inclusivity), means that all the people of God will be sealed. It does not under any circumstances mean that the fire department has surveyed the expanse of heaven and deemed that heaven can only legally hold 144,000 people without incurring a fine or something.

This would further be impossible because at the time Revelation was written, there were no longer 12 tribes in Israel. Really by that point, the only tribe still in existence was the tribe of Judah (from whence we get the term “Jew”). Technically speaking, Jewish is only an adjective applied in reference to those from the tribe of Judah. A brief history lesson is necessary here.

The Jewish people technically began with Abraham. Abraham had a son named Isaac, Isaac had a son named Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons. Jacob also was known by the name Israel. These 12 sons of Jacob/Israel

became the twelve tribes of Israel. These twelve tribes were basically a loosely federated tribal council for hundreds of years until the time of the Judges. One famous judge was Samson. However, the twelve tribes of Israel wanted a king eventually and made Saul the first king of Israel. Saul technically united all the tribes under one government, but he was not well-supported, and being the first king, there were many things that had to be perfected later on. Then David became king after Saul. David was a military hero who conquered the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and established a capital of Israel in Jerusalem. David really united the nation together as one in a way that nobody else ever did. After David died, his son Solomon became king.

However, once Solomon died, he did not leave an order as to who should be king and his sons started a civil war over the throne. Eventually, the kingdoms split into two kingdoms: one north (Israel) and one south (Judah). The southern kingdom had its capital remain in Jerusalem and the northern kingdom set up their capital in Damascus. But, in 722 B.C. the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians and then the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The Assyrians had a policy of eliminating a race of people by intermarrying them and taking away their old identities and giving them a new identity as the people of Assyria. The Babylonians used a different strategy of simply exiling the people from their land and holding them captive in Babylon. The Babylonians eventually were conquered by the Persians under Cyrus and he allowed the southern kingdom to go home. However, once Assyria lost its dominance in the area, the people of the northern kingdom had been intermarried for so long that there was no pure bloodline anymore and the tribes

of the north had basically ceased to exist. This race of people stemming from this northern kingdom bloodline but without identity as such were known as Samaritans.

So, by the time of the first century, there was basically only the tribe of Judah left from these twelve tribes. It would have been impossible for the people of these tribes to gather and be numbered as 12,000 from each tribe because these tribes (with the exception of Judah) no longer even existed and had not existed for hundreds of years even at the time Revelation was written. John of Patmos knows this history and understands this history. But he is not writing history. He is writing an apocalyptic message of hope for the new people of God who are being persecuted.

But one does not even need to read this chapter that closely to pick up on the main point that John is trying to make here. John (in a rare moment) even explains the meaning of this part of the story to us in verse 9:

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”

This number of 144,000 can only be understood as it was supposed to be understood, apocalyptically and symbolically. It is important to hear the following words from verses 13-14 as well:

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come

from?” 14 I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

These verses provide many of the fundamentalist and literalist interpreters of this book with fodder for the fires they like to kindle in the souls of popular religion adherents, many of whom get their theology and their ethics from whatever sources they are told are best-sellers. The “great ordeal” has received so much attention by these (mis)interpreters that the general picture of the entire book has been distorted. People imagine that this great ordeal refers to a time when God is going to test the people who are left after “the rapture” (even though that concept is not mentioned in Revelation or by John of Patmos or even in 99.997% of Scripture). The great ordeal is not in reference to a time in the future, but to a time in the past. The present time that the recipients of this letter were living in was the great ordeal. Can you imagine what it would have been like to live in fear of your life because you were a Christian and not a patriot of Rome? Patriotism was the national religion of the Roman Empire. And Caesar was the embodiment of such a faith. The great ordeal was not about a time hundreds or thousands of years in the future—it was about the ordeal they were living or dying through in their present time.

Reading the Text Revelation 8:1-5 (The Seventh Seal is Opened)

1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets

were given to them.

3 Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Commentary

Finally, the seventh seal is opened and we have the end of it all, right? Not exactly. There is a strange moment of silence in heaven for about half an hour. Seven angels in heaven are now given seven trumpets and another angel comes before the throne with a golden censor.

A censor is a device that holds incense as it is burning and the lid of it is perforated as to allow this smoke to escape the censor. Incense is offered up in many churches still today, albeit usually only the churches with a higher liturgy than most Protestants, though not entirely. Incense as it rose heavenward was symbolic of the prayers of the saints rising to heaven. Incense also smells sweet and is symbolic of how sweet our prayers smell to God. Most churches have forgotten totally about incense and it has become something reminiscent of the 1970's and flower children. It is shameful that the modern church has allowed this to be the case. What was once an important part of worship and religious symbolism has ceased to be such for most churches in the West.

Worshippers today in church are too concerned about allergies, personal preference, individual tastes, and worries about what the incense would do to the paint on the ceiling to care about symbolism and continuity with the early church. Protestants have historically wanted to get back to the way it was in the early church, but only if they can do so by avoiding the things the Roman Catholics do. However, the main consideration in not using incense is that someone's allergies might be aggravated. Maybe the Church could

use a good dose of theological and liturgical Benadryl and revive some of the important elements in the early church. One might be shocked by experiencing a worship service as rich in the symbolism and liturgy as the book of Revelation, of which incense would be only one small part of the innovation.

“A man says to me,
‘Can you explain the seven trumpets of the Revelation?’
No, but I can blow one in your ear,
and warn you to escape from the wrath to come.”
-Charles Spurgeon

Chapter Six

“The Vision of the Seven Trumpets”

Reading the Text Revelation 8:6-9:21

6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them. 7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. 9 A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise the night. 13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in midheaven, “Woe, woe,

woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!”

1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit; 2 he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given authority like the authority of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to damage the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.

7 In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; 9 they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people for five months. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed. There are still two woes to come.

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. 16 The number of the troops of cavalry was two hundred million; I heard their number. 17 And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur; the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm. 20 The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. 21 And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.

Commentary

Now the scene shifts again from the cycle of seven seals to the second cycle of seven—the seven trumpets. Remember, in apocalyptic literature the visions are independent, self-contained units that are not chronological in nature. This means that the cycle of the seven seals does not have to happen before the cycle of the seven trumpets. The cycle of the seven trumpets are to be seen and studied on their own.

In verses 6-13 we read about a number of different plagues being unleashed on the earth with the blow of each trumpet. The first brings hail and fire mixed with blood which burns up a third of the earth. The second trumpet blast reveals that a great mountain of fire was thrown into the sea causing one third of it to turn to blood and a third of the sea creatures died and a third of the ships even were destroyed.

The third trumpet reveals a star called wormwood that fell into a third of the rivers making the water bitter and undrinkable. The fourth trumpet blast made the light of the day one third less bright. Then an eagle cried out with a loud voice, “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts the other trumpets that the angels are about to blow!”

It is important to note that in the first four trumpet blasts around one third of everything was destroyed. You might be frantically looking back upon chapter one to the list of apocalyptic numbers searching painstakingly to find what one third means in apocalyptic literature. You will not find it there because

it is not an apocalyptic number. It simply means that only a third of everything will be destroyed, that is, this destruction is not ultimate, it is incomplete destruction. These signs are intended to bring the unrighteous to repentance. Did you notice a parallel to the stories of the plagues here? They closely resemble the plagues unleashed on the Egyptians just before the Exodus.

These plagues are not carbon copies of the plagues from Exodus, but that is not what is important for us here. What is important is that John is stressing this parallel between the people of God then and the people of God at the time he was writing. Just as the people of God in bondage in Egypt cried out and God heard them, so God hears his people who are being persecuted at present. God is not absent from his people. God hears their prayers and their cries. The people John was writing to were facing martyrdom for their faith and John is reminding them of the faithfulness of God in the past.

It was said earlier that Revelation is a deeply evangelistic book, contrary to the way in which it has been used in the last two hundred years. This is said because everything is not destroyed. The plagues unleashed by the trumpet blasts are not intended to destroy everything, but to function as a sign to the unbelievers to repent. The faithful are asked to endure a bit longer in order that just a few more might be brought to Christ.

In chapter 9 the fifth trumpet is sounded and its results continue for the first 12 verses. A plague of locusts is unleashed on the earth, but they don't eat the

vegetation. Instead, they torture the people who have not been sealed by God. The locusts are not allowed to kill the people but only to torture them for five months. Do you remember what the number five means in apocalyptic? I hope not, because it is not an apocalyptic number either. What then could it represent? One logical explanation might mean that it is not total destruction. That would be a logical way to interpret this number, but there is a better explanation for John's use of this number five. We forget that we don't live in a world where we worry about locusts destroying our crops.

In fact, we would not recognize a locust if it started torturing us (although I am not sure how it might go about doing that). The life-span of a locust is five months. This image is taken partially from Joel 2:1-11. In this text from the prophet Joel, locusts are compared to an army.

Just to give you an idea of how far some interpreters go to try and understand these visions without looking to the past, we could examine the book by Hal Lindsey, The Late, Great Planet Earth (which you should never take seriously). Lindsey, an American writing this sham during the Cold War, says that the locusts mentioned here are not insects at all but that they are predictions about Russian helicopters. Unfortunately, the insanity does not end with a fanatic writing during the Cold War. In the modern best-selling equivalents to this interpretation on Revelation, the Left Behind series, there is a book entitled Apollyon which attempts to write a historical fiction account of what will happen when these trumpets are blown.

Revelation is not in the business of predicting the future. It is in the business of comforting the oppressed. It has been taken so far out of its historical context by some that it has become a source of fear for many Christians who think it will tell them what to look for to know that the world is about to end. Revelation is not about the future, it is about the past. John of Patmos was not in the business of predicting the future. He is not a Biblical sort of Nostradamus. The locusts are also said here to have hair like women's hair. What kind of locusts are being discussed here? They sound more like an army than they do locusts. Well, that is precisely what is being referenced here. There was a group of people known as the Parthians. They were one of the key barbarian nations to the east and north of the Roman Empire. Rome was never able to stretch its borders past the Euphrates River. It just so happens that this was the border of the Parthian nation. The Parthians were famous for their peculiar army. They rode white horses (literally and symbolically) and they shot flaming arrows while on horseback. They also wore their hair long, like women, and wore iron breastplates. The scorpion-like locusts were not harmless grasshoppers or Russian helicopters but a description of a barbarian nation that was a constant threat to Rome.

So, why be scared of locusts? Instead, let's have a bit of fun with locusts. Technically speaking, a locust is simply a short-horned grasshopper. Who in their right mind would be scared of a grasshopper? Well, locusts were feared not because of what they could do to the people, but because of what they could do to the crops. They multiply so quickly and when they mature and get

with other locusts, they stop functioning as individuals and begin working as a group, eating field upon field of crops. This is why they were feared. However, John tells us that these “grasshoppers” are actually intended to harm people. They have long hair and tails like scorpions with stingers. Again, if you want to take this book literally, go ahead, but know that you do so without any religious or scientific backing. Locusts don’t even carry diseases that can harm humans. You do not need to be scared of grasshoppers!

The name given to the king of the locusts was in Hebrew Abaddon. This word occurs eight times in the Old Testament and is another name given to Sheol, the place of the dead. John gives him another name as well, Apollyon. Apollyon means “destroyer.”

In verses 13-21 we also encounter more mention of the infamous barbarian Parthians, although here they are referred to as the four angels. Do not be confused about this term “angel.” Strictly speaking, the word angel comes from the Greek *angelos* which simply means “messenger.” When John uses that term here, he is not referring to the cute little baby-faced, chubby winged cherubs pictured on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Every time one reads about angels in the Bible they have caused whoever sees them great fear. Most people find a chubby baby with wings no more ferocious than a grasshopper. However, these “angels” mentioned here in Revelation can be either good or bad. Here they are not so much agents of God as they are simply a power which will kill one third of the inhabitants of the earth.

We also read that the number of this army was 200

million. The value of that number is lost to us. The number two is one of those numbers that isn't significant in apocalyptic literature across the board, and it occurs very rarely in apocalyptic writings. One can speculate about it, but in the end, one just has to chalk it up to the files of the unknown. It is best for us not to get too hung up on the meaning of the number. However, there is another key reference in verse 19 to the Parthians. We are told that their power was in their heads and in their tails. We have mentioned that the Parthians were well-known for shooting arrows (sometimes flaming ones) as they rode their horses. They would shoot these arrows as they approached and as they rode away, thus the power of the Parthians was in their heads and their tails. Even though these signs were intended to make people repent, most people continued to worship gods of stone and the god of Caesar.

Reading the Text Revelation 10:1-11

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

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

Commentary

In chapter 10 an angel (in the more traditional apocalyptic sense) comes down from heaven and gives John a little scroll. The thunders sounded a message to John, but he was told not to write it down.

There is a very peculiar translation that needs to be cleared up. The King James Version, despite its eloquence and history can be at times very misleading. The archaic language it employs can confuse many moderns and it is based on manuscripts that are not the earliest or most reliable ones.

This is due to no fault of its own; it is simply because since the 17th century there have been discoveries of more reliable and older manuscripts that many times disagree with the translations of the KJV. That being said, the KJV translates 10:6 as “that there should be time no longer.” The way this sentence is phrased might make one think that the world is about to end. However, the NRSV translates it much more appropriately as, “there will be no more delay.” The seeming discrepancy here is simply a question of archaic language where a phrase in the 17th century means something different to us now.

John was told to take the scroll and eat it. It was sweet as honey to his mouth, but it was bitter to his stomach. Eating a scroll might sound strange to us, and it should if we take it literally. But, like just about everything in apocalyptic, it is meant symbolically. The word of God is both sweet and bitter. And, there is precedence for such an action as eating a scroll in the Old Testament. In

the book of Ezekiel (chapter 3) the prophet is told to eat a scroll and it is sweet as honey. Here John is drawing another parallel to Old Testament literature. John's recipients would have instantly caught the allusion.

Reading the Text Revelation 11:1-19

1 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. 3 And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth.”

4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 5 And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner. 6 They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

7 When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. 9 For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; 10 and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

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

13 At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe has passed. The third woe is coming very soon. 15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

“The kingdom of the world
has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”

16 Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 singing,

“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

18 The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

19 Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and

there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Commentary

In chapter 11 we are told that John was given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple but not the outside court of the temple. This idea of measuring corresponds to the idea of “sealing” in the previous cycle of seven. Behind this action is the idea of protection, not construction. The reason the courtyard is not measured is because in apocalyptic writings there is no gray area. Everything is either black or white, good or bad, saint or sinner. The courtyard was an area where Gentiles were allowed to gather as well. So, those who would gather around the temple were not measured with the people who were in the temple. The “holy city” was going to be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles for 42 months or 1,260 days. This is the typical apocalyptic number for the day of persecution. Remember $3\frac{1}{2}$ is half of seven. Seven stands for completion, and thus half of seven symbolizes incompleteness. In other words, the persecution is not about to end.

The two witnesses, or two olive trees, are references to Moses and Elijah. Elijah had the power to stop rain from falling and Moses had the power to turn water into blood. The fire that comes from their mouths in verse five is symbolic of the judgment of God’s prophetic word. The identification of the two witnesses as Moses and Elijah is deeper than just their identity. In Hebrew culture, the first person who started a movement became the marker whereby the movement was identified. Thus, Moses became the figurehead for the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament attributed to him; and Elijah became the figurehead for

all the prophets. At the time John was writing this apocalypse, only the Law and the Prophets were canonical. In Revelation, this designation is another way of saying God's people.

In verse 7 the reader is introduced for the first time to "the Beast." John typically does this sort of thing to his audience. He will introduce a new character or word to the reader and not explain it until later on. Such is the case with the beast. John will address this figure later on. The beast will kill the two witnesses and they will not be buried for 3 ½ days. But they will come back to life and ascend into heaven. Then a great earthquake will come upon Jerusalem, killing a tenth of the city.

Then finally, in verse 15, we get to the blowing of the seventh trumpet. Another liturgical soliloquy ensues and the scene closes with a view of the heavenly temple. But the end is still not here. Now the reader gets to see some of those crazy beasts that cause so much controversy.

“Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange
monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one
of his own commentators!”

-G.K. Chesterton

Chapter Seven

“The Beast”

Reading the Text Revelation 12:1-6

1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

Commentary

At the beginning of chapter 12 we are told that John of Patmos saw “a great portent in heaven” (1). A “portent” is probably best translated in this context as “sign” or “important vision.” The important vision John sees is that of a woman who is pregnant and trying to give birth. The scene however changes in verse 3 to another portent, that of a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems (crowns) on his head. This great red dragon stood in front of the woman so that he might consume her child as soon as it was born. But the woman was able to give birth to a male child who was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. The child, however, was snatched away and taken to rule on his throne in heaven. The woman fled to the wilderness for 1260 days where she could be nourished.

There are many different interpretations of this specific vision. Remember, in apocalyptic writings each vision is not dependent upon the previous vision. Each vision is an individual, self-contained unit that is not bound in a chronological order to the previous vision(s). The original audience would have all known that apocalyptic literature (of which Revelation is a supreme example) is written in highly symbolic language and that it cannot be understood literally. So, as modern audiences learn to read Revelation in its proper context as an apocalyptic writing, they too will understand that this vision is not referring to a woman who is giving birth being harassed by a mythical red dragon.

So, who (or what) is the pregnant woman, the child, and the red dragon? The answer is complicated. The woman

is a representative of a number of different things. It is meant to refer us to the Virgin Mary who literally gave birth to the Messiah. But this is only its initial meaning. As John is prone to do, he makes the woman into a symbol of the larger Church. Do you remember what was said about the two witnesses in the previous chapter? It was discussed that sometimes the person who starts a movement becomes synonymous with the movement itself (i.e. Moses representing the Torah, Elijah representing the prophets, etc.) . The same thing is going on here in this vision. Mary, having given birth to Christ, becomes the physical character by which the larger Church is represented.

This vision is meant to make us recall the events surrounding the birth of Christ. Matthew 2:16 is brought into view here where Matthew recalls what we know as the slaughter of the innocents where Herod had all the male children under two years of age killed in an effort to eradicate the possible messiah from the land. This vision is actually an apocalyptic retelling of the birth of Christ, but its focus is not so much on the biography of Christ as it is on the purpose of his birth and death. There is no mention made by John of the cross here, but that is because John is trying to stress that the end of Christ's life was also the beginning. Death does not win. In fact, it is only through death that death is overturned. This is John's way of reminding us that the end of life is also the beginning of life.

Another interesting development in this vision is that the woman (the Church) flees to the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God for 1,260 days. But

notice, the Church is nourished in the wilderness. Even though the Church may be afraid of what is happening around it in the world it was a part of at the time, even in the midst of this fear and this persecution, God is nourishing the Church. But the woman does not have to stay in the wilderness forever, only 1,260 days which the reader will recall is an apocalyptic way of saying “an incomplete/temporary duration of time.” The Church will not remain in the wilderness forever, but even while it is there it is nourished.

So then, if the pregnant woman and her child is a metaphor for the Virgin Mary and Christ, who then is the red dragon mentioned in the vision? The red dragon is a representation of the Roman Empire. He is red in color because he symbolizes violence, something John is opposed to in all forms in this book. It is important to note that this dragon has seven heads and ten horns. This will be further explained in chapter 13 when the reader encounters a very similar creature. The dragon tried to kill the child, but was unsuccessful. This however did not keep the dragon away for long.

Reading the Text Revelation 12:7-17

7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation
and the power and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.

11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the
Lamb

and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

12 Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in
them!

But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!”

13 So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 Then from his mouth the serpent poured water

like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

Commentary

In verse 7 the reader encounters something that they need to be very careful about reading too much into. Some see in this section an explanation of how the Devil became the Devil. This is not meant to be a theological exposition on the history of the Devil in Christian thought. This vision should not be taken out of its context to say something that it never had thought to say. This is an apocalyptic vision, not historical theology. If you are curious about this legend popularly called “the rebellion of the angels” you can find something similar in the pseudepigraphal book of 2 Enoch. These books which were not Scripture should not be seen to be on the same level as Scripture, but they can help inform us of many things. These books would have nonetheless been part of the cultural understanding of the people to whom Revelation was written. But, if we are to talk of the rebellion of the angels, let’s keep it Scriptural.

Getting back to the vision itself, Michael fights against the dragon and his angels, presumably in heaven, and eventually defeats them, casting them out of heaven and to the earth. The dragon and his associates are not killed though, and he continues his pursuit of the woman. The woman, however, is given the wings of an eagle so that she may fly away to the wilderness where she is nourished for 3 ½ years.

The dragon here is now called by another name. He is called the serpent now and is referenced by the other names history assigns to this infamous character. The serpent (a.k.a. “the red dragon,” “the Devil,” “Satan”)

made water to pour forth from his mouth to kill the woman, but the earth swallowed it up. It is not uncommon in Scripture for a personified Earth to swallow the enemies of God or their devices. This made the evil figure, now called again “the dragon” angry and he went off to make war on the rest of her children (the Church).

Reading the Text Revelation 12:18-13:10

18 Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.

13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. 4 They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

5 The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. 6 It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, 8 and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered. 9 Let anyone who has an ear listen:

10 If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Commentary

In chapter 13 we encounter one of the most notorious characters in the book of Revelation—The Beast, or more properly, the sea beast. Although there are actually a number of beasts or beast-like characters in the story, the sea beast is the one that becomes known as “The Beast.” It might be easiest to refer to them as the Satanic Trinity: the Red Dragon (12:18), the Sea Beast (13:1), and the Land Beast (13:11). The red dragon and the sea beast are almost identical, and the dragon actually gives his power to the sea beast. This beast had seven heads and ten horns and it wore ten diadems. On its heads were written blasphemous names. One of its heads looked as though it had received a mortal wound but had been healed. The people of the earth worshipped the beast saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” The beast was allowed to exercise authority over the earth for 3 ½ years. It was granted authority over the whole world whose name had not been written in the book of life.

Who is this villainous sea beast? It too, like the red Dragon, is symbolic of the Roman Empire. The beast had seven heads and ten horns. Rome is classically known as the city built on seven hills. John’s readers would have instantly grasped the association. As for the head that looked as though it had received a death-blow but had been healed, it is a representation of the emperor Nero. In order to avert suspicions that he was responsible for a fire that had burned a large portion of the city of Rome, Nero blamed the Christians for it and persecuted them with fire. Nero committed suicide four years later, but it was believed that he would come back

to life and retake Rome by many people of the day. The head of the beast that looked as though it had been killed was simply one more reference that the beast was the representation of Rome.

The sea beast was allowed to rule for 42 months, the period of time that God allows the persecution to continue. It is not a literal unit of time but the apocalyptic number for incompleteness. The beast will not reign forever. The beast was not given authority over the people whose name had been written in the book of life because Christians failed to recognize the authority of Caesar over them. This is not a reference to Christians not being persecuted by the beast that was Rome, quite the opposite. The term authority can also be understood as meaning “power.” The beast had no real power over those he was persecuting. True power is revealed in the weakness of the cross. Christ re-defined power by his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Worldly power means nothing and it is actually the persecuted Christians who are the powerful ones. Not because they have any power of their own, but because they have the power of Christ who nourishes them.

Reading the Text Revelation 13:11-18

11 Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. 13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; 14 and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; 15 and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Commentary

The third person of the Satanic Trinity was the land beast. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. The land beast made an image for the sea beast and was allowed to give breath to the beast so that it could speak and so that those who refused to worship it would be killed. It also causes all to be marked on the right hand or the forehead in order to buy or sell. This “mark of the beast” we are then told is the “number of a person.”

Now we are getting to the point in the book where some people really go crazy with their interpretations. The identification of the beast and his number has been subject to some of the most embarrassing propaganda ever created. Well-meaning Christians with little or no educational background in the study of religion have assigned the designation of “The Beast” to people ranging from Pope John Paul II to Ronald Reagan to a supercomputer in Belgium. Likewise, the identification of the “mark of the Beast” has ranged from UPC codes (bar codes on items) to social security numbers to credit cards.

The point cannot be stressed too much—Revelation was written about the past, not our present, and certainly not the future. John of Patmos cared nothing about the ruler of countries he never knew even existed, he cared nothing for technological devices he could not have fathomed would be available in stores everywhere, and he certainly was not in the business of trying to scare people. John of Patmos was a pastor who cared for his flock who was in the midst of a severe persecution. He

was writing to remind them of the hope they already had because of Christ.

This land beast is also a representation of the Roman Empire. The image that he erects is symbolic to the image of the emperor who demanded to be worshipped as Lord and God. Among the many things archaeologists have found that prove very helpful in the study of Biblical texts, are the remains of such statuary in temples that bear the marks of hidden pulleys and voice amplification systems that would have enabled the priest to make the statues talk and move seemingly of their own volition. It would probably be a safe bet to assume that John knew of such situations as he was writing this work.

But what exactly was the mark of the beast? It could have been many different things. However, it was most likely a mark made with a special kind of chalk on the forehead or right hand of a person as they left the temple devoted to emperor worship. It was probably not a permanent mark since the government would have wanted to monitor the situation often instead of just once. In any case, John tells us that the mark of the beast is the name of the beast or the number of the beast's name. John even tells us the number—666.

But how does the number 666 apply to the Roman emperor as has been suggested here? To answer that question, a short lesson in the number systems of ancient Greek and Hebrew is necessary. As you may already know, the ancient Greeks, Hebrews, and Romans did not use the same number systems most of us in the western world currently use. Granted, Roman numerals are sometimes still used, but on the whole,

these number systems fell out of use centuries ago. The numbers and letters most people in the western world use are separate from each other. We have one set of symbols which are numbers and a separate set of symbols which are letters. However, the ancient Greeks and Jews had only the one set of symbols that were also letters to use as their numbers. This meant that their alphabet doubled as their number system.

In Roman numerals which most people are familiar with, the letter V=5, X=10, and I=1. In similar fashion, Greek and Hebrew letters had a specific numeric value assigned to each one of them as well.

To put it in terms which most people might understand a little better, imagine if our letters represented numbers. Every word would then have a numeric value as well as a value assigned to it for the arrangement of the letters. If, for instance, the letter A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, and N=50; the name “Dan” would have a numeric value of 55 (D)4 + (A)1 + (N)50 = 55. Naturally, the Greek and Hebrew systems are much more complicated than this, but this should help to clarify the ancient ways of counting.

This is important for our study of Revelation because the numeric value of the letters in the name Caesar Nero(n) add up to 666. Despite the complexity of this chapter, the message is surprisingly simple—don’t worship Caesar. There is no need to get overwhelmed with the complicated stuff. John is simply trying to communicate to his churches that they are not to put anything in the place of God, even if that means not eating or not having a job. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Caesar. For modern Christians, this message is just as

important as it was for the Christians of Asia Minor. God is God and anything that we might put before him is a false god. The false god does not just refer to Caesar. It could be in reference to our jobs, our hobbies, our leisure, even our families! God is God and we should live our lives in accordance with that simple principle—even if it means that somebody will hurt our loved ones or that we might starve. Whatever it may be, it is not worth our names being erased from the Book of Life.

It is still possible to have some fun with the ways in which “the Beast” has been interpreted in the not so distant past. Here is a list of people who have been accused of being “the Beast” from a 1999 study done by WGBH/PBS:

Yasser Arafat

A Supercomputer at the European Union headquarters
in Brussels.

Jimmy Carter

Bill Gates

Mikhail Gorbachev

John F. Kennedy (who died of a head wound)

Henry Kissinger:

Martin Luther

Benito Mussolini

Pope John Paul II

Ronald Wilson Reagan

Anwar el-Sadat

Saddam Hussein

Apart from these accusations of famous people actually being the embodiment of Satan, there is still some fun to be had with this infamous number 666. Below are some

whimsical takes on this often less than whimsical number:

666 (Biblical Number of the Beast)
660 (Approximate Number of the Beast)
DCLXVI (Roman Numeral of the Beast)
668 (Number of the Beast's Neighbor)
6, uh...I forget (Number of the Blonde Beast)
-666 (The Opposite of the Beast)
 6.66×10^2 (Scientific Notation of the Beast)
25.8069758 (Square Root of the Beast)
\$665.99 (Retail Price of the Beast)
66 for 6 (Cricket Score for the Beast)

But even apart from the whimsical takes on this number, it is an interesting number mathematically as well. The number 666 is a simple sum and difference of the first three 6th powers:

$$666 = 16 - 26 + 36$$

It is also equal to the sum of its digits plus the cubes of its digits:

$$666 = 6 + 6 + 6 + 6^3 + 6^3 + 6^3$$

The sum of the squares of the first 7 primes is 666:

$$666 = 2^2 + 3^2 + 5^2 + 7^2 + 11^2 + 13^2 + 17^2$$

Reading the Text Revelation 14:1-20

1 Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

6 Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

8 Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

9 Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its

image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, 10 they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name."

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. 13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them." 14 Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! 15 Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, "Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe."

19 So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and

gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. 20 And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

Commentary

Beginning in chapter 14 the story goes back to the beginning of the book and we see once again a vision like that of the heavenly throne room, however, now the Lamb and the four living creatures and elders are in a different place. The Lamb is now standing on Mount Zion. Mount Zion is the name of the mountain which the Temple was built on in Jerusalem, and it has traditionally been ascribed as being the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. It has importance even in Islam, as the Dome of Rock is built there upon this same altar of stone that was the seat of the Holy of Holies, and is believed to be the place from which Mohammed ascended into heaven—thus making it the third most holy site in Islam. It is no wonder that Mount Zion is the setting for the Lamb to be pictured in the vision. It would have reminded the original recipients of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, where the high priest would have sacrificed a lamb in this same place. The associations of the Messiah with Mount Zion are seemingly endless.

It is also important to remember the importance not just of the place where the vision takes place, but the numbers that are associated with it. The 144,000 in the vision that sing a new song that they alone are able to learn are apocalyptic symbols of all the people of God (144,000 being multiples of 12 = people of God; and 10 = all). This is not a literal number but simply the apocalyptic way of saying “all the people of God.” Interestingly, we have an element here in 14.4 that we have not encountered in this way before. We are told that these 144,000 “have not defiled themselves with

women, for they are virgins.” If you still think this book is to be read literally, then you may want to make sure you are seated for this one. This verse, if taken literally, would tell us that only 144,000 people can enter heaven. Your odds are not good of getting in simply on the numbers. But even more difficult, you must be a virgin. It does not say that you could have had sexual relations in the course of marriage, even if it was just with one wife, but that you must be a virgin. Furthermore, and even more troubling, you must be a male! Women are mentioned in this verse as being those who defile men, so no women are allowed in heaven! Moreover, you cannot have lied in your life, for those virgin males who are a part of the 144,000 are blameless and no lie is found in their mouths.

If you still want to take this book literally, do so with the understanding that a literal interpretation of this book means that only virgin males who have never lied even meet the criteria for admittance into heaven, but even then, the sheer numbers don’t mean that you will be granted entrance. This book cannot be understood literally and must be understood symbolically and even apocalyptically to have any meaning whatsoever for Christians.

Is then Revelation saying that women are not to be allowed into heaven and that they are a source of defilement? Is Revelation saying that sexual intercourse, even in the context of a marriage between one man and one woman for the purpose of procreation is evil? Of course not! As we will be reminded in the following chapters, sexual intercourse, especially with prostitutes, becomes a prominent metaphor for the worship of false

gods. Throughout the Bible, there is a very common metaphor employed of the people of God (i.e. Israel or the Church) being married to God/Christ. And any worship of foreign deities serves as an act of infidelity breaking this covenantal marriage. This is the reference John of Patmos is using here. John is not saying that women are evil and unfit for heaven. John is not telling us that sexual intercourse is evil either. John is making a statement on the worship of other gods using the common metaphor found throughout the Bible of prostitution. An appropriate translation from apocalyptic writing into modern English might go something like this:

“I looked and saw Jesus Christ standing on Mount Zion, and with him were all the people of God, the baptized from every generation. And a loud and powerful voice from heaven was heard of a new song that was sung before the heavenly host. The only ones who could sing it were the people of God who had not worshipped false deities and who had been made blameless by the redemption of Christ” (author’s translation/paraphrase).

The sixth verse begins a new segment of this vision, and John sees an angel flying in mid-heaven with eternal good news [gospel] to proclaim to everyone in the world. Then a second angel comes and proclaims that “Babylon the great has fallen. A third then enters the scene and proclaims that those who worshipped the Beast will be made to drink of the wine of God’s wrath and will receive eternal punishment in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The good news, or as it is translated, the gospel, is good news for all those who

worship the Lamb; but it is terrible news for those who worship the Beast! The message however, remains unchanged. It is good news to some and bad news to others. Then finally, in typical fashion, John explains this vision and tells us that this is a call for the endurance of the saints. John's message to the seven churches is that the day is coming soon when they shall rest from their labors and shall be rewarded for their endurance.

Then in verse 14 another segment of the vision occurs and we see "one like the Son of Man" with a golden crown on his head and a sickle in his hand riding on a cloud. An angel comes on the scene and announces that the harvest is ripe, and the One on the cloud reaps the earth.

In verse 17 a very similar scene happens, but the image of the harvest changes from something like wheat or barley to grapes. This time it is an angel that does the harvesting, and the grapes are thrown into the winepress of the wrath of God. The wine is here likened unto the blood of those who worship false deities. This is the scene from which the famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* is titled.

This is one of the more complicated visions, full of duplicity and ambiguity, but regardless, the message is the same as has been all along: A day is coming when God will not allow the unrighteous any more time to repent and God will avenge the deaths of his holy ones. The people of God will see it as a wonderful happening, but the people of false gods will see their ultimate demise. This is a call by John for the unrighteous to

repent while they still can, and for the righteous to endure patiently for the time will surely come when this day will happen. This section gets at the heart of the original message of Revelation!

“Nowhere else in Christianity does the terrible or
heroic name of Armageddon
play such role as in America.
Not even in the Revelation of John.
-Jürgen Moltmann

Chapter Eight

“The Seven Bowls and The Battle of Armageddon”

Reading the Text Revelation 15:1-8

1 Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. 3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! 4 Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.”

5 After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, 6 and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests. 7 Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever; 8 and the temple was filled

with smoke from the glory of God and from his power,
and no one could enter the temple until the seven
plagues of the seven angels were ended.

Commentary

Finally, after several chapters worth of an interlude, we are given the final of the three cycles of seven in the book, the seven bowls of God's wrath. Chapter 15 is really nothing more than an introduction to the following chapters which chronicle the happenings when each of the bowls is emptied. Verses 3 and 4 read much like a Psalm and, like most of the other apocalyptic liturgies in the book, were probably taken from or included in early worship services. The tent of witness in heaven serves to remind the recipients of the tent of meeting in the Old Testament. Obviously the seven angels are robed in white, symbolic of the victory they have won over the forces of evil. The temple was also filled with smoke, symbolic of the presence of God. No one could enter the temple though until the seven plagues of the seven angels had come to an end.

Reading the Text Revelation 16:1-21

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God." 2 So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image.

3 The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.

4 The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of the waters say,

"You are just, O Holy One, who are and were,
for you have judged these things;
6 because they shed the blood of saints and prophets,
you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!"

7 And I heard the altar respond,
"Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty,
your judgments are true and just!"

8 The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire; 9 they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

10 The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, 11 and cursed

the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.

12 The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. 13 And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. 14 These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. 15 (“See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.”) 16 And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

17 The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” 18 And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; 21 and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

Commentary

All the plagues in this vision are meant to remind the hearers of the plagues that were inflicted on the Egyptians as recounted in the book of Exodus. The main difference between this third cycle of seven and the previous two cycles of seven is that this third cycle of the seven bowls has more on an emphasis on the finality of it all than the previous ones. The previous cycles of seven were less complete, a third of the living things were destroyed in the cycle of the seven trumpets, whereas here every living thing in the waters dies.

In verse 7 we are told that the altar responds to the outpouring of the third bowl of wrath. Remember, this is a highly symbolic book, and the altar does not literally talk. The martyrs are always pictured throughout this book as crying out from beneath the altar, and it is their voice which the altar is mentioned as speaking.

When the fourth bowl is poured out, the sun scorched the people with fire. I spoke of Hal Lindsay before, and he interprets this passage as referring to modern times and the fulfillment of this prediction is the hole in the ozone layer whereby people are given skin cancer and sunburn. Skin cancer is not the plague from the fourth bowl of wrath. Apocalyptic literature is symbolic and is not about predicting the future. It cannot be understood literally! These plagues are meant to remind us of the plagues from Exodus where God worked mighty signs and wonders and delivered his people who were being oppressed. John is reminded the recipients of this book

that just as God worked in the past, God will work in such a way for them.

When the sixth bowl is poured out, the river Euphrates dries up in order to prepare the way for the kings of the east. The “kings of the east” is a reference to the barbarian nations to the north and east of Rome. Then these three frogs come forth from the mouth of the dragon, the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. These we are told are demonic spirits who perform signs and go abroad telling the kings of the earth to assemble for the battle on the great day of God almighty. And they assemble at Armageddon.

Thus is inaugurated the famous Battle of Armageddon and the stage is set for the climax of the apocalyptic drama that this book has become. Finally, after so long the final battle between good and evil is getting ready to happen. Or so is thought by the general public who has been reared on a diet of literalist propaganda.

One cannot help but wonder if some interpreters have actually read the account in Revelation. Do they actually think anybody would be duped by three miracle-working frogs telling the kings of the world to assemble for a battle against God? Why has so much been made about Armageddon?

Historically, Armageddon is an ancient city (now in ruins) near the Jezreel Valley a little north and east of Tel Aviv. It was a large city that was situated by a major trading route. This meant that whoever occupied the city could tax those who passed through it. This made it a constant sight of battles. By the time of Christ,

Armageddon, or Megiddo, as it is properly known, had been destroyed and rebuilt 13 times. Thus, since Megiddo had been the site of so many important battles, this is the place where the battle of all time takes place. There are two possibilities for the name Armageddon. Some translations spell it differently. You may see it spelled Harmagedon, or Harmageddon, or Armagedon. The reason behind this lies in the fact that John's Greek was less than eloquent, and sometimes if he didn't know the appropriate Greek word, he would simply transliterate it from Hebrew into Greek. Not every letter in Hebrew transliterates into Greek seamlessly, and you will sometimes find alternate spellings and/or meanings for a particular word. Armageddon for instance could mean either "Megiddo city" or "Mount Megiddo." This is not of extreme importance, but it is nonetheless good to know and avoid confusion that can arise from different place names.

So, there have been many battles of Armageddon. And, according to Revelation, these three miracle-working frogs convince the kings of the earth to assemble for a battle against God at Mount Megiddo. These forces of evil assemble and prepare for battle, but as the seventh bowl is outpoured, a storm arises and giant hailstones fall on these troops and kill them before the battle can even start! All this fuss over one battle at an obscure present-day archaeological site and a careful reading of the text shows that the battle never even occurred. What a disappointment! Sorry Hollywood, sorry Hal Lindsay, sorry biblical literalists. It could have been a movie worth millions, but it never happened. Some interpreters even believe that the hailstones mentioned here are giant meteorites sent to destroy the earth. The

truth though is that the battle of Armageddon didn't happen in the past and isn't going to happen in the future.

Reading the Text Revelation 17:1-18

1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk." 3 So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; 5 and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." 6 And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. 7 But the angel said to me, "Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

9 "This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is

seated; also, they are seven kings, 10 of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. 12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; 14 they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

15 And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. 16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. 17 For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. 18 The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

Commentary

Now we see a new scene in the apocalyptic drama. Many characters in literature are well-known, but few more so than the Whore of Babylon. But what does Revelation tell us about this infamous character? One of the angels who had the seven bowls shows John the judgment of the great whore (seated on many waters) whom the kings of the earth have worshipped in the place of God, or as it is written in apocalyptic literature,

committed fornication. Moreover, the inhabitants of the earth who have worshipped this “great whore” are drunk on the blood of the martyrs.

All this is John’s way of saying that this personification of Rome had killed so many Christians that she (and her followers) were actually drunk on their blood since so much of it had been spilled. But, if this great whore represents Rome, why is she then not called the Whore of Rome? Well, the answer is complicated. Remember that apocalyptic literature is written during a time of persecution or hardship. Daniel, another apocalyptic book, was written to the Jews in exile in Babylon. Similarly, Revelation was written to persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. Babylon becomes the symbol of the foreign oppression that Rome now epitomizes. Even in a more modern context, the music of Bob Marley and other reggae artists equate foreign oppression with the city of Babylon. One of Marley’s famous songs is even entitled, “Chant Down Babylon.” It is a very common way of indicating a foreign and oppressive power. Also, we see the metaphor of fornication being employed here to symbolize the worship of false gods.

In verses 7-12 the identity of the woman and the beast is explained in detail. The beast is contrasted with the Son of Man, the one who was, and is, and is to come. The beast is called the one who was, and is not, and is about to go to its destruction. Too much should not be read into this statement for it is simply meant to remind us of the stark contrast between good and evil, the Lamb and the Beast. We are told in verse 9 that the seven heads are the seven mountains on which the woman is

seated. Rome is constantly referred to as the city built on seven hills. The recipients of this letter would have instantly caught the association of the seven heads with the seven hills of Rome. The ten horns are a little more complex. However, their number is what is important, not their identity. Historically, it is possible to identify these rulers as emperors of Rome beginning with Nero and ending with Domitian. However, there was a period in 68-69 A.D. when there was the triumvirate, that is, three Caesars ruling as one. This is only important for the discussion if one wants to pinpoint a precise date to the book, and even then, it is largely speculative. The number 10 is what is important. It signifies that all the Caesars are on the side of the beast. At the close of the chapter we are told that there is even going to be a civil war between the forces of evil with the horns and the beast rising up against the woman.

Reading the Text Revelation 18:1-24

1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. 2 He called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. 3 For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.”

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,

“Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues;

5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. 6 Render to her as she herself has rendered,

and repay her double for her deeds;
mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed.

7 As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously,
so give her a like measure of torment and grief.

Since in her heart she says,

‘I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief,’ 8 therefore her plagues will come in a single day

—

pestilence and mourning and famine—
and she will be burned with fire;

for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”

9 And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; 10 they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

“Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city!
For in one hour your judgment has come.”

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.

14 “The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendor are lost to you, never to be found again!”

15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

16 “Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17 For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste!”

And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose

trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they
saw the smoke of her burning,

“What city was like the great city?”

19 And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept
and mourned, crying out,

“Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea
grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been
laid waste.

20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles
and prophets! For God has given judgment for you
against her.”

21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great
millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,

“With such violence Babylon the great city
will be thrown down,
and will be found no more; 22 and the sound of harpists
and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be
heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will
be found
in you no more;
and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no
more;

23 and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more;
and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in
you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of
the earth,

and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.

24 And in you was found the blood of prophets and of
saints,

and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.”

Commentary

The defeat of the city of Babylon [Rome] was great and we are repeatedly told that it happened in one hour. The point of this chapter is simply to remind the people of God that the defeat of Babylon will come, and when it does it will be quick.

“I have stolen more quotes and thoughts and purely elegant little starbursts of writing from the Book of Revelation than anything else in the English language - and it is not because I am a biblical scholar, or because of any religious faith, but because I love the wild power of the language and the purity of the madness that governs it and makes it music.

-Hunter S. Thompson

Chapter Nine

“The New Jerusalem”

Reading the Text Revelation 19:1-21

1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying,

“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God,
2 for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the
great whore who corrupted the earth with her
fornication,
and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

3 Once more they said,

“Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and
ever.”

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living
creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated
on the throne, saying,

“Amen. Hallelujah!”

5 And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God, all you his servants,
and all who fear him, small and great.”

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great

multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready;

8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen,

bright and pure” —

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

9 And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” 10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a

name inscribed, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven,

“Come, gather for the great supper of God,
18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains,
the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their
riders —
flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.”

19 Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. 21 And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Commentary

After these things we have a scene of rejoicing in heaven because the great whore of Babylon has been defeated. This scene of praise and thanksgiving is also pregnant with imagery drawn from a marriage scene. Christ and the people of God are compared to a bride and groom eagerly awaiting marriage. When John sees and hears all this, he bows down to worship the angel. However, the angel stops him and reprimands him telling him that he is a fellow servant. God alone is to be worshipped—this is no small point in the book of Revelation.

We are again taken to a vision of evil defeated and good triumphant. This time, a rider on a white horse (symbolic of victory) named Faithful and True is seen wearing numerous crowns on his head (symbolic of ruling over many people and nations). This rider is also wearing a robe that has been dipped in blood. The armies of heaven dressed in pure white were following him riding white horses as well. This scene has been reworked somewhat from Isaiah 63:1-3. In the Isaiah passage, the garments of the people are stained red with the blood of the Edomites, the enemies of Israel. But here, Christ's garments are stained with his own blood. This also is no small point. Earthly battles are won when the blood of the enemy is spilled. But Christ won the ultimate battle by spilling his own blood. In similar fashion, earthly battles are won by the sword, but the battle Christ fought was won by the sword of his mouth—the Gospel. This is a dramatic shift from the way we envision the world working. The slaughtered Lamb is the conqueror in the world and perspective of Christendom, not the mighty warrior.

All this is not enough though to make the evil ones repent. They still gather for battle against God, but yet again, there is no battle per se; rather, the beast and the false prophet is captured and thrown into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. However, the other warriors on the side of the beast are killed with the sword—the sword of his mouth. This rider on the white horse is not meant to be seen with a literal sword coming from his mouth—like just about everything else in Revelation, it is meant symbolically.

Reading the Text Revelation 20:1-15

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

4 Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years.

7 When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. 9 They marched up over the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. 10 And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and

sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

11 Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. 13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; 15 and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Commentary

Once again, we come across one of the most misunderstood passages in the whole of the Bible and in the whole of the book of Revelation. The history of interpretation of this small segment of text has sparked revolutions in (mis)interpretations of Revelation. An angel comes down from heaven holding a key to the bottomless pit. The angel throws the dragon (Devil/Satan) in it, and locks and seals it over him, so that he could not deceive the world anymore, until 1000 years had ended. But then, John tells us, he must be let out for a little while.

Satan assembles his forces again for a spectacular battle (notice again there is no mention of the term Armageddon), but in typical apocalyptic fashion, the battle cannot occur because fire from heaven consumes them before they can even fight. Then the books are opened and there is the final judgment.

This can be very confusing and there are many different approaches to the way “the 1000 year reign” or “the millennium” is interpreted. Their interpretations are intimately linked with the way in which one interprets the entire book. Here are a few different major schools of interpretation:

Preterest: The preterest school is so called because it takes its name from the word preterit which basically means “past tense.” This interpretation says that the book of Revelation is based in history and the historical and cultural context of the people to whom the book was written is paramount. However, it goes so far as to

claim that ALL the prophecies in the book were fulfilled in the past. This school of interpretation was first started amongst Roman Catholics around the time of the Reformation in response to Luther's claims that the current Pope was the Antichrist. The tragic flaw of this school of thought is that it fails to explain why Christ has not returned (if all the prophecies were fulfilled in the past).

Historicist: The historicist school thinks that Revelation is a symbolic prediction of the unfolding of history up to the present time. However, it focuses on mainly European/Western history and says that chapters 4-22 include current events and are signs of the end of days. This interpretation takes seriously the prophetic element of the book (as it relates to prediction), but the adherents to this interpretation are constantly revising their predictions in ever more outlandish and unbelievable ways. They hold to a fairly rigid literal interpretation of Scripture, especially as it relates to prophecy. There is no standard amongst the group, and it is based entirely on the element of fear.

Futurist: The futurist school is also known as the Dispensationalist or Pre-millennialist school. They are similar to the historicist school, but they believe that the seven churches are representatives of seven different ages of the church through history. Inevitably, those living currently (whenever that may be) are those living in the end times. They too hold to a literal interpretation of prophecy. Their emphasis on the final victory of Christ is comforting to believers, but their interpretation fails to take seriously the original context of the book and renders most of the book irrelevant to its original audience.

Idealist: The idealist or allegorical school is one of the oldest interpretations dating back to Origen and Clement of Alexandria. It is almost solely responsible for the inclusion of Revelation in the canon. It holds that the book of Revelation is totally symbol and that none of the images or visions have any relation to the events of history, be they past, present, or future. It is all symbolic, spiritual, and allegorical. This severely waters down the book, but it does make it more palatable to modern people. Its basic message is that God wants his people to be faithful and that good will eventually triumph over evil. This makes Revelation very relevant to the Church in many ages across time. However, it divorces it from any historical context and thus makes the book all but irrelevant for its initial audience and denies the epistolary and prophetic element of the book.

Apocalyptic: The school which I am calling the Apocalyptic school holds that the book of Revelation stands in the tradition of a group of ancient Biblical texts written in a very peculiar method that is highly symbolic yet intimately bound to a particular cultural context. It affirms the relevance for its original audience and for modern audiences as well. It adamantly denies that the book is a literal prediction or blueprint for how the world will end, but instead argues that the book was written to give hope to a persecuted people while providing the people of God with a timeless message. It is also not bound to one group of people or movement.

The apocalyptic school incorporates the best parts of many different interpretations while not falling into the pit of divorcing it from its original audience. Thus, the “millennium” mentioned in chapter 20 is a number, like

other numbers in apocalyptic literature, that is highly symbolic, and, as a multiple of 10 indicates completion. Interpreters should be very careful of trying to make the book say more than it actually does. We would do well not to try and develop a diagram of the way the world will end from these few verses. Rather, taking the overall meaning of the book into its proper context, we can understand it better by letting it speak for itself on the few matters it speaks to.

Reading the Text Revelation 21:1-27

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with
them;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the

Lamb.” 10 And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11 It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. 18 The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

22 I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of

God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Commentary

Chapter 21 introduces us to a vision of the New Jerusalem, which is on earth, but which comes down from heaven. This is an interesting happening because everyone always assumes that the heavenly city will be situated in heaven. However, Revelation tells us that it came from heaven and sits on the new earth which has been re-made, since the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Again, the marriage imagery is used here in verse two. God, we are told, actually dwells with mortals here in this New Jerusalem.

The choice of Jerusalem as the new heavenly city is as symbolic as the choice of Babylon being the city belonging to the great whore. Just as Babylon represents a foreign oppressor who does not worship the true God, Jerusalem becomes the opposite image—that of the city where the true God is worshipped and glorified. This would have had special significance to the original recipients of Revelation since the Temple and indeed most of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Romans, about 25 years earlier.

This New Jerusalem is made of precious stones and sits on 12 foundations and has 12 gates. This should instantly draw your mind to the importance in apocalyptic of the number 12 which is clearly explained here in chapter 21:12-13. We should also note the presence of light/darkness imagery. The city is eternally light and never goes dim. This would remind the people of God of the perfection of the city where there is no darkness—literal or metaphorical.

Reading the Text Revelation 22:1-21

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. 6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." 7 "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" 10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." 12 "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and

the end.”

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” 17 The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let everyone who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. 18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; 19 if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Commentary

In the final verses of the book, John declares that no person is to add to or take away from the words as revealed to him in this book, under the oath of a severe penalty being enacted upon the who would add to or subtract from these words.

This seems fairly normal, but when commentators through the centuries have made the dramatic leap from locusts to Russian helicopters, one must ask if such commentators haven't indeed "added to" the words of this book? If interpreters have "taken away" an ancient and quite simple numbering system like gematria and made a number (616 or 666) to equate with a supercomputer in Belgium or a modern-day tyrannical world leader, have they not likewise "taken away" from the words of this revelation as it was made known to John? It makes so much more sense to attempt to understand Revelation in its historical and literary context as a piece of apocalyptic literature written to give hope to a persecuted people in Asia Minor towards the end of the first century. Anything and everything that interpreters would do to take away from that central thesis is in my mind movement against the words of this book.

Though the final verses of the book seem a bit ominous, I would argue that the conclusion of the book is one that beckons anyone "on the fence" to make the most of the time that is left, and to switch over to the side of God while there is still time. In that sense, the book doesn't end with a warning so much as it ends with an invitation to "come." In all apocalyptic works, the

delay of God to return to God's people to usher in God's kingdom is caused with the singular intent to allow as many as possible one more chance to repent and to join up with those on the side of God. It's an invitation that extends to each of us who read or hear the words of this book today. "Come." Amen.

“The final and full revelation of God is not a book,
it is a person. Jesus Christ.”
-Desmond Tutu

Chapter Ten

“Summary and Conclusion”

The book of Revelation is not an easy book to study or read. It is full of confusing imagery and symbols. But, with an understanding of the book’s original meaning in hand, the reader will be better prepared for a faithful and accurate reading of all Scripture. Let us end by remembering these general guidelines:

1. Revelation is characterized by a high degree of symbolism, not literalism.
2. Numbers stand for more than just a literal number—numbers are symbolic too.
3. Colors are not just descriptive adjectives—colors symbolize certain things also.
4. Animals are not really animals but are usually symbols of a specific country.
5. Revelation was written to a specific historical and cultural context in the past. It was not written specifically to Christians in the present. In order to understand its message for Christians today, we must first understand its message for the Christians to which it was originally written.
6. Apocalyptic visions are not chronological, so Vision #2 is not dependent on Vision #1 to happen first. They are to be understood in and of

themselves as individual, self-contained units. Vision #1 is to be understood on its own, and Vision #2 is to be understood apart from Vision #1.

7. Revelation was written to a persecuted group of churches in order that they might find the strength and hope to patiently endure their sufferings for the sake of Christ.

8. Complete understanding of the book of Revelation is impossible. Anyone claiming to understand the book in its entirety is trying to deceive you or they are reading a different book.

As long as we abide by these elementary rules, we will be able to understand the message of Revelation much more clearly. The main problem with interpreting Revelation is that our minds are so clouded with what various people and groups have told us it means that it is almost impossible to read what it actually says for ourselves.

For example, everyone assumes that the Battle of Armageddon will take place in the future and that God will fight against Satan and will conquer him and the forces of evil. It would make for a nice Hollywood movie, but if we read what it actually says in Revelation, the forces of evil assemble for the battle, but it storms and they are smashed by giant hailstones before there can even be a battle. The Battle of Armageddon never happens!

Another popular element in the misinterpretation of

this book is the presence of this figure known as “The Antichrist.” If we actually read what it says in the book, there is never any mention of the figure of the Antichrist. In fact, the term itself only occurs in I and II John, a group of letters no scholars would ever attribute to John of Patmos. Even in those books, the term appears in the plural and simply means anybody who is against the message of Christ, not some political figure bent on conquering the world and fighting against God.

Most people who have tried to read this book on their own for their private devotions usually abandon the task because it is so difficult to understand, something you may have experienced firsthand. The book actually frightens modern readers, even devout ones, because of the high degree of blood and gore and strange, evil creatures who persecute Christians. This is ironic, because the elements of the book which frighten and scare modern readers are the same elements that would have comforted and sustained its original hearers. This just reinforces the point that Revelation was not written to the Church 19 centuries later, but to a historical and cultural context very different from that of modern readers.

Revelation is deeply symbolic, as is all apocalyptic literature. And, as such, it cannot be understood literally. Many interpreters have been very adamant that this book must be taken literally, and indeed, the whole Bible must be taken literally, or else you are not a “true” Christian. What these interpreters fail to realize is that if we were to understand this book literally, it would have some ridiculous consequences for our current lives and especially for the afterlife.

Revelation as Literal Prophecy:

Just for fun, let us rehash what the message of this book is if understood as a literal “prophecy.”

1. Revelation 3:12. “If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it.” Sit back and think about this one for a minute. If this message is to be understood literally, it is saying to the persecuted Christian in the Church at Philadelphia, “If you conquer, you will be made into an architectural feature of the temple of God—a load-bearing structure, and you will never get to leave that place.” If you had been the Christian hearing this message (literally) would this have been of comfort to you? Would you then patiently endure your suffering with the hope of the reward of being made into a brick?

2. Revelation 4:3. “And the One seated there [on the throne of God] looks like jasper and carnelian.” God is said to have looked like 2 rocks. Do you believe that God literally looks like two rocks from the earth? This sounds more like Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom than it does the Bible if we take this literally. No Christian in their right mind would ever say that God was two rocks seated on a throne. This book makes no sense if taken literally.

3. Revelation 14:3-5. “No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and

the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.” This is perhaps the most atrocious example possible for the follies of taking this book literally. According to this reference, there will only be 144,000 virgin males who have never lied who will be allowed into heaven! That is the plain and clear message of this text if it is understood literally. Women are excluded, men who have had sex, even with only their wives for the purpose of procreation are excluded, and then only those virgin men who have not lied are allowed into heaven. If you still want to understand this book literally, you are greatly limiting your chances of getting into heaven. And, if you are a woman, you are simply relegated to spend eternity somewhere else because you obviously chose to be born the wrong gender.

It doesn't take a Biblical scholar to understand that Revelation cannot be understood literally. One simply needs to read what is written in the text itself, and not rely upon what someone else might say the text says. If you ever get really confused when reading the text, just continue reading because John often explains the meaning of what he writes after a confusing vision. So, if in doubt, continue reading.

Remember that Revelation was written to a group of persecuted Christians that it might inspire them to patiently endure their sufferings for the sake of the Gospel. It was written to give them hope, not to make them fearful. It was written to them, not us. It was written in a way that they could understand the message

more clearly. It is our task to study this sacred writing and to return it to its proper place in the New Testament.

I hope you struggled with this book, but I also hope you enjoyed the struggle and were able to learn something from it. This may mean you had to unlearn what you had been told previously, which is no easy task. Sometimes it is difficult to divorce a person's teaching (right or wrong) from the person. If your minister has informed you otherwise about this book, it does not mean that everything else they told you was unfounded too. Revelation is the most difficult book to study in the whole of the Bible. It is my hope that one day someone will come along and enlighten parts of my work in a new way. It may mean that some of my interpretations will need to be reworked too. I have yet to meet a person who understands everything in the Bible. But, as Mark Twain is often credited of saying, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."

Excursus on Darbyism and Christian Fundamentalism

John Nelson Darby (1800-1881)

John Nelson Darby was a lawyer who became disillusioned with the practice of law and turned to the study of religion to become an Anglican priest. However, he had an accident on his horse that injured his leg very badly and he found himself bed-ridden for a year and a half. During this time, he decided that he would study the Bible (on his own, without any formal study at a university). After this time of study in his bed he concluded:

The word of God was revelation and it was always LITERAL.

The Bible tells of God's working from beginning to end and that it is divided into ages in which God deals differently with creation in each of these different ages.

Most of the aforementioned ages have come and gone and the present time is the end time.

The Bible predicts things.

The Church was an afterthought of God. It was perfect in the beginning, but it became more and more corrupt as time progressed. God will get fed up and will send Christ back soon.

There will be a Jewish Kingdom.

The group known as The Plymouth Brethren were formed (they believed they were a small and incorrupt cell group within the church). Then, by merging together a few verses in Matthew 24 and I Thessalonians 4:13 they developed what we now know as “the rapture.” In their view, the rapture becomes the trigger for the whole end times scenario.

Darby believed that after the rapture, a seven-year period of “tribulation” would ensue that could be divided into two sections of 3.5 years each. Then Jesus would come back. This is known as pre-millennialism.

Pre-millennialism Basic Timeframe:

Rapture of the faithful

7-year Tribulation

Return of Christ

Darby’s teaching was spread far and wide throughout England and even to New Zealand and America. Darby was big on what is known as “proof-texting,” which means he would take one verse out of context from one book, another verse out of context from a different book, and then put them together to come up with a system. Darby came to America 7 times between 1862-1877, during the dark times of the Civil War, a ripe field for harvesting his belief system. The North was especially fruitful.

A movement known as the Niagara Bible Conferences rose up after Darby which championed the rapture and pre-millennialism, etc. James Brookes, a Presbyterian, was the head of the Niagara Bible Conferences, but he was becoming

old and they decided to elect another president. Cyrus Schofield took over and printed a Bible in 1909 that had Darby's notes in it that is known and widely circulated today as "The Schofield Bible." Then, the Niagara Bible Conference decided they needed an academic institution. Louis Sperry Chafer, Schofield's lieutenant, founded what would become in 1936 Dallas Theological Seminary.

Some interesting books written by authors ascribing to this view include: John Walboord, Sr. who wrote a book called Armageddon: The Coming Oil Crisis in which the Antichrist is an Arab oil sheik. It came out during the oil crisis in the 70's, but when the Gulf War started in 1991 he re-wrote it and sold 1 million copies. Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth is another jewel of craziness where he states that the locusts mentioned in Revelation are actually Russian helicopters. It sold over 40 million copies. Throughout most of these and other books from those in this school of thought....1988 was chosen as the date the rapture would begin.

Christian Fundamentalism

Now Darbyists and Christian fundamentalists are very similar, but not the same. They have their own set of principles by which they believe the only real truth can be known. An easy way to remember their belief system is by the acronym T.U.L.I.P.

Total depravity
Unconditional election
Limited atonement
Irresistible grace
Perseverance of the saints

This is what could be called a sort of distorted Calvinism, and can be found in their flagship book entitled Fundamentals of the Christian Faith. When they get to eschatology (the Greek word literally meaning “the study of the end”), they took the Darbyist grid but filled in the blanks differently. They believed in the rapture, the tribulation, the millennial kingdom, but not in the Jewish Kingdom. The Left Behind series is fundamentalist, but it is not strictly Darbyistic. Fundamentalists are influenced by Darbyism, but they fill in the blanks differently.

There are some other groups that have based their entire belief system as a religious body on the end times. These include, the Millerites, the Mormons, the Russelites, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses—they all get carried away with the 144,000 thing. Hopefully this brief background on the history of interpretation of how different groups have viewed Revelation (and other books of Scripture) will help to provide some context as to how so many far-fetched and outlandish ideas about apocalyptic literature have come about.

The Book of Revelation is perhaps the most misunderstood book in the entire Bible, and this has been the case for centuries. However, modern-day discoveries like The Dead Sea Scrolls and the writings found at Nag Hammadi have given new insights into the genre of apocalyptic literature, allowing us to glimpse these writings in the way they would have been originally understood and interpreted by those first Christians in western Asia Minor to whom the book was written. When the "rules" of understanding apocalyptic literature as a genre are followed, fresh and new insights begin to emerge. Rather than Revelation being a frightful and confusing book, it becomes a message of hope written to people in the midst of great suffering and persecution. Rather than being a foretelling about a fearful future, Revelation becomes a beacon of hope in the midst of a frightful past under the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century A.D.

Victors in the Midst of Strife is not written in scholarly language that is hard to understand. Using illustrations and examples from everyday life and culture, Goforth enables the Book of Revelation to come to life in ways that reveal the original meaning of the book. By understanding what the book meant to its original audience, the meaning of the book can be better understood for our own time and place.



The Rev. J. Curtis Goforth is the pastor of First United Methodist Church of Forest City, NC. He is an ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church. He earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Religion with a double-minor in Ancient Hebrew and Archaeology from Berea College. He also earned a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University Divinity School. He is married and has two daughters.