

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iv
How to Use this Commentary	v
Introduction	1
<i>a) The Interpretation Of Revelation</i>	1
<i>b) Approaches To Interpreting Revelation</i>	2
<i>i) <u>Millenarianism</u></i>	2
<i>ii) <u>Praeterism</u></i>	2
<i>iii) <u>Futurism</u></i>	2
<i>iv) <u>"Present Millenarianism"</u></i>	2
<i>v) <u>Augustine's Interpretation of the Millennium</u></i>	3
<i>vi) <u>Historical Interpretations</u></i>	3
<i>c) Criticisms of the Different Approaches</i>	4
<i>d) The Environment of Revelation: Place, Date and Author</i>	5
<i>i) <u>The letters to the Seven Churches</u></i>	7
<i>ii) <u>The Jerusalem Temple and Babylon</u></i>	8
<i>iii) <u>The List of Emperors</u></i>	8
<i>e) The Literary Environment of Revelation:</i>	
<i>Apocalyptic, Prophecy & Letter</i>	12
<i>f) Symbolism in Revelation</i>	17
<i>g) The Structure of Revelation</i>	20
Chapter 1: The Origins of the Visions (1:1-20)	23
<i>a) Introduction (1:1-3)</i>	23
<i>b) The Letter to the Seven Churches (1:4-8)</i>	24
<i>c) The Vision of Christ (1:9-20)</i>	28
<i>i) <u>The Coming of The Vision (1:9-11)</u></i>	29
<i>ii) <u>The Vision of the Son of Man (1:12-20)</u></i>	30

Chapter 2: The First Earthly Vision:	
The Oracles to The Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)	34
<i>a) The Oracles to the Seven Churches</i>	34
 Chapter 3: Opening the Scroll (4:1- 11:19)	 51
<i>a) The Ascent to Heaven (4:1-2) & The Throne Scene (4:3-11)</i>	51
<i>b) The Lamb & the Scroll (5:1-14)</i>	59
<i>c) The Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)</i>	66
<i>e) The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19)</i>	79
 Chapter 4: Reading the Scroll 1:	
The Woman & The Dragon (12:1-14:20)	100
<i>a) The Woman & the Dragon (12:1-17)</i>	100
<i>b) The False God: The Dragon & the Beasts</i>	108
<i>e) The Lamb & the Harvest (14:1-20)</i>	117
 Chapter 5: Reading the Scroll 2: The Seven Plagues (15:1-16:21)	 126
<i>a) Introduction (15:1)</i>	126
<i>b) The Sea Of Glass (15:2-4)</i>	126
<i>c) The Tent of Witness (15:5-8)</i>	128
<i>d) The Seven Bowls (16:1-21)</i>	129
 Chapter 6: After the Reading 1: The Great Prostitute (17:1-18)	 140
<i>a) The Prostitute (17:1-6)</i>	140
<i>b) The Angel's Commentary (17:7-8)</i>	143
<i>c) The Prostitute's Mount (17:9-18)</i>	144
 Chapter 7: After the Reading 2:	
The Hymns of Babylon's Destruction (18:1-19:8)	150
<i>a) The Judgment of Babylon (18:1-3)</i>	150
<i>b) Prophecies of the Fall Of Babylon (18:4-20)</i>	151
<i>c) The Second Judgment of Babylon (18:21-4)</i>	158

<i>d) Praise In Heaven (19:1-8)</i>	160
Chapter 8 : After the Reading 3: The Beginning of the End (19:9-20:11)	163
<i>a) A Warning about True Worship (19:9-10)</i>	163
<i>b) The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-16)</i>	166
<i>c) The Defeat of the Beast (19:17-21)</i>	169
<i>d) The Millennium (20:1-6)</i>	171
<i>e) The End of Satan (20:7-10)</i>	179
<i>f) The Judgment of the Dead (20:11-15)</i>	181
Chapter 9: After the Reading 4:	
The New Heaven & the New Earth (21:1-22:21)	185
<i>a) New Heaven & New Earth (21:1-8)</i>	185
<i>b) Jerusalem: The Bride (21:9-27)</i>	189
<i>c) The River Of Life (22:1-5)</i>	196
<i>d) The Truth of the Vision (22:6-7)</i>	199
Chapter 10: The Epilogue	200
<i>a) John's Testimony (22:8-9)</i>	201
<i>b) The Angel's Testimony (22:10-11)</i>	201
<i>c) Christ's Testimony (22:12-13)</i>	202
<i>d) Blessing (22:14-15)</i>	203
<i>e) Jesus' Testimony (22:16)</i>	204
<i>f) The Spirit & the Bride (22:17)</i>	204
<i>g) Warning (22:18-19)</i>	205
<i>h) Final Testimony (22:20a)</i>	205
<i>i) Final Prayer (22:20b)</i>	205
<i>j) Benediction (22:21)</i>	206
Study Questions	207
Selected Bibliography & Suggestions for Further Reading	211

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was designed as an entry level commentary, and the language is pitched, as best possible, to those who are reading in English as a second language for diploma or bachelors degrees: I have tried to minimise jargon and unnecessarily complex vocabulary, but do assume some theological knowledge. It originated from a request from the Association of Theological Institutions of East Africa (ATIEA) to provide a Kiswahili commentary of the book of Revelation. In that form it was published by Central Tanganyika Press in 2000: the translation was done by Canon Lawrence Mnubi. I record my thanks to him, and Peter Mang'ati, the Director of Central Tanganyika Press, for assenting to the release of the English text version.

There are a few changes: the structure has been simplified and turned into the Table of Contents, I have tidied up the orthography, and added a reference to my 2004 article on *Rev 17*. Otherwise, I have tried to keep parallels with the printed Kiswahili version.

The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge generously provided grants for materials at the time of writing, and I must acknowledge the support they thus gave me. Credit too is due to the staff and students at St Mark's College in Dar es Salaam who gave me the context for writing in lectures, tutorials and seminars as we tackled this most difficult of Scriptural texts together. The late Professor John O'Neill also guided my first forays in *Revelation* as an undergraduate: I found myself returning frequently to his strategy for exegetes as I wrote.

Finally, but not least, my thanks to Irene and the boys who remind me that there is so much more to theology than the writing of books.

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HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

This book is divided into two parts: an introduction and a commentary on the text of *Revelation*.

The introduction provides background information about the book: when it was written, who wrote it, and how to read it.

Rev is a book that is difficult for us to read because it uses symbols. Every culture has its own language of symbols, and their meaning may not be clear to readers from another time or place. Thus, the introduction gives an explanation of the symbols that are used in *Rev* and advice on how we should interpret them.

In the commentary section, the text is analysed passage by passage. First the text has been broken into large units which make up each chapter. These chapters are then broken into sections. Each section contains two parts:

1) *An Outline*- which gives a description of the section and discusses major points that arise from it.

2) *Notes*- which give a more detailed examination of difficult phrases and words.

The reader is recommended to read the text of each section and then its Outline. Reference should be made to the Notes as needed by the reader. The reader who wishes a quick overview of the book is recommended to work through the Outlines, and then to return to the Notes.

There is much cross-reference to passages within *Rev* within the text. These numbers often appear without the name of the book being repeated. Thus, a reference like "13:1" would be to *Rev* 13:1. References to other works, scriptural or non-scriptural are prefixed by the title of the work, or an accepted abbreviation, written in italics. Where appropriate the name of the writer is also given in normal type: thus Juvenal, *Satires*, 6.118

Cross-references within the commentary are intended to reduce repetition. Readers are invited to refer to relevant points in either the Outline or Notes for other sections or verses. These are written "See Outline: The Seven Seals 6:1-8:1" or " See Note 1:18" respectively. Sometimes a page number may be given: thus "See, Introduction, p.25" or similar.

Some supplementary questions about each section are offered at the end of the book to help private or group study.

This work is offered as a critical study of the text. It does not profess to offer a full interpretation of *Rev*. Exegesis like this is only the first part of interpretation. It is the attempt to discover the meaning of the text. When this is done the exegete moves on to another passage. The interpreter's work is, at this point, only half done. The interpreter needs to present that material to a fresh audience.

The Ghanaian theologian, E.A. Obeng , has written of *Rev* that:

In Africa today, there are still marks of the 'beast'- pain and suffering arising from ethnic conflicts and civil wars, corruption in high places which results in unnecessary deaths on our roads, political assassinations, high increase in crime on our streets, extreme poverty and hunger which dehumanises many Africans. These are our experiences which must be reflected in our interpretation of the book of Revelation. Critical study of the Bible then places the biblical message in a correct perspective from which point then our needs as Africans can better be addressed. Our needs must be paramount.

(Obeng 1997,19)

This critical study is offered to brothers and sisters in Christ as a tool to help them in this work. May it be a launching pad for the application of the seer's visions to Christians in new times and places.

INTRODUCTION

a) The Interpretation Of Revelation

Revelation is one of the most difficult NT texts to interpret: evidence of this is found throughout the centuries. The variety of interpretations has led to the book having a chequered history in the life of the Church. In the early and patristic periods, not all Christians accepted it as part of the canon. Resistance to its inclusion came from its use by heretical groups like the Montanists, and some of the Gnostics. It was not until the end of the fourth century, at the council of Carthage (398 AD) that the book was finally accepted as canonical in the Western Church. Acceptance in the east was not found until the fifth century.

Throughout the Middle Ages *Revelation's* place in the canon was secure, despite its constant citation by groups critical of the papacy. Such usages reached their climax in the period of the Reformation, ending with both Roman Catholic and Protestant commentators using the book as an offensive weapon against each other. Not only that, but feuding Protestant groups turned its visions on each other, and some tried to set up states modelled on the New Jerusalem: "heavenly cities".

The Reformation also brought criticism of *Revelation* from the academics. Luther described it as "neither apostolic, nor prophetic, and Christ was 'neither sought nor known in it'" (Wainwright 1993, 109). Luther's outspoken criticisms have been tacitly adopted by many scholars and the book has been comparatively ignored by some, or treated as second grade by others. Amongst modern writers, for example, Bultmann had little use for *Revelation*, an attitude which might stem from his Lutheran background, existential philosophy (*Revelation's* stress on the future might make it seem alien or redundant, compared to the demands of the present stressed by existentialism), or both.

Despite the harsh criticisms levelled at it, *Revelation* must be interpreted accurately, if only to refute some of the more extreme uses that have been made of the book both in the past and in the present. More than any other book, *Revelation* has been subjected to a variety of interpretative approaches, some more imaginative than accurate. Before beginning our own interpretation, it is worth looking at the different types of interpretation which have been attempted over the ages.

b) Approaches To Interpreting Revelation

i) Millenarianism

The name "millenarianism" comes from the Latin word for a thousand, and is centred on the idea of the 1000 year rule of Christ (*Rev* 20:2). Such views may also be called "chiliasm" from the Greek word for a 1000. The unifying feature of such views is a belief that Christ will literally rule for a period of 1000 years (millennium). Beyond this, there are huge differences of belief: some believe the rule of Christ will begin on earth, others in heaven, some think he will reign visibly, others invisibly, some think that the millennium has already begun, others that it has yet to begin. Perhaps the biggest difference is between those who believe that Christ will be seen at the beginning of the 1000 year period (Premillenarians), others at the end (Postmillenarians). Many Postmillenarians also hold that a spiritual resurrection will take place before the millennium, and a physical resurrection after. Furthermore, many of them believe that the 1000 year period will be a glorious period for the Church before the return of Christ.

ii) Praeterism

Praeterism marks a very different kind of interpretation: it sees the events of *Revelation* as events which have already taken place, rather than as events which will take place. These kinds of interpretations were used especially by Roman Catholic commentators during the Reformation to refute anti-papal interpretations. They argued that the events described were long past, and that the visions of *Revelation* could not be used as criticisms of the contemporary church. Some Protestant interpreters such as Grotius and Hammond also adopted this approach.

iii) Futurism

Futurism has much in common with millenarianism in that it tends to look on the visions of *Revelation* as about to happen in the future: the difference is that it expects these things to happen far in the future, rather than comparatively soon.

iv) "Present Millenarianism"

This view is sometimes called AMILLENIAL (literally, without a belief in the millennium) but such a title is inaccurate. Many "present millenarians" do believe in a millennium, but do not put it in the future, as did the early Chiliasts. These "present millenarians" believed that the millennium had already started. One such thinker was Tyconius, the leader of the Donatist movement in North Africa, who held that the

millennium had begun at the first coming of Christ, that is, the Incarnation.

v) Augustine's Interpretation of the Millennium

Whilst Augustine's teaching was based on that of Tyconius, he introduced an important change: the millennium was no longer thought of as a literal period of 1000 years. Whilst believing in the rule of Christ, they did not hold that his rule would be for 1000 years.

Augustine's thinking about this is found in the *City Of God* which offers a "spiritualised" interpretation of *Revelation*. The city of God exists side by side with the city of the world: their parallel development is traced from Cain and Abel. The coming of Christ marks the time when the devil is put in chains. At the end of the present age (which Augustine described as the millennium) the devil will be set free for a period until the final victory of Christ. Whilst Augustine appears to a postmillennialist (in that he puts Christ's coming at the end of the 1000 years) he is not described using this title.

Augustine's interpretation became very important in Western Christianity, and was strongly revived after the Reformation by many denominations who wished to block the more radical millennial interpretations, especially in the Anabaptist traditions. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession, to name one, made the Augustinian approach the official church doctrine, declaring millennial interpretations to be in error.

vi) Historical Interpretations

Many of the above theories set the millennium at some point in history: historical interpretations see *Revelation* as giving a precise description of historical events. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202 AD) is a key figure in this type of interpretation. Joachim introduced the idea of the "three ages": the first, the period of Jewish Law, the second, of the Gospel, and the third, of the Spirit. These ages do not fit, perhaps, as we might expect. The first age does not last until the Incarnation, but until the time of Uzziah. The period of the Gospel starts with Uzziah, and continues until Joachim's own time. The third period, that of the Spirit, overlaps with it and begins with St. Benedict (480-550 AD). Joachim further identified the visions with historical events which had taken place.

Joachim is important because he also introduced, within his theory of ages, the idea of RECAPITULATION. Instead of seeing *Revelation* as a continuous series of events, he thought that different visions might refer to the same event. Many

interpreters have adopted this theory to try and explain, for example, how the visions of 7 seals, trumpets, and bowls might refer to the same sequence of events.

Joachim's interpretation marked the beginning of efforts to use *Revelation* to interpret history. Many of his successors tried to give detailed accounts of history by referring to contemporary events. Different generations of interpreters described visions as referring to their own situation, and their theories quickly expired. A second method of historical interpretation also exists, one in which *Revelation* is seen as being polyvalent (that is, its visions are taken as referring to more than one event in more than one era). These kinds of interpretation see *Revelation* as pointing out general situations which confront the church in every generation: the problem is then to know which vision refers to what in one's own age, rather than what is the one event in the whole of history to which a given vision refers.

c) Criticisms of the Different Approaches

Each interpretative method has its own weaknesses.

Praeterism is open to the charge of making *Revelation* completely redundant except as an account of what happened long ago.

Millenarian and futurist approaches which look on *Revelation* as being about the future similarly reduce its power, by failing to address its applicability to the world in which we live. All three fail to take seriously the implications of the Letters to the Seven Churches (*Rev* 2-3) which address the church in its present state, not in the past or the future.

Many futurist accounts also commit the cardinal error of taking the book literally, as an account of what will happen, rather than as a heavily symbolic piece of writing. They also fail inasmuch as they force *Revelation* into isolation, rather than interpreting it in parallel with the other traditions of the Last Things in the NT, traditions like those found in *Mark* 13 and the Pauline Epistles. On the basis that an interpretation should be tested by wider reference to other Scriptures ("Scripture to interpret Scripture") they are woefully inadequate.

Perhaps the most stringent criticism must be reserved for historical interpretations. They prove the truth of the dictum, "the one who marries the spirit of the age is soon widowed". Whilst such interpreters deserve praise for taking seriously the importance of *Revelation* in taking seriously the current situation of the Church, the

speed with which such writings can date and show their inadequacy can be breathtaking.

A recent bestseller shows this splendidly. Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970) sold millions of copies in the 1970s and purported to show that the visions of *Revelation* would soon come to pass. Thus, the visions of the Seven Seals (*Rev* 6-8) showed a war between Israel, the Arab States and Russia, and its consequences. The Sixth Seal was taken to be a reference to an imminent nuclear war. The Bowl visions (*Rev* 16) were interpreted as referring to a battle between Western and Chinese armies. The Beast from the Sea (*Rev* 13:1-10) was the European Economic Community. The criticism of all this is simple: it did not happen. Furthermore, subsequent events have made some of this patently impossible. The thought of a Russian super army fighting in the Middle East has been dispatched by the break up of the USSR and the patent inability of its armies to wage war successfully in Afghanistan and the break-away Republics. It is equally hard to identify the Beast with the EEC because the criterion of the identification (that the 10 horns represented the 10 member states) has been wrecked by the EEC's subsequent enlargement. Lindsey's interpretations could be said to tell us more of his own concerns than that of *Revelation*.

It would be easy, in light of such criticisms, to give all up as hopeless, or to look for new methods of interpretation. However, all these different schools of interpretation all contain grains of truth. They remind us that an interpretation of *Revelation* must both address the immediate situation of the Church, but must also have a future thrust. Thus they encourage us to grapple with some of the most serious theological problems, those of suffering and evil, of God's relationship to the world, the role of Christ and his work, as well as the question of God's promises, and how they will be completed. The key to interpreting *Revelation* is to balance all, and to refer constantly to the testimony of other scriptures and its environment. Even if the meaning should remain opaque, the worst excesses of error can hopefully be avoided.

d) The Environment of Revelation: Place, Date & Author

Revelation is connected to Asia Minor: the letters to the Seven Churches (*Rev* 2-3) are all directed to congregations there. Thus we may guess at the identity of the

recipients, that they were Christians in Asia Minor primarily, but also the church in general (see below on *Rev* 2-3). The question of the place of writing is intimately connected with the identity of the writer and the date of writing. If the writer is John, the son of Zebedee, the book may be linked to Palestine or Ephesus: those are the places linked to the apostle. If the writer should be some other John, the number of possible places is increased. Similarly with the date, the common suggestion of 96 AD might suggest that John, son of Zebedee, would have been too old, or dead, and unable to compose such a work. The question of the date will be our first call in this investigation: it may then let us focus on the author's identity.

Different dates for *Revelation* have been conjectured in different times. At the end of the last century the great Victorian commentators, Hort and Westcott, both dated it to 68 AD in the period of chaos at the end of Nero's rule. Gradually opinions changed in the first part of the twentieth century until the dominant view became that of a date around 96 AD, in the period when the emperor Domitian was supposed to have started the first official persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. More recently, other writers, such as G.M. Ford have advanced theories that the visions of *Revelation* can be traced back even further into Jewish visionary traditions. Ford:1975, 30-7 argues that the original source of much material is John the Baptist. This last option has been accepted in part, so that it is agreed that many of the visions may show a pre-Christian origin. However, these traditions, it is continued, have been adopted and adapted by a Christian writer in light of the church's situation at some point in the first century AD. Thus the main choice remains between 68 and 96 AD, though occasionally others are offered. Thus Garrow (1996) argues for a date c. 80 AD, on the basis that many of the disasters resemble natural disasters of that period. The problem he would face is how to reconcile his suggested date with the persecutions suggested.

In considering the date, two kinds of evidence need to be evaluated. External evidence comes from outside *Revelation* (that is, from other books or sources). Internal evidence comes from the text of *Revelation* itself.

The external evidence comes from a number of sources. Irenaeus, *Against the Heretics*, 5.30.3, which is also quoted in Eusebius, *Church History*, points to a date in the period of Domitian, the 96 AD date. Other external sources point towards the 68 AD date, namely, the tradition recorded by Clement Of Alexandria, *Quis Div.*

Salv. 42:1-15 which tells of John returning from Patmos and being agile enough to travel extensively in Asia Minor with more energy than might be expected of a man in his nineties (which would be the scenario demanded if it described the 96 AD date). Tertullian, *Praesc.*, 36.3 records a tradition that John's banishment was contemporary with the martyrdoms of Paul and Peter in the Neronian period (after 64 AD). Whilst many commentators view the external evidence from Irenaeus as conclusive in dating *Revelation* to 96 AD, we must note that the second set of traditions point to the 68 AD date. The external evidence is not, it would appear, conclusive.

The internal evidence focuses on three distinct points: the Letters to the Seven Churches (*Rev* 2-3), The Jerusalem Temple and Babylon (esp. *Rev* 11, and 17), and the List of Emperors (*Rev.* 17:9-14). The decision about the date will depend on the interpretation of all three points, and the weight that is put on the importance of each.

i) The Letters to the Seven Churches

This passage has been used to argue for the 96 date, because, it is argued, the details do not fit with the period around 68. It is thus said that the Church at Smyrna had not been founded in the late 60s, and that there would have been no church at Laodicea, which had been destroyed by an earthquake in 60-1 AD and not rebuilt by 68. Proponents of the 68 date argue that these arguments are wrong. The first, Polycarp's *Letter To The Philipians* 11:3, about Smyrna, is wrong because it is based on the idea that the church at Smyrna was only founded after the death of Paul. In fact the text in question says that the church at Smyrna was founded after the church at Philippi had been founded, not after the death of Paul. Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.27 gives a different picture of Laodicea, pointing out that the citizens rebuilt the city very quickly, without help from the imperial treasury. In short, the rebuilding at Laodicea would have been sufficient for there to have been both people and place enough for a church by 68 AD. The Laodiceans may even have needed to be warned against being too proud of their achievements (*Rev* 3:17).

One of the abiding problems in the study of *Revelation* is whether the Letters are part of the original text. Interestingly enough, it is often suggested, even by supporters of the 96 date, that the Letters are an earlier document added into the final text. As it can be argued on stylistic and textual grounds that the Letters are, in

fact, an integral part of the work as a whole, they might rather point to an earlier date of writing for the whole book, that is, that *Revelation* comes from the 68 date. Theories that say the Letters must be an earlier work added in to a work written in 96 are in danger of cutting and shaping the text to the theory, rather than letting the text itself dictate the final answer.

ii) The Jerusalem Temple & Babylon

In his *Re-dating The New Testament* (1976), John A.T. Robinson argued that every book of NT is written before 70 AD because none contain obvious references to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple with knowledge of the events as they happened. In his interpretation, *Revelation* fits this pattern. He especially thinks that *Rev* 11 displays an ignorance of the events of 70 AD. However, the problem may be more complicated. Supporters of the later date may argue that this is a passage from before the destruction of the Temple which has been incorporated and re-interpreted by the writer of *Revelation*. Furthermore they may argue that this does not refer to the Jerusalem Temple, but rather be a symbolic passage. In this second case, the passage can neither be used to argue for the earlier 68 AD date, nor for the later date. Ultimately the question will hinge on whether the passage is expressly identified with the Jerusalem Temple. If it is, Robinson has a strong case. If not, the passage gives no help with the date as it is either (a) irrelevant to events at Jerusalem, or, (b) an earlier passage incorporated, giving information only about the date of that particular passage (i.e., before the destruction of the Temple since its details do not match what really happened).

The Babylon question (*Rev* 17:5) is also problematic. It can be argued that Babylon refers to Rome as the destroyer of the Temple (Aune 1988, 1300). However, this interpretation seems to read too much into the text. Different interpretations are possible. Ford: argues that Babylon, the Great Prostitute, is rather Jerusalem rather than Rome, on the basis that it is difficult for Rome to stand both for the beast and the woman (1975, 276-93). The passage becomes a vision critical of Jerusalem rather than Rome. If Ford is right, or even if it is only agreed that Aune is reading too much into Babylon, this passage too ceases to be grounds for arguing the later 96 date.

iii) The List of Emperors

This passage too is used as evidence to support the different theories about the

date of Revelation. Again, its interpretation is difficult, notoriously so. It is especially difficult to connect the date to Domitian for those who support the later date. However, it is also difficult to connect the list historically to Nero. Many commentators suggest that one who "was and is not" (*Rev* 17:11) is Nero: the problem is getting the identification to fit with the list, if it is treated as an historically accurate list. Two solutions are offered:

a) Robinson thinks that the problem arises because many commentators, following the ancient practice, start the list of emperors with Julius Caesar. The list thus reads:-

Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho...

Nero becomes number 6 (and alive), when the theory demands he be fifth (and dead!). Robinson suggested that the counting start with Augustus as the first named emperor rather than Julius. The problem is that Robinson can provide no evidence for any such beginning, other than his own demand. To do as he suggests would be too contradict all ancient practice and examples. That surely is too much to ask.

b) the other approach is to suggest that the list is not an historical list, rather it is symbolic. Under this reading the number 7 could stand for "a schematic representation of the complete number of Roman emperors" (Aune 1988, 1315). Under this scheme, the list is useless in helping to date the book. If this approach is correct, the passage becomes irrelevant in arguing for either date.

It may be that we can leave the question of the date a little more open. One important historical factor needs to be considered. Much is made by commentators of the persecution by Domitian. This, it is argued, was the first official persecution of Christians by the Roman state. Much of the case for the later dating of the book rests on this. It comes then as rather a shock to realise that the persecution may well be imaginary. The earliest Christian accounts do not point to a wholesale persecution under Domitian, but rather to attacks on prominent individuals in Rome, some of whom may have been Christians (Wilson 1993, 590-4). Nor is there any record that Domitian's command that he be called "Lord" and "God" led to clashes between Christians and the Roman authorities, beyond the tensions that had already existed for much of the first century (Wilson 1993, 589;595-7). We should remember that calls for emperor worship had started in the eastern Mediterranean as early as the time of Augustus. It may well be that tests against Christians were

instituted by Domitian, but the first clear evidence for such processes comes from the reign of Trajan, well after the time of writing of *Revelation*.

What we can say is that the bulk of evidence points to a time of writing after the death of Nero, whether 68 or 96 AD. The following points can be noted in this regard:-

1) the rule of Nero had seen the first persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities within the city of Rome. Persecutions had also taken place, probably unofficially, in Jerusalem. Much will depend on whether *Rev* 14:20 is interpreted as being Rome or Jerusalem. Either might provide the basis for the persecuted church found in *Revelation*.

2) Regardless of the question about the place of the persecutions, a further belief must also be considered, that of *Nero redivivus* (Nero back from the dead). After Nero's death in 68 AD, there were widespread beliefs that he would return again at the head of Parthian armies from the east and wreak a terrible revenge on the Roman Empire. This belief is recorded in the writings of historians such as Tacitus as well as religious writings from the Jewish and Christian traditions such as the *Sibylline Oracles*. We might compare this to the way in which people entertained irrational fears about the possible return and vengeance of Idi Amin after his overthrow. This belief in *Nero redivivus* persisted well into the second century, and some even saw Domitian as the returned Nero.

Whilst strong academic traditions lie behind both the 68 and 96 AD dates, my own eventual preference lies with the 68 date for the following reasons:-

- a) The fresh memory of persecutions in the city (*Rev* 14:20), be it Jerusalem or Rome.
- b) The belief in *Nero redivivus* (as signifying 68 as the earliest possible date).
- c) The lack of references to the fall of the Jerusalem Temple in historically accurate terms.
- d) The "non-event" of the Domitian persecution.
- e) The better earlier date for the Letters to the Seven Churches.

As has been suggested, the final choice of date may not be as important as the concept of *Nero redivivus*: a myth whose power cannot be underrated and which persisted throughout the entire period under debate.

In turning to the question of the author, the traditional view that the writer of

Revelation was also the writer of the Gospel according to John and the Johannine Epistles is our starting point. However, since the time of Dionysius of Alexandria questions have been raised about this identification of linguistic grounds. The Greek of *Revelation* immediately raises problems: some commentators describe it as the Greek of someone thinking in Hebrew or Aramaic. It is sometimes argued that this would be the kind of Greek written by someone who was beginning to use the language. Such thinking then might go on to say that one writer first wrote *Revelation*, and, as a more accomplished Greek writer, then wrote the Gospel and the Epistles. However, the theory just does not work:-

The Greek of the Apocalypse is not that of a beginner whose grammar and vocabulary might improve into those of the evangelist. It is the pidgin Greek of someone who appears to know exactly what he is about with his strange instrument and whose cast of mind and vocabulary is conspicuously different from, and more colourful than, that of the correct, simple, but rather flat style of the gospel and the epistles.

(Robinson 1976, 255)

Caird is less sure of the arguments and notes that, whilst there are differences, it is still possible to argue for a common author. It is possible that the writer is deliberately writing in an alien style (1984, 5).

If the writer of *Revelation* is taken as being the same as that of the Gospel and Epistles, we could even argue that, given the complex theories about the composition of the Gospel, it might be better to talk of the evangelist as the common source, admitting the possible work of editors and redactors in the final written document. The Orthodox tradition in iconography, of John dictating his visions to a scribe, may contain a truth which echoes with the fruits of scholastic labours. The theory of John as common source is less prey to questioning on linguistic and textual grounds, but no easier to prove, and he would be more difficult to know, hidden behind the work of the scribes and redactors..

Whether the writer is identified as the writer of Gospel and Epistles as well, or not, common features are found in both sets of writing. The "Lamb of God" albeit with some differences in emphasis is present in both, perhaps helping Ford's speculation that John the Baptist is the John of *Revelation* (1975, 30-7). Beasley-Murray, who is perhaps most drawn to the idea of a common author, is finally drawn to conclude that there are two writers with a shared common theology (1981, 35-6).

The date also can be a problem: could an old man be posited as the writer of such a powerful book? The question is much more difficult for supporters of the 96 date.

A second theory has been to say that the book is pseudonymous, that is, claims to be written by one of the greats of history. Such pseudonymous writings were treated by many in the ancient world as marks of respect, not acts of fraud. However, there are arguments about whether the Church made use of this practice of pseudonymity, and that the reputation of the writer is not exploited in *Revelation*.

A third theory is that *Revelation* was written by some other John, probably a church elder from Asia Minor. If so, he remains a mystery. One candidate mentioned is John the Elder who appears in the works of Papias, but he remains unknown except by name.

Rather than speculate on this question, we do better to remember the writer's advice: what matters is that these visions come from Jesus Christ.

It also must be borne in mind that, even if our writer remains anonymous, or mysterious, and the date and place also uncertain, the religious background helps our quest. Knowledge of the Old Testament's visionary and prophetic writings, as well as Jewish cult practices and symbolism is obviously at work. Our quest will be better helped by knowing this literary and religious landscape than biographical details of a writer who humbles himself before Jesus, the true source of the visions.

e) The Literary Environment of Revelation: Apocalyptic, Prophecy & Letter

What kind of writing is *Revelation*? On the surface it is a book that appears to be about the future, so we might say it is prophecy. However, the Greek name for *Revelation*, *Apocalypse*, reminds us that it is not just prophecy; it belongs to a wider Jewish literary tradition called Apocalyptic.

In everyday English the word "apocalyptic" is used to mean something disastrous. An apocalyptic event might be a huge explosion, earthquake or a scene in which many people died and chaos seemed to rule supreme. When theologians use the word "apocalyptic" they use it differently, and, in fact, must distinguish between two different fields of meaning. The first field of meaning is used to describe a kind of writing, books like *Daniel* (Old Testament), *1 & 2 Enoch* (Inter-Testamental, coming from the period between our two Testaments) and *Revelation* itself and parts of the Gospels (*Mark* 13): apocalyptic writing is found in both Jewish and Christian

traditions, especially in the period from about 300 BC to 200 AD. The second meaning is used to describe a kind of eschatology, that is, thinking about the way in which God will finally solve the problems of the world, death, judgment and so on. Apocalyptic eschatology has three common features: a future transcendent Kingdom (we might say "the rule of God in heaven"), God intervening in the history of the world, and pessimism or gloom about the current state of the world. Apocalyptic writings do not always show apocalyptic eschatology, so care must be taken not to say too quickly that apocalyptic writings will show these three theological themes, or that every book which does show these is an apocalyptic writing. In recent studies, the word "apocalyptic" has been taken to refer to a kind of writing rather than a kind of theology, in order to lessen the confusion. It is this usage that will be adopted throughout this commentary.

What are the marks of apocalyptic writing? The following features can be noted:-

- 1) It is usually pseudonymous, that is, its visions are described as the visions of some famous historical figure like Daniel, Ezekiel or Enoch, but are not actually written by those people.
- 2) It often uses complex symbolism and imagery. Some of this is based on numerology, the practice of thinking that numbers have meanings, and astrology, movements of the stars and astronomy (that studies of the stars and planets can give information about the world and what will happen). A useful précis is that apocalyptic language often uses the language of heaven to talk about matters on earth. Apocalyptic writings may often be coded interpretations of the way things are. This also means that apocalyptic writing is often related to the circumstances of the first readers and/or the writer. Such concerns can be seen in the apocalyptic period from the time of the Maccabean Revolt. These writings explore the question of martyrdom because it was a very real threat: people were being killed for their beliefs. Apocalyptic may also show these concerns in historical reviews, explanations and meditations of larger historical periods. Some commentators, especially those who think that *Daniel* was written in the second century BC, think that passages about the different kingdoms (*Daniel* 2:31-45, for example) are examples of apocalyptic. Some apocalypses have heavenly reviews, that is, passages in which the famous character is taken up to heaven and given a guided tour of all its parts, instead of historical reviews: these, too, are meant to inform

about the current state of the world (see *1 Enoch* 72).

3) It is often pessimistic about the world in which we live, presenting it as a corrupt, evil or unhappy place.

4) It often shows a deterministic or dualist theology. In determinism, it appears that people can do little about the situation in which they live: solutions and change can only come from God. In dualism, the world is often viewed as a battleground between good and evil. In many pagan and polytheistic belief systems, this is a battle between different Gods. In Christianity, there is a difference, the battle is between God and Satan (who is not a God), though some heterodox sects often seem to have come close to making God and Satan equal. In orthodox Christian belief Satan is not God, but rather a creature under the authority of God: care must be taken not to promote him.

Where did this apocalyptic writing come from? It seems similar to prophecy, and to draw much of its inspiration and method from the Old Testament's prophetic tradition. Firstly, like prophecy, apocalyptic assumes that God speaks through particular people, "God reveals himself and his ways to certain chosen agents of his purposes" (Rowland 1985, 63). Furthermore, the prophecies provide much of the subject matter for the apocalyptic visions, as do the other Old Testament writings: *Genesis* 1 and *Ezekiel* 1 both provide material used by apocalyptic writers. Many apocalyptic passages have their origins in the Old Testament:-

There is no question here of visionary inspiration independent of Scripture-study, for the vision takes its origin from the insight already communicated in the biblical passage, however further it may take it.

(Rowland 1985, 62)

The most important idea from the prophetic tradition is that a person is able to receive and transmit a prophecy straight from God, who is the source of the revelation. As our study of the authorship of Revelation showed, this is much more important than the identity of the prophet or the visionary. As in prophecy, the visionary speaks "on behalf of God". Interpretations which say that prophecy or apocalyptic are about the future have muddled up Latin and Greek. Whilst much prophecy does have a future dimension (Latin *pro*-), the prophet speaks firstly on behalf of God (Greek *pros*). The stress on the future must not be allowed to escape the fact that much prophecy also includes reference to the current situation, often being marked with an implicit call to conversion, repentance or change of life here

and now, not at some vague future point.

If these remarks remind us of the present dimension of prophecy, so too does the apocalyptic development of prophecy. Apocalyptic is purposely addressed to the current situation. Often these situations are grim, and hope is slight: faith may be wavering. The apocalyptic writer addresses the situation of loss and writers rather *paraenesis* (for hope and encouragement). This, when done badly, can amount to little more than advice to "always look on the bright side of life". In a skilled writer, more will be found, and the call to hold firm traditional beliefs, values and hopes about God will stress the supremacy of God, and the hope, as Julian of Norwich put it, "that all manner of things will be well". *Revelation* does this not just by the final concluding vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, but also by the pointers throughout the text that the powers of evil are limited and ultimately self-destroying.

If the prophetic tradition can be seen in apocalyptic's concern with the present, and giving a communication directly from God, its debt to wisdom traditions can be seen in the setting of the visions and an interest in speculation. Wisdom traditions are found both within the Jewish-Christian tradition and outside it, and are marked by an interest in describing the things of heaven, the supernatural or what cannot be perceived by usual human senses. The different wisdom traditions and their influence on apocalyptic can be seen by:-

- 1) an interest in the created order (*1 Enoch* 72), claiming knowledge through a revelation.
- 2) Mantic wisdom. The ways in which people believed they could interpret the future by "reading a meaning" or unlock the mysteries of the world. These included dreams and their interpretation, divination (reading the future through objects, for example, the entrails of a sacrificed animal), astrology and astronomy.
- 3) Biblical wisdom, that is, the tradition in the Scriptures of looking at the created world for understanding the mysteries of God.

The presence of some of these, especially, the mantic, has led some to be suspicious of apocalyptic, arguing that it has been corrupted by alien or foreign beliefs which have no claim to reveal the truth, or as leading to excessive speculation about the supernatural, invisible and heavenly (for example, among those who work out long lists of names of angels or demons).

All of this talk of prophecy and wisdom might lead us to think that apocalyptic is a

kind of fraud: what claims to be visions from God turns out to be based heavily on Scripture and human traditions. This need not be so, and two points must be made against such views.

Firstly, we should not be surprised if religious traditions shape the reporting of visions. The two are not mutually exclusive, and the presence of traditional elements need not deny validity. There is no rule that says visions must be completely fresh. Secondly, the opposite could be argued: the agreement between the vision and the tradition is a sign of its authenticity. The presence of traditional elements need not deny that some mystical revelation is not the source of a vision.

Although apocalyptic can be described as having common features or sources, it must be noted that there are a variety of apocalyptic writings. One important distinction is that of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic styles. Christian and Jewish apocalypses differ, firstly, in that Christian apocalyptic stresses the second coming of Christ and is more concerned with exploring the ideas of heavenly reward and punishment. Secondly, the Christian writings are less concerned with heavenly and historical reviews: they focus more on the immediate situation. Furthermore, their concern is less with making a distinction between the Two Ages (the present period of persecution and the heavenly age to come). Lastly, they are less interested in the mantic kinds of wisdom.

From that brief summary it might be argued that *Revelation* looks more like a Jewish than a Christian apocalypse. Ford, indeed, suggests that *Revelation* is really a Jewish apocalypse, coming from the tradition of John the Baptist, which has been "christianised" by the addition of a preface (introductory section: chapters 1-4) and a codicil (closing section: chapters 21-22; 1975,26). She notes that *Revelation* is much more like Jewish apocalyptic because it includes animal symbolism, numerology and vision images from Judaism (for example, thrones, sealing, tribes, new Jerusalem, the Messiah, the millennium and the Prostitute of *Rev* 17). Ford's theory has not been accepted by many, and strong counterarguments can be made. Firstly, it is not as easy to separate the preface as Ford suggests: it fits very well with the book as a whole. Secondly, *Revelation* is not pseudonymous (which is also a strong feature of Jewish apocalyptic). Ford also noted the lack of historical and heavenly review. Again, these are strong features of Jewish apocalyptic: their absence might point rather to a Christian origin. Finally, much of Ford's theory about John the Baptist lies

on an identification of themes in *Revelation* and the Johannine writings as coming from the Baptist (thus, Lamb of God), but she has no independent means of checking this: perhaps her John the Baptist is a Christian construct rather than the "real John the Baptist"? Such a construct would then argue again for a Christian origin for *Revelation*. Aune notes that Ford has now rejected such theories of John the Baptist as author and sees *Rev* as a unitary composition (1997, cxi).

One final kind of writing can be identified with *Revelation*: it can, in the form we have, be identified as a letter because of its introduction and conclusion. The letter form is obvious in the Letters to the Seven Churches (*Rev* 2-3), but covers the book as a whole (*Rev* 1 and 22). Given our knowledge of the letter form in the New Testament, and the way in which such letters often address the immediate context, the presence of this form is a reminder that we do well to interpret the letter in a specific context. Many recent commentaries thus address the original context of the letter and identify the visions with events and people from that period. This should not, however, be taken as meaning that the application of *Revelation* is now exhausted. Its visions are polyvalent and the original meaning and its significances allow us to apply the visions to our own situation, as is the case in our interpretation of many of the prophecies. Whilst it is important to know the original significance, the application of the visions to our own times remains part of a wider interpretative process and tradition (see Chapter 2).

f) Symbolism in Revelation

A careful reading of *Revelation* should make us aware that these are not literal descriptions of the world in which we live. If it were so, we would only have to wait for terrible visions and monsters. Furthermore, we would have to imagine the Risen Christ changing shape from being the Son of Man (*Rev* 1:12 ff.) to a Lamb (*Rev* 5:6ff.). Both figures refer to Christ, but are not literal descriptions, rather they reveal theological truths about who Christ is and what he has done. Similarly, the city Babylon does not suddenly stop being a city with streets and buildings and change into a monstrous woman (*Rev* 17). We are in a world of symbols and images and the big question is how they should be interpreted.

Symbols and images are notoriously difficult to interpret, and we need to look for clues, or a key, to help our interpretation. There is no quick answer, though, and no

single, simple key will give us the meaning of *Revelation*. Rather we can note some features which help our task of interpreting, paying attention to the ways in which the people of *Revelation's* period used symbols and imagery. Thus we need to look at the use of names, colours and numbers.

Names of people and places come with meanings based on the Old Testament and its history. Babylon refers to enemy of God's people, but that leads us to a further problem, who is the "Babylon" of Revelation, Rome or Jerusalem? Similarly, the names of Egypt and Sodom appear (*Rev* 11:6), but their new identity is uncertain. Even words like "heaven" may be more complex than we think: does heaven refer to a place for angels, or does it refer to those who are with God, on his side, and include the faithful on earth as well?

Colours also have meanings: white may refer to victory or justification (2:17 and others), red for bloodshed (6:4), green (6:8, or perhaps "pale") for death.

Numbers are especially important in *Revelation*, as well as throughout the ancient world. We must be careful: sometimes a number may just be a number. There were many different numerological systems (ways of using numbers as codes) in the ancient world, and care must be taken to know which is being used. A good basic rule would appear to be to prefer Scriptural systems and meanings to those of exotic pagan systems. Some of the most important numbers in that tradition are as follow:

2- witnesses. Two witnesses were needed according to Jewish law (11:3, compare *Deut* 19:15) to guarantee a faithful version of events.

3- God (1:4 ff.), but can be imitated (16:13) or parodied (13:1-18).

4- the world or universe: four seasons, corners or winds stand for the whole world being affected).

6- the number of evil and imperfection: it can thus come to stand for the Antichrist. It becomes the number of evil because it is short of being the number of God.

7- the number of perfection and God. It can be parodied by the Antichrist (12:3, 13:1).

8- the number for Christ in early Christian tradition based on his Resurrection on the 8th day.

10- wholeness, in numerical terms, but not used of God. Increasing by 10,100 or 1000 may add emphasis to a particular feature.

12- 4x3. Symbolises wholeness and perfection. Thus 21:12-14 signifies the whole number of the elect being gathered in, not just a certain number.

Multiplication, especially squaring or cubing, may emphasis the basic symbolic meaning of a number, and sometimes numbers overlap, thus 1260 days=42 months= 3.5 years.

Numbers often refer back to a particular Old Testament tradition. The "42 months" come from *Daniel* 7:25 and signify, not a literal period of time, but the period of oppression before the final victory (Sweet 1990, 182). Thus used it is a reminder that the Church is not at peace with the world, and that all Christians face a time of trial like their spiritual predecessors, a time of trial which will be

followed by their triumph in God.

g) The Structure Of Revelation

In examining a book like *Revelation*, it is tempting to list its contents (that is, the different scenes and messages it gives) at the expense of talking about its structure (that is, those parts and the ways in which they connect together, or fail to do so). A quick glance through the literature on Revelation shows a huge amount of disagreement about whether the book is a unity (that is, has a structure which shapes its flow from beginning to end) or a collection (different visions badly put together) or something between these two. In the case of *Rev*, there is a lack of agreement on both how to classify the contents and the structure. It is usually accepted that the first three chapters provide an introduction, a vision of Christ and the Oracles to the Seven Churches, but from chapter 4 onwards there is much less agreement. Part of the problem is that from that point the different scenes are not distinct, but flow in and out of each other. Consider chapters 4-7 which contain a throne scene and the visions of the seven seals: it is debatable whether the throne scene ends at 5:14 or 6:17. The confusion is further complicated by the introduction of the scroll carrying the seven seals in 5:1. Should this really be called the beginning of the vision of the seven seals? Two features are used to try and determine the different elements of the book: grammatical features ("after this/these", *meta touto/tauta* [4:1;7:1]) and the subject matter.

A further problem comes from the way in which the interpreter approaches the book. Is it primarily seen as a giving a sequence of different eschatological events, or is the principle of recapitulation being used? Recapitulation, it will be remembered is the idea that different scenes refer to the same event. However there are different meanings of "recapitulation": are the different scenes fuller descriptions of the same events, or are they similar patterns which recur, or a story line which is repeated (Aune 1997, xcii)?

One further difficulty that must be faced in finding the structure of *Rev* is the way in which the reader thinks about time. A European reader may well work,

consciously or not, with a concept of past, present and future: time is like a line, and single events are distinct points marked on that line. In talking about God, Western concepts of time may also include eternity: in which there is no way of measuring time in spatial terms, time with no beginning, end or spaces on a line. An African reader may work with the concepts of *Sasa* and *Zamani* (Mbiti 1970, 28-9; 1994,34-5). *Rev* works with its own concepts of time: the different periods of time are not as distinct as other systems. Writing of the death of Christ, Sweet highlights this difference:

The scene is timeless. Even the historical event of the Lamb's slaughter is later implied to have been "before the foundation of the world" (13:8). The events and scenes of the following chapters cannot be plotted on a timescale, though historical reference is not lacking. It is the essence of Jewish and Christian worship that the lines of eternity and historical event cross, and man is admitted to heaven where past, present and future are alike in God, who was, and is, and is to come.

(Sweet 1990, 132)

Margaret Barker gives a helpful description of the philosophy of time in ancient Jewish thought. Instead of thinking of time as past, present and future, or even as *Sasa* and *Zamani*, or in terms of space or a line, the Jews thought of time *mythically*:

The mythical world envisages another manner of being, a dimension in which there is neither spatial limitation nor time in our sense, but one which shares with this world the invisible forces of love, hate, obedience, rebellion and so forth. This other world is often called Eternity, which does not mean an unbelievably long span of time, but rather an existence *without* time, something which, because it lies outside our experience of time, actually underlies in its entirety every perception that we have of time. It could perhaps be called a belief in certain principles on which the world was based, principles which could be compared to the laws of science in that they were used to interpret the experiences of life and to predict what was likely to happen.

...space and location were ambiguous. Time was similarly ambiguous; the stories which we read as having taken place in time, albeit in the remotest past, were believed by them to be another aspect of the present, perpetually there. The myths were not primitive history, but statements of current principles in symbolic or narrative form....Both past and future were combined in the one myth. Thus in

Revelation John hears an angelic voice saying, ACome up hither and I will show you what must take place after this (Rev. 4.10). *After this* can also mean *beyond this*, meaning here that John will see what has to happen behind the earthly drama he sees in his own times and this will include what has to happen in the future because it is a glimpse of the eternal.

(Barker 1991, 59 and 61)

This way of looking at time influences the way in which *Rev* should be read. It should not be considered to be a timetable of events, following either a contemporary Western or African philosophy of time. Rather it should be seen as an analysis of the world in mythical terms. It should be treated as a reflection on the principles which shape and form this world, which are sometimes called the Powers (Wink 1984, 5, quoted below in the Outline, *Letter To The Seven Churches*). Readers who expect this commentary to give a wealth of information about the timing of God's plan for the world will be disappointed. Instead they will find that it concentrates on John's description of the Powers which govern this world, and the consequences of following God or those who would take his place. In outlining the structure, two features predominate. Firstly, *Rev* is a letter, and the visions are all part of that. The letter begins at 1:4 after a short introductory section (1:1-3). The beginning of the letter is followed by a description of the circumstances of John's visions (Ch.1), and oracles directed to each of the congregations (Ch.2-3). The many body of visions begins with a vision of heaven and the opening of a scroll (Ch.4-11). This section anticipates or foreshadows what is to come when the scroll is read (Ch 12-16). Chs 17-21 detail the results that follow from the reading of scroll, and ch. 22 concludes the letter.

The full structure suggested is that used in the Table of Contents, and it shows where you can find the different sections in the section by section commentary which follows.

CHAPTER 1
THE ORIGINS OF THE VISIONS
(REV. 1.1-1.20)

a) Introduction 1:1

Outline

The title introduces the book as a revelation given in signs: it will reveal things which will happen soon (1:1), the time is at hand (1:3). This gives a sense of urgency common to both apocalyptic writing and theology. It need not mean that everything must happen soon (such views had to change in light of the delay of the Second Coming), but that life must be lived as though the Last Things are, indeed, imminent. This could be expressed in the thought that, even though the time itself is unknown, the faithful must live as if they expected Jesus Christ to return at any minute, and so be found ready for him.

The title also sets out the source of *Revelation*. It is not, as the title often suggests, a revelation from John, rather it is a revelation from God, centred on and passed through Jesus, by means of the angels to John and thus to the church. John holds it as vitally important that Revelation be seen as "of Christ". The role of Christ can, however, seem puzzling at first: it looks as if Jesus and the angel might be the same person in 1:1. Such ideas are dispelled later: this is the revelation of Jesus, not of an angel. In 1:12-18, Son of Man, that is, Jesus, is shown as the distinctive source of the vision. Later the role of the angels is clearly subordinate: at most they seem to give out information, and they strongly resist any attempts to give them the honours due to God and Christ (19:10). Without Christ, there would be no vision, and he is the revealer, even if the ultimate source is God, the Father of later Christian tradition, who remains invisible and accessible only to us through Jesus, not directly.

Notes

1:1. "The revelation of Jesus Christ" could mean either "the revelation given by Jesus Christ" or "the revelation about Jesus Christ". Whilst the phrase might be intentionally ambiguous, reflecting the facts that Jesus is both the giver, and part

of the subject of the visions, the first translation seems better: what is at issue here is the source, not the content of the revelation. Similarly, the "revelation about Jesus" seems inadequate, as many of the visions are not directly about him, but other events and persons expected to appear.

"servants" may refer to the prophets (Ford 1975, 373), but is better taken as referring to the people of churches (1:4). John, too, is referred to as a "servant", and this joint usage would seem to point against "prophet".

"angel" - John here uses a common part of apocalyptic symbolism: the mediation of angels as commentators or guides. This pattern becomes visible later when the angels assist in, and explain to John, what is happening (thus, 19:9).

1:2 "witness". John bears witness to the "word of God", a reference to what is going to happen or His purposes rather than to Jesus as the Word of God. Ford argues that the use of the verb *martureo* (witness) here and in chapter 20 shows that the introduction and ending are later writings (1975, 374), but this must surely be balanced by the use of its related noun, *marturia*, in the visions themselves (for example, 12:11) .

1:3 "blessed" - is similar to the blessings formulae found in *Matthew* 5:3-12 and *Luke* 6:20-1, and elsewhere in Judaism. It suggests a definite blessing or advantage to those who read and hear the visions. This picture, of one person reading, and others listening, suggests perhaps a setting in which the book was used as part of worship or gatherings. The blessing also involves "keeping", a reminder that it is not enough just to hear or listen: the visions must be heeded, the reader must pay attention and respond to what has been heard. "the time is near" - the word *kairos* means a specific time or opportunity: it is the time for a decision or choice. What is happening is of ultimate importance, both for the world and for those who receive the vision.

b) The Letters To The Seven Churches -1:4-8

Outline

John begins with a introduction of the kind found in many NT letters, giving the names of the writer (John) and the recipients (the seven churches). These are

followed by a prayer asking for God's grace on the recipients (1:4-5a), and a prayer glorifying Jesus (1:5b-6). The quotation which follows (1:7) is made up of verses from *Daniel* 7:13, *Zechariah* 12:10ff and *Genesis* 12:3 and 28:14, depicting Jesus as the heavenly Son of Man (an identification developed later in 1:12-18) and the world's reaction to him. The passage finishes with a claim made by God, and further titles (1:8).

Notes

1:4 "John"- either the apostle, son of Zebedee, as has been held by much tradition, or some other little-known John, probably from Asia Minor (see Introduction).

"the seven churches" - are mentioned by name in 2-3; all are found in Asia Minor. The fact that some do not correspond to churches known from the accounts of St. Paul has led some to consider the possibility that there were different missionary movements in Asia Minor, rather than a unified effort (Goulder 1995). The "seven" should not be taken purely at face value, they symbolise the whole church, and that *Revelation* is for all Christians.

"the one who is and was and is to come" – Ford suggests this be written as one title/word based on its origins in the *tetragrammaton* (YHWH), the Hebrew title for God in the OT (1975, 376-7). She also suggests that it means, according to rabbinic usage, that God is the same before creation, after creation and in the world to come. Bauckham notes a difference between *Revelation's* title and the common Pauline formulae about "God and Jesus" (1993b, 23-5). This seems to be a "Trinitarian" formula. Such a claim rests on the basis that the "seven spirits" refer to the Holy Spirit. Two other possible meanings for the "seven spirits" are suggested. One is that these are synonymous with the "throne angels" (the angels who stand around the throne of God). These are identified in *1 Enoch* 20:1-8 as Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqael, Gabriel and Remiel. A second suggestion (Ford 1975, 377) is that they are the "chief princes" of *4QSerek*. However, these chief princes may be identified with the throne angels. An added difficulty with this proposal is that Qumran writings, like *4QSerek*, rarely use "spirit" language to talk of angels (Bauckham 1993b, 110). Furthermore,

when *Revelation* does talk about angels around the throne (8:2), it talks of them in a different way (Bauckham 1993a, 162). Given these difficulties, it seems most likely that the seven spirits refer to the Spirit of God, based on John's understanding of *Zechariah 4:1-14* (see also on 11:4). The connection of these spirits to the "Lamp" tradition (1:12-13) and the symbolism of the *menorah* (7 branched lampstand) in the Temple also strengthen this identification. Caird suggests that the seven spirits may be a direct challenge to the emperor worship demanded by such as Domitian (1984,15): 7 was the number that pagan mythology connected to the planets and such claims for worship. However, there would appear to be little reason to conjecture such meanings given the readily available use of 7 as the number of completeness and of God, and the difficulties of setting the book in the period of Domitian. That the seven spirits are claimed to be the spirit of God may cause some uneasiness, especially when the spirit of God would appear also to be linked to the seven churches (1:20). It is often assumed that such images must refer to God or to the churches but not to both. Are there really any grounds for such a division? Might not the problem be with our categorising rather than the text of *Revelation*? A strong case can be made that such symbols can refer both to the Spirit of God and to the churches. Firstly, the ancient world did not distinguish clearly, as we tend to, the natural and supernatural worlds. Wink's analysis is worth quoting in full:-

Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form - be it a church, a nation or an economy - and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. Neither pole is the cause of the other. Both come into existence together and cease to exist together. When a particular power becomes idolatrous, placing itself above God's purposes for the good of the whole, then that Power becomes demonic.

(Wink 1984,5)

Whilst wishing to take issue with Wink on one point (that, in the case of the church, it would depend on its heavenly power, that is, the Spirit of God, rather than both coming to be together and ceasing to exist together), his main thesis remains important, and the church has both its supernatural, heavenly pole, and

its earthly, visible pole. It would be natural to link the heavenly pole with its heavenly manifestation, no mere angel, but God Himself. If this line of approach is correct, here there are signs not only of a "trinitarian" theology but also of a "high" theology of the Church as the earthly manifestation of the Spirit. This is no less bold than Paul's claim that the church is the Body of Christ (*1 Cor* 12), but it points to a view of the church in terms of the Spirit rather than Christ. 1:5-6. The greeting continues with a description of Jesus in terms of his work as witness and forerunner of the resurrection (compare *1 Cor* 15:23) and ruler over all earthly kings. His work is symbolised by his continuing love for us (*agaponti*- present participle: still continuing) and his once and for all shedding of his blood (*lousanti*- aorist participle: a completed action). The claim that he has made his people kings and priests is both a reminder of the Exodus tradition which will be echoed in the visions to come (*Ex* 19:4-6), and of *Psalms* 89:27. Caird notes an important change: in the Psalm, the Messiah alone is given the appointment, but here these gifts are given to all of those who follow the Messiah (1984,17). The prayer of glory also reminds of the promises made and given by God to his faithful people in Christ. 1:7 - starts with a quotation of *Dan* 7:13, followed by a quotation of *Zech* 12:10, altered to refer to the piercing of Christ on the cross. Those who look at him will be those who pierced him: presumably a spiritual or symbolic piercing is intended rather than a literal reference to the individual of *John* 19:34,37. The reason for weeping is left open: penitence, remorse or fear- *Dan* 7:13 introduces the description of the heavenly Son of Man, a glorious heavenly being. Ford thinks more is implied, and that this is a theophany, an appearance of God (1975,380): if so, this may in symbolic terms anticipate the claim made by the titles used by both God and Jesus (below). The "amen" acknowledges the truth of the preceding statement (1:7).

1:8 "Alpha /Omega" may surprise us as the title is put on the lips of God, not Jesus. The title is a reference to the totality of God. He is both the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet, and, by implication, all the others in between them: he is an A-Z. These words mark a formal beginning to the visions and remind the readers of the pattern of the revelations: their source is God Himself. What,

however, is to be made of the fact that both God and Jesus use this title "Alpha/Omega"? We must be careful, again, not to assume a full patristic trinitarian theology, but can note that John is trying, within the confines of Jewish monotheism (the belief that there is only one God) to show how Jesus is God, but that there are not two gods. Certainly, Jesus is being identified as God (Bauckham 1993b, 54-8). The placing of all three sets of titles ("Alpha/Omega, "First/Last", "Beginning/End", see verses 1:8,17; 21:6 and 22:13) on the lips of both God and Jesus points repeatedly to this claim and identifies Jesus completely with God, thus allowing no room for adoptionist Christologies (those that claim Jesus assumed divinity at some point, and was not always divine) which seem to clash with the Johannine writings. Aune:1987,486-9 interprets these titles against the background of contemporary pagan worship arguing that all these titles used of God and Jesus are claiming for Christ the role that followers of Hekate (the Greek goddess of death, widely venerated in Asia Minor) claimed for their deity. Hekate's function as a key-bearer (see 1:17 below) led her to be considered as one who could give access to heaven and hell, and power over the world of the spirits. Her worship thus came to include a strong magical element, which may even have penetrated the church (see on 2:18-29).

"ruler of all"? The final declaration that God is the *pantokrator* (ruler of all) gives immediate encouragement to the reader, reminded of the true source of power in the world. As such he stands in his rightful place in direct contrast with the unworthy rivals who will try to claim this title for themselves (for example, in 13:2 and following). The careful reader, remembering this verse as the visions unfold, will remember that the visions all take place under the control of God, and that the struggles to come are not between equals, but between God and creature, true king and impostor.

c) The Vision of Christ (1:9-20)

The Vision of Christ divides into two segments: The Coming of the Vision (1:9-11) and the vision itself (1:12-20).

i) The Coming Of The Vision (1:9-11)

Outline

John now begins his visions with a description of their manifestation. He reminds the readers of his own credentials: he is known to them and has suffered together with them for the faith, right up to the point of his exile and beyond. He begins to describe his visions , and of hearing a voice behind him which told him to write to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Notes

1:9 "tribulation/ kingdom /patient endurance" - as in *John* 15:18-27, there is a reminder that Christian discipleship is a matter not just of glory, but of obtaining that kingdom through patience in the face of trouble. It is not possible to connect the persecution faced by John and his contemporaries to a particular event in the second half of the first century AD.

"Patmos"- one of the islands known as the Sporades, it is near Rhodes close to the South coast of Asia Minor. Both Juvenal and Tacitus report that political prisoners were banished to Patmos. "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus"? John has been banished for his faith: could he be counted a political prisoner? In the Roman Empire, worship of the pagan state gods was not just a religious act, it was also a mark of political loyalty. The Jews had been exempted from participating in such rites, but the first Christians, especially after the fire in Rome in 64 AD, were considered to be members of a new religion, and thus not given this privilege. If an accuser brought a charge of treason against a Christian which was upheld by the governor of the province in court, that Christian would face a penalty decided by the governor. As the death penalty was not mandatory in such cases, it is possible that a governor could have chosen to banish rather than execute. Such a scenario would fit with John's account of his exile to Patmos.

1:10 "on the Lord's Day" has been variously interpreted as being Sunday, Easter Day or a reference to the Age to Come. The strongest case for Sunday is the Christian practice of worshipping on the "first/eighth day" of the week (*Acts* 20:7; *1 Cor* 16:2). However, it was not until later that "Lord's day" became a widely

used title for Sunday. Some have also suggested that Sunday is meant because Christ is shown as taking his rightful place in worship rather than the sun (v.16). Less likely is the suggestion that it refers to the first day of the month, with Christ shown as the right object of worship, not the emperor (see also Chapter 13). The suggestion that this shows John is talking of the Age to Come, meaning that he is not talking about a day of the week, but that his visions concern the eschaton (Last Days), is based on that Age's identification, in Christian talk, with the "first/eighth day".

"in the spirit" - an echo of *Ezekiel* 3:12, where the prophet is described as being in the spirit, meaning that the vision given is from God, rather than talking of ecstasies or strange experiences.

"behind" - a further echo of *Ezekiel* 3:12, where the prophet hears a voice behind him before seeing a vision. "trumpet" - trumpets may herald the glory of God (*Exodus* 19:16,19) or His victory over His enemies (*Joshua* 6:6, 7:18), or the Parousia, that is, the eschaton, Last Day or Second Coming (*Matthew* 24:31; *1 Cor* 15:52; *1 Thess* 4:16). Any or all would be appropriate echoes here given the vision of a victorious Christ who is identified with God (v.8).

1:11 "write...see" - a command given to the prophet Amos (*Amos* 1:1), which is repeated in 1:19, where John is told to write down the visions which he will have seen.

"the seven churches" - the seven local churches are now named. A description of each follows in the commentary on ch.s 2-3.

ii) The Vision Of The Son Of Man (1:12-20)

Outline

John, like Ezekiel, turns and sees the vision that spoke the voice (vv.12-16), described in a wealth of images used to describe figures of heaven and God himself. This vision causes him to collapse (v.17). The figure comforts him, commands him to write, and prepares to reveal the first mystery, that of the seven stars (vv.17b-20).

Notes

1:12 "seven golden lamp stands"- an image based on the menorah, the seven

branched lampstand that stood in the Temple sanctuary. In John's hands it is a rich image used to describe the church, and drawing on the prehistory of the menorah's symbolism. Jewish traditions connected the menorah to the Tree of Life which stood in the Garden of Eden (Barker 1991, 90-5). Here, their closeness to Christ suggests that he is bringing his people back into Eden, the life they were originally meant to live close to God. Christ is thus presented as returning his people to paradise, a paradise which is located within the church: heaven on earth.

1:13 "Son Of Man". A phrase that is familiar from the Gospels where care has to be taken to distinguish between three different uses: i) as a title based on the heavenly figure found in *Daniel* 7:13, ii) as a general term (compare Kiswahili's *Mtu*) or iii) as a self-referring title meaning "I, me". In *Revelation* the first titular usage is meant, referring to Jesus as the heavenly Son of Man. This reference is made clear by the description which follows, in which Jesus is described using other terms from the *Daniel* imagery. Some of the images used were originally descriptive of God, and suggest that here a move has been made beyond a heavenly figure: the Son of Man is also identified as God.

1:14 "long robe...girdle" - clothing of the High Priest (*Exodus* 28:4).

1:14 "head/hair/white"- the Ancient of Days (*Daniel* 7:9) is similarly described. Ancient of Days was a title for God.

"eyes/fire". Ford suggests that this implies omniscience (1975,383). Duff points to a different significance drawing on the common Mediterranean view that eyes like fire might imply the ability to harm, and refers to the tradition of the "evil eye" and thus, in Revelation's context, to ancient magic and the cult of Hekate (1997).

1:15 "feet/bronze"- the Greek *chalkolibanos* (burnished bronze) is a guess: it is a *hapax legomenon* (occurs only once in surviving literature) and its precise meaning is unknown. It may refer to items produced at Thyatira (Sweet 1990,72). The reference to feet comes from the cherubim in *Ezekiel* 1:4,7 and the heavenly figure of *Daniel* 10:6. They also signify Christ's strength as opposed to the "clay feet" of earthly rulers (*Daniel* 2:33,44). "furnace" is used in *Daniel* 3 as the place of torment of the three young men. Here it may refer to Christ's testing in his

Passion.

"voice/many waters"- suggests that the voice of the figure drowns out all other sounds: it is used of the approach of God in *Ezekiel* 1:24, 43;2.

1:16 "seven stars"- a further image which refers to the churches. The stars refer to their heavenly pole or aspect. The identification is made clear in 1:20.

"mouth...two-edged sword"- initially contained the idea of punishment for the wicked (*Isaiah* 11:4, 49:2), but came also in the NT to refer to Christ's ability to know people's innermost thoughts, and to challenge them with his Gospel and example (*Hebrews* 4:12ff). "sun"- used of Jesus at his Transfiguration (*Matthew* 17:2), it signifies that the divinity of Christ is revealed.

1:17 "fell at his feet"- a sign of respect in many ancient cultures.

"as if dead" - a reference to the OT tradition that one cannot see God face to face and live (*Exodus* 33:20). However, John is raised up and permitted to see so that he may record the visions.

"Do not be afraid" - a common reassurance to one receiving a vision (*Daniel* 10:12).

"first and last". A title that is used of God (*Isaiah* 44:6) and now refers to Jesus (see 1:8). It highlights God's permanence over other powers and deities. Aune notes that a similar title was used of Hekate (1987,489).

1:18 "the living one"- this title is described by phrases "died, but live forever" which refer to Jesus' Passion and Resurrection to eternal life.

"keys of death and Hades" A possible reference to Greek religion in which the Goddess Hekate, who was widely worshipped in Asia Minor, was often depicted as holding the keys of Hell: she was claimed to have power over the spirits of the dead, and power over death itself. The image may be reinforcing Christ's role as the one who really has that power. The idea of eternal life and keys was also used in the Gospel traditions to include the power to forgive sins. Furthermore, this power whilst coming from Christ, was given to His followers: they were able in his name to forgive sins and allow people access to the eternal life Christ promised and showed (*Matthew* 16:19-20 ascribes this gift to Peter alone, but *Matthew* 18:18 to the disciples).

1:19 This verse has been variously interpreted as describing the structure of the book of *Revelation* either as referring to events past, present and to come, or to the present and the future. Michaels argues that a third interpretation is more helpful, one which argues that this verse is concerned rather with the interpretation of the book (1991). After analysing the role given to different narrators (John, Jesus and angels) and to the use of the verb "to be" (1:20; 4:5; 5:6,8; 7:14; 11:4 12:5; 14:4-5; 16:13-14; 17:17-18; 19:10; 20:5,14), he finally concludes:-

the identifications we have looked at do not designate something as to time (i.e., as being now) but as being what it is. Their purpose is interpretive rather than temporal, and taken cumulatively they support the view that *Rev.* 1:19 has to do with the interpretation of what John sees, not with the distinctions of past, present and future.

(Michaels 1991, 616-7)

This interpretation further makes claims for *Revelation* being understood as a set of visions relayed by narrators whose knowledge surpasses human understanding. In short, it is the word of God, and contains within itself the keys for its interpretation:-

It [*Revelation*] is not merely a record of what someone saw, but an account of what is or what is true whether in the present or in the future. Second, the Book of *Revelation* is intended (at least to some degree) to be self-interpreting

(Michaels 1991, 619)

1:20 "mystery" is the Greek word *mysterion* interpreted in its usual sense of "symbolism" rather than secret. The symbolism is an interpretation of the seven lamps and seven stars: they are respectively the earthly and heavenly manifestations of the church.

CHAPTER 2
THE ORACLES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES
(REV. 2.1-3.22)

a) The Oracles to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

Outline

The oracles to the seven churches, given that the number seven has a universal significance, mean that *Rev* is not directed only to seven specific congregations but to the church as a whole.

The oracles follow a pattern based on ancient conventions of letter-writing:

- *Adscriptio*: the name of the congregation addressed.
- The Command to Write. Similar commands have already been seen in 1:11 and 19, and will further be seen in 14:13, 19:9 and 21:5. This kind of command is found in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman writings, and would appear to be a device to show that what is written has been given by a deity.
- *Tade Legei* (lit. "thus says..."). This is an archaic (old-fashioned) style of Greek, and has two functions: it is a reminder of the prophetic messages given in the Old Testament, and is also similar to the style of writing used in decrees given by human kings and monarchs. It thus may remind the Christians of each congregation that they are listening to a prophecy and to a message from their king.
- Description of Christ.
- "I know"... a section which describes the current situation of each congregation. There are two different phrases used "I know your works" (2:19; 3:1,8,15) which stress Christ's intimate knowledge of all the members in each place, and "I have this against you" (2:4,24,20) which shows that he knows, and disapproves of, a particular practice.
- *Dispositio*. These sections (2:5-6,10,16,22-5; 3:2-4,9-11, 16-20) contain the reason for writing each letter.
- Proclamation. These occur at the end of each letter, and include the

formula of the kind, "He who has an ear, let him hear...". This section includes a prophecy to each church about its fate.

- A Promise of Victory. Even if there is a warning in the letter, there is always a reward for the "one who conquers".

This pattern within the letters has led Aune to suggest that the term letter is imprecise (1990). Rather, the letters should be seen as oracles in the form of edicts, commands from their true king, which serve to both prophesy about the fate of each church and to give encouragement that they can conquer and be rewarded if they hold onto their faith in Christ.

The oracles to the seven churches are also a warning against thinking that *Rev* has only one, correct interpretation. A listener in, say, Ephesus, after hearing the words to that church might well interpret the book in a different way to a listener from Laodicea. In both cases, the listeners are being asked to think of what the visions of *Rev* say specifically to their situation. If this is then applied to church in general, the variety of interpretations will multiply. The message, in short, is that every listener or reader, in every time or place, must apply the Scripture to their own situation. Whilst this may seem dangerously modern, in terms of hermeneutics or critical theory, it actually fits well with contemporary Jewish theories of interpretation which did not merely look to a "correct" historical interpretation, but also to an application by the reader to his or her situation. Whilst *Rev* may have one, or seven, literally historical situations, these do not exhaust its meaning, or set the boundaries of its full interpretation. Klyne Snodgrass writes of such interpretative theories:

The important point about correspondence in history is that the text is not used up by a single event....We have not interpreted a text appropriately until we have determined how it corresponds or does not correspond with our present situation.
(Snodgrass 1994, 38)

This commentary, then, which primarily looks to the historical situation of *Rev* will always be inadequate: it cannot address the specific situation of every reader. That remains the task of each reader him- or herself. The historical commentary can, at best, hope to limit the worst excesses of rampant

subjectivity.

Notes

2:1 "angel"- some have argued that this may refer to an angel or messenger who guides each church. The Latin fathers interpreted as "bishop". However, it is better to think in terms of the two poles that we have already seen and take this as referring to the church's heavenly pole or dimension.

"seven stars/ lampstands" - refers to Christ's presence in, and control of, the churches. The stars may also refer to the astrological beliefs which were a part of the Artemis cult in Ephesus (Arnold: 1992, 28-9).

"Ephesus"- the most important city of Asia Minor in economic, political and cultural terms. Its fame in pagan worship was as a site of the great temple of Artemis. It was also famed as a centre for astrology, magic and the cult of the emperor. Arnold also notes that some magical papyri show traces of being Christianised, and that perhaps Christians joined in magical practices (1992, 38). Such problems, he continues, provide the background to the discussion of "powers" in *Ephesians*.

2:2 The congregation is praised for its vigilance and perseverance, but criticism follows in

2:4 which shows that the central Christian virtue, love (*1 Cor 13*; *1 John 4:7*), has been lost in the process.

2:5 "take away lamp stand" unless love is regained Christ will distance himself from the Church. Such a distance implies a loss of his promises including eternal life.

2:6 Nikolaitans- see 2:15 for a definition: they are presented as personal enemies of Christ.

2:7 the reward for the faithful is presented in identical terms to the losses for those who will not reform. These are spelled out using the *menorah* symbolism (1:12,20): to share in wisdom, knowing good and evil, even eternal life.

2:8 Smyrna- 40 miles north of Ephesus/ 45 south of Pergamum.

died, came to life...-may refer to the history of the city which was destroyed by the Lydians in 600 BC and not resettled until Alexander the Great built a new city.

first and last (see 1:17)- again, a possible reference to the city's history and failure to be a political power, now compensated for by its being a spiritual power. 2:9 "Jews/synagogue of Satan"- may refer to Jewish persecution of the Christian church (Caird 1984, 35; Sweet 1990, 85). Ford suggests that it refers rather to Jewish groups who began to include pagan rites in their practices, which included the worship of Zeus (hence 2:13), and pointing to 2nd century evidence for this (1975,393-5). If this is the case, we begin to see a common phenomenon facing the church in the different cities of Asia Minor: syncretism.

"Satan"- referred to here in his role as the slanderer or false accuser.

2:10 "prison"- refers to remand, which could be followed by trial, persecution and even death.

"ten days"- possible reference to *Daniel* 1:12-14 and *Gen* 24:55: both show the faithful of God surviving persecution.

"faithful" - a possible reference to the history of the people of Smyrna, praised by Cicero for their political loyalty. Here the suggestion may be inferred that they will also triumph in spiritual loyalty.

"crown of life" - A possible reference to Smyrna's architecture and layout which resembled a crown, but it is more likely to be a reference to the victor's crown (2 Tim 4:7ff) for those who persevere and triumph. See also 3:11.

2:11 "second death" - not the death of the body, but the ultimate destruction of a person, sometimes called "spiritual death" (see also 20:6,20:14, 21:18, *Mt* 10:28, *Lk* 12:4). This can only be done by the one who also has the power to give life.

2:12 "Pergamum" - 45 miles north of Smyrna, famed for its religious buildings (2:13). It was also the centre of the Roman administration in the area as well as its cult.

"two-edged sword" - refers to the true authority of Christ and perhaps his ability to know people completely ("know"-2:13,1:16). Here the stress is on the sword as a sign of authority (*Romans* 13:4).

2:13 "Antipas"- is otherwise unknown, but his mention by name may suggest he has been the only martyr in the congregation.

"Satan's throne"- a variety of interpretations are suggested. Caird suggested a

reference to the cult of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing (1984,37), but this cult flourished only after the period of Domitian (Sweet 1990, 87). Other suggestions include the cult of Zeus *Soter*, Saviour (Sweet 1990, 87) or the imperial cult (Ford 1975, 399). Whatever the precise reference, the cult is connected with Judaism and Christianity's traditional adversary, Satan. This pattern will be repeated in *Rev* 13.

2:14 "Balaam" - a reference to the story of Balaam and the blessing/cursing of Israel (*Num* 22-24). Later traditions about Balaam portrayed him as the false prophet *par excellence* leading the faithful astray, especially to immorality and idolatry: often these included infidelity, magic and astrology (Sweet 1990, 89).

"practice fornication" suggests sexual immorality, but the Greek *porneusai* need not have this literal meaning. John only uses it once with this sense: in the majority of cases it refers rather to religious immorality, deserting worship of the true God for idols and false gods. The same terms are used for Jezebel (2:20) who was a type for religious unfaithfulness (*2 Kings* 9:22), not for sexual immorality. It would seem better to take it referring to religious rather than sexual immorality. Both could, in some instances, be implied, but then it would need to be shown that the corrupting religion was one that involved cult prostitution, and that information is not to hand.

"food..to idols" - John's advice is close to the conclusions of *Acts* 15:29. All eating is here condemned. There is no inkling of the distinction that would be made by Paul of sharing in the actual pagan temple rites as opposed to buying meat from a market or hotel which had come from a sacrifice (*1 Cor* 10:14-30).

2:15 "Nikolaitans" - the Greek grammar shows that this group are to be identified with the Balaamites (there is no antithesis, nor distinction of the groups). Many also identify them with the followers of Jezebel at Thyatira (2:20). What precisely the Nikolaitans taught remains vague. Some suggest that theirs was essentially a Gnostic heresy, but this is hard to prove from the information given (Scobie 1993,619). Definitions of the name do not help much. Irenaeus claimed that the name is taken from Nicolaus of Antioch (*Acts* 6:5) and that they held beliefs similar to Cerinthus, the traditional Gnostic opponent of John: firm evidence to

support this cannot be found in the text itself. Others have suggested that the name comes from a Greek translation of the name Balaam, meaning "he has consumed the people" (Ford 1975, 390-1; Caird 1984, 31): such a name says more about the effects of their teaching rather than its content.

Spreading the net wider, and returning to terms used [Balaam and Jezebel], it would appear that the chief danger of the Nikolaitan teaching was its tendency to syncretism, to accommodations with pagan cult and culture which could be seen as a corruption of the faith. Our study of the environment shows that there were many cults and religious movements which could have provided the impulse for such syncretism. Gnosticism is only one of many distorting elements, and one whose definition is notoriously difficult. The range of Gnosticism may also be overstated. In many ways it seems to be an intellectual and philosophical movement, which might have limited appeal. Its importance may have been overemphasised by modern scholarship because of its survival in written form. However, other religious practices which were more populist, but whose record is less in terms of documents, could equally have been threats to the Christian communities of Asia Minor. Such popular religion would include magic, astrology, and the emperor cult. A study of *Rev* 1-3 reveals many references, or possible references, to such religious movements. It may be that scholarship with its tendency to think of ideas, has overstressed "ideas" religion and philosophy, and understressed "practical" religion and magic. Whilst not suggesting that the contemporary African situation is identical to the world of 1st century Asia Minor, its problems of syncretism ("Church on Sunday, *mchawe* [Kiswahili-traditional healer] on Monday") might illuminate the problems faced by those Christians of Asia Minor, and syncretism of a kind which appears to be supported by contemporary evidence (see 2:1 above). In short, it is suggested that Nikolaitism is the problem of syncretism with pagan, popular religion in its many manifestations.

2:16 "repent" - the call is addressed to all members of the congregation, not just the guilty.

"sword" - the sword stands for the judgment and authority of Christ (1:16)

2:17 "manna" - the reward for the faithful who conquer is the true food of heaven, symbolised by manna (*Ex* 14-15), rather than the false food of idols. Whilst *Jn* 6:31 uses manna as a type of the Eucharist, such an identification is not made here.

"new name" - raises the question of whose name? Christ's or the disciple's? If there is a Gnostic background to the controversy at Pergamum, it would seem strange for John to use the ideas of his enemies, a secret name. Against that, the gaining of the name is not based on arcane knowledge, but on perseverance. A new name might however, be more than just a name: it could refer to becoming a new person, or of a new quality. People in the ancient world might take a new name after a recovery from serious illness, and that name might express some link with the God who saved them. In Christian thought these ideas came together in the new name given at baptism. Thus here we may have a reference to the one who conquers becoming a new creation in Christ rather than finding out a new name. The question of "whose name?" becomes redundant as Christ and the disciple become one.

"white stone" refers to the ancient custom of stones or pebbles being used as tokens to gain admittance to a place or function. The colour of the stone refers to the victory of Christ.

"secret" -the secrecy of the name may refer to its power: in the ancient world it was believed that knowing a name gave power over a person. Thus the believer who perseveres and gets a new secret name and not be open to attack

2:18 "Thyatira" - a town on the road between Pergamum and Smyrna, it was the least important in political terms. The city had a strong metal industry, which may be echoed in the titles used for Christ (flaming fire/ burnished bronze). Duff:1997,124-6 prefers to see these titles as referring to Christ as the true God who has the powers claimed by Hekate. This is the only occasion in which *Rev* identifies Christ as Son of God.

2:19 "Patient endurance" - the city is praised for its virtues, some of which are shared with John (1:9) and for its spiritual development and growth.

2:20-2 - "Jezebel" - a type of religious unfaithfulness (2:14) who remains

unrepentant (2:21). She appears to stand for a real person. Her false teaching appears similar to that at Pergamum and is described in identical terms. Duff's theories about Hekate would pinpoint her teaching as being an example of witchcraft within the Christian community, and he argues that the three punishments to be visited on her and her followers (sick-bed, suffering and death of children) match precisely with the curses of witchcraft and the Mediterranean tradition of the evil eye (that the eye stands for the ability to put a curse on someone). If this is so, the message is this: Christ will out-witch the witch. Such an identification might not work for all the groups mentioned, for that would depend on the Hekate cult being identified as the opponent in each place, an idea which is possible, given her popularity, but ultimately cannot be proved. The wider identification of the erring groups as being syncretists, while more vague, at least sees a common feature to their teaching which could be covered by the similarity of terms used to describe their activities.

2:23 "mind"- literally "kidneys" (nephros) which the ancients thought was the part of the body which controlled the emotions.

"heart" - the will or the intellect.

2:24 Translate as follows:

"But I say to the rest of you, as many as do not hold this teaching, and have not learned the deep things of Satan: as they say, "I put no other burden on you except that you hold on to what you have until I will come."

"deep things of Satan" - the teachings of Jezebel's sect, here explicitly connected with the Devil (see also 2:9,13).

The "they" remains unclear. Translated this way, it could be a general, vague "they" or some group known to both writer and listeners. The advice given is very similar to that of *Acts 15:28-9*, implying that the leaders of the church are meant. Such an identification would fit with the views already expressed by John about food sacrificed to idols (2:14,20).

"Perseverance...power" - perhaps a reminder of the lack of earthly power in Thyatira: they will be rewarded instead with spiritual power.

2:26-7 The picture appears violent and may it unsettle us to see Christ described

in such violent terms: the warrior-king is, however, a potent part of John's imagery (19:15-16). Christians, however, may always temper such violent imagery, or talk of the wrath of God, with their knowledge of how that wrath and violence has actually been seen, in Christ's self-giving on the cross. The picture is based on *Ps* 2:9 and Ford suggests that a double meaning is intended for *poimanei* (he shepherds): "rule over and shatter them with an iron scepter" (1975, 402). Sweet also moves towards a double meaning: that the grace of God is like an iron bar for those who will not accept it, but a shepherd's crook to those who do (1990, 96). Like all the imagery of punishment and reward in these chapters, no doubt is left that the choice made by each believer will have the greatest consequences.

2:28 "morning star" - the conquering (persevering) believer is promised to share the same reward as the father has given to Christ. This could either be "sovereignty", meaning the chance to rule with Christ (Ford 1975,404) or victory over the hostile powers of magic and idolatry (Sweet 1990,97). This conclusion brings us, by a different route, close to the conclusions drawn by Duff (1997): victory over the forces of magic.

3:1 "Sardis"- this town is situated 30 miles to the south-east of Thyatira. It was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17 and restored by Tiberius. it was well known for its trade in woollen goods and garments.

"seven spirits/stars"- a reference to Jesus as the one who guides the church. See also 2:1.

"alive..dead" - Sardis is described a a congregation which was once alive and is now dead. It is the opposite of Smyrna which was dead and is now alive (2:8 -11).

3:2 "not found perfect"- the reasons are now given for describing Sardis as dead: it has failed to complete the works which God gave it to do. This is further evidenced by the lack of evidence for the persecution of the church in Sardis.

3:3 "remember" - the complaint continues by pointing out that the Christians of Sardis have failed to keep the faith which they were first given. Paul directs similar criticisms to the Galatians (*Gal* 3:3), but praises the Thessalonians for

their perseverance (*1 Thess* 1:2-10).

"thief" - this image is sometimes taken to refer to the history of Sardis which was captured by surprise twice, by Croesus in 549 BC, and Antiochus in 195 BC. Otherwise this is a common biblical image which stresses the need to be continually prepared for Christ's return at any time (see also *Mt* 24:39 ,49-51; *Lk* 12:39 , 45ff.; *Mk* 13:35; *1 Thess* 5:2,4).

3:4 "few names" - not all of the congregation at Sardis have lapsed: a few remain faithful and are both encouraged and used as a sign of encouragement.

"soil...garments" the image of the believer as wearing soiled garments is found on pagan inscriptions from Asia Minor, and implies that believers can be disqualified from worship. The same image is also common in rabbinic Judaism. *Zech* 3:3-5 uses the image to talk about the personality of the wearer. The implication in all circumstances is that the relationship of the believer and God has been broken.

"will walk" - an image of discipleship (*Jn* 6:66).

"white" - may stress victory, or purity. Many Jewish sects, such as the Essenes, *Therapeutae* (a sect based in Egypt) and the Qumran writings, stressed the wearing of white as a sign of purity. Here, this is a future activity: they do not wear white to show purity, but they will wear it to show that they pleased God. This future aspect may imply that the "white robes" (also in 3:5) are a reference to the resurrection. Some Intertestamental writings and Qumran documents describe the resurrected body of the faithful believer as a being of "light" or "glory".

3:5 "If you conquer"- the lapsed of Sardis are reminded that they can share the rewards promised to their faithful colleagues.

"book of life" - this expression is first used in the Old Testament (*Ex* 32:32; *Ps* 69:28) to describe those who share in the Covenant with God, but later came to be used for those who would have a share in the life to come (*Dan* 7:10; *1 Enoch* 47:3). This later usage reflected the development of beliefs in a life to come, or life after death, in Judaism. It is this later usage that is adopted by the New Testament writers (*Lk* 10:20; *Heb* 12:23; *Phil* 4:3; *Rev* 13:8,17:8, 20:12,15,

21:27). *Daniel* 12:1 mentions the book, and further says that those whose names are written there will be saved from the troubles which will torment the world. John may share this hope as a similar belief is found in 3:10.

The idea of the book may also draw on a common phenomenon of the ancient world, that the names of the citizens of a city would be inscribed in a book or roll: this would then show their status and rights in that place.

"I will confess" - Jesus himself will be the witness for the faithful. Compare with *Mt* 10:32 and *Lk* 12:8.

3:7 "Philadelphia" - 28 miles south of Sardis. Like Sardis, it was rebuilt after the earthquake of AD 17.

"Holy one" - an OT title for God (*Is* 1:4, 5:9)

"True one" - an OT title for God (*Ex* 34:6; *Is* 65:16)

Both of these titles are used for God in 6:10. This would appear to be a further example if John identifying Jesus as God by describing both Jesus and God by the same titles.

"key of David" - The key of David is also found in *Is* 22:15-25 describing the calling of Eliakim. It suggests both the unique power and authority given to Jesus and his commission by God for this work (1:18) and is a reminder of his status as Messiah in the line of David (*Mt* 1: 1-17). V.8 stresses that the power associated with the key is unique and belongs to Jesus alone.

3:8 "you have little power,...name" -The people of Philadelphia are praised for their faithfulness (see also 3:10) in keeping their faith.

3:9 "the synagogue of Satan" (see 2:9 and 2:14) is again mentioned as the threat to the faithful, who will be an example to them of true discipleship. it would appear that the "synagogue" is dominant, but the hope is given that the roles will be reversed and that the faithful will triumph: members of the synagogue will be forced to bow down and learn from the faithful.

Sweet suggests that the Christians at Philadelphia have been expelled from the Jewish synagogue and have thus lost the protection which Roman law gave to Jewish worshippers (1990,109). This fits with the AD 96 date which follows the formal expulsion of Christians from synagogues which is usually associated with

the Jewish Council of Jamnia in AD 86. The Twelfth Benediction of the Eighteen formulated there could not be said by Christians, but became a mandatory part of synagogue worship, thus denying Christians attendance. Informal expulsions would presumably have occurred earlier and so the scenario of Christians excluded from worship need not demand the later date.

The phrasing of this verse raises problems for such an interpretation. Christianity has, at some stages, had a tendency to anti-Semitism, and this is often based on passages which criticise "the Jews". Is this such an anti-Semitic passage? Part of the anti-Semitic tendency has arisen from the term "Jew" being used primarily as an ethnic term. However, if the phrase is considered in terms of a relationship with God rather than an ethnic claim, the role of such passages in promoting, or being used to support, anti-Jewish feeling on racial grounds is shown to be a fraud. That said, let us consider the crime of the "synagogue of Satan". It is that "they say that they are Jews, but are not." This suggests that it is actually good to be a "Jew", and the error lies in a false claim. It is difficult to imagine this being said after the breach caused by Jamnia: a positive value for the term "Jew" might be harder to imagine in those circumstances.

Whilst the passage might be based on the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue, there is a second possibility. It is that the "synagogue of Satan" refers to those elements who were considered to compromise their faith and practice by incorporating elements from pagan religion. If taken this way, the phrase is referring to a controversy that is taking place within the religious context of Asia Minor, in which there was a dispute about the degree to which elements from different religious traditions could be adopted. Rather than an anti-Semitic condemnation of the Jewish race, it is an attack on the tendency to syncretise.

3:10 - as in *Daniel* 12:1, the faithful are promised that they will not suffer in the troubles that are about to engulf the world (see also 3:5).

3:11 "I am coming soon". References to the coming of Jesus have already been seen (2:16, 2:25, 3:3). This phrase is sometimes taken as implying that John held a belief in imminent eschatology, that is, that there would not be a long delay until Jesus' return. It is sometimes argued that this was a common belief which the

Early Christians changed as the Second Coming was delayed (*1 Thess* 4:13-18 is Paul's attempt to answer the questions raised by the experience of Christians dying before the Second Coming, a scenario which did not appear to have been anticipated by the Thessalonians). It would seem unlikely that John did hold such views given the 1000 year delay mentioned in *Rev* 20 before the Final Judgment. Neither a literal nor a figurative interpretation would suggest that 1000 years implies Christ coming soon. The adverb (Gk- *tachu*) used here can be interpreted as meaning "quickly/suddenly", as well as "quickly/soon". Such an interpretation would then suggest that John's meaning is that Jesus' coming will be sudden, and may catch people unawares rather than Christ will soon return. This would fit, too, with the imagery of the thief which has already been used (3:3).

"crown" -as in 2:10, the Gk- *stephanos* is used, suggesting the wreath won by an athlete in a contest (*1 Cor* 9:25; *2 Tim* 2:5) rather than the crown of a king. In the rabbinic writings, such a crown could be the reward for obedience: such an interpretation was given for *Ex* 24:7 (Ford 1975, 415).

3:12- "pillar in the temple of my God". The idea of God's reign being symbolised by a temple, building or city is common in the Old Testament (*Is* 2:1-4; *Zech* 8:23, 14:16). Does it, however, clash with *Rev* 21:22, which states that there is no temple in the heavenly city? It must be remembered that this is the language of symbolism, not an architect's drawing. Caird resolves the problem:

"There is no more than a verbal conflict between this promise and xxi.22...

for there he is denying that in heaven there is any more need for the distinction between the sacred and the secular or for the mediation of the divine presence, and here he is asserting that the new temple, like the new city, is composed of the lives of the redeemed.

(Caird 1984, 55)

"name" - see 2:17. here the list of names show three things. First they show the right relationship of the believer and God, second they show that the believer is a "citizen of heaven", fit to live in God's holy city and live the new life given, and third that the relationship with God, and citizenship are mediated through Jesus Christ, whose "new name" is indicative of the new life he has given, by his saving work, to his disciples.

"new Jerusalem" - see 21:2,10. The idea of Jerusalem as the place for God and his people is common in the Old Testament. Ezekiel refines it by suggesting that the earthly, corrupt Jerusalem will need to be made anew (*Ezekiel* 31:38). This new Jerusalem is usually seen as coming in the future. here, however, John talks about it in the present tense ("comes down"). This can be explained as being not a statement about when the new Jerusalem will be seen, but rather a statement about its quality: it comes from God, rather than from human action. It may also imply that, even if the city is to come in the future, it is somehow available to us now through Christ and faith (*Phil* 4:3).

3:14 - Laodicea- is found six miles south of Hierapolis (*Col* 4:13) and ten miles west of Colossae on the south bank of the river Lycus. Laodicea was famed for its trade in wool, for its medical school and for its wealth: all points which are referred to in the oracle.

"Amen...of God". This title amplifies and builds on 1:5 (faithful witness). Many commentators have taken it as referring to an OT background in *Genesis* and *Proverbs*, esp. 8:22,30. Taken this way the verse refers to Christ's role in the original creation of the world. However a second tradition transforms this pattern and makes the title refer to Christ as the faithful witness to the new creation. The core passage here is *Is* 65:16-18, the only other occasion where "Amen" is used as a title (Beale 1996,137-144, esp 140-1) and where the phrase "beginning..creation..God" is echoed by *Rev* (Beale 1996, 141). The use of "witness" in *Is* 43:10-13, a passage which is parallel to *Is* 65:16-18, shows that God, Israel and the Servant (or Messiah) are witnesses not only to God's previous saving work, based on the *Exodus* story, but also to the redemption to come, an event which is described as a new creation (Behold, I create new things [*Is* 43:19]). Against this background the title shows Christ's role not just in the original creation, but as a witness to the new creation, which is first seen in his resurrection (Beale 1996,148). This combination of witness with resurrection shows Christ not only as the witness to the new creation, but as the one who inaugurates it. It can also be seen that *Rev* 3:14 is a further example of a title used for God ("Amen" in *Is*) being used of Jesus, and thus claiming a divine

status for him.

3:15 "cold...hot...lukewarm". The congregation is being judged on the basis of its works which are described as lukewarm. The verse has sometimes been interpreted as showing that the Laodiceans show neither love (hot), nor hate (cold), but indifference (lukewarm). This might suggest that indifference is a worse sin than hate. However, given the condemnations of those who hate the church in the central visions of *Rev*, such an interpretation would seem to clash with the message of the book as a whole. The geography of Laodicea provides better material for the interpretation of this verse. Laodicea relied on a system which brought water by an aqueduct for five miles: after this the water would be lukewarm. This is, perhaps, in contrast to water found at Hierapolis which was hot and medicinal, and that of Colossae which was cold. Aune suggests that the phrase "neither hot nor cold" means "useless", whether or not all these references apply (1997,257). In short, the Laodiceans are being criticised for being ineffective Christians. The penalty for this is to be "vomited" out: a crude term which expresses the violence with which the ineffective will be rejected.

3:16 The indifference of the Laodiceans appears to be founded on a pride in their own abilities, and their self-reliance: they have forgotten the basic need of God (v.17). Their pride has also made them blind and unable to see their own weaknesses.

3:18 Advice on how to correct their mistakes is now given. The rich Laodiceans are advised that they should seek the riches of God rather than trust in their own wealth. A second image, the white garments (see also 3:5), may gain an added significance. Laodicea was famed for its trade in black wool: they are being asked again not to trust in their material prosperity, but rather in God. Lastly, they are to seek the healing that comes from God, and the ability to look properly at the world (which surely implies faith, not just good eyesight), rather than to trust in their own medical skills.

3:19 is based on *Prov* 3:12, but not quoted exactly. Here the Lord is taken as being Christ. The discipline which the Laodiceans face is meant to teach them and is founded on love.

3:20. This verse contains echoes of the bridegroom in *Song of Songs* 5:2, the parable of the bridegroom in *Lk* 12:35ff., and meal traditions (that the faithful eat with God). Whilst some commentators (e.g., Sweet 1990,109) put emphasis on the history of the parable to provide an interpretation of the verse, it is noticeable that John does not develop either the theme of the bridegroom, or detailed thought based on the Synoptic picture. In the form presented here, the focus appears to be of Christ wishing to enter the home of the worshipper.

When does Christ come in this way? There are two possible answers: i) Christ's eschatological coming, or ii) a present coming, implying repentance or conversion. Whilst the background of the verse suggests an eschatological setting, this need not determine the meaning of this verse. The tenses used (I am standing....) suggest that a present coming may be intended, as the believer returns to God in the period before the Last Coming.

Three possibilities suggest themselves for the meal, a) close fellowship, b) the Messianic Banquet of the last days (see Note, 19:9), or c) the Lord's Supper. Aune suggests that two types of pagan meals may influence the imagery of this verse (1997,251-4). The first type is characterised by an invitation to eat with the deity. However as these invitations appear to be given by the deity, these are different from *Rev*, where Christ seems to be responding to an invitation. The second is the kind of meal prepared by a magician to seek and establish a link with a deity, or minor divinity. However, the details that Aune gives about this kind of meal are not found in *Rev* 3:20. If care is needed to avoid the addition of superfluous details (and thus interpretation) from the Synoptic picture, the same warning applies to details drawn from pagan practice. One common feature is the use of *Gk-eiserchomai* (enter in) which is used for the admission of the deity to such a meal, and is also used of Christ's entry. If this magical tradition is being used, we can note that John has again subverted it. Instead of the worshipper attracting a deity, here it is only too clear that the dominant player is Christ: the believer is secondary and can only respond to the actions of Christ, not initiate the action. It would also seem impossible to demand that the Eucharist is meant here specifically. Caird argues for this, but is not convincing: his argument

depends more on conjecture than knowledge of contemporary practice. He also concludes by saying that the Eucharist is not what is ultimately important, but "a coming of the Lord even more intimate and personal than that experienced in the corporate worship of the church" (Caird 1984,58). That the verse refers only to the Messianic Banquet also seems unlikely, as it appears to refer to the present. By the time of the Messianic Banquet, such a sequence of actions would be irrelevant: choices for Christ would have to be made before then, and it is not the believer who does the inviting (*Mt* 22:1-14; 25:1-13). In this verse, the believer is promised to be close to Christ, if only he/she will "be earnest and repent" (3:19), hearing the voice of Christ and responding to it.

3:21 "throne" - a reminder of the promise that the faithful will reign with Christ (*Lk* 22:30; *Mt* 19:28). This promise occurs five times in *Rev* (1:6; 5:10; 20:4,6; 22:5) and is based on *Dan* 7:18,25). At other points in *Rev* Christ is depicted as near the throne, but not sitting on it (5:13; 6:16; 7:9-10, 15, 17): it is God who sits on the throne. Aune suggests that the throne which may take both Christ and God is a *bisellium* (Lat.-double throne), that is, a throne with two seats, common in the ancient world (1997,262). Whether or not the *bisellium* is intended, we can note that, as with the titles shared by God and Christ, Christ is being given equality with God , and that his status is shared with his faithful followers (1:18). The basis of this promise is that Christ has already conquered and taken his place on his throne: the basis of his promises to the faithful is the work he has already done (1:5,18; 2:26-8).

CHAPTER 3
OPENING THE SCROLL
(REV. 4.1-11.19)

After the Oracles to the Seven Churches, a new section opens: the Opening Of The Scroll. In this section, John is taken up to heaven and given a vision of the heavenly court. A scroll is produced which is sealed and needs to be opening. The opening of the scroll includes the visions of the seven seals and of the seven trumpets.

a) The Ascent To Heaven & The Vision Of The Throne (4:1-2 & 4:3-11)

Outline

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of a new section of the narrative: the scene moves from the earthly church to the heavenly church. This change is signified by 4:1-2, with the opening of the door in heaven, and John's prophetic trance. If the fact that entities were considered to have an earthly and a heavenly aspect is remembered, this scene should not be interpreted as describing only the church in heaven, but also giving information about the church on earth. To that extent it can be said to describe the work of the church as the worship of God, and the proclamation of the Lamb of God . Both God and the Lamb are shown as objects of worship.

The picture shown in ch.s 4-5, that Jesus is to be worshipped, is further evidence for the high claims made by the early Christians for his status. The impression can sometimes be given and, indeed, often has been in NT studies, that the high claims made for Jesus' divinity mark later, and undesirable, theologies. These theories may come close to saying that the claim that Jesus was divine is came from the early church, rather than from Jesus himself. Furthermore, it may be argued that these tendencies come from a penetration of theology by alien, usually Greek, ideas. The idea that a pure Palestinian theology was corrupted by Hellenistic thought is mercifully in decline, weakened by the growing awareness that the early church cannot be readily broken into different strata or trajectories

purely on the basis of culture or geography.

Even if a distinction should still be made between Greek and Jewish theological patterns, *Rev* 4-5 warns against a hasty identification of Jesus' divinity with Greek thought alone. Here we have a passage that is solidly Jewish in its depiction of heavenly worship. As such the picture that it presents is rooted in the traditions of monotheism. The Inter-testamental writings are adequate witnesses to these phenomena. They also show that Jewish thought was careful to preserve the character of monotheism. The book of *Enoch*, for example, includes reference to a heavenly figure called Metatron whose destruction is ultimately caused by his confusion with the one God. Yet, in *Rev*, monotheism develops in a different way. Jesus continues to be a figure worthy of worship and thus identified with, or as, God. The writer is pushing his theological language and concepts to the limit, to ensure that Jesus is identified with God, but also to ensure that polytheism is not entertained:-

...the worship of God by the heavenly court in chapter 4 is connected with the acknowledgement of God as the Creator of all things (4:11). ...

It is important to notice how the scene is so structured that the worship of the Lamb (5:8-12) leads to the worship of God and the Lamb together (5:13). John does not wish to represent Jesus as an alternative object of worship alongside God, but as one who shares in the glory due to God. He is worthy of divine worship because his worship can be included in the worship of the one God.

(Bauckham 1993b, 60)

Christ is not, like Metatron, to be destroyed because he threatens the uniqueness of God, he is worshipped because he is God. This, no less, is the claim of *Rev*.

The depiction of the heavenly court is one that was common to Jewish apocalyptic writing: Aune describes it as a "throne vision report", in which the writer narrates a revelation which has been experienced (Aune 1997, 277). In this particular scene, the throne vision is a means of "commenting on earthly events in the narrative" (Aune 1997, 278). The other throne scenes in *Rev* (7:9-17; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:2-8 and 19:1-8) function in slightly different ways, but are examples of the same tradition.

The passage also introduces another feature of *Rev*: the use of hymns. These are found in the different throne scenes. Whilst Paul (e.g., *Phil.* 2:5-11), *Luke* (1:46-55, 68-79; 2:14,29-32) and *John* (1:1-18) appear to have used pre-existing hymns, the hymns of *Rev* appear to be new and composed for the book, drawing on Jewish and Christian liturgical traditions. They also act as commentaries on the scenes in which they are set. Aune (1997, 315-7) further argues that some features of Graeco-Roman hymn writing, including that of hymns to the emperor, are also present, especially in the use of terms like "Holy One" (Gk- *hagios* [6:10], *hosios* [15:4]), "glory" (Gk- *doxa* [4:11]), "salvation" (Gk- *soteria* [13:10]), "authority" (Gk- *exousia* [12:10]), "worthy to receive power" (5:12), "righteous are your judgments" (19:1), "Our God, the Almighty" (19:6). It is not certain whether this might reflect a shared vocabulary or a conscious attempt to state the true sovereignty of God over the false rule and claims of the emperor, or pagan deities.

The idea of John's ascent to the heavenly throne room also reveals his cosmology (way of describing the world). He uses the traditional "three decker" view of the world, with heaven at the top, earth in the middle and Sheol (Hell) at the bottom (5:3), although he may speak of the sea as a fourth part (5:13), or just talk in terms of earth and heaven (20:11; 21:1). John does not appear to have adopted contemporary Graeco-Roman theories of a seven tiered universe (one for earth and a separate layer for each planet) or to have entered into the more complex cosmologies of contemporary Judaism, in which the seven layers corresponded to the seven different parts of the Temple leading to the Holy of Holies (Aune 1997, 318-9).

The throne vision sets the scene for the subsequent visions (4:1-22:9) in two ways:-

- 1) it shows that all that is to take place, whether on earth or in heaven, has its origins from God. *Rev* does not allow for a dualism in which God and Satan are equals. Rather, anything that Satan does is limited in its effect and permitted only by God and for his purposes.
- 2) It gives an eschatological framework for the visions. The eschatology of the NT

is best described as "yes...but not yet" meaning that the works that bring salvation have been completed, but that the ultimate rule of God has yet to be established. *Rev* takes this belief and turns it into a basis of hope by showing that final state, revealed in the descriptions of the church in heaven. The church on earth remains beset by troubles, but it will inherit what the heavenly church already has. This will be a recurring theme throughout the visions that follow: that the persecuted church on earth will become the triumphant church in heaven.

That this scene is described at the beginning of the visions is no accident: the vision of the heavenly court describes a victory that has taken place, rather than the court of a king who is still fighting a war. It shows again that Christ has already conquered, and that the victory of the faithful is beyond doubt. No matter how distressing the visions of tribulations to come may be, the suffering and chaos they show is always diminished by faith in the Christ who has conquered. In this way the heavenly scenes are paranaetic (encouraging) passages through the narrative, giving reminders of the final victory and encouraging the readers.

Notes

4:1 "After these things I looked" this phrase is also used in 7:1, 15:5 and 18:1. It is one of a number of similar phrases used to introduce new visions or scenes. It need not imply an order of events (one after the other), just a change of scene.

"door" the ancient cosmologies which clearly distinguished heaven and earth needed to describe some means of passing from one to the other. Such ways are described in both Hebrew (for example, *Gen* 28:17, *1 Enoch* 14:15) and Graeco-Roman literature. Whether the talk is of openings, doors or gates these motifs indicate that what follows is a vision revealed to the writer. Aune notes that such motifs were common in the pagan religions of Asia Minor (1997,281). Thus the picture may be a further instance of Christian faith being placed over pagan belief, or it may just reflect a use of a common religious imagery.

"voice"- Two suggestions are made about the identity of the speaker.

- that this is the voice of an angel (Aune 1997,282), and that the "first" refers to the voice of 1:10 rather than the voice of Christ (1:17). Against this view it is argued that there is no such distinction of voices

in 1:9-20.

- the voice of Christ. This would mean that there was only one voice in 1:9-20. This raises the question of why it is described as the "first" voice when there is no other voice in the story so far. This becomes even more problematic when it is remembered that this voice would only just have stopped speaking in 3:22.

Although there is no distinction of voices demanded in 1:9-20, the use of "first", implying a distinction of two distinct voices seems to point towards a separate angelic voice in 1:10, which returns again in 4:1. The vision that follows itself also seems to point to this because Christ is presented as part of the vision (the Lamb of God) rather than a guide to it.

"what must happen"- is sometimes taken as only meaning the vision of 4:1-8:1, but is better understood as referring to all the visions recorded in 4:1-20:9.

4:2 "in the spirit" - see 1:10.

"throne" - a symbol of the kingship of God. If the *bisellium* (3:22) is the throne of the vision, it may also point to the kingship of Christ. The vision of the throne is based on *Ezek* 1, but the focus is not an a lavish description of the throne, more of the one seated on it. The idea of "being seated" is common in the religious language of the time, and was a common way of describing a deity in both literature and magical formulae (Aune 1997, 284-5). John spends hardly any time on a description of the seated figure: it is as if he stands in an apophatic (silent) tradition in which God cannot be described: language is not fit for the task, only silence and contemplation. Such traditions still are found in Orthodox iconography, which forbids depictions of God the Father.

4:3 "jasper" - is described as an opaque semiprecious stone, usually red in colour (Aune 1997, 285), but Sweet describes it as a clear stone, like a diamond (1990,117). Whichever is chosen, it is a stone symbolising God, and its presence in the New Jerusalem shows that the city reflects the glory of God (21:11,18-19).

"carnelian"- a red, semiprecious stone (Sweet 1990,117).

"rainbow"- despite its being described as an emerald (a green, translucent, precious stone), the rainbow also is a reminder of God's mercy and his promise

made to Noah (*Gen* 9:13, *Ezek* 1:28). God's kingship is based on his mercy.

4:4- the identity of the twenty four elders whose thrones encircle the throne of God has been the subject of much debate. Their thrones suggest that they have been given a special place in heaven. Their further identity can be summarised by seven different theories:

- the leaders of the 24 priestly courses (*1 Chron* 23:6, 24:7-18). However, their lack of priestly duties is seen as weakening this identification.
- the 24 divisions of musicians (Levites- *1 Chron* 25:1-31), but this is considered to give too much importance to the otherwise less significant Levites.
- Representatives of Israel and the Church (the 12 sons of Israel and the 12 Apostles).
- Individual Christian martyrs
- OT "Saints"
- Angels in the court of heaven.
- Figures from astrology (for example, the 24 Babylonian star-gods)

Of these 7, it is difficult to see why (7 –the star gods) would be elevated to such a position of importance, especially when *Rev* appears hostile to syncretism. The details of the elders' clothing may give some indication: their garments of white and crowns are reminiscent of the rewards given to those who have been faithful on earth, specifically within the church (2:10, 3:18). That would seem to eliminate (6- angels). That the faithful should be of the OT only appears strange in what is a Christian text: this would seem to eliminate (1 -leaders), (2 - musicians) and (5- OT "saints")), but need not demand that all OT references be excluded. It suggests that the faithful should include Christian references too, and not be exclusively about the OT. Chapter 7 seems to point to the reward of the martyrs, and differentiates them from the 24 elders (7:11): this would seem to eliminate (4). Thus it would seem that the 24 are to be identified with the 12 sons of Israel and the 12 Apostles, an identification which is in part shared with *Mt* 19:28, and also builds on the OT picture of the role of the twelve tribes in the court of heaven.

4:5 "thunder/voices/lightning"- based on the appearance of God at Sinai (*Ex* 19:16-19). These, and others, are all signs of the presence of God, and specifically of his judgment. Bauckham argues that this theme is repeated and expanded (4:5,8:5, 11:19, 16:18-21) as the judgment of God comes closer (1993a,202).

"seven torches of fire"- see 1:4.

4:6 "sea of glass, like crystal"- see *Ezek* 1:22. The sea of glass is a symbol of God's bringing creation out of the first chaos (*Gen* 1). In many Ancient Near Eastern myths the sea was the home of destructive monsters the basis for Biblical monsters such as Leviathan (*Job* 41:1).The crystal sea signifies God's taming of the forces which bring chaos and destruction. In some Jewish symbolism, the Jerusalem Temple was seen as built over the water, taming its destructive power. Here the throne, God's rule, is shown in that role: God has power over the forces of chaos.

4:6 "Around/each side"- the Greek is difficult, but seems to suggest that the four creatures stand between the throne of God and the sea.

"four living creatures"- these appear to be drawn from the visions of *Is* 6:2 and *Ezek* 1:4-21, as well as the tradition of the cherubim which were around the Ark of the Covenant (*1 Sam* 4:4; *2 Sam* 6:2). Later Christian commentators thought that the four animals stood for the four Gospels, but that is problematic. If, as is suggested here, *Rev* was written in AD 68, it would have been written before the gospels were known in their current form. Others have suggested that they refer to ancient astrology, but the fact that John develops no such theme weakens the proposal. It is most likely that the four creatures, which represent humanity, wild animals, domestic animals and birds, are rather symbolic of the whole creation and its worship of God.

4:8 "six wings"- this feature comes from *Is* 6:2. *Rev* gives no function to the wings, but *Ezek* 1:24, 3:12-13, 10:5) says that the wings were used to produce noise.

"full of eyes"- repeats the image of 4:6. Ford gives the use of the eyes as "sparkling" rather than for seeing (1975,75). The "fullness" indicates that they

never rest from their work, a point made again in the last part of the verse.

"Holy, Holy, Holy"- this hymn is made up of two lines. The first comes from *Is* 6:3, but John has substituted "Almighty" (one of his favourite terms to describe God) for "of hosts". The title is found elsewhere in *Rev* (see 1:4). The *Is* passage is known as the *Qedussah*, and was a common item of praise in both Judaism and early Christianity.

4:9 "And...throne," is like a doxology, describing what is given as well as part of the character of the one who is being praised. The phrase initially seems to suggest a repeated activity, but the Greek word which introduces the clause (*hotan*) is more usually used in *Rev* to indicate something which happens once, not a repeated activity. Furthermore, the Greek changes tense: the singing of 4:8 is described using a present tense, that of 4:9 using a future tense:

And when the living creatures will give glory, and honour and thanks to the one who is seated upon the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the 24 elders will fall before the one who is seated upon the throne and will worship the one who lives for ever and ever; they will cast their crowns before the throne, singing...

When will this one event take place? The actions described in 5:8 suggest that it will take place when the scroll is about to be opened.

4:10 "fall and worship"- these two actions, the Greek *piptein* and *proskunein* respectively, come to mean almost the same thing in *Rev*: worship appears to demand "falling down", a change in posture signifying the humility of the worshipper in the presence of God.

"cast their crowns"- the elders take off their crowns and lay them on the ground before God as a sign of their submission to his authority.

4:11- A hymn which begins with a common Eastern Mediterranean style of address. Supporters of the AD 96 date suggest that this is a direct attack on the claims of Domitian. However, it need not be tied to him: Nero too seemed to think he should be called *Dominus* (Lord). Titles like this were used, more often unofficially, throughout the first century AD. More important is the third line which shows why God is to be called "Lord and God". The title is fitting because God is the Creator of everything that exists. If the hymn is taken as a commentary on the scene in which it fits, it could be said that it makes clear the meaning of the "sea

of glass" (4:6) and "the four creatures" (4:6-8), both of which are signs of God's creative power.

b) The Lamb & The Scroll (5:1-14)

Outline

The focus in the heavenly court now shifts to the scroll in the right hand of the seated figure. A great drama is made of the failure to find anyone suitable to open the scroll. Finally, the Lion of Judah is called: it is Christ. In the passage that follows he is described as the Lamb, and great importance is put on his death, the Lamb who was slain (5:6,12). When he takes the scroll to open it, he becomes an object of worship, worshipped for his death as God was worshipped for his creative power (4:11). In this worship he does not take the place of God, rather he is seen as sharing in his glory. The scene of worship builds to a climax as the members of the heavenly court wait for the scroll to be opened (6:1ff.)

Notes

5:1 -"scroll"- the scroll was the usual form of written document in the ancient world. It was made of a long piece of parchment with a wooden rod at each end. The text was written in vertical parallel columns. The reader would read the text one column at a time, unrolling a column from one rod and then winding the column just read onto the other rod. Scrolls would be marked outside with a tag to show the contents and could be sealed with wax seals. The scroll here is described as being sealed with seven seals which will later be opened by the Lamb (6:1-8:1). The scroll is found at the right side of God: this suggests either its goodness or its importance (the right was the side of blessing), or may even point to its identification with Christ who is often described as sitting at God's right hand.

This scroll is described as having writing "inside and on the back" (Gk- *esother kai opisthen* in the majority Greek text), suggesting that the parchment was written on both sides. This kind of scroll was called an *opisthograph* and they became increasingly common in the first century AD because of the high cost of parchment. This also is an allusion to the scroll of *Ezek 2:9-10*, which is

described as having writing "front and back".

Others have preferred to follow a minority Greek textual tradition (Gk- *esother kai exother*- "inside and out") which might imply a scroll that was written twice: one unsealed copy would be read, the other sealed copy would be kept to ensure the text was not altered. However, it is difficult to see how such a double document would allow for a dramatic unsealing: the unsealed copy would always be available for inspection.

A second question centres on the contents of the scroll: can these be identified? There are two basic theories, that the scroll is included somewhere in the text of *Rev*, or that it is not a part of the text.

This second category includes such proposals as God's plan for the world, the Book of Life (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12,15, 21:27- named only, the contents are not revealed), the sins of the human race, the Old Testament, Torah, a "bill of divorce" (summarised in Aune 1997,344-6).

Some of these are well-known. Again the question must be asked, why is such a drama made over the unsealing of a scroll whose contents are already known: thus, the Torah, OT. Perhaps the scroll is their true interpretation? More importantly, when such a play is made of the opening of the scroll, why are the contents not made explicit, whether the material is already known or as yet hidden?

If these appear unsatisfactory answers, attention must turn to the first group, and the question then becomes one of identification: which parts of *Rev* make up the scroll? It is suggested that the contents of the scroll begin to be revealed in 6:1, but care must be taken not to confuse the seals of the scroll and its contents (Bauckham 1993a, 248). It is more likely that the seal visions forecast what the contents of the scroll will be rather than reveal its actual contents. Thus the contents of the scroll would seem to start later in the book: 8:1 is sometimes suggested as a likely starting point. However the most likely starting point is suggested by Bauckham. He argues that the scroll of 5:1 is to be identified with the "little scroll" of 10:2, inasmuch as both descriptions draw heavily from one source, *Ezek* 2:9-10 (Bauckham 1993a, 248).

The scroll which has now been opened by the Lamb through the opening of the seven seals (6:1,3,5,7,9,12; 8:1) is then brought down from heaven by an angel for John to consume, so that he may reveal its contents as prophecy (10:11). He does so initially in 11:1-13, more fully from chapter 12 onwards (Bauckham 1993a, 13).

Whilst admitting the similarities between 5:1, 10:2 and *Ezekiel* 2, Garrow does not consider that these give sufficient grounds to identify the two scrolls as one (Garrow 1997,26-30). He notes, too, that whilst *Biblion* is used in 5:1, the scroll of 10:2 is described as *Bibliaridion* (a little scroll): this he argues, implies a different scroll. He further notes that Bauckham's argument uses Dan 12:9 to show a sealed, heavenly scroll. However there is no indication in 10:2 that the open scroll has ever been sealed: Bauckham may imply too much. Nor would the scroll of Dan 12:9 be a "new scroll" of the kind which seems to be demanded. Garrow resolves these difficulties by suggesting that the scroll of 10:2 and 11:1-13 is the sealed scroll of *Dan*, and that the scroll of 5:1 is found in 12:1 ff.. The points mentioned above all depend on how the reader assesses the OT evidence and thinks that John has used it in his own writing. A further point appears, however, to add weight to Garrow's theory, or at least to weaken Bauckham's.

11:1-13 appears to be part of the sequence of the seven trumpets, separating the sixth and seventh trumpets. Such interruptions, of varying length, occur throughout the text, and are part of the character of John's writing. To suggest, as Garrow does, a separate scroll, which anticipates the visions that will follow would appear to do less violence to the flow of the narrative than Bauckham's introduction to a scroll (11:1-13), followed by the seventh trumpet (which is not part of the scroll, and would break up that sequence), followed by the visions of the scroll.

Thus it would appear that there are two scrolls, and that the scroll of 5:1 will be revealed in 12:1ff.. Whilst many commentators appear to see the contents of the scroll including all the subsequent visions, it is suggested that the scroll may only cover the visions of 12:1-16:18. These are the only visions which are not introduced or interpreted by either Christ or an angel, and would thus fit a

revelation from a scroll. Against this view it may be argued that the seven seals might imply a scroll which implies the complete revelation of God's saving work in Christ.

5:2- "strong angel"- occurs three times, but seems to refer to different persons in each case (5:2; 10:1 and 18:21).

5:4 -"weeping"- John's weeping is caused not just because the contents of the scroll remain secret: the opening and reading of the scroll also imply the actual beginning of God's saving work. If the scroll cannot be opened, the whole of God's plans are frustrated (Caird 1984, 73). In this dramatic pause, John points out Christ's unique and essential role.

5:5 -"conquered"- the one who has conquered is also the one who is worthy; a possible play on the Aramaic *zeka'* which can bear both meanings.

"Lion of the tribe of Judah"- a Messianic title originating from *Gen* 49:9.

"root of David"- a Messianic title coming from *Is* 11:1-10. It reflects both the beliefs that the Messiah would be like a king, and would also come from the royal family of David, a point elaborated in the Infancy Narratives of *Mt* and *Lk*.

5:6 - "Lamb"- it has been suggested that this might be better translated as "Ram" because the animal of the vision appears rather to be an adult sheep (wrath, horns). Furthermore the Gk *arnion* (lamb) used in *Rev*, and the Gk *krios* (ram) could be used interchangeably. However, the use of Gk *amnos* (lamb -*Jn* 1:29,36; *Acts* 8:32; *1 Pet* 1:19) and the more common NT imagery suggest the traditional "Lamb" be retained.

The title "Lamb" carries two themes: leadership and sacrifice. The theme of leadership does not mean that "Lamb" was a Messianic title, although that connection is made through the titles of 5:5: contemporary usage does not indicate that "Lamb" was used of the Messiah. The idea of leadership is rather indicated by the enthronement of the Lamb (7:17; 22:1-3), his being worshipped (5:12-13; 7:9-10) and by his role as a warrior (17:14).

The sacrificial theme comes from the description of the Lamb "as though slain", which refers to the death of Christ. Whilst many writers have tried to identify a precise ritual sacrificial practice that might lie behind this, it appears safer to say

that the general language of sacrifice gives this meaning rather than a precise reference to one ritual (Aune 1997, 372-3).

Furthermore, there is no need to choose whether "Lamb" should be interpreted as either "leader" or "sacrifice":

it seems clear that the author of Revelation has fused both of these associations together in the figure of the Lamb.

(Aune 1997, 368)

Barker argues that this joining of the themes of leadership and sacrifice is achieved through using the tradition of the Servant from *Is* 53 (1996,131-8; see also Aune 1997, 371). The use of two different words for "lamb" (Gk- *arnion* and *amnos*) has led some to argue that *Rev*, *Jn* 1:29,36 and *Is* 53 cannot be put together in this way (Barker 1996, 131). Despite such objections, Barker argues that the passages share the same themes: enthronement, leadership and war. These shared themes are the basis on which John develops a picture of the Lamb as Servant. This theology is based on contemporary interpretations of the Servant passages of *Is* 53. Contemporary thought about the Passover may also be an element in John's thinking. Although the Passover of *Ex* was not a sacrificial ritual, it had come to be interpreted in this way by the NT period. This was in part caused by the change in the way the Passover was celebrated. It had become a Temple ritual, rather than one carried out at home. Thus the Passover Lamb began to have a sacrificial significance. Both John and Paul appear to have used such ideas. A sacrificial interpretation of the Passover can also be seen in *1 Cor* 5:7. In this case, the sacrificial understanding of the Lamb allows John to fuse together the ideas of Servant, leadership and sacrifice to describe the work of Jesus.

"seven horns/seven eyes"- the horn is a symbol of power (*Jer* 48:25; *Ps* 18:1-3; 132:17) which shows the leadership motif of the Lamb. The eyes with their connection to light and the spirit of God (see 1:4) stress the wisdom of the Lamb. Sweet suggests that the horn is a symbol of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the eyes of the Root of David (1990,128).

"went and took"- the Lamb, not yet enthroned, approaches the seated figure and takes the scroll from his right hand.

5:8- as soon as the Lamb takes the scroll, the significance of his action is marked by the worship offered by the members of the heavenly court. The elders "fall down" (see 4:10): a prelude to worship.

"harp" - (Gk-*kithara*, see also 14:2, 15:2 and 1 Cor 14:7)- a stringed instrument, or lyre, associated with worship.

"bowls full of incense"- here the bowls are used positively: all other instances of bowls (Gk-*phiale*) are associated with the wrath of God. These bowls were dishes used in worship for the presentation of offerings in both Jewish Temple and pagan ritual.

It is difficult to see how the elders can carry bowls and play lyres simultaneously. The scene should not be approached so literally: ancient art often portrayed worshippers in this way as a visual expression of the act of worship.

"prayers of the saints"- this phrase interprets the bowls: incense was long seen as a symbol of prayer (*Ps* 141:2). The saints (Gk-*hagioi*) are the whole people of God, not just the faithful dead in heaven. The phrase was commonly used in the NT for Christians, and refers to their relationship with God, rather than their holiness.

5:9 "new song"- (also 14:3) used of a new song written either for a special occasion or for usual practice.

The hymn has the same pattern as 4:11, but is directed to the Lamb, not to the figure seated on the throne. The Lamb is worthy to receive blessings principally because of his death ("blood"). As God was worshipped for the original act of creation, the lamb is worshipped for his redeeming work, which is a new creation: "to create" and "to redeem" overlap. The Lamb is "slaughtered" (Gk-*sphazo*), which is used to describe Christ as the Passover in *1 Cor* 5:7 and the sacrifice of the Passover lambs (*Mk* 14:12; *Lk* 22:7). "Redeem" is the language of the slave market and means "to release someone by paying a price": that price was the death of the Lamb.

"tribe.."- the list of four groups is a feature that recurs throughout *Rev* (7:9; 10:11; 13:7; 14:6; 17:13). The number four signifies universality, that the whole of a particular group or order is involved in an activity. Here the list stresses that

Christ's death is effective for all, that is, that everyone has the chance to be redeemed because of his death.

5:10 "kingdom and priests"- see 1:6. The verse raises the question of when the saints are to reign: in the future (20:4-6, 21:1; 22:5) or in the present. The future tense used (Gk *basileusousin*) suggests a future reign. However, the hymns anticipate what is to happen and so may show what is the case. Sweet further notes a scribal tradition that would put the verb in the present tense (Gk-*basileuousin*), and argues that this preserves an earlier tradition (1990,130): he thinks that the future tense is a correction made by scribes.

The present in fact fits the context well: Christ is praised for what he has achieved: the ransomed are already a kingdom (1:5), sharing Christ's pattern of kingship (1:9) in faithful "witness to the truth" (cf. Jn 18:37)....

The hymn expresses the heavenly reality behind their outward weakness - "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt* 5:1)...

Their kingship and priesthood have still to be fulfilled, but it is vital for our understanding of John to recognise that he can regard it as a present fact.

(Sweet1990, 130-1)

That the saints already reign in heaven anticipates their future rule on earth but adding the firm belief that this is a process which is definitely begun, even if not completed.

5:11 "angels"- now become part of the court of heaven. A myriad is literally 10,000, but was often used for a number too large to be counted. It is a reminder of the host of heaven that accompanies the Son of Man (*Dan* 7:10). This may also be an image that fulfils the promise made to patriarchs such as Abraham (*Gen* 22:17) that their descendants would be numberless (i.e., too many to be counted).

5:12- the third hymn does not share the same structure as its predecessors (4:11; 5:9-10), and states what the Lamb is worthy to receive rather than the reasons for being worthy. The gifts for the Lamb show that he is thought to be both king and God. Power (Gk-*dynamis*) and might (Gk- *ischus*) are synonyms, and especially used to describe God in *Rev* (4:11; 7:2; 7:12; 11:17; 19:1). "Wealth" (Gk-*ploutos*) is used of earthly kings rather than God (18:17). "Wisdom"

(Gk-*sophia*) is an attribute of God (7:12), but is also given by Him as a gift to earthly kings. "Honour" (*time*) is used of God (4:11; 7:12) and of God and the Lamb together (5:13): it means the proper respect or accord given to someone in recognition of his/her abilities. "Glory" (Gk-*doxa*) is only given to God (4:11; 7:12; 19:1) or God and the Lamb (5:13). "Praise" (Gk-*eulogia*) is given to God (4:11; 7:12).

The hymn shows that the Lamb is given not only the respect due to a king, but also the worship due to God.

5:13- the whole of creation, represented by its three different layers is now seen as joining in the worship of God. While the list mentions "earth" and "sea" this does not mean that John has changed to a "four layer" model: it was a common practice to divide the "earth" layer into earth and sea. Again both God and the Lamb are considered fit to be worshipped.

5:14- John brings the scene to a climactic finale with the "Amen" of the four elders.

c) The Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)

Outline

The scene is now ready for the seals to be opened by the Lamb: they are opened one by one, and each is described in turn. The seals form two distinct groups: the first four describe horsemen and are based on visions found in *Zech* 1:8-15; 6:1-8. John, however, alters the details (colours, and the order of colours) to suit his own purposes.

These first four seals share a common pattern:-

- 1) the seal is opened
- 2) one of the four living creatures (5:6) gives a command, "Come!".
- 3) the horseman appears.

The identity of the first horseman is especially important as it shapes the rest of the vision. He looks like the rider on the white horse of 19:11 ff., and is thus sometimes thought to be Christ. However, he is really a Satanic figure accompanied by the powers of evil. The images in this passage are similar to the

tribulations highlighted in the "little Apocalypse" of Mk 13 and its synoptic parallels. The two tables show the similarities:-

<i>Revelation</i>	<i>Mark</i>
1) Conquest	1) War
2) Civil War	2) International Conflict
3) Famine	3) earthquake
4) Pestilence	4) Famine
5) Cry for vengeance/ persecution	5) Persecution
6) Earthquake (& heavenly signs)	6) Family Strife
7) Sealing of 144,000	7) Desolation in Judaea
8) The Multitude	8) Saving of the Elect
	9) False Christs
	10) Chaos in heaven
	11) Gathering of the elect

A wider survey which includes the parallels in *Matthew* and *Luke* reveals similar elements, but a different ordering of event. The elements shared include civil (or family) strife, famine, pestilence, earthquake, Antichrist(s) and the saving/gathering of the chosen of God. The apocalyptic or prophetic style of the passages is a further common feature. As such this first part of the scene takes us into a picture shared with *Mk* 13 and its parallel passages: of the way in which the Antichrist will appear before the Last Days to try and trick the faithful, but will be frustrated by God's saving of the elect.

This scene further serves as an advertisement for events, rather than the events themselves: they warn of what is coming, rather than describe the events. Garrow describes this literary technique as "foreshadowing". What will happen is described in the later visions: the seal visions anticipate those events. He notes that the appearance of the four horsemen on their own (see *Esther* 8:10,14:2; *2 Kings* 9:18; *Zech* 1:8-11; 6:1-8), with no accompanying armies, and going to the

four corners of the earth (implying the whole earth) are classic signs of messengers:

The four horsemen are classic foreshadowing images. These characters are messengers sent out to warn the four corners of the earth about the disasters which will pour forth from the scroll when it is eventually opened.

(Garrow 1997,18)

In contrast, the fifth seal shows the martyrs who have already died for their faith crying for vengeance: an image which is not comfortable to many modern Christians. Surely it would be better to depict them crying for mercy rather than vengeance?

The sixth seal depicts an earthquake: a symbol of the Last Days. This is again a foreshadowing: it is a mere taste of the final earthquake (16:17-21) which will surpass it in scale and in content.

7:1 sees an interruption of the sequence of the seven seals: the interruption (like the second interruption in 10:1-11:14) shows God delaying the Last Days until he has set aside his faithful people for salvation. Two groups are mentioned: the 144,000 and a numberless multitude, who are identified as those faithful in persecution.

The seventh seal appears to be an anticlimax, as it begins with a period of silence: there may be a reminder here of *1 Kings* 19 where the still, small voice of God is only heard after a series of loud noises. The seventh seals lead into the sequence of seven trumpets. Indeed, the seven trumpets could be described as the "seven within the seventh". John's skill here is like that of a musician, leading the listeners to think that the climax of the sequence has been reached, but then surprising them with a false coda or ending, after which the development of the theme continues.

The sequence of seven seals raises two important questions whose range and final answer will lie outside *Rev* itself.

The first is the question of timing: the reader is drawn to ask "when will this happen?". As has been suggested this is perhaps not the case here: the seven seals are seven advertisements rather than seven events. However, the question still remains- when will the events advertised take place? Any answer to this

question must be carefully thought out, and checked against other witnesses. Attempts to predict the timing of the Last Days are difficult, and complicated by false alarms (*Mk* 13:24). It may even be a question beyond the revelations given to us: *Mk* 13:32 suggests such information is known only to God. With these warnings in mind, it would seem that all that can be said is that the tribulations forecast come after the death of Christ (the Lamb has already been slaughtered) and before the final resolution. Like *Mk* 13, the seal visions warn of the coming of the Antichrist. However, *Rev* also makes great play of the way in which God ensures, before that time, that the faithful will be preserved, survive the difficulties to come and finally be called into the heavenly city of God. One last point must be made which has already been made in the Oracles to the Seven Churches. The situation of the reader will influence how these visions are interpreted and allow for a plurality of interpretations: it may well be that some Christians today may feel that their circumstances show that they feel they are in the grip of persecution, as did the Christians of *Rev*'s time. Others, perhaps the more comfortable, may not feel that their time has come. Whatever the situation and however the reader feels, the seven seals warn of the Antichrist, and persecution of the church, but, more importantly, tell that God has already rescued the faithful.

The second question raised is much more difficult: it is the problem of suffering. Why, in short, does God allow any persecution and suffering for the church and the world? It cannot be denied that many of these visions give a picture of God as a vengeful judge. Even Caird's judgment of the first four seal visions does not satisfy:

It follows that all four riders represent evils which are not directly caused by the will of God, but only tolerated by his permission
(Caird 1984, 81)

Why does God permit these evils? In truth, *Rev* does not seem to answer such questions as accept that this is the way the world is. It is true to say that the tribulations are connected to sin (which is the root cause of the judgment) and, indeed, to the judgment itself. There is, however, no detailed attempt to answer the question "why evil?", that is better handled by *Job*. However, to think of

judgment, vengeance and evil as giving a complete picture of *Rev's* view of the world is inadequate. Any detailed reflection on these themes must include God's wrath and judgment being seen also in the Lamb and his death, in the heavenly visions and in the rescuing of the faithful. With these features in mind, it looks as if *Rev's* dominant message is that the faithful will be treated differently from those who have rejected Christ, and that suffering is, ultimately, of less importance than the final rewards given by God to the faithful. That this can come dangerously close to a platitude is no reason to deny its significance. Nowhere does *Rev* diminish the reality of suffering by saying that it does not matter: the reality and anguish of suffering is never played down. What *Rev* does stress is that his visions have given him a different picture of suffering in which God has already taken care of the faithful. What may be uncomfortable for some readers is this picture in which God seems only to care for his own, and that faith is what appears to divide humanity into two groups, the saved and the damned. Unless a universalism (the theory that everyone is saved regardless of their belief) is demanded, and *Rev* obviously does not demand it, there is always going to be such a scandal. At heart, the reminder is never far away that choosing or rejecting Christ is, in the strongest terms, a matter of life and death.

Notes

6:2 "white horse...rider" Three different identifications have been put forward

a) Christ. The figure of 6:2 has been identified with the rider of 19:11ff.. However, the only common feature is the colour of the horse. *Mk* 13:10 with its claim that the Gospel must be preached before the Last days has also been used to support this view. However, other eschatological passages in the NT omit this detail (*Lk* 21:9-11).

b) Parthian horseman. The Parthians, from the areas of modern Turkey/Syria were feared enemies of ancient Rome famed for their skill as archers on horseback: they also, according to some sources, favoured white horses (Ford 1975,106). This identification would raise a problem for identifying the other horsemen. However, they may well provide contemporary colour for the description, especially as *Nero redivivus* was sometimes expected to be

accompanied by armies from Rome's eastern enemies (see also 16:12).

c) The most likely interpretation is that the rider represents a satanic figure, the Antichrist. Thus he is similar to Christ because he tries to copy him (see also 13:3; *Mk* 13:21-22). Rissi describes him thus:

a terrible imitation of Christ, as a Christ of hell, this rider moves through history to meet his anti-type, the rider on the white horse who is in reality the ruler and almighty judge who will appear at the end of history.

(Rissi 1964, 417-8, quot. from Ford 1975,105)

It is sometimes suggested that the fact that the rider "conquers" implies an identification with Christ. The Greek of 6:2 may, however, reflect a Hebrew construction, the Absolute infinitive, and be translated "he came out to conquer and conquer". His purpose is to conquer, but it remains open whether he fulfils his aim, or is frustrated. The verse may well imply "he came out in order to conquer [but failed]"- as such it would fit the aims of the Antichrist and his subsequent defeat by Christ. Or, the verse may point to the temporary triumphs won by the Antichrist, rather than an ultimate victory.

"given" – *Gk-edothe*. This word is used three times for a gift from God (6:11, 12:14, 19:18). Its more common use is to suggest that an evil power has been permitted to act (9:1,3,5; 13:5,7; 19:14,15).

6:4 "red"- the colour stands for bloodshed, and the details of 6:4 ("slaughter one another") suggest civil war.

6:5 "black"- symbolises death and mourning

"balance"- a symbol of famine (Lev 26:26; Ezek 4:10).

"*denarius*" - Roman coin, the equivalent of a day's wages.

"oil...wine"- various suggestions have been given as to the meaning of this phrase. Some think it may refer to Jewish worship, and others to an edict of Domitian which forced Italian farmers to destroy vineyards and olive groves so that wheat might be grown (Ford 1975, 107). This caused the wheat farmers of Asia Minor to lose their market. However, the verse here would appear to suggest the opposite: that wheat is destroyed, and olives and vines saved. Better is Sweet, that this refers to a limited famine which will affect some staple crops (wheat), but not the hardier plants such as olives and vines (1992,140).

6:8 "pale" (Gk--*chloros*- "bile-green")- a colour of death and sickness.

"Death" (Gk- *thanatos*) - can also mean "plague".

"Hades" -the Greek name for the underworld, as well as the god of death.

"sword/famine/pestilence" the attributes of the last three riders are mentioned together, presumably to show that the destruction caused by the three tend to go together. The first rider was not shown as having a particular destructive power so none is mentioned. This may also show that the other three are subordinate to, but work with, the first. The summarising of all the different troubles further provides a neat conclusion to the first four seals, showing that they belong together as a group. Ford suggests that the list of troubles may be based on events which occurred in Jerusalem from the period 169BC- AD70 (1975,109), but it is also possible that these are stock images of the tribulations.

6:9 "altar" -a place of sacrifice, and a symbolic reminder of the religious significance of the death of martyrs.

"souls slain..."- refers to those who are slain, and makes specific reference to those slain for faith in Christ. The passage may be based on the historical persecutions of the Church in the 1st century AD, for example, in Jerusalem and Rome. It is also possible that the "souls" include the faithful of the OT (see also *Hebrews* 11:32-9).

6:10 "vengeance"- Gk-*ekdikein*. Translations which stress vengeance may give the wrong emphasis. *Ekdikein* was often used as a legal term, from the law courts, and is better translated as "vindicate", or "give a sentence to make the crime". This is the language of justice, not revenge. The passage may include an implicit condemnation of human courts, both official and unofficial, which condemned Christians, and compare them with the true justice which comes from God's judgment. The call here then becomes a call by the victims of injustice for God to vindicate their cause and settle the miscarriages of (human) justice which have taken place. Such a vindication will be seen later in the judgment of Babylon (17-19).

"those who dwell in the world"- this would refer to those whose allegiance is not to God, but to sin, or to earthly, or human institutions.

6:11 "white robe" -see 3:5.

"wait...complete"- three different meanings have been given:

a) that there are limited spaces in heaven. This would appear to be ruled out by the 144,000 and multitude in Ch.7.

b) that salvation is for a group, rather than individuals. This would appear to be contradicted by the white robe (3:5, 6:10), the writing of names in the book of life and testimony about individuals by Jesus (3:5).

c) the death of the martyrs is part of God's plan to conquer evil. This is the most likely interpretation, and might shed light on Paul's difficult words on completing the sufferings of Christ (*Col* 1:24).

6:12 "earthquake"- whilst this is a stock part of writing about the Last Days (*Mk* 13; *Hos* 10:8), it has a further use. Building on the *Exodus* tradition, the earthquake is also a *theophany*: a sign of God revealing himself (*Ex* 19-20), especially as judge and king. The earthquake is used four times in *Rev* (4:5, 8:5, 11:19, 16:18-21) and each time the details are expanded, and further stress the OT theme that the coming of the Lord will be a fearful event (*Joel* 2:11,31). This expansion shows that God is getting closer and closer (Bauckham 1993a, 204).

The seven phenomena of the earthquake listed in 6:12ff. suggest a complete destruction of the world, but this is not destruction for its own sake: it should also be seen as a preparation for the new creation.

6:12-14- "sun/moon/stars"- may not just refer to the physical destruction of the world. These three elements also stand for the powers, now become corrupt, which lie behind the world: they may imply the destruction of the forces of evil (*Is* 34:2-4;24:19-23). The earthquake of the Last Days (which is a sign of God's coming) means that evil will be overthrown, not just the destruction of the present creation. Many of the details which follow are OT images of the coming of the Lord.

"sackcloth" - a sign of mourning (*Is* 50:3).

"blood" - *Joel* 2:31. One of the signs seen in heaven before the coming of God.

6:13 "figtree/rolling" - *Is* 34:4. Both signify the fear of the world before God's judgment.

6:14 "mountains" - *Jer* 4:24. Creation trembles at the coming of God.

6:15 Humanity is counted as belonging to seven different classes, implying that no-one will escape the judgment of God.

"hide"- a reference to the corrupt rulers of the earth who hide from God when he comes (*Hos* 10:8).

6:16 "Wrath of the Lamb"- some have argued that the words "of the Lamb" are an addition to the original text. There are good reasons to see it as original: "wrath" is a characteristic of the Lamb (Barker 1996,134).

6:17 "standing" - the rulers of the world are filled with fear at the earthquake, and ask a question which seems to them to have the answer, "no-one may stand, meaning "survive" these tribulations. The events of Ch.7 will give a very different answer: "standing" is a characteristic of the Lamb (5:6) and of the redeemed. There are some who will stand, who will survive, but the rulers of the world do not recognise them.

"wrath" - is not so much anger and revenge. Rather, it should be seen in terms of the consequences of sin, God's judgment of the world and his vindication of the faithful who have suffered at the hands of the "people of the world".

7:1-8: the vision that follows is an answer to the question of 6:17, although that answer is never made directly. The destructive action of the four horsemen is halted by the angels to allow the 144,000 to be sealed before the destruction takes place. The answer to the question, "who can stand?" is, those who have been saved by God because of their faith in the Lamb (Christ).

7:1 "four angels"- the four angels match the "winds of the earth" (7:1), which in turn match the four horsemen of 6:1-8. The work of the angels is to delay the work of the Antichrist. The use of "wind" and "horsemen" to describe the same phenomena is found frequently in the OT (*Zech* 6:5; *Ps* 18:10; 68:17,33; *Is* 19:1; 65:15; *Hab* 3:8 and *Deut* 33:26).

"earth/sea/tree"- earth and sea signify the middle layer of the Hebrew world: the earth on which we live is the place where destruction will take place. "Trees" appears an unusual addition. Sweet suggests because they will be the most likely victims of destructive winds (1992, 147). Ford gives a symbolic

interpretation based on examples from the Targums and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1975,115-6): they represent the "people who dwell on earth" (6:15).

7:2 "another angel"- this angel represents the will of God (10:1) and comes from "the rising of the sun" (the East), a compass point especially associated with God (Is 41:2; *Ezek* 43:2-3).

7:3 "seal" - the seal refers to the chosen being somehow marked by God. While sealing could carry many meanings in the ancient world (branding of slaves or cattle, marking of a soldier or member of religious group, prophet (*1 Kings* 20:41), phylactery, circumcision, or "one formed after the image of God"), the important sources for this passage are *Ezek* 9:1ff and *Ex* 12 in which sealing is the sign that God saves his people from destruction. Caird works on the assumption that sealing implies martyrdom (1984, 95-6). He argues that the parallel of 14:1, and that the passages about prophets and servants also include the idea of martyrdom. However, objections can be raised to this idea: the passage in 14:1 need not imply martyrdom, rather faithfulness to God and Christ, with or without martyrdom. Secondly, the number 144,000 would appear to imply all the elect rather than a sub-group like martyrs (below). Sweet suggests that the idea of sealing implies baptism and thus all Christians, not only martyrs (1990,148). Whilst "sealing" is used of baptism in the NT (*2 Cor* 1:22; *Eph* 1:13; 4:30), *Rev* does not appear to use this image. What is more important is the notion of being saved by God found in the OT source. Such a message without no direct reference to baptism, or to martyrdom, would appear to be the most natural.

7:4 144,000- this should not be used literally to suggest that the elect only number 144,000. It is a number with a symbolic meaning (12x12x1000) which implies that all of the elect will be gathered in.

"every tribe of the sons of Israel"- whilst some writers comment that John has altered the traditional list of the tribes of Israel, others point out that it is difficult to talk of such a "traditional list" since such lists have 18 different variations! What we can note is that the list in *Rev* begins with the tribe of Judah, and omits the tribe of Dan. To begin with Judah serves two purposes. It makes the tribe in which Jesus was born the first and most important. It also demotes the tribe of

Levi, whose priesthood has been replaced by the kingship and priesthood of Christ (*Heb* 10). Dan is perhaps omitted because, according to some traditions, it was the tribe from which the Antichrist would come: such interpretations were based on *Gen* 49:17. Farrer suggests that the whole list of names as written in *Rev* puts the names of the tribes in an order which follows the dignity of their mothers, Leah, Rachel and their handmaids (1964,106-8). The list of the twelve tribes appears again in 21:9-22:2 in the description of the heavenly Jerusalem. Such an identification would point to the 144,000 being identified with all the elect: the heavenly Jerusalem was for all the elect, not just the martyrs.

7:9-17 the next vision is set in heaven. If the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 is the "before" (the anticipation of salvation), the vision of the numberless multitude is the "after" (the reality of the saved in heaven). The tribes of Israel do not represent an ethnic group or an elect based on descent, but the body of faithful witnesses: Paul's description of the church as the descendants of Abraham makes a similar claim (*Rom* 4:1-12).

7:9 "from every nation...."- this is the fulfillment of the hymn in 5:9: God is now praised by the faithful from every nation. The phrases used here echo 11:9, the group who will gaze on the witnesses, and 13:7, those whom the Beast rules. As the presence of evil will affect every group, so will God's saving action.

"standing"- the elect are the ones who will be able to stand on the day of the Lord (6:17)

"clothed in white robes"- the elect who have come through the time of tribulation are shown wearing white robes, one of the promised rewards for the church undergoing persecution (3:5).

"palm branches" - a sign of victory or triumph.

7:10-"salvation". May be variously translated as the Gk-*soteria*, implying total well-being (Sweet 1992,152) or as the Heb-*yasha'* , implying "victory" (Caird 1984,100). The first stresses the survival of the elect, the second God's triumph over his enemies, but the two are not, in effect, very different. Whichever is preferred, it is won by the joint action of God and of the Lamb.

7:12 - a short hymn of praise addressed to God alone. It contains seven

elements like the hymn of 5:12. There is one difference: God receives "thanksgiving" (Gk-*eucharistia*) rather than wealth (Gk- *ploutos*- 5:12). *Ploutos* was more associated with earthly kings than with the kingship of God.

7:13 introduces an interpretation of the scene given to John by an elder (4:4). The elder asks John a question, John replies that the elder knows the answer better than he. This dialogue shows John claiming that the interpretation of the scene is not his own, rather it comes from God, passed through a member of the heavenly court.

7:14-17- the elder's response is presented in the modern Greek texts as a poem or hymn: it thus should be seen as an interpretation of the scene (see intro. to this chapter)

"these ...great ordeal" - the elect in heaven are those who have been faithful to God and Christ through trouble and persecution. They do not have to be martyrs, that is, those who died for their faith in such times. The reference to "blood" refers to the blood of the Lamb; there is no mention of the blood of the martyrs.

7:14 "washed robes" may mean several things

- that they have fought alongside the Lamb.
- that they died a martyr's death.
- reference to baptism (Sweet 1992,153)
- given a better understanding of the Torah and their relationship with God by Jesus (Ford:1975,127).

Of these, the second would appear to limit the multitude to being martyrs when the crowd is the whole company of the elect, whilst d) is based on other contemporary, or later, interpretations. The reference to baptism may be forced: *Heb 9* talks of being washed with blood, but the background is in the language of sacrifice rather than baptism. The same may well be true here. The best choice seems to be a): they have struggled alongside Christ, and have not given in.

7:15 "serve" - the elect in heaven are occupied in the worship of God.

"day and night" - need not mean that time in heaven can be divided as it is on earth. Rather, "day and night" implies "ceaselessly, without stopping". The saints will constantly worship God. This joy is contrasted to the fate of those who follow

the Beast: they must worship the beast, or be killed (13:15).

"in his temple" - see 21:22, where we are told that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem. The two visions need not contradict each other (see Introduction)

"shelter" -the Gk *skeno-ein* was used of the *Shekinah* (the glory of God) which accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness (*Ex* 13:21-2) and of the incarnation of the Logos (*Jn* 1:14). The faithful are promised that they will live with God, and enjoy his protection.

7:16- the protection given by God is presented in physical terms as the absence of what most often distresses us. The passage is also based on *Is* 49:10, following the Septuagint text (which mentions "heat"). That passage described the joy that the exiles would receive on their return from Babylon. Here the joy of heaven is compared to the suffering of our earthly exile. Joining in the heavenly worship is a return to our true home and place which have been lost to us through sin.

7:17 "shepherd" - here John develops the *Is* material: the lamb is the one who guides us back. There is surely a little humour here in the description of the Lamb as a shepherd. The shepherd was an image used both of Jesus (*Jn* 10:10-18) and of God (*Psalms* 23:1)

"springs of the water of Life"- part of *Is* 49:10, but given an new dimension in the NT (*Jn* 4:10ff and 7:37-9). "living water" refers to "flowing water" (which is good to drink), but also implies salvation, and what (or who) brings salvation. A reference to baptism may be intended, but this idea is not developed.

"every tear" - appears also in 21:3. This vision anticipates the New Jerusalem and the final act in God's plan of salvation. The verse is based on *Is* 25:8 which in turn appears as part of a description of the Messianic Banquet (the great victory feast to be celebrated in heaven on the Day of the Lord). From this background Sweet: sees a reference to the Eucharist intended here (1990,154).

8:1- the opening of the seventh seal might appear disappointing. If the reader has become used to more spectacular phenomena, further signs may be anticipated: the silence becomes a dramatic pause to build up tension.

d) *The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19)*

Outline

The silence at the opening of the seventh seal turns out to be a prelude to the vision of the seven trumpets. It is as if the seventh seal is made up of the trumpet visions: a vision within a vision, like a Russian doll, one of those children's toys that opens to show another toy inside.

After the silence, the visions of the trumpets are introduced by a vision of heavenly worship. An angel offers incense at the heavenly altar, and then smashes the censer down to earth, vividly showing that the plagues are the answer to the prayers of the saints (8:2-5).

The trumpet visions are similar in pattern to the seal visions: they are seven in number. These seven are divided into a first group of four supernatural visions (8:7-8:12): hail, fire & blood, the falling mountain, the falling star, and ice & fire. These first four visions are based in part on the plagues of Egypt recorded in *Exodus*, and their subsequent interpretations by the OT prophets, especially *Amos*. In considering how these visions should be interpreted John's primary concern is with typology (what an event teaches about the continuing work of God based on his past work), not history. In this context, it seems that John expects the new Israel, the Church, to be led on a journey to safety by God: this journey, like the *Exodus* story, will be preceded by plagues, but will end in the deliverance and salvation of God's faithful people. These are followed by three demonic trumpets (9:1-11:19). In the fifth vision, an angel brings up a plague of monstrous locusts (9:1-12). In the sixth, terrible armies are called up from the East, the land beyond the river Euphrates (9:13-12). As happened in the seal visions (7:1-17), an interlude takes place between the sixth and seventh trumpets. This interlude comprises two scenes: a vision of an angel with a small scroll (10:1-11), and the vision of the Temple and the Two Witnesses (11:1-14). This second vision would appear to be the contents of the small scroll (see on 5:1).

The first scene of the vision (11:1-3) suggests that a time of danger or persecution is coming which will affect even the Temple itself: its court will be

given over to the Gentiles.

In 11:4-6 a description is given of two witnesses, described as olive-trees or lamp stands: both figures refer to the same two witnesses. This image from *Zechariah* has been used already (1:12), and is based on the *menorah* of the Temple. The two witnesses are described in details which suggest the church is to follow the example of both Moses and Elijah whose testimony involved opposition to corrupt and crooked earthly powers.

These two witnesses give their testimony (11:7) and are destroyed by the beast. They are depicted as lying dead in the streets of Jerusalem (11:8). The dead witnesses are brought back to life again by God (11:11), and are welcomed into heaven. Their ascension is accompanied by an earthquake which kills one tenth of the city and kills seven thousand. The survivors give glory to God (11:13). This vision is described as the "second woe".

Two questions have dominated the interpretation of this passage: the identity of the witnesses, and the significance of Jerusalem.

The previous use of lamp stand imagery shows that the witnesses are, like the temple, to be identified with the church, but why only two? Caird argues that they are an image of the martyrs, not of the whole church (1984,134-5). Caird's interpretation is dominated by martyrdom, as can be seen from his treatment of Ch.7 (1984,102) which this work has already queried (see on 7:4). An alternative view is given by Bauckham who interprets the two as signifying the witness of the whole church (1993a, 274); "two" does not signify a part of the church so much as part of its work. In Jewish tradition, two witnesses were needed to show that a testimony was reliable (*Num* 35:30; *Deut* 17:6). The "two witnesses" are a way of saying that the church gives testimony and that testimony is reliable.

That the city concerned in Jerusalem is in no doubt: the references to the Temple (11:1-3) and of 11:8 make that clear. But is this the Jerusalem of history or the Jerusalem of symbol? The passage has been taken to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but the events described (a partial destruction and earthquake) do not fit with the actual destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. Robinson uses this to argue for *Rev* being written before AD 68

(1976,240-1). However such a conclusion is premature. The passage is highly symbolic, and its real meaning is found in an interpretation of such symbolism. What then is the significance of Jerusalem? Firstly, it is not connected with the historical Jerusalem and its destruction in AD70. Even if *Rev* was written in AD 68, and it was clear that it would fall to the Romans, the descriptions of the eventual destruction would not even match with expected events. If Jerusalem was expected to fall to Gentile armies, why make the earthquake the final destroyer of the city? As in 3:9, an anti-Semitic interpretation should be avoided: it could well be anachronistic (that is, a belief which does not belong to the time of *Rev*). Rather, the significance of Jerusalem as understood by the prophets should be considered. Jerusalem represented those who should be faithful to God, but had often become unfaithful to Him and rejected his ways. Jerusalem is the city which rebels against God: the unfaithful faithful. This is its significance here, and it thus becomes a criticism of the church, rather than of Judaism or the historical Jerusalem. The church should be faithful to God, but many in it have become unfaithful. It is trampled over by the nations (11:2); it is Sodom and Egypt (11:8); it is the city where the Lord was crucified (that is, the ones responsible for his death). All these signify an element of corruption which makes the church lose its true identity and become no better than the pagan nations. However, within that corrupt church or city, true witness is still given and brings persecution and even death to those who witness. The unfaithful of the church and the people of the nations may rejoice at their death, but God will ultimately vindicate them by raising them to new life, and bringing punishment on the faithless city. At his coming (signified by the earthquake - 11:13), God will finally be recognised and glorified by unfaithful members of the church and the people of the nations.

Let us return to the question of "two". It would appear that there is an element of truth in the theories of both Bauckham and Caird. Bauckham has rightly stressed the witness and its reliability. Caird is right in saying that the witness is given by part of the church, but it seems better to say that this witness is borne by the faithful members of the church, not the whole church, nor by martyrs. As such the

vision warns those who remain faithful to God that they can expect persecution not only from those outside the church, but also from some within it. However, it also gives hope: God will protect them while they bear witness, and persecution which follows from that witness will be rewarded and be the means by which God saves the pagan nations. The vision repeats the warnings made in the oracles to the church (2:9, 14, 20-22; 3:4, 9). It is not just a prophecy to the church to be faithful in times of persecution, it is also a warning to the church to keep itself faithful to God, and not to allow itself to be corrupted by the world. That the church is failing to do so can be seen from the vision and from its description as the "second woe".

Chapter 11:15-19 comprises the seventh trumpet, a vision of the heavenly court. The interruption is again paraenetic and gives encouragement and hope after a dreadful series of visions. The third woe mentioned by the "eagle" (5:13) is never explicitly mentioned, but would appear to be the end of the Temple vision.

The central question of interpretation is whether these visions repeat the material described in the seven seals, or give fresh revelations. Several factors suggest new material:

- trumpets indicate a theophany: these are of God rather than the Antichrist.
- destruction takes place, but only of a *part* of creation.

These points suggest that here we have a vision of God, coming in his wrath to punish the evil and unrighteous, and a revelation of the true consequences of humanity's rebellion from God. This is not the Last Judgment, as only a fraction are killed, but is rather a sign that God, before he comes to judge the world, and lets the full consequences of sin be seen. If these different visions are meant to give a chance for repentance, the message of 9:20-1 is grim. People's hearts are so hard that not even this amount of suffering will make them repent and give up their idolatry. The visions that follow make explicit how the sins of humanity damage their world (the first four trumpets) and endanger their own lives and chances of salvation (the last three trumpets).

Ford suggests that the trumpet visions show a series of plagues, like those directed against Egypt, now directed towards God's own people (1975,154-6). It

is difficult to sustain such an interpretation. Certainly the people of God may well be affected by some of the plagues: the first four trumpets show damage to the environment which surely would affect all. The fifth trumpet is, however, not directed against the faithful, but against those who have not been sealed (9:4). The sixth trumpet may bring the most confusion. It will kill a third of humanity, but it is not stressed whether that third includes the faithful, or is only directed against unrighteous humanity. That the faithful are not included could be inferred from 9:20 which might imply punishment is only for the unrighteous. However, as we have already seen, "sealing" (7:1-8) does not guarantee an escape from physical death, but rather is a guarantee of salvation. It may be that the "sealed" will suffer along with the unrighteous. If these trumpets show the consequences of sin we might reasonably conclude that the faithful could die a physical death, and suffer because of sin. One of the enduring problems of theology, and recurring facts of life, is that the good suffer the consequences of sin along with the evil. John does not attempt any answer to this problem other than to promise the faithful that, whatever they may suffer in this life, they will be saved and enjoy new life in Christ.

To conclude, the seal and trumpet visions anticipate the contents of the scroll (5:1; 12:1-16:19). They warn of what is coming: the Antichrist, the judgment of God and the full, terrible consequences of sin. That this last will be worse than we can imagine is shown by the demonic aspects of the visions. Even here, however, there are signs of hope: God delays the events which take place to seal the faithful (7:1) and reduces the time of suffering (10:4).

Notes

8:1 "silence" - various suggestions are given for the period of silence:

- from the pagan athletic games
- from Temple ritual. *Lk* 1:10 includes a time of prayer (silence?).
- the Talmud suggests that periods of silence in heaven allow the praises of Israel to be heard.
- Most likely is the pattern of silence before the great acts of God begin. There is silence before creation (*2 Esdras* 6:39,7:30; *2 Baruch* 3:7), before

the punishment of Egypt (*Wisdom* 18:14-16) and before the Incarnation (*Jn* 1:14- although a period of silence is not specifically mentioned in the text) (Sweet 1990,159).

8:2 "seven angels"- a reference to the seven archangels (Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Michael, Sarial, Gabriel, Remiel- *1 Enoch* 20). *Tobit* 12:15 suggests that the angels have a heavenly role in passing prayer to God.

1 QM 9:14-19 refers to four angels commanding four parts of the armies of God against the enemies of Israel. This may be why the first four visions make a separate group. Alternatively, the pattern may match the visions of the seven seals but making an important distinction: whilst the Antichrist is the first of the seals, the first four trumpet visions do not include God. This may be a subtle indication that the Antichrist is not equal in stature to God.

8:3 "altar"- this image appears to clash with 21:22 which says that there is no temple in the city of God. How can there be an altar? We need to note that John does not sustain his use of images, nor does he restrict himself to images of one kind (religious, war): John's method rather is to use a number of images to give a more complete picture of God and to show the limitations of language in talking about God (Caird 1984,61). The two images do not clash with each other, rather they reveal different aspects of the heavenly scene.

"censer" - a metal vessel in which incense is burned on hot charcoal.

"incense"- fragrant resin from trees, used in ancient worship, and as a symbol of prayer.

8:5 - the censer is flung down to earth suggesting that it is now a sign of judgment, rather than prayer. The fact that the same censer signifies both prayer and judgment implies that the judgments are the answers to prayer. The image of the earthquake is here repeated and expanded: the combination now includes elements from *Ezek* 10:2 and *Ex* 19:16,18 and summarises the four visions that follow (Bauckham 1993a,203, see Notes 6:12).

8:6 "trumpet"- *Num* 10:10ff. shows that these instruments were made for part of the work of Israel. Trumpets can be a sign of the Last Days (*Zeph* 1:16; *Zech* 9:14), but such an interpretation does not fit with the period of repentance

recorded in this passage.

8:7 "hail and fire, mixed with blood"- combines elements from the seventh (*Ex* 9:23ff) and first (*Ex* 7:17ff) plagues of Egypt. The "fire" may be a reference to the coals from the censer (8:5), but "hail and fire" (fire = lightning) were used to show how nature serves God in punishing the wicked and saving the righteous (*Wisdom* 16:15-24).

"third" - the partial destruction stresses a time for repentance rather than the Last Judgment at which everything would be destroyed. "Thirds" were used to signify the destruction of Jerusalem (*Ezek* 5:1-5). The call to repentance may thus include those inside Jerusalem, the church.

"all green grass"- "all" may be used to give some variation (Sweet 1990,163), but could also imply a destruction that covers all areas, but is not complete (see also the "partial" famine in 6:5).

8:8- "mountain"- this may refer to a meteorite or falling star, but that might clash too much with the third trumpet. "Mountain" was also a symbol of Babylon, the city which symbolised opposition to God, (*Jer* 51:24-5), and would here suggest that its sins have corrupted creation (*Rom* 8:18-22).

8:10 "wormwood"- the bitter herb called absinthe. Its meaning is more than "bitterness" as it is also used to describe "injustice" (*Amos* 5:6) and "idolatry" (*Jer* 9:15), both of which have corrupted the world. Rather than being an active agent of destruction, God is depicted as allowing sin to take its course and experience its own consequences.

"in large numbers" - This may only state the effects of injustice, rather than active destruction undertaken by God? However, even if it does, it would appear to suggest that God's plan includes the death of many people. What kind of God does such a view entail? There is a different way of seeing the problem:

The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat"

(Caird 1984,113)

In other words, perhaps the view taken of death needs to be reconsidered as well as our thinking about God and his wrath. The Christian faith has never taught that

the death at the end of this life will be escaped, but rather that is not an end in itself. To be a Christian involves a rejection of popular views of death, and to see it as a stage of transition rather than as an end or a loss.

8:12 "sun/moon/stars" - the loss of light and heavenly bodies signifies a return to chaos (Amos 8:9)

"darkness" - continues this theme. The darkness itself does not destroy, but provides the environment in which the destroyers will flourish. It provides the environment for the monsters to come.

8:13- "eagle"- an eagle is often a positive sign of God, but it is difficult to square this with the message of woe. The Hebrew equivalents mean that this might better be translated "vulture" a bird which foretells the approach of destructive armies (*Deut* 28:49; *Jer* 48:40; *Hosea* 7:1; *Hab* 1:8). Here the "vulture" announces the coming of demonic, destructive forces.

9:1 "star fallen" - the star is identified with the angel. Whilst some have identified this as the archangel Uriel , and the angel of 20:1, it is more likely that this is an evil angel. Caird rejects any angelic interpretation and suggests that the angel is the heavenly symbol, or aspect, of human sin (1984, 118; see also 1:4). Whilst the word "fallen" need not necessarily imply a moral fall, it is likely that this is here meant. *Rev* will refer again to the fallen angels of *Genesis* 6 (see chapter 12). This angel is also to be identified with the "king" and the "angel of the abyss" (9:11).

"given"- see 6:2. Here used for permission given by God for an evil power to act.

"bottomless pit"- this is part of the ancient cosmology (see Outline 4-5). It is sometimes identified with the sea (4:6, 13:1). The Hebrew *tehom* has four meanings: a) the ocean (symbol of chaos) which spread over the earth, now confined by the creative power of God, b) the place of the serpent, God's enemy, c) a place of punishment, d) the residence of fallen angels (Ford 1975,147). Any or all of these would be suitable. The description of the pit, full of smoke and darkness, is in direct contrast to the heavenly court.

9:2 "darkened"- a reference to the ninth Egyptian plague (*Ex* 10:21-9). The darkness (8:12) is now revealed as the place of demons (*Wisdom* 17).

9:3 "locusts" - the eighth plague of Egypt (*Ex* 10:12-20), but the picture here builds on *Joel's* handling of the plague. That this is no ordinary plague is indicated by the comparison to "scorpions" (9:3), and the tormenting of people rather than destruction of crops (9:4).

"scorpion"- the main point here is its sting which is very painful, but rarely kills. The purpose here is not to destroy.

9:5 "five months" - a limited period of time which shows the limited effects of evil. Ford thinks that this and other details refer to the historical events of the Jewish War (1975,149). Even if this is the case the historical meaning does not exhaust the meaning of *Rev.*

9:5 "torture"- *Gk-basanazo* can mean torture, suffering in illness or harassment. rather than think of a torture chamber (and the deliberate inflicting of pain) it is better to think of this as people experiencing the true effects of their own sinful behaviour.

9:6 - much of the description comes from *Joel* (thus "horses" in *Joel* 2:4). Ford sees the imagery as based on the weapons of Roman and Parthian soldiers (1975,151-2). She goes further and suggests that the beasts may be based on Greek mythical creatures called centaurs: half-man, half-horse (1975,152). However, centaurs are rarely depicted with wings. Another contender could be the Greek mantichora: a mythical creature with the body of a lion, face of a man, and with a sting in its tail. Neither really fits precisely with the creatures here.

9:7 "human faces"- a reminder that the sins which bring out these monsters have their roots in human sinfulness and disobedience to God.

"like gold crowns"- sin has promised rewards to people. These rewards are now revealed as false, "like gold crowns", rather than the true crowns which are the reward of the faithful.

9:8 "Hair"- Sweet sees this as a classic image of horror, but "like woman's hair" means "long hair" which could be a sign of military ability (1990,169; see also Absalom in *2 Sam* 14:25-6) or strength (Samson in *Judges* 16:13,19).

9:10 "sting"- also used in *Acts* 26:14. Used of spiritual pains in *Hosea* 13:14 and *1 Cor* 15:16.

9:11 "king"- identified with the angel of the abyss, and with the angel of 9:1. The name is given in two forms, Heb-*Abaddon* and Gk-*Apollyon*: both mean "destroyer". *Abaddon* is used in the OT of Hell, or Sheol, as a place, but here it refers to a person. *Apollyon* may be added for the benefit of listeners or readers unfamiliar with Hebrew. It is also suggested that the Greek title is used to make an attack on the Greek deity, Apollo, who was sometimes depicted with locusts as a symbol of his power. The God would thus be identified as an evil spiritual power. Others, especially those who favour the AD 96 date, say it may be an attack on emperors like Nero and Domitian who claimed to be "Apollo incarnate". Lastly, the title may be another contrast: the king of Hell is the Destroyer, whilst the King of heaven is Creator and Redeemer.

9:12 -"woe"- the fifth trumpet is described as the first woe. Only in *Rev* and *1 Cor* 9:16 is the Gk- *ouai* used as a substantive (with "the"). In the Gospels it occurs frequently without the article (*Matthew* 11:21 and parallels, for example). In the Gospel context the "woe" is connected to a punishment which is imminent for the failure of the people of a place or group to obey God. A similar meaning would fit here.

9:13- "horns of the golden altar"- the permission for the sixth plague is seen to come from heaven, that is, by permission of God. The altar was associated with rituals which reconciled God and humanity: now it is shown as the place which permits punishment. This shows how damaging sin is to the relationship between God and humanity. The suggestion that this location shows the sixth plague is an answer to prayer (perhaps of 6:9-10) is fraught with difficulties. It would make Christians seem cruel and vindictive. Furthermore, it could be seen to remove the planning of events from God and putting such decisions in the hands of the saints.

9:14 "four angels"- correspond to the four angels of 7:1- what was held back is now concentrated in one place and released into the whole world.

"Euphrates" - the longest river in Western Asia, which was Ancient Israel's northern boundary, and Rome's eastern boundary. In both Roman and OT writings there was a fear of attack from beyond the Euphrates. This fear, Jewish

or Roman, appears to be fulfilled by this sixth trumpet.

9:15- in contrast to prayers influencing events (9:13), this verse shows that every part of the unfolding series of events is already set and fixed by God.

9:16 "10,000x10,000"- signifies the huge scale of the invading army. It is not, however, as big as the host of heaven which cannot be counted (5:11; 7:9-17; *Deut* 33:2; *Ps* 68:17).

9:17 -"red...blue..yellow". Sweet suggests that these three colour match and identify the riders with the riders of the second, third and fourth seals (1990,173 ; see also 6:2-8). *Gk-hyakinthous* (blue) may not match as well with black as do the pairs of red and yellow. If this does signify the destruction to be carried out by the forces of the Antichrist, it will be noted that he destroys his own followers. This point is made explicitly in 13:10. Evil begets evil, and eventually destroys itself.

"lion...fire, sulphur, smoke"- these different elements stress that the destroying forces come from the Pit (9:1), and the destructive power of the forces and beings who dwell there.

9:19 "tails like serpents"- presumably the tails like serpents are destructive, and may have the power to kill. The joining together of destructive imagery involving scorpions, lions and serpents is based on OT imagery.

9:20- a further indication of how hardened the hearts of people have become. Despite pain and physical death they do not repent of their sinful ways. The list of errors in the verse has a common foundation: the root sin is idolatry, the worship of what is not God.

9:21- as in *Wisdom* 14:12,24-7 and *Romans* 1 these sins are seen as symptoms of the root sin, idolatry. The sins mentioned in vv.20-1 give reminders that such sins are also found within the church. The warnings of sin and judgment may not refer just to pagans, those outside the church, but be directed to some within the church. Such warnings have been hinted at in the Oracles to the Seven Churches, but they will be made more explicit in the visions to come.

10:1 - the sequence of seven trumpets is interrupted by the first of two visions: an angel comes down from heaven and gives John a scroll to eat. The interruption

marks God's delaying of the final judgment, to save humanity from destruction (cf. Ch.7).

10:1 "mighty angel" -as in 5:2, this suggests that the vision which follows is very important. This angel also "comes down", unlike the "fallen" angel of 9:1. The difference implies that this angel "coming down" is acting in agreement with the wishes of God rather than being allowed to let evil happen. The angel is variously identified as an aspect of God Himself, or as an angel, perhaps Gabriel (Ford 1975,163). Whichever is chosen, there is little difference to the final meaning, The voices from heaven (10:4,8), which the angel appears to obey, might point to the angel as an angel rather than an aspect of God.

"cloud"- a symbol of the presence of God: this is God's angel.

"rainbow"- the sign of the covenant made between God and Noah (*Gen* 9:12-17). It indicates the mercy of God. What follows will show the mercy of God rather than the wrath seen in the previous visions.

"sun"- see 1:16, where the sun is associated with Christ: the angel comes from both God and Christ.

"pillar of fire"- the *Shekinah* (*Ex* 13:21-22), the cloud by day and fire by night which accompanied Israel in the wilderness is brought to mind: the angel speaks as the representative of God.

10:2 "little scroll" - see on 5:1 for the identity of the scroll. See on 10:9 for other theories about the scroll. The contents of this little scroll will be revealed in 11:1-13.

"set right foot"- by putting his right foot on both land and sea, the angel shows that he has authority over what happens on earth. It is a reminder that true authority on earth belongs to God and his servants, not to the Antichrist or to sin.

10:3 "lion roaring"- in the OT, the image of a lion roaring can be used to show God and his work as judge (*Amos* 1:2; 3:4,8; *Hosea* 11:10; *Jer* 25:30; *Joel* 3:16). The angel will proclaim the judgment of God.

10:4 "seven thunders"- would appear to be another series like those signified by the seals and trumpets, but they are sealed. In other words, God does not allow them to take place. *Mk* 13:20 and God's mercy in shortening the troubles

suffered by the world are brought to mind. Here, too, it appears that God acts to reduce the suffering which might be expected to be endured, perhaps as a consequence of sin. The pictures of God's wrath which many modern readers find so uncomfortable must be balanced by this picture of God's mercy.

10:5 "raise right hand" - a standard gesture in the ancient world to show that the speaker is telling the truth, in making a promise or giving witness.

10:6- the angel swears an oath which will be guaranteed as true because of the one by whom he swears, God the Creator (4:9,11).

"no more delay"- the angel promises that God's mystery, the revealing and carrying out of his redeeming work, will be finished after the sounding of the seventh trumpet. In the analysis given here, the seventh trumpet is followed by the contents of the scroll opened by the Lamb (5:1) which represents the completion of God's saving work. John's readers or listeners are promised that they will soon know all of God's plan, and share in its benefits. This fulfillment has been brought forward by God in his mercy (10:4).

This promise is a reminder that interpretations which see *Rev* as happening far in the future may not be true to the spirit of the book. They are not meant to tell people that all these events are far away. We need to remember the way in which apocalyptic works. John is talking to people under pressure and persecution, who may feel that they are already suffering the coming of the Antichrist, or the consequences of sin. To them John now gives a message of hope: God is actively reducing the time of their persecution and they will soon be saved (see also Caird 1984, 128).

10:7- "prophets"- this shows that the fulfillment of God's plan will agree with the prophecies of the OT. However, John also uses the word "prophet" to talk about the martyrs of the church. The plan of God is revealed in the suffering of the church as well as in the OT prophecies.

10:8- the voice from heaven tells John to receive the little scroll from the angel.

10:9 "eat"- in a vision reminiscent of *Ezek* 2:9-10, John is given the scroll to eat. This is an example of an '*ot*' (Heb- action with a prophetic meaning), which may be connected to *Ezek* 4 (the siege of Jerusalem) or *Ezek* 16 (the city described

as a prostitute). Both will fit with the later visions of Rev and its description of the city of Jerusalem which will begin in 11:1-13. Ford's suggestion that the 'ot should be connected to the "bitter water" ritual of *Numbers* 5 is open to question (1975,164-6). According to Ford, this small scroll represents the curse pronounced by a priest in the serving of a divorce. There are several problems with such a theory. The contents of the scroll (11:1-13) do not constitute such a curse. Secondly, to whom should such a curse have been given? If it was given to the adulteress, the correct recipient would be corrupt Jerusalem, not John. Thirdly, it is difficult to see how a curse document could have been given by an angel who is dressed to show the mercy of God (10:1). An angel of mercy would be unlikely to bear a curse document signifying the irrevocable breach of God's relations with humanity.

The eating of the scroll is given a variety of interpretations, often general in nature. It can suggest that the eating of the scroll signifies the way in which the gospel is encountered, sweet at first, but bringing bitter consequences, persecution for the faithful and judgment for the wicked. However, this "sweet...bitter" pattern also fits with the contents of the scroll (11:1-13) which begins with a "sweet" picture of the two witnesses, but finishes with a bitter scene of disaster and destruction.

10:11-"again prophesy"- this is a picture which has its roots in *Daniel* (3:4; 6:25; 7:14), but has "kings" added to it. The kings may be a reference to *Jer* 1:10, or to the early church's picture of its own witness (*Mt* 10:18). John's, and the church's, work will include witness, perhaps, even to the point of death, before the rulers of this world.

11:1 "measuring rod" - The Temple is measured here for its protection and preservation rather than its restoration, as happens in *Ezekiel* 40:3 and *Zechariah* 2.

"temple" - a symbol for people, not a building (3:12; 1 Cor 3:16). The vision thus tells of the protection of God's people.

11:2 "court of the Temple"- suggests that part of the Temple will, in fact, be destroyed. There are several different interpretations given:

- the church in its inward life, and its outward life (Sweet 1990, 184)
- an inner security against spiritual danger, but open to attack (Caird 1984,132).
- the preservation of an inner group, and excommunication of the unfaithful (Ford 1975,176-7)

"exclude"- (*Gk-ekballo exothen*) implies an exclusion of people from the inner court, and points towards the third interpretation of the "court". A distinction is thus made between those who are faithful and those whose faith is inadequate. Caird objects that the "altar" group (11:2) cannot be a faithful group within the church because these are the very ones who will be persecuted. His objection fails, however, to note the significance of the "forty two months" (11:2) The "holy city" is trampled for this period which matches the period given to the witnesses for preaching. The implication is that the different events (the preservation of the "altar", the trampling of the city and the preaching of the witnesses) are related. The faithful, "altar" group are to be identified with the "two witnesses" (11:3). God preserves them from persecution until they finish giving their testimony, but they then are killed by the beast (11:7). John does, indeed, say that the faithful are persecuted, but not in the vision of the temple (11:1-3) which stresses rather the faithfulness of his people.

"nations"- i.e., non-believers, and followers of other religions and cults. The idea of being trampled suggests that those thrown out may be oppressed by the nations. Why? Surely it would be better to think of the faithful as being trampled, but they, according to the vision, would be safe in the inner court. Against that, trampling may refer rather to the idea of being made unclean or profane (which would not apply to the faithful who have been sealed by God -7:1-8), and may do no more than repeat the warnings that the Antichrist torments his own followers (9:17;13:9-10). The warning here is that contact with pagan practices causes excommunication and expulsion, which would fit with the warnings against syncretism in chapters 2 and 3.

"holy city" - that this area can be called "holy" signifies that somehow it is part of the church. This would fit with the idea of those excluded from the number of the

true faithful. It also gives a warning:- it is possible to end up outside the number of the chosen of God despite a professed membership of the church.

"forty-two months" - from *Daniel* 7:25 ("time, two times and half a time"). Forty two months = 3.5 years= 1260 days (42 months x 30 days). This is the time of power and authority given to the Antichrist when the church faces persecution. John makes it clear that it is also the time when God protects his people until they finish their testimony. It is a symbolic figure and should not be thought of as a literal period of time. All references to these lengths of time (11:3;12:6; 13:5-7) refer to the same period. The significance of the period may have an historical origin. Three and a half years was the approximate length of time for which the Temple was left unclean because of the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes in 168/7 BC to 165/4 BC.

11:3 "I will grant"- in the period in which the Antichrist exercises authority the church will be expected to give its testimony.

"wearing sackcloth"- sackcloth was a sign of confession and the need for forgiveness (*Jonah* 3:6). It may signify their role as witnesses to the divine judgment (Bauckham 1993a,278).

11:4 "olive-trees/lamp stands" - see on 1:12.

11:5 "pour down fire" - in *2 Kings* 1:10-14. Elijah was able to call down fire on those sent to arrest him. Fire can also be a sign of the Holy Spirit. It may signify true prophecy or utterance. In 13:13, the third beast mimics this gift. The flame is said to kill. If taken literally this would appear to oppose Jesus' rebuke to James and John (*Luke* 9:53-55). It may mean rather that the testimony of the witnesses brings a choice of life or death. It "kills" because it shows that our due fate is death. The fire also indicates the witnesses' immunity from attack until they finish their testimony (Bauckham 1993a,277)

"shut the sky"- a further reference to Elijah (*1 Kings* 17:1). It implies that the Church is to follow the example of Elijah's prophesying. As Elijah's prophesying brought him into direct conflict with corrupt rulers this may also be an example to the church threatened officially or unofficially by unfriendly powers and authorities.

11:6 "waters...blood"- see *Exodus* 7:14-24. The church's witness is also to be like that of Moses.

"every kind of plague" - a second reference to the traditions about Moses, repeating the church's role in prophesying fearlessly as Moses did. Given the date of *Rev*, Moses' resistance to oppressive pagan government may also be a role model for the church.

Farrer notes that it is odd to describe Christian prophecy as so destructive (1964,134). John may not imply, however, that Christian prophecy is so destructive. Rather he may imply that such prophecy provokes its opponents to actions which rebound, with catastrophic effects (*Wisdom* 16:17; 18:4; 19:1-6). Christian witness provokes angry responses which damage those who commit them.

Note that both Elijah and Moses were expected to prophesy before the coming of the Messiah. Their use as examples here suggests that the church, too, is prophesying before Christ comes again, for the final judgment.

11:7- "when...fulfilled"- in God's plan, the church is allowed to finish its witness.

"the beast"- is mentioned for the first time, and will be described further in chapters 12 and 13.

"beast ..pit" - does not mean that the beast comes up at this point. Rather this is part of its character, much as we would talk of Jesus' character if we said that he was from heaven (see Caird 1984,137). The time of the beast's war and the church's prophesying overlap: the period of three and a half years ends with the death of the witnesses.

11:8 "great city"- Jerusalem. "Sodom" is used of Jerusalem in *Isaiah* 1:10 and 3:9), "Egypt" is not used of Jerusalem in the OT, but is linked with Sodom in *Wis* 19:14 (Sweet 1990, 187).

"where...crucified"- there is literal, historical connection: Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. However, this may also be symbolic. Jerusalem is a geographical symbol for "what crucified Jesus", and so represents the place where sin, injustice and human vices conspire to corrupt and kill not only Jesus, but also his followers. For this reason, some commentators prefer to describe it as Babel

(*Gen 11*) or "the latest embodiment of something that is a current feature of human history" (Caird 1984,138; see also Sweet 1990,187). Whilst admitting that the biblical tradition and history have shaped this "Jerusalem" tradition, the meaning should not be taken as the place, Jerusalem. Rather, it is a symbol: the place where those who are supposedly faithful are shown to corrupt and sinful. The joining of the city with all the nations may point out that what has brought corruption is the following of pagan practices, or syncretism. The dangers of syncretism have already been made explicit in the Oracles to the Seven Churches. Jerusalem thus also comes to symbolise the place where God is not known and worshipped: the world as a whole rather than any particular city

11:9 "three and a half days" -echoes the three and a half period (11:2). Jesus was raised on the third day, but here the raising takes place after three and a half. As the witnesses have suffered and died like Christ in Jerusalem, so they rise there (11:10).

"peoples and tribes"- Caird uses this phrase to argue that the city is Rome (1984,138). The preference is surely irrelevant given the universal significance of Jerusalem with apostasy. The "peoples and tribes" are rather a sign of that universal significance.

"placed in a tomb"- the refusal to bury a body is a sign of the hardness of heart and lack of compassion found in the enemies of the witnesses.

11:9- the inhabitants do not hold a funeral, but a party to show their failure to hear and heed the word of God. They have seen the witnesses as a "torment" and have failed to understand the Good News to which they bore witness. Bauckham sees this as a reversal of the Jewish feast of *Purim* (1993a, 281). This feast was to celebrate the salvation of the Jews, and the punishment by death of those who unjustly plotted against them (*Esther* 9:9,12). Here, the death of the witnesses, the faithful people of God, is celebrated by their enemies. Bauckham notes a change to the *Esther* story (1993a, 281-2). Here, the victory of the people of God does not bring the destruction of the enemies of God, but their salvation (11:13).

11:10 - "breath of life" (*Ezek 37:10*). Breath was the means by which the dry

bones of Israel were raised to new life. In the ancient world, breath and spirit were related, and breath also becomes a symbol for the work of the Holy Spirit in giving life, that is, the gifts of salvation.

"fear"- the reaction is the same as to Jesus' resurrection (*Matthew* 28:4), but would also fit the dismay of those who have been rejoicing over the death of a "torment".

11:12- the witnesses are taken up to heaven. A similar ascension is described for Jesus (*Acts* 1:19), Elijah (*2 Kings* 2:11) and Moses (traditions based on *Deut* 34:5: see also Sweet 1990,188). Whilst Moses and Elijah might both have been thought to ascend into heaven, they were not considered as martyrs. They provide no pattern for the death of the witnesses. That, however, is supplied by Jesus. It is his death which provides the model for his followers (11:8).

11:12 "watched"- may emphasise that the truth of their witness is now revealed: what could be seen would be accepted as true. "Seeing" could also be a sign of reliability. In *Jn* Jesus' teaching is considered reliable because he teaches what he has seen and known (*Jn* 3:32).

11:13"earthquake" - this raises a theme which will be continued in 16:19. Both Jerusalem and Babylon imagery tend to describe the same phenomenon. The earthquake indicates not only judgment but the vindication of God's faithful people: they and their witness are proved to be true.

"tenth"- as in the plagues, destruction is limited (see chapters 6,8 and 9). Bauckham sees this as a reversal of the Old Testament and a sign of the generosity of God (1993a, 282-3). In the time of Elijah (*1 Kings* 19:14-18), 7,000 who had not worshipped Baal were spared. Here, only 7,000 are killed. The fact that a tenth are spared (*Amos* 5:3) could also reflect this reversal of the "faithful remnant" tradition.

"the rest were terrified and gave glory"- both those cast out (who will no longer count as "faithful"), and the people from all the nations are moved to give glory to God. The witness and raising of the church thus accomplishes what was not managed in the visions of the trumpets (9:20). The phrasing here stresses the conversion of pagans. Bauckham notes that "fear" and "give glory" both imply

correct worship, and "God of heaven" is a phrase which shows pagans acknowledging the God of Israel as the true God (1993a, 278-80). Thus, it may be implied that those thrown out from the church (11:2) no longer have a special status, that their rejection of true faith and practice has made them no better than the pagans.

The most important point must be made again. Nothing else has failed to bring the nations to conversion, but God, through the witness of the church, reveals that the opportunity for repentance is there, and that his purpose is to save, not to destroy (*Jn* 3:17).

11:14- the "second woe" prepares for the "third", which is not explicitly identified. The three woes, however, appear to match the different parts of the trumpet visions: the first with 9:1-12, the second 9:13-11:13. The third woe would appear to be the seventh trumpet which is to "come very soon". For "woe", see 9:12.

The sequence of woes might be expected to continue with this final trumpet vision, but, in fact, the third woe is never explicitly mentioned. Instead, the seventh trumpet reveals a triumphant scene in heaven in which God is praised for his victory over the forces that would destroy the earth (Caird 1984,142). This lack of a third woe may again be a sign of God's mercy (10:4,6-7). This is an anticipation, a foreshadowing, of God's ultimate victory and enthronement. The assumption of "full power" (11:17), judgment, rewarding the faithful and destroying the destroyers (11:18) all point to this as the finale of the history of salvation, which will ultimately be accomplished in *Rev* 20. The vision is based on *Ps* 2, which celebrates the enthronement of the Messiah, and which will be echoed in the scenes which follow (12:5; 14:1; 16:14; 17:18; 19:15,19). *Ps* 2 especially celebrates the enthronement of the Messiah after the defeat of the powers of evil. Thus, the visions of the seals and trumpets anticipate the contents of the scroll which will be revealed in 12:1- 16:21, and the consequences of those visions to be revealed in 17:1-22:17.

In short, the visions of the seals and scrolls warn of the coming of the Antichrist, the consequences of sin and the difficulty of repentance. They warn that God will allow sin to run its course, but will reduce the time of suffering for his people.

They also show the way in which God will seal and save his people, but will also expect them to witness to Him. In that witness, which follows the example of Christ, will be found the only hope of repentance for the people of the world.

Notes

11:15 "kingdoms/sovereignty of the world"- not only earthly kingdoms, but also the rule of evil powers and Satan himself have passed away. Their time is over: God alone now rules.

"and to his Christ"- as in chapters 4 and 5, God shares his rule with Christ, symbolising the divinity of Christ.

11:16 "24 elders" -see 4:4.

"Bow down/worship" - see 4:10.

11:17- the hymn is a commentary on the events which have taken place (see chapter 4 Outline). It also foreshadows the events of *Rev* 20 and the hymns of 19:1-3, 6-8. God takes his power, and this is followed by a period of resistance by the powers of the world before God finally triumphs. The hymn shows judgment of people of all kinds: the prophets, those who fear God's name and the destroyers (11:18).

"Lord God Almighty" - a title used frequently in *Rev*. See 1:8.

"have taken power and entered" - this rule of God dates from the birth of Jesus (12:1ff. also Matthew 2:2ff and Luke 1:32ff. & 2:11ff.)

11:18 "nations raged" - this would refer to subsequent persecutions of the church, which threatened John and his readers/listeners.

"dead...judged" - an anticipation of 20:11ff..

"rewarding thy servants"- "the prophets" are those who are faithful in their witness to Christ (20:4-6).

"people who fear your name" - those converted by the witness of the church (11:13).

"small and great" - an idiom meaning "of all kinds". God's followers are not restricted to any group, but come from all kinds of people (cf. *Gal* 3:28).

"destroying the destroyers"- the "destroyers" will be clearly identified in the verses which follow (*Rev* 13), but their identity has already been anticipated

(6:1-8; 9:1,11; 11:7). The destroyers are the forces of evil, both earthly and heavenly.

11:19 "temple in heaven opened"- the final conclusion is the opening of the temple in heaven. This verse may mark a transition from 7:15. We have already noted that John is not consistent in his imagery and that it may be wrong to look for a "systematic" imagery. Here the temple is shown as open. The Temple was usually a closed place, in which only the High Priest entered the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, once a year (*Lev* 23:26-32; *Num* 29:7-11; *Heb* 9:6-10). Here, the heavenly Temple is shown to be open, signifying the closer presence of God with his people. That closeness will be stressed further in 21:22, which says that there is no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem. It is as though that closeness is anticipated here, by saying that the temple is open, but that the full vision or implications, that there is no need for a temple because God is fully revealed to his people, have yet to be grasped.

"ark of his covenant"- the symbol of God's presence (*Lev* 16:2ff.; *Heb* 9:1ff; 10:20). and of atonement, that God and his people have been reconciled.

"trumpets" - in *Joshua* 6:1-20 trumpets accompanied the ark when the Israelites used it to conquer Jericho. They thus fit with God's "destroying the destroyers" (11:18).

"lightning" a sign of God, often signifying judgment or God as the lawgiver (*Ex* 19:16ff.)

"hail" - a fall of small ice-balls like rain. This addition to the description appears for the first time. Each addition signifies that the judgment of God is coming ever closer (Bauckham 1993a, 8). Bauckham further suggests that the inclusion of hail is making more explicit the Sinai imagery (1993a:204; see also *Ex* 19:16ff). The full meaning of the hail will finally be seen in 16:18-21. Again we see that the revelation of the Last Things is becoming more detailed, but is not yet complete.

CHAPTER 4
READING THE SCROLL 1:
THE WOMAN & THE DRAGON (*REV* 12:1-14:20)

The scene is now set for the opening of the scroll: the seventh trumpet is the end also of the seventh seal which held the scroll shut. No further introduction needs to be given because Ch.s 4-11 are the introduction to the scroll. No intermediary, angel or voice, is present, pointing to a source such as the scroll. The scroll contains two visions, The Woman and The Dragon (12:1- 14:20) and The Seven Plagues (15:1- 16:21).

The vision of 12:1-14:20 can be broken into three segments: The Woman and The Dragon (12:1-17), The Dragon and The Beasts (12:18-13:18) and The Lamb and The Harvest (14:1-20).

a) The Woman & The Dragon (12:1-17)

Outline

The scene of the Woman and the Dragon is comprised of three sections: 12:1-6, 7-12 and 13-17. The central segment (12:7-12) describes a heavenly war, and seems to interrupt a narrative in which the dragon attempts to persecute the woman and her children (12:1-6,13-17). This has led some to conjecture that the order should be re-written so that 12:1-6 and 12:13-17 form a complete unit together. Interruptions to narrative are a part of John's plan. In chapters 7, 10 and 11 there are interruptions to the sequences of the seven seals and trumpets. These interruptions have a common purpose: they provide encouragement. This can also be seen in the interruption of 12:7-13. The vision of the Woman and the Dragon (12:1-6,13-17) describes a persecution, in which the dragon fails to devour the child of the woman, but the interruption (12:7-12) gives hope that other persecutions will also fail. Furthermore, it gives a reason why the persecution is taking place on earth. The reasons for the persecution will also show why victory over the persecutor is guaranteed. To see this fully, the heavenly war must be explained.

Many readers think that 12:7-13 refer to a prehistoric or primeval war in heaven because of *Gen* 6. It may be noted that the idea of a primeval war between god, or gods, and the forces of evil, represented by a serpent or dragon, were commonplace in the ancient world. Most Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures had such a story in their mythology. In ancient Greece, the god Apollo, who represents order and goodness, is said to have conquered the Pythian serpent (chaos and disorder). The shrine to Apollo at Delphi was said to stand on the place of his victory, and his priestess, the Delphic oracle, was said to prophesy sitting over the chasm into which Apollo cast the giant snake. Traces of such beliefs can be seen in the Old Testament references to Leviathan (*Job* 41:1). In *Rev* there is an important difference: neither God nor Christ is shown fighting the dragon, rather it is their agents, the woman and Michael, who fight. This may be a further example of the way in which John shows the superiority of God and Christ to other "gods" (see Note 1:8): Christ himself is not shown fighting, but it is his victory, the victory of the Lamb, which has given both Michael and woman the means to resist and overcome Satan.

The idea of a pre-historic war is a later interpretation. In English-speaking Christianity it gained popularity because of the 17th century writer John Milton. His poem, *Paradise Lost*, helped to make the pre-historic heavenly war a commonly-held idea. Similar ideas are found in writings contemporary with *Rev*, such as *2 Enoch* 29:4-5 and *The Life Of Adam & Eve* 16:1. However, they were not used by John. Rather, his heavenly war serves as a reminder that Christ has already conquered the Devil. It will be remembered that everything has its heavenly and earthly pole (Notes 1:4). The victory of Christ in the heavenly pole is a guarantee of his victory in the earthly pole. The interruption encourages the reader. No matter how terrible the persecution of the woman on earth may seem, she will be saved. The heavenly victory is a proof of her salvation.

But who is this woman? It looks as if she could be the Blessed Virgin Mary. Indeed, many descriptions of Mary in apparitions have details similar to the description of the woman of *Rev* 13. However, it is very unlikely that John made

such an identification. If he is making an identification with Mary it is symbolic, not literal. Firstly, the details of the birth do not match the details of Jesus' birth given in the Gospels. Secondly, those who are most likely to favour an identification with Mary are often those who hold beliefs that Mary remained "ever virgin". John describes the dragon going to make war on the woman's "other children" (12:17). If Mary is identified as the woman, belief in her as "ever virgin" will seem to be contradicted: how could she be so and have "other children"? Thirdly, the tendency in the Johannine writings is to use Mary as a symbol for the church, or community of the faithful. *Jn* 19:27 can be interpreted as a symbolic scene in which the community of the faithful is entrusted to the care of the disciple whom Jesus loved. Many of the details given have symbolic interpretations: a woman can be used to describe a group, and descriptions of crying out and childbirth can refer to crying to God, and waiting for the coming of the Messiah (see notes 12:1-2). The woman thus represents the community of the faithful waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the same group represented by the "inner court" (11:1) and the two witnesses (11:3).

It is worth comparing the two images. Both the visions of the Temple and Witnesses, and of the Woman, describe the fate of the community of the faithful under persecution. In the Temple & Witness visions (Ch. 11) the community survives a period of persecution, which is also a period of witness, before its slaughter (11:8) and subsequent resurrection (11:12). In the vision of the Woman, the community of the faithful is nourished by God. As a community the group survives, but danger lurks for individual members of the group (12:17). It cannot be denied that the visions are different and appear to clash with each other. However, we must remember that John does not use his visions systematically, and that, to an extent, the visions share a message that persecution will not see the complete destruction of the community of the faithful. The vision of the Temple & Witnesses stresses the faithfulness of the community, its persecution and its survival. The vision of the Woman again stresses persecution and survival, but warns of a threat to individual members of the group. If the vision of the Temple might lead to overconfidence, the vision of the

Woman reminds individuals that they are still in danger, despite belonging to the community which God will save.

The scene of conflict between the woman and the dragon uses the story of *Genesis* 3 to describe the community. The community of the faithful is described as being like Eve. The woman is not Eve, but she, like Mary, is used as a symbol or type of the group. In *Genesis* the woman (Eve) falls victim to the temptation offered by Satan, and is doomed to death. In *Rev* 12 the woman resists the dragon (Satan 12:9), and suffers, but is saved by God.

What about Michael? Why is he described as fighting in heaven? It is certainly not John's intention to make him into a second Christ. Elsewhere he ensures that there should be no confusion of Christ and the angels (19:10). Michael is Christ's agent in heaven, just as the woman is his earthly agent. Both OT writings (*Daniel* 10:13,21 and 12:1) and writings from Qumran (*1 QM*) depict Michael as God's heavenly warrior. Michael is the one who is enabled by Christ to fulfill the struggle against Satan.

It is, in fact, helpful to move away from the description of these events as a war, and to think of them as a struggle, or even as a court case. Such a scene would fit with Satan as the prosecutor, building on his traditional naming, "the Adversary" (*Job* 1 and 2). Michael becomes the advocate for the defence, arguing his case and winning (see Note 12:8). Satan's case has been thrown out of the heavenly court because of Christ, and Michael presents that case. Satan's only option is to make trouble on earth.

The confrontation which results is described using scenes and imagery from the *Exodus* story. The desert may be a place of suffering and temptation, but it also becomes a place where God nurtures his people and saves them (*Ex* 16 and 17; *1 Kings* 17:1-7; *Mk* 1:12 and parallels; *Mk* 6:30-44 and parallels). In this re-telling, Satan takes the role of Pharaoh, who threatened the Israelites with drowning (*Ex* 1:22, of male children, and 14, by driving them into the Red Sea). The dragon, frustrated in his attempts to destroy the community as a group, turns his attention to the individual members of the community, the "other children" (12:17).

The scenes describing the Woman and the Dragon thus tell the story of the

church and its suffering as it waits for the coming of the Messiah. It can also remain confident of its salvation because of the victory already seen: the child-Messiah is exalted to heaven, and the dragon is defeated in heaven. However, John repeats a warning: the danger of temptation remains real, even to members of the faithful community. To remain faithful may look difficult, but it is the only way to be saved.

Notes

12:1 "woman" - a symbolic figure for the community of the faithful. Several OT texts use a woman as a symbol of a community (*Is* 54:1,5,6; *Jer* 3:20; *Ezek* 16:8-14; *Hosea* 2:19-20). Further instances show a mother as symbol of a community (*Is* 49:21, 50:1, 66:7-11; *Hos* 4:3; *Bar* 4:8-23). A community can also be described as "giving birth" (*Micah* 4:9-10).

"clothed with the sun"- See *Ps* 104:2. The sun describes an object or person who belongs to God.

"crown" - see Note 3:10. The woman wears a crown of victory, implying that she has already overcome the troubles which will be described.

"twelve stones"- different interpretations are offered. The suggestion that they refer to the signs of the zodiac can be queried. Why would John, normally so opposed to syncretism, use pagan terms to describe those who have not mixed their faith with pagan ideas and practices? Better, it would seem, is to follow a tradition which was based on the zodiac, but had converted the symbol into Jewish terms. The twelve signs came to represent the 12 tribes of Judah. Other Jewish symbolism described Jacob and Rachel as the sun and the moon. Taken together these different symbols were used to suggest priesthood. The woman thus becomes a symbol of a faithful, priestly community.

12:2- this verse appears to describe a literal childbirth, but the vocabulary also is symbolic. Gk- *krazo* (cry) may mean to cry out to God in prayer, Gk- *basanizomene* (be tormented) and Gk-*odino* (suffer in labour) both can be used of suffering while waiting for the Messiah (Ford 1975, 198).

12:3 "dragon" - used of a mythological creature, either a giant lizard or snake. In the OT, it often represents a mythical sea monster who is the enemy of God (*Is*

27:1, 31:9; *Job* 7:12).

"red"- a colour symbolising death and murder (6:4, 17:3). The colour describes the activity of the dragon. The choice of colour may reflect Babylonian or Egyptian myths in which a red monster is the bringer of evil and chaos. The colour may identify the dragon with the beast of 17:3, but the Gk Manuscripts do not agree on the text of 17:3. Some use Gk-*purros*, (fiery red) others Gk-*kokkinos* (scarlet).

"seven heads"- the beast of 13:1 will copy this feature, to show its maker and master. Seven is usually a number which refers to God, but such a meaning is not possible here. Seven is a sign that the dragon is mimicking God and claiming his place and titles.

"ten horns"- again will be used in 13:1. This feature recalls the beast of *Daniel* 7:7.

"seven diadems"- Gk-*diademata* means a royal crown (compare 3:10 and 12:2). The dragon is claiming to be a king, a title which really belongs to God.

12:4 "third"- may show the size and power of the beast. It may also reflect 8:7, in which "third" showed how the destructive power of evil is limited by God.

"devour child" - a reference to Pharaoh in *Ex* 1. The dragon first attempts to devour the child of the woman, that is, to destroy the Messiah. It is unlikely that this refers to the birth of Jesus because (1) Jesus' escape from Herod was not accompanied by an Ascension and (2) Satan only comes into the Gospel stories at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (*Mk* 1:12 and parallels). Caird (1984,149-151) and Sweet (1990,197) both argue that Jesus' Crucifixion is implied here. However, the text makes no mention to the death of the Messiah. On the other hand, the passage does mention the ascension or exaltation of Jesus. In some NT writings (*Hebrews*, for example) this exaltation motif takes the place of Cross and Resurrection, but both are implicit. Thus the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection may so be implied here.

Even if this may read too much into the passage, its significance is clear: the designs of dragon are frustrated, and victory belongs to God.

"rod of iron"- *Ps* 2:7-9. A sign of the rule of the Messiah. See Note 2:27.

12:6 "desert" - a place of temptation danger and suffering, but also the place where Jesus first defeated the Devil (*Mk* 1:12 and par.), and where God nourished the people of Israel (*Ex* 16 and 17) and prophets (*1 Kings* 17:1-7).

"1260 days"- The period in which the woman is harassed by the dragon matches the time of witness in 11:3 (see Note)

12:7- "war" need not refer to a primeval struggle (*Gen* 6), or a heavenly war after the Resurrection of Jesus (following 12:5). It is a description of events in the "heavenly" pole of creation (see Note, 1:4). For further significance of the dragon in heaven see Note 14:7.

12:8-The victory in heaven gives hope for a victory on earth. Compare the Lord's Prayer "on earth as in heaven" (*Mt* 6:10) in which the prayer is made that earth will come to be like heaven- a place where God's will is always done.

12:9- the dragon is now specifically identified with Satan, the serpent of *Gen* 3:1. The woman too resembles Eve, but here she will resist the serpent rather than be deceived and fall victim to his temptation.

"deceiver"- the serpent is described in terms of his actions: he deceives. The deception is two-fold: (1) a reference to the original deception of *Gen*, and (2) his current deception (12:3).

"on earth" - conflict will still take place on earth, even if there has been a definitive victory in heaven.

12:10-11- the hymn gives a commentary on the events described (see Outline Ch.5). The casting down of Satan to earth indicates his eventual, complete defeat. Victory over Satan has already been accomplished by the Lamb (5:6). The hymn stresses two points already made: that Christ brings victory (5:6ff) and the importance of the testimony of the faithful (11).

12:12- the victory in heaven is accompanied by rejoicing, but there is no such joy, rather "woe" on earth, where victory has not yet been won. However there is only a short time until such a victory is won: the fight will be short, but bitter.

"earth and sea" - see Note 5:13.

12:13- the dragon, unable to destroy the child, turns his attention to the woman, that is, to the community of the faithful.

12:14- "eagle's wings" (*Ex* 19:4; *Deut* 32:11) - an echo of how God took the people of Israel into the desert, and saved them there.

"time, times and half a time"- see Note 12:6 and 11:3. The time of nourishment is also a time of danger.

12:15- the dragon's attempt to kill the woman using the water of a river may echo the attempt of Pharaoh to kill the children of Israel (*Ex* 1:22).

12:16- Creation helps God to punish the wicked (Note 8:7). Here creation acts to help and save the righteous.

12:17 -"angry"- but it is the anger of one who is powerless to do what he wishes.

"other children" - frustrated in his plan to destroy the woman, the dragon turns his attention to her other children. It may look at first as though these might be the same as the "court" (11:2), that is, those who are the "unfaithful faithful". The description of them as "keeping the commandments of God and holding the testimony of Jesus", both marks of the faithful, makes this unlikely. However, John may be making a distinction between the group (the faithful community) and individual members of the community. This can be seen in OT writings which distinguish Jerusalem or Israel from individual Israelites (Ford 1975,205). If so, John has brought in an important qualification: the community may be safe, but individuals are still at risk. The dragon has failed to destroy the community- now he will attempt to destroy its members, one by one. No-one can be complacent because he/she belongs to the faithful community; danger is still at hand.

b)False God(s): The Dragon & The Beasts (13:1-18)

Outline

The dragon now stands by the sea and watches as a first beast comes from the sea (13:1). This will be followed by a second beast from the land (13:11). Both of these beasts are described coming from the earth level of the cosmos. As such they represent earthly powers rather than heavenly or supernatural powers. The key to their identity is found in their descriptions. The first beast is similar to the dragon. It too has seven heads and ten horns; it wears crowns on its heads. Like the dragon, this beast is trying to take the place of God. The beast is also

described using imagery from *Dan 7*: its features are drawn from the first three beasts which represented the pagan kingdoms. The fourth beast in *Dan 7* represented Antiochus IV Epiphanes who desecrated the Temple in 169 BC (*Mk 13:14*). John, however, is not referring to that event, rather he is using the imagery to describe the current situation of the community of the faithful. The new feature of this beast is its mortal wound (13:3). This feature is an imitation of the Lamb (5:6), which still bears the marks of the death of Christ. The beast is trying to take the place of Christ. The features shared by the dragon and the beast are also an imitation of the way in which God and Christ share titles (see Notes 1:8,17). The beast will be identified (13:18) by the number 666.

The second beast, from the land, also mimics features already seen. It has two horns to symbolise its copying of the church. The two witnesses (11:4ff) describe the work of the church in bearing witness to Christ. The second beast also brings people to worship the first beast just as the two witnesses brought the nations to the worship of God. Like the two witnesses (11:5), it brings down fire from heaven, and performs signs and wonders. This false ministry is described using details from pagan worship (13:15).

In 13:18, the first beast is identified by a number which, far from being a mystery, reveals to *Rev's* recipients the identity of all three, the dragon and the two beasts. They are rivals setting themselves up in the place of God. That they should mimic God, Christ and church is not an idea that is confined to *Rev*. A similar idea is apparent when the Antichrist is described in the gospels as looking plausibly like Christ, and when false prophets are described as wolves in sheep's clothing (*Mark 13:22*; *Matthew 7:15*). An Antichrist that looks like a beast will deceive few. Many more will be fooled by one who disguises himself, seems to be the Christ, and so leads the people of God astray. In the first century the idea that the Roman state and emperor were taking the place of God might easily be seen in the demands for worship made by state and emperor. The beasts variously describe the emperor Nero and those who maintain and service his rule and devotions to him. This historical scenario does not exhaust the meaning of the text and, as we have seen, interpreters have found all manner of new empires

and emperors to identify as the beasts. The factor common to the interpretations is that the beasts are seen as being outside the church. Sweet adds a twist to this and gives a reminder that the search for the beast should perhaps also begin inside the church (1990, 208-9). Considering the beliefs of the Nikolaitans (2:6), he points out the danger that the Church may align itself with the beast when it makes an unholy alliance against some other outside source (as happened in the German church's support of Nazism as a defence against communism) or holds that the state must be obeyed as an institution appointed by God (*Romans* 13:1-7 is often a key text in such theories).

Do John and Paul disagree about the state and the source of its authority? If Paul is arguing in *Rom* 13 that all governments are appointed by God, such a conclusion is hard to avoid. Two arguments suggest, however, that there is no contradiction. First, *Rev* already has shown us that God may permit something without approving of it. This interpretation may also be given to *Romans*. However, Paul did not develop such a line of thinking. A second possibility is that Paul's description of the state in *Rom* 13 applies to a particular government and circumstances. It is not a general description of every government. Such an interpretation is possible (King 1997), and would mean only that Paul approved of the government in power at the time he wrote *Romans*, whilst John was critical of the government in power at the time when *Rev* was written. The passages would not contradict each other. They would show the writers' opinions of different governments.

If Sweet's hunch is right, this passage becomes a reminder to look at the state as it really is, rather than what it appears to be. Christians should see the wolf in the sheep's clothing, so as to speak.

In summary, *Rev* 13 may be based on an historical scenario, the period at the end of Nero's reign, but it also has a wider meaning- that the state is a rival to the church, not an ally, and that such rivalry begins within the church. There is a temptation for both ideologies and institutions as well as individuals to become satanic in their domination of what truly belongs to God. Christians are not exempt from being deceived. Good and bad theories and ideologies alike can

grow out of hand and end up claiming the allegiance of the people of God. *Rev* describes this using the picture of the dragon and the beasts. That which claims to be God really comes from Satan (the dragon). The object of the cult (beast from sea) and its adherents (beast from land) will persecute those who remain faithful to God. Those who lapse from faithfulness cannot be distinguished from the other followers of the beast. Their worship of the beast will not bring them safety and security, rather it will be the means of their own destruction. The church cannot see itself as separate from the beast and its followers, for the beast has its followers within the church, those who would encourage compromise and syncretism. The advice of *Mt* 7:1-3, that any quest for enemies must begin within rather than outside, was never more pertinent.

Notes

13:1 "sea" . See Note 4:6, 14:7.

"ten horns/seven heads"- see Note 12:3. The "horns" are further explained in 17:12.

"blasphemous name"- never given explicitly. This may refer to the divine titles adopted by the emperors in the imperial cults (Sweet 1990, 209).

13:2- The different animal parts are a composite figure based on the three beasts in *Dan* 7:2-5.

"gives authority". If this phrase is interpreted as referring exclusively to Rome, it suggests that the power of Rome comes from Satan, not from God. This would be the opposite of passages such as *Rom* 13:1-7. If the dragon is thought of as copying God, here it mimics the way in which God gave power to his Son.

13:3- "mortal wound". Several interpretations of the wound have been advanced. Our dating of *Rev* to 68 AD rules out the suggestion that this refers to Vespasian's banishment by Nero and subsequent triumphant return and conquering of Rome. The mortal wound is often taken as referring to Nero's suicide. The ancient historian, Suetonius, reports that Nero stabbed himself in the throat. While the wound being healed may refer to the myth of *Nero redivivus*, it is difficult to see how this event would have provided a threat to the dragon (13:2). The best explanation is that the wound mimics the wounds of Christ (5:6).

Such explanations would show well how the wound could threaten the dragon, be healed, and be a basis for worship.

"whole earth" - includes both pagans and those who have lapsed from faithfulness. See note 11:2.

"who is like?" a parody of *Ex* 15:11. Similar questions are found in *Job* 41:33-4. The best parallel is *Ps* 35:10, which would imply a clear comparison being made between God and the beast.

13:4 "who can fight?" suggests that resistance to the beast is futile. Weak believers might use such ideas to suggest compromise.

13:5 "given"- the authority given does not come from the beast, but refers to the permission that God gives for evil to take place (see Outline, The Seven Seals).

"authority" - See 11:9.- stresses the power that the dragon has over all the earth. Rome was often described as a universal power, but it never really did exist without enemies, like the Parthians, on its borders.

"42 months"- see Note 11:2. The description here is similar to that of the Two Witnesses (11:4ff). A period of 42 months leads to the destruction of the faithful witnesses (13:7).

13:7 "saints"- as in Paul, "saints" refers to the faithful on earth (11:1). This verse also gives encouragement. The "saints" may be destroyed, but no harm can come to the host of heaven. By promise, the destruction of the faithful is of no consequence compared to their heavenly reward.

13:8 "earth-dweller" - See Note 11:2 and 13:3.

"book of life" - see Note 3:5.

"slaughtered" -the reference to the lamb gives a reminder of the way in which the beast mimics Christ.

13:9 - "let...listen"- similar to the words in the Seven Oracles. The verse that follows is directed to the churches. 13:10 - The passage appears to quote *Jer* 15:2 and 43:11 which read "whoever is to be killed with the sword must be killed by the sword". Here the quotation reads "whoever kills with the sword must be killed by the sword". The change appears to be influenced by *Mt* 26:52. The meaning is changed from the *Jer* texts. Instead of being a threat to the world, the

verses now encourage Christians to accept the fate that is before them, and accept the persecutions to come. This is not just fatalism, it is built on the belief that such witness will in fact destroy evil. Resistance with force will only beget more evil. The ones who use force (i.e., the evil, the world, the lapsed) are doomed, because what they do will bring their own destruction.

13:11- "from the earth"- the second beast is based on Behemoth (*Job* 40:15-18). Behemoth seems to be an exaggerated description of the hippopotamus, an animal which was known to the ancient Mediterranean world. See Note 14:7.

"two horns"- an imitation of the two witnesses. The second beast is a symbol of those who control the imperial cult.

13:12"makes..worship"- its work is similar to the work of the witnesses who bring people to worship God (11:13). The work of this beast is also similar to the work of the Spirit in later orthodox Christianity. However, here it seems John is using the beast as a symbol of the community of the faithful rather than the Spirit.

"earth and its inhabitants"- echoes Pentecost (*Acts* 2:5).

13:13 "fire" - mimics the Two Witnesses (11:5). Fire was also a sign of Pentecost (*Acts* 2:3), or of a faithful prophet (1 Kings 18:38).

13:14 "image"- the worship of the beast ends in idolatry, the worship of an image. This was expressly condemned by God (*Ex* 20:4;32:8ff). Such idolatry was also condemned in *Dan* 3 and 11:31. Worship of the beast cannot be accepted: it contradicts the worship of God.

"wounded by sword"-may refer either to the death of Nero, or to the "sword" as the judgment of God.

13:15- "speak" - illusions such as speaking statues (ventriloquism) were part of pagan cults. John uses the deceits of pagan practice as further ways to show the falsehood of the beast and its worship.

"to be killed"- systematic persecution had not yet begun. John appears to anticipate what was about to happen. See Note 1:9.

13:16 "marked"- a parody of the way in which God seals the faithful (7:3). Whilst *Gk-sphragis* is used for the sealing of the faithful, a different word, *Gk- charagma*, is used for the sealing done by the beast. This could mark a different method of

sealing, such as branding, or the kind of seal. *Charagma* was used of graven images, perhaps implying that those sealed are not "of God", but "belonging to an image". Ford suggests that this is an imitation of the devout Jewish practice of wearing phylacteries on the forehead and left hand (1975, 225: see also *Deut* 6:8).

13:17- A puzzling verse as no such ban is ever recorded. It may refer to the Jewish practice of not doing business with those who were excommunicated. This would imply that Christians can expect to be marginalised and isolated because they do not take part in the worship of the beast. Ancient Christians who did not take part in the imperial cults might well have been noticed and marginalised because they were seen as disloyal both to cult and state.

13:8-"wisdom" - the use of the cipher 666 seems well-known in contemporary apocalyptic and should not be thought of as a "secret knowledge". The "wisdom" probably refers to *Gk-geomatria*, the science of numbers and number codes which not only identified, but gave information about its subject.

"human number"- two meanings are possible: (a) "a number known to humans", or (b) "the name(number) of a person". The number refers to the beast from the sea: the beast of the land only encourages the worship of the first beast.

"six hundred and sixty six". Few phrases in the Bible have been used to commit so much slander as this number and its identification. It must be clearly said that this number has often been interpreted with the hope of winning a political battle more than hearing the word of God. Some of these interpretations are openly biased, others are hidden behind a veneer of scholarship. They include such candidates as the Pope, Luther, Mohammed, Napoleon and Hitler (Ford 1975, 215-7).

One example of such false scholarship is the attempt by Barnham to identify this figure with the Pope. Such an attempt is not novel: similar attempts have been made since the medieval period. However, this attempt, popularised in copies of his writing, wrongly, it seems, pits Christian against Christian. Barnham attempts, by an ingenious number game, to show that 666 is a cipher for the Pope. Firstly, he takes one of the papal titles, *Vicarius Filii Dei*, and argues that this makes the

link. He pays not attention to the anachronism involved in using this title from a much later period and applying it to this text.

His first argument is to assume that the title means "instead of the son of God", suggesting that the Pope is a rival to Jesus. This is not, however, the meaning of the phrase which is properly translated "standing in for the Son of God", much as an ambassador represents his government rather than sets himself up as a rival government.

Secondly he takes every letter which was also used as a number in the Roman numeral system and adds them up. Letters which were also used as numbers in Roman counting were I (1), V (5), X (10), L (50), C (100), D (500), M (1000). It must also be remembered that "V" in Latin stood for both "U" and "V", so both will be counted as "V". In order, going through *Vicarius Filii Dei*, this gives Barnham:

V+I+C+I+V(U)+I+L+I+I+D+I

or, in arabic numerals,

5+1+100+1+5+1+50+1+1+500+1=666.

However, Barnham has added up the numbers to suit his theory. It is also possible to take the "iu" of *vicarius* together, in their order as the Roman numeral IV (4) rather than I + V (1+5). If this was done, the total would be:-

V+I+C+IV+I+L+I+I+D+I

or,

5+1+100+4+1+50+1+1+500+1= 664.

At best, Barnham has chosen one of two possible answers, the one that suits his own prejudices. Furthermore, plausible though this may seem, it was not the way that number codes worked in the ancient world. In their numerological systems every letter had a number value, not just those that happened to be used as numbers. Thus the method is wrong. Furthermore, Barnham has to explain why John, writing in Greek, uses a number code which is based in Latin, a language of which he apparently has no knowledge.

The most serious objection to Barnham, however, is the fact that this kind of interpretation completely misreads 666 and treats the number as a puzzle to be decoded. For the first readers of *Rev* the exact opposite was the case: 666 was

not a number to be decoded, it was the key which revealed completely the identity of the beasts. Far from being a mystery, 666 was a commonly known way of talking about someone. The problem of using 666 is ours, that "someone" is not readily known to us. However, an identification is possible if close attention is paid to text and context.

The beast identified as 666 is the first beast, the beast from the sea. The second beast has a subsidiary role: it points to the first, and encourages its worship. The first beast, it will be remembered, is similar to the dragon, but is distinguished by a mortal wound (13:3,12,14). It seems to be imitating Christ.

The first point that must be made is a text-critical point. Some of our Greek manuscripts do not read 666, but 616. However, 666 is the more likely original version. 616 is an attempt to give a numerical reading of the name Nero Caesar, written in Latin and transliterated into Hebrew. If the Greek spelling of Nero (Gk- *Neron Kaisar*) is put into Hebrew and then calculated using contemporary number codes the total of the name is 666. It would appear that interpretation of the number was clearly meant to point to Nero, to the extent that the text could be changed to make such an identification clear to Latin readers.

If we can accept this identification, the wider implications can now be addressed. Firstly, why should Nero be addressed as 666? The identification begins with the first persecution of the church in Rome which was seen as taking place with Nero's blessing. However the number loads all manner of significance onto Nero: he becomes more than just a persecutor.

The number 6 stands for incompleteness, which is stressed by its being repeated three times. The repetition also suggests, because three is the number of God, that the beast puts itself in the place of God. That the beast also attempts to put itself in the place of Jesus is also suggested. An ancient cipher identifies Jesus as 888 (*Sibylline Oracles* 1.324). 666 is an imitation, based on Friday (the day of evil's triumph in the Crucifixion) and Sunday (the Lord's Day, day of resurrection) being represented by 6 and 8 respectively: the sixth and eighth days. Thus the number points to Nero as the beast with the number 666 as not just a persecutor, but usurper of Christ's rightful place.

c) The Lamb & The Harvest (14:1-14:20)

Outline

The narrative takes a familiar turn. John follows the description of the beasts with a scene intended to give confidence to the faithful. The scene shifts to heaven, and a description of the faithful 144,000 together with the Lamb. The scene uses the same imagery as was used in Ch.7. It now becomes obvious that the 144,000 (7:1ff) are to be identified with the numberless multitude (7:9ff). There seems to be a major difference between this description of the faithful and those of Ch.7. Here, the specific characteristic of the 144,000 is that they are virgins (14:4), who have not defiled themselves with women. Has John's criterion of faithfulness moved from idolatry to sexual immorality? In Ch.2:18-29, the oracle to the church at Thyatira, the unfaithfulness of some members of the congregation was described in terms of fornication and unfaithfulness. It is so with this vision: it uses sexual imagery to describe faithfulness, rather than chastity. The contrasts of 14:4 support this interpretation. The 144,000 follow the Lamb. The implication is that their "virginity" or purity is connected to their discipleship: they follow the Lamb. They do not follow the path of unfaithfulness, of "defiling themselves with women", of Jezebel (2:20ff). The 144,000 are still being described by their faithfulness and loyalty to Christ.

The descriptions of the Lamb and of the faithful repeatedly echo claims made or actions performed by satanic creatures. John has already used similar techniques in 1:18. In all cases, the echoes reveal the superiority of God, either in power or goodness.

In 14:6-13, the narrative moves forward. Three angels each proclaim a message: the first, that the judgment of God is now come, the second, that Babylon has fallen, the third, that those who have followed the beast (14:11) will be punished, but the faithful rewarded. If these themes were anticipated in the visions of the seals and trumpets, this section describes the imminence of God's judgment. The movement of the angels, and the short messages that they proclaim give an impression of speed. This little bridge section encourages the faithful that the judgment of God, and, with it, the downfall of his enemies, is very close.

The first angel names the enemies as "Babylon". This name comes from the traditional OT enemy of Israel, which was identified with sinfulness and hostility to God. Its historical identity led to its use as a symbol of being opposed to God. On occasions this symbolic "Babylon" could be identified with Jerusalem itself (see 11:8). It is also argued that Babylon may be identified more with Rome in *Rev.* The interpretation of "Babylon" will be explored further in Ch.17 where the city is described as a woman riding on a beast. At this point in the narrative it is enough to know that Babylon, the earthly symbol of enmity to God, is overthrown as a part of God's judgment.

The images of judgment and punishment may be disturbing to some modern sensitivities. The descriptions of God's anger, of fire and sulphur (14:10) may be as disturbing as the picture of the faithful calling for vengeance (6:10). However, no matter what language is used, the concept of hell and punishment remains harrowing: that is its purpose. Is it any less disturbing to say that Hell is the absence of God, that the damned will live without knowing the love of God? Any theology which involves the distinction of the faithful and the damned will share this problem, namely, that it may appear to show God as unloving. However, within the Christian faith such criticisms must be tempered by reflection on the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. This shows us rather a picture of a loving God reaching out to save his people. Nowhere are we presented with a picture of God rejoicing in the suffering of the damned. Like much of the imagery of *Rev.*, the fate of the damned should be seen as something God allows to happen. This is different from saying that God wishes or enjoys such suffering. Rather, the consequences of sin, leading to the ultimate punishment of "fire and sulphur" are the consequences of individual's choices: these will be their fate because of how they have chosen to live. If John's imagery shocks us, it has begun to do its work. That work is not to invite criticism of God, but to make people aware of the full consequences of their actions, and to direct them to the service of God. Whilst such ideas may make some critical of God, the imagery also accords the highest possible seriousness to human action and behaviour. Human behaviour has a

value which God respects, so much so that he lets it run its course. The price of such non-interference is the possibility of damnation, of losing all that matters, for ever. It is this possibility that John is constantly bringing before his readers. He wants to shock his readers, and make them firm in their faith, so that they do not lose what ultimately matters. To do this he uses powerful language of suffering and punishment to remind them that the easy choices and rewards of this life will be short-lived compared to the price one pays to get them.

The final scene in this section describes the judgment of God. It shares much with the images of the Final Judgment described in the Gospels. However, the scene appears to be muddled. In vv. 14-16 Christ harvests, but a second harvest is carried out in v.19, by an angel. Commentators either may describe this passage as badly edited, and begin to cut sections from it, or try to deal with it as it stands. Given that even the most amateur editor rarely causes such confusion, the removal of problem verses is only to be a last resort. If the passage is taken as it stands, the answer might be to see it as showing two harvests. The first harvest is a harvest of grain, the second the harvest of the vine. In this scheme, the first harvest represents the harvest of the faithful by Christ, the second the harvest (and condemnation) of the wicked. This would give a picture of the Final Judgment very close to the OT expectations. There are, however, problems with such an interpretation:-

- It is odd that John would use the image of the vine to describe the nations. In the OT (*Is* 5, *Ps* 80) the vine is a symbol of Israel, of God's people. It would seem, given this background, to be more fitting to use it to describe the faithful than the nations.
- If the city (Ch. 11, Babylon) refers to the nations, why does their destruction take place outside the city? Surely it would take place within the city?
- Is the winepress a symbol of punishment? Caird argues that it symbolises the preparation of God's wrath which will be poured out in the visions of Ch.s 15-16 (1984, 192-4). This symbolism is built on the death of Christ which took place outside the city. This was a well-known reference to

Christ's death: in both *Mt* 23:39 and *Lk* 20:15 the version of the parable of the Vineyard makes this clear. The owner's son is thrown out of the vineyard and then killed. As *Mk* 12:8 records that he was killed and then thrown out, it seems that the changed order in *Mt/Lk* shows Christ's death more explicitly. References to "death outside" would be interpreted as referring to Christ's death. If this is so, the harvest outside refers not to a bloody harvest of the unfaithful, but rather to the death of Christ and, by extension, to the suffering of the church.

There is still a problem, there still seem to be two harvests. *Joel* 3:13, on which the scene is based mentions only a harvest of grapes, but John appears to have interpreted the verse as referring to two harvests, one of wheat, the other of grapes. Bauckham notes that a similar interpretation occurs in *Mk* 4:29 (1993a, 290-2). How can the two harvests be explained. Firstly, one is of first fruits (wheat), which stands for, and includes, the whole harvest of every crop. The wheat and grape harvests are part of the same event. Secondly, they present different images of the same harvest, the wheat harvest a positive image, and the grape harvest, a negative one (Bauckham 1993a, 290-2).

Thus it would appear that the harvest is a harvest of the church and is connected to the death of Christ. As such it does not describe the whole of the final judgment. It is a description of the harvesting of the church, the "first fruits", and is the first stage of the whole process of the Final Judgment, which will also offer a chance of redemption to the nations (11:13; Bauckham 1993a, 291). John uses the imagery of the harvest in a new way and combines it with the death of Christ. His message is again one which should encourage the faithful. Their suffering is a sign that God's judgment has begun.

Notes

14:1 "Mount Zion" –used for the "heavenly pole" (see on 1:4), "Jerusalem", or the church. Zion is used 154 times in the OT. It marked the place where the Messiah would meet with his faithful people in the Last Days

"Lamb" -see 5:6

"standing" - for the significance of "standing" as victory or survival, see Note 6:17.

Ford suggests that standing implies a firmness which is superior to the rising (13:1,11) and falling (9:1) of Satanic beasts and creatures (1975,233).

"name"- compare to 7:3 and 13:16. If the beast attempted to copy God by marking his followers, the superiority of God's marking is shown by the quality of the mark. The faithful bear the name of the Father which is superior to the number of the beast.

14:2 "waters/thunder/harps" See 1:15, 6:1- water and thunder symbolise the voice of God. "Harps" (5:8) are symbols of angels. The sound of heaven includes the voices of God, angels and the redeemed.

14:3-"four living creatures/elders"- see 5:6,10.

"song" . The song is not secret to preserve its power. Rather secrecy shows that only the faithful in heaven really understand the full meaning of redemption and salvation (Sweet 1990, 222).

14:4 -"defiled with women"- looks as if it is a reference to fornication. Fornication and sexual immorality were both metaphors for idolatry (2:15,20). "Defiled" could refer to the practice of purity by soldiers and priests (*Deut* 23:9-14; *1 Sam* 21:5): even married men who had had intercourse with their wives had to undergo purification rituals before they could resume their duties. However, regulations about sexual behaviour or purity are not the issue. John rather is stressing the devotion of the faithful to God. Ford (1975,234) thinks that this could be critical of those who had been involved with cult prostitution (sexual activity with a prostitute as an act of worship). Cult prostitution was part of the Artemis cult at Ephesus.

"virgins" - used more frequently of women than of men. This mixing of male ("defiled with women") and more commonly female sexual language may show that this is metaphorical rather than literal.

"goes" - Gk- *hupago* is used in *Mt* 26:21 and *Mk* 14:21 of Christ going to his death and in *Jn* 7:33 of Christ's going to the Father. The verse may thus imply that the faithful follow Christ, even to death.

"first fruits" *Lev* 23:6ff. First fruits were the first part of the harvest offered to God as a sign that all belonged to him. The faithful are to be the "first fruits" of God's

redeeming work. These verse seems to show God's generosity: the faithful are not the only ones he wishes to be saved. His plan includes his hope that others will be saved (11:13) from the nations. This hope is part of the work of the faithful: they are to witness and bring others to salvation (11:4-13; 14:12).

14:5 -"lie"- the redeemed resemble Christ, the Servant (5:6; *Is* 53:9). *Zeph* 3:12-13 and *Jer* 23 both also mention lying in the context of idolatry.

"blameless"- literally "spotless", a word used to describe sacrificial victims which had to have perfect, unmarked hides. The faithful, too, are perfect, without spot, stain or sin.

14:6 -"angel" - the angels resemble the eagle/vulture of 8:13. Rather than woe, they will announce an "eternal gospel". Ford argues that 14:6-20 is all one section made up of seven scenes (3 angels, voice/Son of Man/ 3 angels: 1975,235). Such a structure only works if the voice and Son of Man are identifiable as the same person and the Spirit (14:13) ignored.

"eternal gospel"- the message given by the angel is described as a gospel, "a piece of good news". Caird notes that "a gospel" as proclamation is not necessarily a retelling of Jesus' story (1984,184-6). Such a story can be assumed to be known, and its consequences spelled out. The consequences of hearing the gospel are that people should repent. If the words of the angel make up its "gospel", v.7 could be paraphrased as follows: "[You have heard about Jesus Christ, therefore] fear God and give him glory...". Compare this to the action of the beast (13:6) which blasphemes God rather than worship him.

In 10:7, the mystery of God was revealed only to the prophets. If the gospel now being revealed to all is identical to that mystery, it will include material about the end of the world.

The different meanings complement each other, because the point of the visions about the end of the world is that they should encourage the faithful to persevere in worshipping God. They also reveal the role of Christ. Thus the gospel will include "good news" about the end of the world, about Jesus Christ, and encourage the faithful that they should therefore, worship God.

14:7 -"hour of judgment"- the events that have been anticipated are now at hand.

The beginning of a new era is also signified by "henceforth" (14:12).

"springs of water"- heaven, earth and sea represent the three layers of the universe (Outline, Ch.4). "Springs of water" do not represent a change to this view, or a fourth layer. They are a symbol of the eternal life offered by God and offer a contrast to the desert where the dragon lives (12:6,14; 17:3) and his destructive waters (12:16). The repetition of heaven, earth and sea also shows the superiority Of God to the dragon and the beasts. These three come from the different layers (12:3; 13:1,11) and claim authority over creation. Here God is introduced as the creator and, thus, the rightful ruler.

14:8 -"Babylon"- the traditional OT enemy of Israel. Its name came to stand for those who oppose God. One of the central questions of *Rev* is the identity of "Babylon" and whether it stands for Jerusalem (or the Jewish people), Rome or is a symbol for idolatry. The identity of Babylon is a central part of Ch. 17.

"drink wine...fornication"- a difficult phrase, whose meaning is related to the similar phrase in 14:10. These two phrases distinguish two kind of wrath. The wrath of this verse means the consequences of sin. It repeats an idea already seen in the visions of the seals, namely, that God does not intervene to stop the consequences of sin, but rather lets them follow without interference.

14:9 does not mean that everyone who has engaged in idolatry, or the worship of other gods is automatically condemned. If it meant that, even those who had been converted would still be condemned. Repentance and rejection of such practices in favour of true worship will enable the convert to be saved.

"cup"- Sweet suggests that this verse introduces symbolism of cup and bowl which will dominate the second half of *Rev* (1990,224). An objection to this theory is the use of the word "cup" (Gk- *poterion*) in this verse, and "bowl" (Gk- *phiale*) in Ch.16

14:10- "wrath...anger"- refer to God's righteous reaction to sin rather than the emotion of anger. The picture of an angry God, rejoicing in the downfall of his enemies, is often, it seems, due to us making God in our own image.

"tormented...fire and sulphur".- the traditional imagery used by John is based on the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah (*Gen* 19). John does not, like some of his

contemporaries, view the torment of the unrighteous as entertainment for the righteous. The word for "torment" (*Gk-basanizo*) has already been used to describe torments which result from sin (9:5). If the same is true here, the torments mark the consequences of one's own behaviour rather than a punishment from God. The reference to the Lamb and angels may echo *Lk* 12:8, where Jesus acknowledges those who are faithful, and rejects other, before the angels.

14:11 -"day and night"- see 4:8. The unfaithful suffer ceaselessly, just as the faithful in heaven constantly rejoice.

14:12- "Here" , literally "hither, from here on". A new era is beginning, but why is it an era in which the saints must endure. One would expect the time of judgment to be a time when the saints could rest. The answer will be seen in the vision of the harvest: the judgment of God begins with the persecution of the church.

14:13 -"Blessed are..." . The eagle of 8:13 introduced a series of events which led to a woe (9:12). The angels of 14:6-12 have brought messages which lead to a blessing. "Blessed are" is a common phrase in which a blessing is promised to those who have shown a particular virtue (*Mt* 5:2-12). As in *Mt* the blessing includes a promise, namely, rest from labours.

"rest from labours" - John offers no easy gospel of success: to be a believer is hard work and may lead to persecution and death. The end of such labour is rest which means the end of suffering (*Ps* 95; *Heb* 2:7-19). John never says that "works" or "deeds" are what save the righteous. Such arguments belong to discussions of the Law which are not part of the thinking here. When John says "their deeds follow them", he does not mean that people are saved by their works. Rather he means that their works are a sign of their life and character. They are what Paul calls fruits of the Spirit (*Gal* 5:22) and *James* 2:14-25 describes as signs of a living faith.

"Spirit" - see 1:4;2:7. The Spirit represents an interpreter given an authoritative definition of what is happening.

14:14 "Son of Man" - see 1:13.

"golden crown" - a crown of true kingship superior to those of the dragon and the

beast (12:3; 13:10)

14:15- How can an angel tell Christ what to do? The scene may be based on the Temple rites where the call to begin the festival comes from inside the Temple. The image of Temple (as the place where God is) may be a picturesque way of expressing the ideas of *Mt* 24:36, where Christ says that even he does not know the time of God's judgment. The angel brings a message from God to Christ. The coming of two angels from the Temple (14:15,17) and one from the altar (14:18) point to all coming from God. On the problem of a temple in heaven, see 8:3; 12:19.

14:18-"authority over fire" may be the same angel who gathered fire for the incense (8:5). This angel is active at the beginning of the trumpet visions and the judgment scene.

"vine" - an image for Israel in the OT (*Ps* 80; *Is* 5)

14:19 "wine-press"- punishment, or a preparation of the wrath of God?

14:20 "trodden" - the wine press appears to be trodden by Christ (19:13). This passage is a symbolic depiction of the events of 19:11-25 and is based on *Is* 63:3.

"blood...bridle"- Caird says that no interpretation has been offered for these verses (1984,145). Bauckham suggests that these images are evidence for this passage anticipating 19:11-21 because the language of blood and bridles would fit well with the battle scene (1993a,47). This would fit with Caird's own connection of the Son of Man to the winepress (C1984,191)

"sixteen hundred stadia"- roughly the length of Palestine. Sweet suggests this may symbolise the whole world (1990, 233).

CHAPTER 5
READING THE SCROLL 2:
THE SEVEN PLAGUES (*REV* 15:1-16:21)

a) Introduction (15:1)

Outline

The vision of the seven plagues is revealed directly like the visions of 12:1-14:20. They make up the second set of visions in the scroll. The introduction shows that the visions of 15:1-16:21 make up a complete unit. They reveal the seven plagues which are the final sequence of God's judgment.

Notes

"wonderful"- (Gk- *thaumaston*) is only used of this vision. *Thaumaston* is used to describe what belongs to God: this is a vision of God rather than of his creatures.

"plagues" - Gk- *plege* has a variety of meanings: plague, blow, misfortune. These plagues have two inspirations: the *Ex* narrative and the holiness codes of *Deut* and *Lev*. Of these codes, those in *Lev* 26 which prohibit idolatry are perhaps most relevant.

"wrath...ended"- the wrath of God will end with the sequence of plagues. The mystery of 10:7 will be completely revealed. This also tells us that the visions of seals, trumpets and plagues are not identical. No other series has been described as the end. The seals and trumpets anticipated what is revealed in the scroll (12:1-16:21).

b) The Sea Of Glass (15:2-4)

Outline

The sea of glass echoes the first vision of heaven (4:6), but the imagery now develops in a new way. The sea of glass refers not just to God's victory over chaos, but to the *Exodus* narrative. This reference becomes more explicit with the description of the hymn as a hymn of Moses, and of the Lamb. The *Exodus*

story is a key component of the narrative of the seven plagues.

Notes

15:2 "sea of glass" - see 4:6. This may refer not only to the Red Sea, but to the "sea of bronze" found in the Temple. This "sea of bronze" was a large basin in which priests washed as part of the Temple rituals (*2 Chron* 4:6; *1 Kings* 7:23ff.; Barker 1991,30). Given *1 Cor* 10:2, there may also be a reference to Baptism in Christian interpretations of this scene.

"mingled with fire"- may be based on the heavenly fire of *Ezek* 1:4,13,27. It may also refer to the "sea of bronze".

"conquered...name"- Gk-*nikontas* (lit., "conquering") can be translated either as a participle or a noun. The latter is to be preferred: it reveals the character of elect rather than an action either completed or currently taking place.. Translate as:-

I saw the conquerors of the beast, his number and his name..."

The conquerors are the same group as the 144,000 (7:1-8; 14:1-5).

"harps" - see 5:8; 14:2.

15:3 -"song of Moses"- the scene is reminiscent of the triumph song of Moses sung by the Red Sea after the drowning of Pharaoh's army. This song is also described as the song of the Lamb. As it is addressed only to God, the reference to the Lamb must be like the title of the *Ex* hymn, and identify the one who has composed or performs the song. In both cases the chief performer sings the hymn together with his followers.

"king of the nations" - a strong variant tradition reads "king of the ages". "King of the nations" is to be preferred as it (a) stresses the theme of the nations (15:4) and (b) echoes *Jer* 10:7 which is quoted in 15:4. Either textual tradition would stress the true kingship of God compared to creatures, earthly or supernatural, that would claim his place (13:1-18).

15:4 "for you alone are holy"- God's claim to be feared and glorified (that is, worshipped [11:13]) is based on his unique holiness.

"all nations..." - *Rev*'s hymn has a different character from the hymn of Moses. *Ex* 15:1-18 glories in the defeat of enemies. This hymn rejoices not that the enemies have been destroyed, but that they have come to worship God. It provides a

further reminder of John's picture of a generous God (10:4;11:13; 14:14-20; 21:24,26). God is shown as interested in saving rather than condemning the nations (compare *Jn* 3:17). Many casual readers fail to see this aspect of God among *Rev*'s scenes of destruction and suffering.

"judgments...revealed"- will the scenes of judgment that follow lead people to worship God? Caird suggests that this refers not so much to the plague visions to come, but to the revealing of Christ's love (1984,199). Any mention of God's judgment which did not include mention of Christ's love and sacrifice would be an inadequate revelation.

c) The Tent of Witness (15:5-8)

Outline

This vision takes its inspiration from another scene in the *Ex* story. The Ark of God was housed in a tent made by the Israelites (*Ex* 33:7). This tent was described as the model for the Temple built by Solomon. This tent symbolises the place where God is, and the angels who come out from the temple are thus bringing plagues from God himself. *Rev* is making clear the wrath of the plagues to come. It is not the "wrath" of the consequences of sin left to run its own course (14:8), but God's response to sin (14:10).

The tent has a further significance. The appearance of the tent and the manifestation of God which follow it (15:8) were believed to be signs of the time of the Messiah and the restoration of God's people, that is, their release from oppression and suffering.

Notes

15:5 -"temple" see 11:9. Here the temple is associated with the Tent of Meeting (*Ex* 33:7) and with God's revealing of himself to his people.

15:6 -"out of the temple"- the plagues come from God himself, signified by the place where he dwells.

"linen" - Gk- *linon* suggests the robes of priests (*Ex* 28:27). Some texts read Gk- *lithon* (stone) which could refer to the jewels set on priestly vestments (*Ex* 28:15-20) or royal robes. *Linon* is the preferred reading, both on textual grounds,

and because of its echoes to *Ezek* 9:1-10:2 (see 8:3-5, which also uses this passage).

"golden sashes"- may also be priestly vestments (*Ex* 28:4-5,40).

15:7 - "creatures" - see 4:6-8.

"bowl"- see 5:8.

15:7 - "wrath of God" - see 6:17;14:10. The grapes pressed in 14:20 now provide the "wrath" to be poured out.

"no-one could enter"- a common description of the Temple to stress the majesty of God (*1 Kings* 8:10-14; *2 Chron* 7:2-3; *Is* 6:4; *Ezek* 10:3-4).

d) The Seven Bowls (16:1-21)

Outline

The seven bowls represent the last stage of God's judgment and show the fulfillment of many of the warnings given in the seal and trumpet visions. This fulfillment is seen in the repetition of images and themes from the earlier visions. As in the earlier visions, the book of *Exodus* remains an important source, with many of the bowl visions based on incidents from the *Exodus* narratives. The later interpretations of the *Exodus* narratives, for example, in the book of *Wisdom*, have also influenced *Rev*. However, the visions here, like their earlier counterparts, are never just copies of older material and interpretations.

Like the earlier seal and trumpet visions, the bowl visions break into sub-groups: the first four bowls are directed primarily at the human race (16:1-9). The last three are directed towards the destruction of the great city, Babylon, and the beasts. However, they too have a human dimension, because the destruction of these entities will also affect those who "live" in the city and still follow the dragon and the beasts. The arrangement serves as a reminder that the judgment of God is not just a judgment on those who commit sin, it will involve the destruction and rooting out of the causes of sin. Without the removal of sin and its causes, there can be no new creation (Ch.21-2). The last three plagues appear to put the events of 17-19 in reverse order. We might call this a *chiastic* (X-shaped) structure: the fifth bowl gives the judgment of the dragon's kingdom and promises

its eclipse (20:7-10), the sixth, the overthrow of the beasts (19:17-21). In the seventh the judgment accompanies the destruction of Babylon (16:19), making it the first judgment to be put into effect. We might liken God's judgment to the work of a gardener: unless the roots of weeds are taken out, the weeds themselves will always return. God's judgment involves the destruction of the weeds (sinners) and digging up the roots (the city, the beasts and the dragon- the causes of sin). Such a description helps to settle some confusion within the bowl narratives. It is not always clear, at first sight, whom these plagues will affect. The reference to "men" might lead us to conclude that all people are affected by them. A closer reading shows that this is not the case, and that the visions are rather directed at the unfaithful. Firstly, according to the interpretation given above, the plagues cannot affect the righteous, because they have already been judged as the first fruits of the harvest (14:14-20). Their separation has further been shown by Ch. 15: the righteous are with God. The first plague is clearly directed to those who are not faithful, those who bear the mark of the beast (16:2). By definition, this cannot include the faithful (14:1,4-5) and so shows that the first plague is directed not to all, but towards a group. The second and third groups initially seem to be directed to "men", implying all people. An important qualification is introduced in 16:6. This verse suggests that those who suffer from the plagues, and are forced to drink blood, are those who have persecuted the church. The fourth plague also seems to be directed to all people. However, the reaction of the afflicted causes a reconsideration. They curse the name of God, following the example of blasphemy set by the beast from the sea (13:6). This description sets them apart from the faithful, who sing the praises of God and cannot tell a lie (14:4-5). The final three plagues, connected too the city and the beast, similarly affect those who are still under the control of these powers.

An important qualification must be made at this point. John himself makes this qualification in 16:15. The faithful are not necessarily all those who count themselves Christians or worship within the churches. From the very beginning, *Rev* stresses that Christians are in danger of compromise, of losing their status as the faithful, and of sharing the fate of the pagan nations. The oracles to

Ephesus (2:1-7), Pergamum (2:13-17), Thyatira (2:19-29), Sardis (3:1-6) and Laodicea (3:14-22) all warned of the dangers facing the congregations: compromise, syncretism and idolatry. 11:2 warned of the corruption of part of the church. Chapter 13 raised the possibility that some church members are followers of the beast. The heavenly visions stress again and again that the promises of God are only for those who hold firm to the true faith which they received. The same point is stressed again in these final visions of judgment: some of those who suffer in the plagues will be the "unfaithful faithful". Several references hint at this. The throne of 16:10 may refer to Pergamum (2:13). Most importantly, 16:15 echoes warnings to the church at Sardis (3:3) and Laodicea (3:18). These final judgments, revealing what is to come, thus serve as reminders of what to do in the present: hold firm, and do not lose the salvation offered by God.

The reactions of those afflicted by the plagues are also revealing. Repeatedly, they curse God (16:9,11,20). This is very different from the visions of Ch. 11 in which the testimony of the two witnesses caused many to worship God (11:13). Can these different reactions and passages be reconciled? It would appear so. In the seal visions, humanity does not repent after experiencing the consequences of sin (9:20). Repentance only takes place later after testimony has been given by the witnesses (11:13). This repentance is not, however, shared by all: a small group are still destroyed. The bowl visions, and their plagues, represent God's judgment on this group.

This lets a more positive side to be seen to *Rev.* This is usually considered to be a book that catalogues destruction after destruction. It cannot be denied that such themes are present and are part of John's strategy to make his readers take seriously the consequences of their life and worship. However, there are two positive messages.

The first, and most obvious, is that God will save his faithful people from all manner of destruction, just as he saved Christ (11:4-12).

The second is that destruction is not just destruction. Within the scenes of carnage, God can be seen striving to bring the nations into the group of the

faithful. Furthermore, the destruction which God will carry out will eradicate sin and make possible a new creation (21-22). Those who remain liable to the judgment of God are those who reject the works of Christ witnessed to by the church and remain, right to the end, trapped in the manners and the blasphemy of the dragon and the beasts. *Rev* warns of the consequences of following the beast. Furthermore, in showing that repentance is possible, but can be left too late, John echoes a theme found elsewhere in the NT, that the time to choose Christ is now, not tomorrow, nor the day after.

The final bowl vision is an earthquake. This picture of the last days has been anticipated by the earlier earthquakes (4:5; 8:5 and 11:19), but none matches the intensity of this account. It is not just a judgment; it is also a *theophany* (a revealing of God). At the end of the judgment, God himself is revealed. The voice of God announces that all is finished (16:17), in a way that is reminiscent of Christ's words on the Cross (Jn 19:30). However, the visions are not finished. The earthquake which brings the destruction of Babylon may mark the end of God's judgment, and the beginning of its realisation, but that judgment is still to be fully described. Such descriptions follow in the visions of 17-19. The earthquake also marks the end of a section of the book. The scroll ends here, and the visions that follow mark a return to the format seen in the opening of the scroll with angelic mediators and interlocutors.

There is one major difference from the pattern of the earlier visions: the bowl visions do not include any interruptions like those of Ch. 7 or Ch.10-11, unless 16:15 is counted as an interruption. It is unlikely that 16:15 should be counted as an interruption because of (a) its brevity and (b) its lack of visionary material. Why is there no interruption at this stage? There are two reasons. Firstly, there is no need to include any encouragement about the fate of the righteous since their judgment and destiny have been revealed. Secondly, the lack of an interruption gives an impression of speed: the reader now feels close to the climax of God's judgment.

Notes

16:1- "loud voice"- the voice of God himself from within the Temple where no-one

else is able to enter.

"pour out"- Gk- *ekcheo* is often used of pouring libations (drink offerings). If this imagery is used, John has reversed it completely: God is the source, not the receiver, of the libations and they bring disaster rather than the blessings usually associated with such rituals.

16:2- "earth"- shows the layer of the universe on which the judgment of God will be effective. The plagues have no effect in heaven because the dragon has no authority there (12:7-12).

"foul and evil sores"- based on the plague of *Ex* 9:10-11. The use of two adjectives (Gk- *kakos* and *poneros*) suggests that these sores are incurable. They may also suggest a disease like leprosy which was considered to be the punishment for evil thoughts or deeds (*Num* 12:9-15; *2 Kings* 5:27; *2 Kings* 15:5). If *Deut* 35:27 is relevant, these sores might be presented as a punishment for apostasy (turning away from God). This would be a suitable punishment for Christians who had not remained faithful (see Outline). It would also show that religious behaviour was a reason for affliction.

16:3 "blood"- see *Ex* 7:17-21, but here both the sea and drinking water are affected.

In Hebrew thought, blood was considered to carry the life-force of a person or creature. Thus the eating of meat with blood in it, or drinking of blood, were proscribed by Jewish law. This thought still remains important in the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses and explains their refusal to use blood products in medical treatment. The drinking of blood would not just be thought to bring physical, but also spiritual death, as the drinker would be unclean.

This passage may also echo *Is* 49:26. If so, its reference to the enemies of God is even clearer.

Some commentators think that the events of recent history give colour and immediacy to this bowl vision. Sweet thinks it shows events of the Neronian persecution (1990,244). Ford cites events recorded in Josephus, *Jewish War*, 3.530-1 (a description of corpses in the Jordan in AD 68-9) as influencing the picture (1975, 271).

16:5 "angel of the waters" - in Jewish mythology, everything had its angelic guardian. See 1:4. The angel of the waters is also found in *1 Enoch* 66:1-3.

16:6-This plague operates on the principle of the *lex talionis* (Lat.- law of revenge or retaliation/getting even), that the punishment should equal the crime (*Ex* 4:22-23). Jesus did not appear to think that the *lex talionis* was an adequate basis for human behaviour (*Mt* 5:38-9). His criticism would seem hard to justify if God is seen to use such a system of punishment. The answer to the problem may be found in 13:10. This would be an example of the punishment for sin in part being formed by the sin itself rather than God playing "tit for tat". The sinner has already chosen his/her punishment by acting in a certain way.

16:7- See 6:9-10. The voice stresses the correctness of the punishment rather than vengeance.

"Almighty"- see 1:8.

16:8- a sun plague is not found in the plagues of Egypt described in *Exodus*. Ford suggests that it comes from later in the *Exodus* story (1987,328b). In *Ex* 13:21-22 the Israelites are led by a cloud at night and pillar of fire during the day. *Wisdom* 10:16-19 uses this image to describe the guidance of God both before and after the Red Sea Crossing. The plague of darkness represents a reversal of this blessing. Instead of a light that brings shelter, there is a darkness which brings pain to the unfaithful. Such an interpretation, based on the people of Israel, might be especially critical of those whom *Rev* would describe as the faithful who had become unfaithful.

16:9- Gk-*blasphemeo*. Those afflicted by the plague do not repent. They remain trapped in their hatred of God. Their actions imitate those of their true master (13:6).

16:10- this plague is directed against the beast and his kingdom. It also affects those who are members of his kingdom, and their grief is the focus of the vision. This passage is built on the ninth plague (*Ex* 10:21-23), but may also be influenced by the "pillar of fire" (*Ex* 13:21). Two interpretations of this passage are offered. The first is that it describes the overthrow of the kingdom of the beast. Is this so? The overthrow of the beast is ultimately the last thing to happen

in 20:10. For his kingdom to be overthrown at this point, before the downfall of Babylon, will contradict the order of events in 17-20. Such an overthrow may well be anticipated and guaranteed, but it would be premature at this point.

Thus the second interpretation is to be preferred. This uses interpretations of the themes of dark and light as found in the *Exodus* tradition which are contemporary with *Rev.* One extended example is found in *Wisdom* 17-18. From this perspective, the plague is a description of the spiritual torment of the unjust. Ford describes it thus:-

It says, in effect, that evil-doers are in truth captives within their own dark deeds.

They convince themselves that they have not been observed, but are always haunted by the fear of discovery. No light can penetrate the darkness of the "hateful night" of dread and terror they create for themselves.

(1975,272)

16:10- "gnaw tongues"- shows the extent of their anguish.

16:11- "curse" - see 13:6; 16:9. Again the reaction of the afflicted shows that they do not repent, but continue to reject God.

16:11- "did not repent"- judgment is only for those who remain in the service of the beast. The righteous have been judged already (14:14-20).

16:12- the sixth bowl concerns the drying up of the Euphrates. It also echoes two themes from *Exodus*, the plague of Ex 8:2-3, and the Drying Up of the Red Sea (Ex 14:20). It may also refer to *Joshua* 3, the drying up of the river Jordan. Such drying up incidents came to be repeated in the OT for the hope of the restoration of Israel (*Is* 11:15-16; *Zech* 10:10-12). Here such hopes are reversed and dashed. The drying-up of the river becomes a means of destruction, not restoration.

"Euphrates/ kings from the east" - see 9:12-13; 16:14. The greater destruction here is a fulfilment of the warning given by the sixth trumpet (9:12-13).

16:13- "foul spirits like frogs". Two different suggestions are given for the significance of frogs:

a) Magic. The plague of frogs (*Ex* 8:1,7) also affected the magicians of Egypt. The frogs would thus identify magical practices as part of the plague and presumably warn the churches to avoid participation in such rituals(Ford1975,

274; Sweet: 1990, 248-9).

b) The utterances of the three beasts which are connected to the imperial cult. They signify the propaganda of the beast from the land (13:12-15), the blasphemies of the beast from the sea (13:6) and the lies and accusations of the dragon (12:9, 15; see also Caird 1984, 206).

It may be that both are possible. There was no clear distinction between the imperial cult and magical rites, and John appears to be fighting against both practices. See on Ch. 1, 2 and 13.

"false prophet"- 19:20 makes explicit what is hinted at in this verse: the false prophet is the beast from the land (13:11-17).

"Battle"- this is the last, eschatological battle on the Day of the Lord. It is anticipated in 6:4 and 9:13-21. Its final resolution is seen in 20:7, 9.

16:14- "kings of the whole earth"- Caird would make the kings of the earth enemies who will fight with, and overthrow Rome (1984, 206). However, given the eschatological dimension of the battle, and the fact that the kings are summoned by the dragon and the beasts, such an interpretation is unlikely. Furthermore, this bowl vision relates only to the summoning of the kings. It promises the battle, and the victory of God, but the battle itself does not yet seem to take place. God's judgment puts in place the events of the Last Days, but does not yet see their resolution. The "kings" (plural) give a reminder that the events of *Rev* should not be identified exclusively with one king or country: such rulers are only the manifestations of a recurrent problem. *Rev* is not concerned wholly with Rome, but at the time of writing it was Rome which best exhibited the features of Babylon.

"great day of the Almighty"- a reference to the Last Day and further evidence for an eschatological understanding of the battle. See *Joel* 2:11, 31; 3:9ff.; *Zeph* 1:14ff. for the phrase in the OT.

"Almighty" - see 1:8.

16:15- Some critics remove this verse, and treat it as a later addition to the narrative (Caird 1984, 207-8; Ford 1975, 263). However, the verse fits the context and provides a reminder for members of the church to remain vigilant. It

picks up themes and images already used (3:4,18).

Ford suggests origins in regulations of the Temple (1975,263). Guards who were found sleeping on duty at night were beaten for a first offence. If they were caught asleep a second time their clothes were burned.

"thief" - see 3:3.

16:16 - "Armageddon"- the most common explanation is that Armageddon means "the mountain of Megiddo". Megiddo was the site of Sisera's defeat (*Judges* 5:19-20). However, Megiddo lay on a plain (*Zech* 12:11).

A second suggestion is that it is based on the Hebrew *har mo'ed* (mountain of assembly). *Is* 14:13 identifies this as the place where Lucifer tried to set himself up against God. However, it is difficult to prove this from the Hebrew etymology.

A third suggestion refers to Megiddo but uses a different set of references. Megiddo was near Mt Carmel where Elijah triumphed over the prophets of Ba'al (*1 Kings* 18:19). It was also the site of Josiah's death (*2 Kings* 23:29). Josiah's death, according to this account, is unlikely to provide a precedent for triumph by God's forces since it was followed by a period of chaos and apostasy (*2 Kings* 23:31-2). A better precedent is found in *Zech* 12:10-13:4 where, after a period of mourning for the "pierced one" (*Zech* 12:10), idolatry and uncleanness are removed from Israel before the final victory (*Zech* 14; see also *Ezek* 38-9). This would provide a precedent for the battle of 19:17-21; 20:7-9. See notes 19:17-21; 20:7-9.

16:17 - "it is done" - Gk-*gegonen*. Compare this with *Jn* 19:30 and Christ's cry "it is finished/completed" (Gk-*tetelestai*). As in *Jn* the cry marks the end of the saving work, rather than the final results of that work (Christ's Resurrection [*Jn* 20-21] or the New Creation [21-22]).

16:18- this is the fullest description of the earthquake which marks the Last Day. It has been described already in 4:5; 8:5 and 11:19. The earthquake will be shown to mark the destruction of Gog (20:7-9) as well as the city. The use of imagery from the appearance of God on Sinai (*Ex* 19:16) shows that this is also a theophany.

The account in *Rev* shows a creative use of OT imagery, linking the earthquake

to the destruction of a city.

Some critics find historical events may have contributed to John's use of the earthquake as well as imagery from the OT. It has already been noted that earthquakes had affected many of the congregations of Asia Minor. (See Introduction, p.7). It is sometimes suggested that the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 may also have been a source for these descriptions (Garrow 1997, 78). However, if this is so, it is surprising that John did not make more use of the feature of darkness caused by falling ash which was part of that volcanic eruption. The ash which fell was so large in quantity that the neighbouring cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum were both buried in a short period of time. Recent events may colour the use of the imagery and may influence John's choice of such imagery, but the driving force in these descriptions is the apocalyptic imagery of the OT. The earthquake marks the end of God's judgment, and its first effects. The effects have yet to be described fully.

16:19 "cities of nations"- like the kings of the earth (16:14), this phrase is a reminder that "the great city" is not to be identified solely with one corrupt city, such as Rome. There will be many "cities" at different times and places, all of which will be in rebellion to God and in the service of the dragon.

16:19- "three parts"- the division of the city may refer to *Zech* 14, which has already been anticipated by 16:16. A problem is raised when this verse is compared to 11:13. Both verses seem to offer different accounts of the destruction of the same city. Can they be reconciled? 11:13 did not describe the final destruction of the city, but a warning to the city which involves its partial destruction, and the repentance of many of its inhabitants. This verse deals with the ultimate destruction of the city, which would suggest that it describes the fate of those who did not repent after seeing the resurrection of the Two Witnesses (11:13). Such an interpretation would also be supported by our interpretation of 14:14-20: only the unrepentant are left for judgment. The more positive and less obvious side of *Rev* is thus seen. God's ultimate judgment is not for all, but only those who remain unrepentant at the end.

"drain cup" - the cup is emptied, and the judgment of God is shown to be

complete.

16:20 "island"- see 6:14. Sweet suggests that the islands represent false religion (1990,251). Ford thinks that they are general apocalyptic imagery with no specific significance (1975, 264). Caird suggests that the details of mountains and islands vanishing refers to the destruction of the city of Rome (1984, 209). The mountains might support this theory: Rome was famous for being built on seven hills. The islands, as Caird himself admits, are a problem, since the city of Rome did not have any islands within its boundaries.

"hailstones" - see *Ex* 9:23-4 for the plague of hailstones, and *Rev* 7:7 for the warning of this danger. Ford argues that the descriptions may be based on the catapults of the Roman army which fired huge stones into besieged cities (1975, 265).

16:21 "curse"- see 16:9.

CHAPTER 6
AFTER THE READING 1:
THE GREAT PROSTITUTE
(REV 17:1-18)

a) The Prostitute (17:1-6)

Outline

The vision of the Great Prostitute is introduced by an angel from the bowl visions. This return to the use of an angelic guide shows us that the reading of the scroll is over: its reading required no such intermediaries. The point is also made by the change of location (17:3). However, the presence of an angel from the scroll is a reminder that the reading of the scroll has also seen the playing out of a series of real events. The other events of the scroll are as real as the angels who poured out the bowls.

The angel leads John into the wilderness, which is not only the place where the faithful may be tempted, but also the place where they are nurtured by God and, like Jesus, can triumph over the devil.

The vision reveals a picture of a woman seated on a beast: the references to horns and heads (17:3) reveal this as the beast from the sea (13:1). The woman is named as Babylon, and is to be identified with the city of 16:19. This leads to her further identification with the city of Ch.11.

Is it possible to name the city which the prostitute represents? Perhaps the solution which has been offered most frequently is that the woman be identified with Rome. It is argued that such an identification would fit well with the description given and that the phrases "kings of the earth" (17:2), "inhabitants of the earth" (17:2). "Mother of whores and of earth's abominations" (17:4) together with 17:18 give a suitable description of Rome's political power. The references to blood (17:6) are taken as descriptions of the Neronian persecution. It may be argued that the descriptions of 17:16-17 may refer to civil war, and somehow describe the current political tensions, if Rev was written in AD68. Supporters of the later AD96 date also make references to the persecutions of Domitian.

However, strong arguments can be made for Jerusalem being Babylon. First, Babylon is guilty of fornication, and, as has already been seen, this means idolatry. It is also usually connected to the idolatries to which the faithful people of God fall victim (2:14,21). Second, much of the imagery and the description of the woman fits descriptions of the Temple (see Notes). Third, the woman appears to be a corrupt equivalent of the Woman of Ch.12. It will be remembered that she represents the community of the faithful. Thus, this second woman would appear to represent those who are unfaithful: such imagery fits better with Jerusalem than Rome. Fourthly, the woman rides on the beast of Ch.13 which we have already identified with the false cults of the Roman empire. If the woman is to be identified as Rome itself it is hard to see how "Rome can sit upon Rome" (Ford 1975,285). Fifthly, Jerusalem, too, had been the site of persecutions of Christians (17:6).

However, this identification with Jerusalem is also problematic. If Jerusalem's current political status is considered, it was not powerful enough to be a source of world-wide corruption (17:18). Secondly, our remarks on 3:9 must be remembered. *Rev* appears to have been written before the split between church and synagogue. The reader will remember that we are assuming an AD68 date and will also be aware of the danger of reading in anti-Semitic interpretations. Even if the interpretation of the Prostitute and the Beast appears to relate events which could be anticipated, such as the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies (17:16), this is not the primary purpose of writing. John is not interested in relating the downfall of earthly kingdoms as purely political events. Nor is its message exhausted by a single event. If this were so, *Rev* would not continue to puzzle us in the way it does. Its meaning would be clearly defined and, in many ways, redundant.

Rather than try to identify the woman with a particular city a similar strategy should be adopted as was taken in Ch.11. The woman represents a spiritual reality which is manifested time and time again in many times and places. Such manifestations have been influenced by the OT's representation of history as the

way in which God and his people relate to each other. Thus it is not surprising that the name Babylon should be used, nor that imagery about Jerusalem and the Temple give colour to the description.

Like the city of Ch.11, the woman represents the rebellious state of God's people. The Jerusalem and Temple imagery builds on the fact that so often those who should have been faithful to God were in complete rebellion. However, the identification does not stop with Babylon and Jerusalem, which are now only of historical interest, even to *Rev's* readers. Let us summarise the interpretation offered so far. The woman on the beast represents not a single earthly city (either Rome or Jerusalem), but rather idolatry and, by extension, those who practise idolatry including such groups within the church as the Nikolaitans.

Notes

17:1 "great harlot"-sexual sin has already been used as a metaphor for idolatry (2;15,20). *Is* 1:21 identified unfaithful Jerusalem in similar terms. Such language is used primarily for unfaithfulness by Israel, rather than Gentiles or pagans. Only two OT passages connect idolatry to pagan practice. *Is* 23:15-18 identifies Tyre as a prostitute, and *Nahum* 3:4, Nineveh. Ford argues that these two examples need not imply that idolatry is a description of pagan practice (1975,283-4). First, Tyre had a different status from other nations because of special treaties made with Israel. Second, Nineveh could be used as a symbol of Jerusalem (*4QpNah*). Whether or not Ford's arguments are accepted, the imagery primarily points to a criticism of the faithful, and, for John, that means people within the church. For fornication as a symbol of idolatry see 2:14,20-22.

"upon many waters"- in contrast to the throne of God (4:6) the woman's place seems stormier. It may also anticipate the beast on which she rides (17:3, see 13:1).

17:2- the sin committed by the woman has corrupted the whole earth. If the faithful are not faithful, there is no chance for witness, gospel and an end to corruption (11:4-13).

17:3 -"spirit"- a renewal of John's inspiration, signifying a new section of his prophecy (see 1;10;4:2; 21:10).

"wilderness"- echoes the temptation of Jesus (*Mk* 1:12). See 12:6.

"woman" -this woman is the opposite of the woman in 12:1-6 who represented the faithful.

"scarlet beast"- the colour might suggest that this is the dragon of 12:3, but the heads and horns link it with the beast of 13:1-10. For the significance of the heads and horns see on 13:1 and 17:9-14.

17:4-"purple-scarlet". Scarlet was the traditional colour for a prostitute (*Joshua* 2:21). Purple may suggest royalty. It is also possible that the woman's clothing contains a reference to the Veil of the Temple (*Ex* 26:31) and draws on the prophetic tradition of criticising the temple cult for impurity.

"golden cup"- used of Babylon in *Jer* 51:7. It is also a parody of the cup of God's wrath (14:8,10), and of the eucharist (King 2004)

"Babylon"- see 11:8.

17:5-"forehead"- a possible reference to the Roman practice of marking prostitutes on the forehead (Juvenal, *Satires*, 6:122ff). It may also mimic God's sealing of his people (14:1) and show the woman's link to the beasts (13:16).

"name of mystery"- the name is not a secret (since it is revealed immediately), but a symbol. See 1:20.

17:6 "drunk"- refers to idolatry as a source of persecution rather than to a specific historical persecution.

b) The Angel's Commentary (17:7-8)

Outline

John is amazed by the vision, and is told by the angel that the meaning of the vision will be revealed to him. Thus, the interpretation of the vision is given an added authority: it comes from a heavenly source. The bulk of the interpretation which follows will concentrate on the identity of the beast (17:9-15). 17:8 also describes the beast in a pattern that is already familiar to us. The beast comes from the pit, sharing a Satanic origin already seen in the trumpet sequence (9:1-11). The beast is also described in terms which mimic the title of God "who was and is and is to come" (1:8). However, despite this imitation, it is not the

equal of God, for it will be destroyed (17:8). These subtle changes are meant to give encouragement. They show that Satan is, in the end, weaker than God, and doomed to destruction. They also provide a reminder that John's theology is not dualistic, that is, that he thinks of a battle between a good god and an evil god. Satan may appear to be God, may claim to be God, but he is not.

Notes

17:8 "was/is not/is to come". Chapter 13 has already provided similar examples of the way in which the beasts imitate God. The beast from the water (13:1) appeared specifically to imitate Christ. Bauckham suggests that this title is being used to parody the return of Christ (1993a,433). The beast comes from heaven and goes to destruction, but Christ will come from heaven. More important is the significance of these two journeys: the journey of the beast will end in destruction, that of Christ in victory. Whilst some suggest that the rising of the beast (17:8) marks the same event as the healing of the beast (13:3), Bauckham disagrees. In his analysis, Ch 13 is a parody of the Resurrection, and Ch.17 of the Second Coming. Both are used by the beast to claim his power and victory, but both claims are shown to be false, even if the people of the world are deceived by these claims. The belief that Nero would return again (*Nero redivivus*) provided a commonly held belief that was similar to that of the Second Coming. John has exploited that similarity to expose the beast and its manifestation in Nero and current beliefs, and to show the superiority of the true God and Christ.

c) The Prostitute's Mount (17:9-18)

Outline

This section provides an identification of both the beast (17:9-15) and the waters on which the woman is seated (17:16-18). In the identification of the beast, two features have dominated critical thinking: the significance of the seven heads, and of the ten horns.

The identification of the beast with the beast from chapter 13 suggests that the beast is identified with Rome and its pagan cults. Specifically, there would seem

to be a reference to Nero here as the fifth king, and the king who will come again. However, the numbers provided here do not match with what we know about the lists of emperors and the ways in which the emperors were listed (see Introduction, p.9; Bauckham1993a, 405-6). It seems impossible to fit Nero in at the right points in the list of kings. There are similar problems, if not more, for those who wish to identify the beast with Domitian. An alternative method of understanding the symbolism must be found.

Bauckham suggests a different approach (1993a, 406-7). The meaning of the numbers does not depend on the list of the emperors, nor on finding a way of counting emperors. What matters more is the significance of the numbers six and seven. What is important is to show the readers that they are close to the end of Roman rule:

All that 17:10 is intended to tell his readers is how far they are from the end of the sequence of seven, that is, of the full sequence of emperors of Rome. It tells them there is only one short reign to go before the end of Roman imperial dominance of the world. It tells them, as *Rev* frequently does, that the end is near (Bauckham1993, 406-7).

The number seven here stands for completion, but it is the completion of Roman rule rather than the perfect nature of God. The "eight" (17:10) may refer to the myth of *Nero redivivus*, and bring in the reference by that method rather than by counting. The beast of 13:1 has already been seen to imitate Christ, and the use of the number eight may be a reminder of that tradition. Eight represented Christ in early Christian number codes. In short, this sequence again reminds John's readers of the false claims made by the Roman cults, especially their claiming of roles that truly belonged to Christ, and of their ultimate doom.

Can the ten kings be identified? Again, a number of explanations have been made including Roman senators and governors, perhaps the ten governors in Palestine (Ford 1975, 291). Against this, it might be asked what relevance the ten governors of Palestine might have for readers based in Asia Minor. Others suggest demonic or barbaric powers (Sweet 1990, 260). Bauckham suggests that they may refer to the "kings of the earth", perhaps even the "kings of the

east" (1993a, 407; see also 16:2). Whichever is chosen, there is a common link: the ten are part of the beast. This signifies that they have an alliance with the beast and join in its work. Whether the ten are considered to be part of the Roman administration or foreign, even demonic, powers, it is their alliance with the beast that matters. They help the work of the beast, and are doomed to be destroyed when the beast reaches its end. As with the seven, there is more meaning in the relationship to the beast and its significance rather than the precise historical identification of the ten.

The last part of the interpretation concerns the waters (17:15-18) which represent all the nation of the earth. Thus the image shows the beast as having authority over all the nations of the world. This last point lets us complete our interpretation of the passage. The woman represents those who practise idolatry and compromise their faith with Rome and its cults, represented by the beast. The beast is described as imitating Christ, and doomed to perish soon, together with its allies. The relationship of the prostitute and the beast is ultimately destructive: the prostitute will be destroyed by the beast and the horns (17:16). John's message is this: those who would compromise their faith with the power of Rome are basing their authority on what is evil and doomed to destruction. The rewards that they enjoy will be short-lived. Implicit in this is a message to the faithful to remain firm and true to Christ who is the true ruler of the earth. John's warning to the unfaithful members of the church would appear to be similar to the maxim quoted in Paul: "eat and drink, for tomorrow you die" (1 Cor 15:32).

The one verse which makes this seem difficult is 17:18 which would appear to suggest that the ultimate authority lies with the woman. However, if the woman represents rebellion from God, how can "unfaithfulness" or "idolatry" be said to "Have dominion"?

Ford suggests that this verse is proleptic and anticipates the future glory of Jerusalem (1975, 293), the New Jerusalem of chapters 21-22. It does not describe Jerusalem's current state. However, such an anticipation seems unlikely since the description of the New Jerusalem shows that is different in kind from the current Jerusalem: it will be a new creation, coming down from heaven, rather

than a transformation of the earthly city.

An alternative explanation is possible, and draws on the imagery already used for idolatry. Jerusalem imagery, the city and idolatry have already been connected (Ch. 11). Idolatry has already been connected with Jezebel (2:20). Perhaps her story lies behind the puzzling verse. The Jezebel of *1 Kings* 19 and 21 has authority over the king, her husband Ahab. Jezebel appears to be the true power in Israel, not the king. However, her period of influence was short: after the deaths of Ahab, Joram and Ahaziah, her influence was finished and she suffered a terrible end (*2 Kings* 9:30-37). Her death, furthermore, is the result of her idolatry, her unfaithfulness to God (*2 Kings* 9:22). The wider sequence of events in Revelation also matches the sequence of events around Jezebel's death. The destruction of the prostitute is the first stage of the destruction of God's enemies. In *2 Kings* Jezebel's death is the first stage in the purification of Israel by Jehu, and is followed by the destruction of Jezebel's allies, the worshippers of Ba'al and its cult.

Idolatry, false worship, often is used in the hope of controlling others and exerting authority, but the reality is different. For John, such idolatry is focused on members of the church. Ch.2 identified Jezebel with the Nicolaitans, those who wished to compromise their Christian faith by adopting elements of pagan practice. Like all users of idolatry they start thinking that they gain power and authority, but their idolatry ultimately turns and destroys them. The idolaters may think that they benefit from the compromises that they make, but these will backfire and destroy them. John's prime concern is to reveal the true state of those compromised by their idolatry and the fate that will overtake them.

Rather than pointing to a true state of affairs, 17:18 is an ironic comment of the false hopes which drive John's opponents: they think that they have true power, but this is a passing dream.

Notes

17:9- "wisdom" see 13:18: this is not a reference to some secret knowledge, but rather to the understanding of the reader.

"seven mountains"- Rome was commonly described as built on seven hills, the

dominant feature of the city up to the present day. It is an obvious clue to the prostitute's mount being identified with Rome. This makes clear the identification of the beast with Rome.

"seven kings"- a reference to the emperors of Rome. The meaning of seven is more important than the identification with any particular emperor (see above).

17:10. Five kings have already ruled. This is the time of the sixth king: the meaning of six could imply that this is a time of evil. The rule of Rome will shortly reach its end with a seventh king.

"only a little while" stresses that the end of the empire is imminent. Like the rule of Satan (12:12), the rule of Rome is short. This also gives encouragement: the time of the empire is short, implying that it will be followed by God's judgment.

17:11- "eighth", who will come after the end of the empire. He is one of the kings who returns. This could be a possible reference to the myth of *Nero redivivus* (see above). It could also suggest that God and Christ are being mimicked by the beast. Here there is a parody of the Second Coming (see 13:3 for a parody of the Resurrection).

17:12- see above (Outline) for some different identifications of the ten kings. Two factors may help the reader to prefer one identification to another. Firstly, the horns are part of the beast: does this mean that the kings should be part of the Roman empire rather than foreign powers from outside? Secondly, they have "yet to receive power": does this mean that it is wrong to identify them with the current administration or alliances of the empire? Rather than identify them with any particular group, John defines them by their actions (17:14). The significance of the ten may be found in the scriptural pictures John has used, in which case they are part of the description of the Roman empire given in *Dan 7:7*. They could also be a repeat of the description of the beast in 13:1. No specific identification may be needed or implied.

17:14- "Lamb"- see 5:6.

"Lord of lords and King of kings"- some suggest this may be particularly directed against the claims that Domitian made (Ford 1975,282) to be the ultimate ruler. Such a specific historical reference is not needed: the titles stress the true

sovereignty of God which has been pointed to in 1:5,18.

"chosen and faithful"- this reference to the true and faithful followers of Christ provides a subtle reminder that those who commit idolatry are no longer counted as true and faithful. John has already placed similar reminders throughout the preceding visions (6:9, 7:13-17, 12:17, 14:4).

17:15- "waters" - all the people who become part of the Roman administration and cults rather than following God. See also 13:7.

17:16- the interpretation given above (Outline) would make this verse refer to the destruction of the unfaithful faithful by those in whom they had trusted rather than God. Rather than help its followers, the beast will destroy them. Interpretations which see the prostitute as being Rome see this as a reference to the political chaos and civil strife which could be seen to threaten the survival of the empire throughout the first century. Those who favour a reference to the historical Jerusalem might see this as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army in AD 70. The language of destruction echoes *Ezekiel* 16:37-41 where unfaithful Jerusalem is left naked, *Ezek* 39:4,17-21 in which its flesh is eaten and *Ezek* 16:41 and 23:25 where burning is the penalty for its fornication, that is, idolatry. These would be fitting pictures to use as warnings for unfaithful Christians.

17:17- "God has put it into their hearts"- John shows that events which are about to take place do not occur because of the power of the beast, but because they are permitted by God. For evil as something "permitted by God", see the discussion in the Outline to the Seven Seals (6:1-8:1). John stresses that the devil and his subordinates have no power of themselves to wreak havoc but can only do so because God permits it. Why is it so permitted? In John's theology it seems that God allows sin to run its course and its full consequences be seen and experienced before the conclusion of his plans. See on 10:2-7.

CHAPTER 7
AFTER THE READING 2:
THE HYMN OF BABYLON'S DESTRUCTION
(REV 18:1-19:8)

An angel, described as "having great authority" introduces the next section. This follows on from the prophecies of Babylon's destruction given in Ch.17. The destruction itself is never described but it is the subject of the hymns. The passage has two sections, each beginning with a prophecy and finishing with hymns. In the first section, a prophecy (18:1-3) is followed by hymns sung by those who mourn the destruction of the city (18:4-20). A second prophecy (18:21-4) is followed by the hymns sung in heaven to celebrate the destruction of Babylon (19:1-8).

a) The Judgment Of Babylon (18:1-3)

Outline

The first prophecy about Babylon's destruction is given by an angel who is described as "having great authority". The prophecy links the destruction of Babylon to its previous actions. These have made Babylon the place of unclean spirits and demons. Such infestation has its roots in the "fornication" (idolatry- see Note 2:14) of the city.

Notes

18:1 "great authority" is only used in *Rev*. The same phrase has been used of the authority given by the dragon to the first beast (13:2). Here the angel has authority from God. In the Gospels, the word "authority" (Gk- *exousia*) has two meanings: genuine teaching (*Mk* 1:22) and the power to cast out demons (*Mk* 1:27).

"was made bright"- the descent of the angel, who has authority from God, brings light into the world (as does God himself- *Ezekiel* 43:2). Compare with the darkness brought by the powers of evil (9:2).

18:2 "mighty"- see 10:1.

"Fallen, Fallen"- the shape of the hymn resembles the lament sung by Amos over Israel (*Amos* 5:2). Note, too, that the Kiswahili translation's use of the stative verb (*anguka*) highlights the state of Jerusalem rather than the precise act of its overthrow. This reflects the "timeless" quality of many of the actions described (See Introduction, p.21).

"dwelling" - the phrase echoes several OT passages about Babylon (*Is* 13:11, *Jer* 50:19, 51:37). Ford argues that the Gk- *katoiketerion* is used frequently in the Septuagint to refer to the Temple, or other places where God dwells (1975, 296). Such a history would identify Babylon with idolatry by the faithful rather than a pagan city.

"demons"- the ancient peoples believed that supernatural beings such as demons often lived in ruins (*Is* 13:21- the Septuagint uses "demons", not "satyrs").

"foul"- Gk- *akatharton* means "unclean". The ruined city is not just a place of evil spirits, it is a place of impurity, where the faithful will not enter and God cannot be found. *Is* 34:11-13 lists several birds which were unclean. Many of these, and unclean animals, were scavengers or creatures that feed on dead bodies.

18:3- repeats a standard description of the city (14:8). The image of drinking is a parody of God, whose wrath is described as poured from a cup (14:10).

"fornication"- See 2:14,15; 17:1: a symbol of idolatry.

"grown rich"- idolatry is now linked with wealth. This reflects the Oracles to The Seven Churches in which wealth, and the arrogant self-confidence which it brings, was criticised (2:9, 3:17). This theme is developed in the hymns that follow.

b) Prophecies Of The Fall Of Babylon (18:4-20)

Outline

The fall of Babylon itself is never described, but only alluded to in hymns. The reader will notice that it is difficult to say exactly when Babylon is destroyed: the timelessness of the event stressed by the destruction seeming to be at some times a future event (18:8), and past at others (18:10,14,17,19). The different

settings of the hymns suggest, however, that the destruction is coming.

Part of the confusion comes because of the second prophecy which follows in 18:21-24. This should not cause confusion if it is seen that the two prophecies from heaven (18:4-8 and 18:21-24) take place in the same period of time.

The first prophecy (18:4-8) is set in John's immediate circumstances, and promises a future destruction. The hymns of the kings (18:10), merchants (18:14,16-17) and seafarers (18:18-20) all suggest that the destruction has taken place, and follow after the voice from heaven. The second prophecy (18:21-4) and its following hymns (19:1-8) occur in the same time frame, but in heaven rather than on earth. How can it be that the two prophecies refer to the same event? An illustration from the Gospels may be helpful.

In *Matthew*, the questioning of Jesus (*Mt* 26:57-69) precedes Peter's denial (*Mt* 26:69-75). The same order of events is found in *Mk*. In *Lk*, the order of events is reversed: Peter's denial (*Lk* 22:54-62) precedes Jesus' interrogation (*Lk* 22:63-71). In *Jn*, a different approach is used. The scene starts with Jesus before the High Priest (*Jn* 18:12-14). Then, part of Peter's denial (*Jn* 18:15-18) precedes the remainder of the interrogation of Jesus (*Jn* 18:19-24). Finally, the denial of Peter reaches its conclusion (*Jn* 18:25-27). There is, of course, no problem of order: the two events are concurrent. However, some writers choose to describe each episode in its entirety rather than mix them together. It is suggested that a similar phenomenon is found here: that each prophecy and its concurrent hymns is presented as an episode, but both refer to the same period of time.

The first prophecy (18:4-8) is sometimes considered difficult. It appears to contradict the earlier vision of Ch.11 in which the faithful are destroyed when the city is trampled by the Gentiles. Here the faithful are not trampled, but told to leave the city. The problem is similar to the problem of Temple imagery (see Notes 8:3). John's visions are not necessarily related or systematic. Rather, each image stresses a particular point. In Ch.11, John was stressing the danger of martyrdom and persecution, and the need for the faithful to persevere through such times. In Ch.18, a different point is being made, that the faithful should no longer have anything to do with the idolaters within congregation, those who are

in danger of compromising their faith.

A further argument arises in the three hymns which follow. In these the kings, merchants and seafarers lament the fall of Babylon. The laments are accompanied by a list which details a large number of goods which were traded with the city (18:11-13). Different commentators have used this list to argue different identities for the city. Thus Bauckham produces a long study of the different items and argues that the list points to the city being identified with Rome (1993a,338-83). Bauckham's study details the precise use and trade in these different items with many cross-references to ancient Roman writers (see Notes). However, despite the vast amount of learning packed into his argument, one crucial factor remains unknown. That is John's knowledge of Roman trade: would he have known, or been able to know, all that Bauckham can discover from his use of many different ancient writings?

A second approach is found in Ford in which it is argued that these goods were all part of trade with Jerusalem, and that their appearance could point to a criticism of Jerusalem for following Roman fashions (1975, 304-6). Ford uses Jewish texts, especially Josephus, to argue for the consumption of such goods in Jerusalem. Again, it can be asked whether John would have been so familiar with trade in Jerusalem. The reader's choice ultimately depends on the way John is considered.

A third approach is found in Sweet where *Ezekiel* 27:12-24, a lament over Tyre, is seen as providing a model for this list, which John subsequently reworks (1990,272). The list that appears here is not concerned with Tyre, which has no great importance for our writer. For Tyre as a symbol of a pagan city or Jerusalem, see Note 17:1.

Thus the mention of goods themselves does not provide an infallible key to identifying the city. The other factors which we have already noted in Ch.17 such as the use of fornication as a symbol for idolatry are just as important. Nor does the list of goods give any reason to reject the previous suggestion that the city refers to the unfaithful within the church. Whether the goods imagery implies Jerusalem or Rome, it must be remembered that the unfaithful faithful were being

criticised for their association with both cities: prophetically, with Jerusalem, for unfaithfulness, and historically, with Rome, as the source of the corruptions they were tempted to follow. If wealth and power were seen as a benefit of idolatry and compromise with pagan state religion, the luxurious trappings of pagan life would be fitting items to describe the city. The loss of such luxuries at the overthrow of the city would also provide a reminder that what is truly valuable is to be found elsewhere (*Mt* 6:19-21).

The linking of wealth and luxury with idolatry should not come as a surprise: the two have been identified as enemies of the church in Ch.s 2 and 3. In the laments over Babylon's destruction, John brings these two weaknesses together.

Notes

18:4 "my people"- the faithful are encouraged to leave the corrupt elements within the church to avoid the destruction which will come to those who have shared in the sins of the city. The command recalls *Jer* 51:45 and can be used for separating for moral reasons (*2 Cor* 6:17).

"share" (Gk- *sugkoinoneo*)- used in *Eph* 5:11 of sharing in the works of darkness and in *Phil* 4:14 of sharing in Paul's suffering.

18:5 "heaped high as heaven"- the sins of the unfaithful match the tower of Babel (*Gen* 11:4).

"remembered"-see 16:19. People's deeds are recorded for the final judgment (20:12).

"unjust deeds"- (Gk-*adikema*) may be used to stress the breaking of God's commandments rather than a more general kind of evil.

18:6- the city is judged by the standard of the Golden Rule (*Mt* 7:12)

"double"- according to the Mosaic law some crimes deserved a double punishment (*Ex* 22:4,7,9). Ford thinks that this means Babylon's crimes have been doubly bad and thus deserve a double punishment (1975,298).

18:7-"lived luxuriously"- Gk- *estreniasen* is translated as "went aworting" (Ford 1975,298) or "flaunted her power" (Sweet 1990,269).

"queen"- see *Is* 47:7-9. Laodicea has already been criticised in a similar way for her wrong opinions of herself (3:17). A root problem of idolatry is that reality is

lost, and the sinner has a false opinion of his or her strengths and weaknesses which further leads away from God.

"pestilence"- Gk- *thanatos* literally means "death" (see Notes 6:8).

"fire"- see Notes 17:16: the penalty for idolatry.

18:9 "kings of the earth" (17:2,18) may refer to earthly rulers in general, or to those who deferred to Rome.

"lived in luxury" - see Notes 18:7.

"smoke of her burning"- the penalty for idolatry. See Note 17:16.

18:10- the kings fear that the fate of Babylon will become their fate. The first burning of Babylon may cause them to repent before they are similarly affected. This echoes Ch.11 in which the preaching of the gospel is seen as a vital part of the work of the faithful in saving the nations. Under the picture of destruction, glimpses may be seen of the mercy of God.

"Alas, alas"- this pattern will be repeated in the other laments. Laments traditionally included two elements: a remembering of the characteristics of a dead person or thing destroyed, and the loss felt by those mourning.

"in one hour"- or "moment". The phrase stresses the swiftness and violence of the destruction.

18:12 "gold"- extravagantly used by rich Roman households, to the extent that laws were passed banning its use in some household items (Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.33)

"silver" again used excessively in Rome.

"jewels/precious stones"-mainly imported from India, used for jewellery and decorating household objects.

"pearls"- from the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, or India. Mainly used as jewellery.

"fine linen"- an expensive cloth, often used as a replacement for wool in Rome.

"purple"- refers to cloth dyed with murex (a sea crustacean) which gave a purple colour. Purple was used to denote high status either in public or religious life.

"silk"- a fabric woven from substances secreted by caterpillars, mainly from China. The wearing of silk was banned at one time (Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.33).

"scarlet"- an expensive dyestuff, produced from kermes oaks. The colour came

from an insect parasite rather than the tree.

"all kinds of citrus wood"- an expensive wood, prized for its patterning. Originally found along the North African coast, forests of this slow-growing wood were cut down and never replaced. By the 1st century, supplies came only from Morocco.

"ivory" - Roman use of ivory led to the extinction of the Syrian elephant. Most of the ivory supplied later came from India, though some came from North Africa. It could be used for jewellery, ornaments and even whole items of furniture

"costly wood"- includes ebony, maple, cedar and cypress.

"bronze"- objects made from a mixture of tin and copper. Corinth was especially famous for its bronze products.

"marble" - a stone prized for its colour. It was used for statues and decorating buildings

18:13 - "cinnamon"- probably the wood (cassia) as well as the spice. East Africa may have been a source for this product. Arabian traders do not seem to have informed the Romans of this source.

"amomum/spice"- an aromatic spice from South India

"incense"- a mixture of spices and dried gum/resin which gives a fragrant odour when burned. Used in religious ceremonies, funerals and as a perfume for house rooms.

"myrrh"- an aromatic ointment used for perfumes. Usually imported from Yemen or Somalia.

"frankincense"- used as an ingredient in perfume, and burned at funerals.

"wine"- a luxury product. By the late 1st century, there was a surplus production of wine and a shortage of wheat . See note 6:5.

"olive oil"- olive oil was used both for cooking and as lotion.

"wheat"- a staple grain. Much came from Egypt. In the imperial period the supply of grain from Egypt was necessary to stop famine in Rome which could no longer feed itself.

"chariots"- four-wheeled private chariots used by the rich and famous. Ford notes that this is the only item in the list whose use cannot be documented at the Temple or in Jerusalem unless "insinuating that Roman ways were introduced

into the sacred city" (1975,305)

"slaves, that is, human lives"- the economy of most ancient societies was based on slavery. Even in Athens, which is claimed to be the founding city of democracy, very few men were entitled to vote: women, aliens and slaves (the bulk of the population) had no such rights. Despite the strictures laid out about slavery in the Torah (*Lev 25:39-55*), there seems to have been a flourishing slave trade in Jerusalem (Ford 1975,305). The word for slave used (lit. "bodies") is described by the phrase that follows, "human souls or lives". The phrasing here points to the reality of slavery, and may mark the nearest to a criticism of the slave trade found in the NT.

18:14- the riches which Babylon coveted have proven to be short-lived, and can never be regained. This is meant to be contrasted with the rewards which await the faithful.

18:16-see Outline: The Prostitute (17:1-6) and accompanying notes for the identity of the city.

18:17- "one hour"- see Note 18:10.

"shipmaster" (Gk- *kubernetes*) may mean ship owner or captain (*Acts 27:11*).

18:18 What city was like...?" Compare the question of 13:4, where the same is asked of the beast from the sea. People are blind to the true nature of the city. It appeared superficially attractive. The question will be answered in Ch. 21-22. There is a city which is all that Babylon claimed to be, but never was: the heavenly Jerusalem.

18:19 "all grew rich". It is difficult to see how the historical Jerusalem could be so described unless this is hyperbole (over exaggeration). Historically, it would fit with Rome. Could the "unfaithful faithful" be so described? It is unlikely that they influenced such economic strength, but John may feel justified in describing them in this way because of their links to Rome through the pagan cults. They have, after all, pursued the values and tastes on which such trade has been built. In modern terms we might say that they have become affected by consumerism, and therefore, are as guilty of supporting such trade as the most extravagant consumers and their society.

"one hour" see Note 18:10.

18:20- a surprising finish, which anticipates the section that follows. The sailors realise that the fate of the city has come from the judgment of God: its destruction has revealed to them who God truly is, and what he can do.

"apostles"- may refer to the Twelve apostles, or to all who "have been sent". The word "apostle" changes its meaning in the NT period. Paul uses it to describe himself, and in such texts its primary meaning is "one sent by God". Later NT writings such as *Acts* use it to refer to the Twelve who were chosen by Jesus. *Rev* 21:14 uses Gk-*apostolos* to refer to the Twelve, but there it is qualified by the number 12. That, and the early date argued for *Rev*, would both point to the unqualified use here (that is, with no number) standing rather for the Pauline usage, "one sent". The idea is similar, too, to *Mt.* 23:37, in which Jerusalem kills the prophets and stones those who are sent (Gk- *apostalmenous*).

"judgment for you against her"- literally, "God has judged your judgment from her". The city falsely accused the faithful and wished their destruction. Because such a charge was false, the penalty has rebounded back. *Deut* 19:16-19 describes this as the fitting penalty for false witnesses. The punishment of Babylon is thus self-inflicted, originating in its own attempts to torment the faithful.

c) The Second Judgment Of Babylon (18:21-24)

Outline

The second judgment describes the fall of Babylon by using a prophetic action, the hurling of a millstone, and a hymn which interprets the action.

The action itself echoes two other passages in Scripture, *Jer* 51:59-64 and *Matt* 18:6. In the *Jer* passage a scroll describing the destruction of Babylon is tied to a rock and hurled into the river Euphrates, an act which signifies the ultimate destruction of the city. In *Matt* 18:6, a warning is given. Those who lead the "little ones" astray will have a millstone fastened to their necks and be cast into the sea.

These images suggest two things. Firstly, the ultimate destruction of those symbolised by Babylon, and, secondly, that the reason for their destruction is that

they have caused others to be led astray. By leading others away from God and the true faith, those who would compromise their integrity and faith bring themselves to destruction (2:14-16). What, in this instance, brings their destruction is that their errors have brought damage to others. This is based, in part, on "sorcery" (18:23). This sorcery may be purely symbolic, signifying idolatry, but could also involve participation in magical activities, given their popularity in Asia Minor (see Notes 2:1, 15). However, it is also based on the city's persecution of the faithful (18:24).

Notes

18:21- "mighty angel"- see 5:2 and 10:1. The presence of the mighty angel may mark the fulfilment of what is written in the earlier scrolls.

"stone" - see *Jer.* 51:59-64, though here no scroll is attached to the stone.

"millstone/sea" - suggest that the *Jer* passage is interpreted using *Matt* 18:6, or the saying that lies behind the verse. *Mt* uses Gk- *skandalisei* to describe making others stumble. *Rev* has already used the noun *skandalon* (2:14). This sin appears to be punished in the destruction of the city.

"with violence"-Gk- *hormemati* is only used here in the NT. Its related verb (Gk- *hormesan*) is used to describe the Gadarene swine and their rush to the sea (*Mt* 8:32).

18:22- *Ezek* 26:13 may provide a source for the silence of the musicians.

"artisan"- linked to the list in 18:11-13. The idea returns in the mention of merchants and magnates in 18:23.

18:23 "bridegroom and bride"- may have a religious significance: the "bridegroom" can be a symbol of Christ (*Mt* 25:1-13 and others). Such a significance is not, however, developed. Rather, the ending of all the usual activities of life signifies the completeness of Babylon's destruction (see *Lk* 17:26-30; *Mt* 24:37-9).

18:24 "prophets and saints"- may refer to faithful members of the church, or perhaps also to the faithful of the Old Testament (*Heb* 11:32-38).

"all who have been slaughtered"- this phrase which lays the blame for all deaths on Babylon may point to the city representing an attitude or kind of faith rather

than a specific city such as Jerusalem or Rome. It would also suggest that Babylon should not be identified purely with the Nikolaitans, but with all who share the tendency to syncretism and compromise.

d) Praise In Heaven (19:1-8)

Outline

The second judgment, like the first, is followed by a series of hymns. These hymns are sung in heaven. The first hymn is sung by the heavenly multitude, the second by the 24 elders. The third is a command to praise God, which is followed by a hymn sung again by the heavenly multitude. The first hymn stresses the judgment which God has enacted on Babylon. The second (19:4) is a very short hymn of praise. The final hymn stresses the rule of God and the marriage feast of the Lamb.

These two events mark the final period expected in Jewish and Christian thinking. Both schools of thought believed that the present age of the world, in which the faithful may suffer poverty or persecution would be followed by a period in which God would rule directly and all pain and loss be banished. This new perfect kingdom was often connected to the coming of the Messiah, or Christ. Some schools of Jewish theology still hold this belief: that the Messiah will come to bring in the full rule of God. Christians, who believe that the Messiah or Christ has already come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but that the Kingdom of God did not come fully at that first coming, often believe that there will be a second coming of the Messiah at which the kingdom of God will be fully revealed and experienced. *Rev* describes this Second Coming in the events of chapters 19 and 20.

Notes

19:1 "great multitude" -see 5:11, 7:9.

"Salvation, glory and power"- God is worshipped as the one who rightly holds these blessings. These have variously been claimed by pagan gods (see Notes 1:18) and the beasts (13:1-18). See also the praise of God in 4:11 and 5:12-14.

19:2 "judgments are true and just"- See 15:3 and 16:7. Compare the false

judgments and trials brought against the faithful (2:9, 12:10).

"avenged blood"- Antipas may have been killed by the unfaithful (2:13). Even if the "unfaithful faithful" were not guilty of actual murder, they helped to create the circumstances in which the blood of the faithful would be shed.

19:3 - "Hallelujah"- Hebrew for "Praise God/the Lord!"

"power"- see Note 5:12.

"smoke.."- compare this with the incense of heavenly worship (5:8; 8:4). Much of the language used to describe the destruction of God's enemies (11:18:19:20 and 20:10) echoes the destruction of Sodom (*Gen* 19:24-28).

19:4 "twenty-four elders" - see Note 4:4.

19:5 "throne" - the seat of God (Note 4:2). The voice would appear to be the voice of God himself.

"small and great"- see Note 11:18.

19:6 "many waters/ thunder peals" - see Notes 1:15, 6:21, 14:2- these symbolise the presence or voice of God.

19:7 "marriage of the Lamb". For Lamb, see Note 5:6.

Bridegroom imagery was soon used about Christ (see Outline; see also *Mt* 22:2) and Christians were identified as the Bride of Christ (*Rom* 7:2-4, *2 Cor* 11:2; *Eph* 5:25-32). When John says that the marriage of the Lamb has come, he cannot mean that all things are now at an end, because several other events will follow. One of these is described as a 1000 years (20:2) which suggests that the end is still far away. The hymn does however mark the beginning of this final process and anticipates its conclusion.

"bride"-Ford argues that the use of bridal imagery refers to two OT passages (1975,317-8; see also *Is* 54:5-6 and *Ezek* 16:8-10). These two passages both speak of Jerusalem and support Ford's contention that Babylon represents Jerusalem, or rather that John is making a distinction between Old and New Israel. Such a background would also support our thesis that Babylon represents the unfaithful faithful, those who have rejected God by their following of pagan practices.

19:8 "fine linen, pure and bright"- these represent the clothes of the saints (19:14;

3:4,17-18). They are contrasted to the clothing of the Great Prostitute (17:3) and the Christians criticised at Sardis and Laodicea.

"righteous deeds"- these are symbolised by the linen clothes. Note that John is not saying that the righteous deeds are what save a person. Deeds, rather, show righteousness and faithfulness to God (see *James* 5:14-26, esp. 18).

CHAPTER 8
AFTER THE READING 3:
THE BEGINNING OF THE END
(REV:19:9-20:15)

a) A Warning About True Worship (19:9-10)

Outline

After the final hymn, there follows a short scene in which John is commanded to write a blessing, described as the words of God. He wishes to worship the angel who gives this message, but is stopped. A firm point is being made: there may be other heavenly creatures, but only God is to be worshipped. Similar ideas are seen in the book of *Enoch* which describes a heavenly creature called Metatron who appears to be similar to God, but is destroyed because of the possible confusion his appearance might cause: he might be mistaken for God. Such an example also gives a reminder that John is also being radical in his descriptions of the Lamb as being worshipped (5:8) or sharing a throne with God (Notes, 3:21): the implicit claim is that the Lamb is divine.

In a contemporary African context, such thinking may force a review of the roles of such "heavenly" beings as ancestors. They have an existence that is "heavenly" because they are nearer to God. Not only that, they also become participants in human religious activity. If John's thinking is transferred to such a context, the existence of such creatures would be assumed, but he would warn that they are not fit to be worshipped. The question thus would have to be asked: if ancestors cannot be worshipped, what is the correct attitude to have to them? Here African Christian theologians are divided: some deny any role for the ancestors, others say that they may be respected or venerated, but not worshipped. John's challenge is that we examine what we do and ask whether we are worshipping those who should not be worshipped, or not.

In a puzzling last phrase (19:10), the testimony of Jesus is described as the spirit of prophecy. This raises two points. First, is the "testimony of Jesus" the testimony which is about Jesus, or is it the testimony given by Jesus? (see Note,

below). Second, the testimony is described as the spirit of truth. The passage thus refers to God, Jesus and spirit. Sweet suggests that the passage thus implies a theology of the Trinity (1990, 281). A similar "trinitarian" theology has already been suggested in 1:4 and Chapters 12-3. It must be admitted that there is no fully worked out theology of the Trinity in *Rev*, and that later formulations like that of Chalcedon should not be read into the text. However, given the early date that we suggest for *Rev*, it is worth pointing out that Christian theology was moving at a very early stage towards a trinitarian theology, and that this should not be seen as some later error.

The "spirit of prophecy" is identified with the "testimony of Jesus". This is a claim which is of the greatest importance in thinking about matters of faith. To John, prophecy and spiritual matters must, in some way, match up to the testimony given by Jesus in the events of his life, death and resurrection. It goes without saying that this has great importance in our own time for thinking about the relationship of God, Jesus, Spirit and religious traditions. If religions, sects or prophetic voices claim to be "spiritual", that is, "of the spirit" and thus "from God" (and that seems to include a claim that they are true), how are such claims to be tested?

Notes

19:9 "angel"- many translations begin with this, or a similar word. The Greek text itself says only "he". This "he" cannot obviously refer to God, and so "angel" is often added for clarification. Sweet identifies the angel with 17:1 who has already talked to John rather than the angel who is depicted in the vision of 18:1 (1990, 280)..

"write"- continues the command of 1:19.

"blessed"- a traditional Jewish form of blessing (see 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; *Matthew* 5:3-12). Here the blessing is for those who are invited. Those invited must respond in a way that is fitting (*Mt* 22:11-14).

"marriage supper of the Lamb" for "Lamb", see Note 5:6, for "marriage", see Note 19:6. "Supper" adds in the notion of the Messianic Banquet, that the victory and rule of God could be likened to a heavenly banquet to which God would call

his faithful people (Is 25:6-8, 55:1-3). The common practice of Jesus' time, that weddings were held together with celebratory meals, helped in the creation of such imagery.

"These are the true words of God"- Sweet points out that these words describe not just the blessing, but all the preceding words and vision (1990,280). A similar phrase is found in 22:6, and is also followed by a misguided attempt to worship the angel (22:8).

19:10-"worship....'You must not do that!'"- Sweet: suggests that this passage and 22:6-8 point to a danger which John saw within the churches of Asia Minor, that of confusing the message of God with God himself (1990,280). It is, however, also possible that John is referring to a concern found in Jewish writings. Within Jewish cosmology, there were other heavenly beings, but these were not to be considered objects of worship: that was only for God. John may be warning against the danger of worshipping "angels" or the "other gods". In Ps 82:1, we read of other gods, but they are not the equals of the God of Israel, and unfit to be worshipped. A wider discussion of this background and the implications of "worship" language being used in respect of Jesus is found in the Outline for 4:1-2,3-11 and Note 4:10.

"fellow servant" implies that the status of the angel is no greater than that of John or faithful followers of Jesus.

"testimony of Jesus" - either "testimony about Jesus" or "testimony given by Jesus". The same phrase is found in 1:2,9 and 12:17. The related phrase "revelation of Jesus Christ" in 1:1 seems to mean "the revelation given by Jesus Christ". It may be that the phrase has been chosen deliberately to include both these meanings. Given 1:1 and the other usages, it would seem that "testimony given by Jesus" is better, focusing on the events of his life, death and resurrection, rather than any report of those events. It is keeping this testimony which is the mark of the true servant.

"spirit of truth"- Sweet suggests that this was a rabbinic term for the Holy Spirit (1990,2810). John here makes the point that any true prophecy must match up with Jesus' witness, meaning, if our analysis of "testimony" is correct, his life and

work.

b) The Rider On The White Horse (19:11-16)

Outline

A white horse and its rider have already been seen in 6:2, identified as the Antichrist imitating the victorious Christ. It is this victorious Christ who now appears, identifiable by appearance, metaphors and titles: many of these have already been used earlier in the visions to describe Jesus (see Notes, below). This passage gives us the first appearance of Christ himself in the sequence of events which lead up to the End, and show that a new phase of the history of salvation is about to be described. The appearance of Christ marks the beginning of the end of the supernatural enemies of God who will be destroyed in order of importance. Babylon has already been destroyed, now it is the turn first of the beasts and finally of Satan himself.

A major point of discussion centres on the blood which covers the rider (19:13). It is easy to jump to the conclusion that this is the victorious Christ covered with the blood of his enemies. However, there is a problem with this interpretation. How can Christ be covered with blood in 19:13 when the slaughter of battle has not yet begun (19:15)? A different answer comes if we remember the scene in 14:20 and the depiction of two harvests. Like that earlier scene, this one draws on imagery from the Old Testament (see Notes on 14:15-20 for "harvest"). However to this imagery has been added the picture of *Is* 63:1-3. This mixing of OT images should warn us that a different aspect of harvest is now being considered. At this point the second harvest, that of the unrighteous begins. In this interpretation, the blood which stains Christ is not the blood of his enemies, but his own blood, and that of the church. John subtly gives a reminder that victorious Christ of battle is really the crucified Christ.

Notes 19:11- "heaven opened"- see *Ezekiel* 1:1. The opening of heaven signifies that the revelation comes from God.

"white"- the colour of Christ (1:14), worn by the faithful (4:4; 7:13), and worn by the AntiChrist in imitation of Christ (6:2).

"faithful and true"- a similar title is used to describe Christ in 3:14 .

"judges"- Christ shares God's function of coming to judge the world (Is 11:4; Ps 96:13). The verse may also use the imagery of Ps 45:4. This would also hint at the kingship of Christ.

"makes war"- is similar to warlike descriptions of the Messiah (Philo, *De Praemiis et Poenis* [On Reward and Punishment], 16:95). This war will be directed against the pagan enemies of Christ and the "unfaithful faithful" within the churches.

19:12- "flames of fire"- see Notes, 1:14 and 2:18.

"diadems"- the rider in 6:2 wore a crown (Gk- *stephanos*) which is the headgear worn by the winner in an athletic conquest (2:10; 3:11). The rider here wears crowns (Gk- *diademata*) a sign that he is a king. The dragon and beast wore crowns in imitation of God and Christ (12:3; 13:1).

"name which no-one knows"- the fact that his name is unknown suggests it must be other than the name given in 19:13. It should be remembered that people could have several names in ancient cultures (thus, Simon Peter). This "secret name" may reflect the reward given to the faithful in 2:17 and 3:12, that they know who Christ is in a way superior to those who are still alive on this earth.

19:13- "a robe dipped in blood"- based on the imagery of Is 63:1-3, but John has re-interpreted the passage so to show Christ bearing the marks of his own suffering and death. "dipped" (Gk- *bebammenon*) is related to baptism, and could be used of a ritual or cultic practice. It may also suggest purification. This would be strange if it applied only to Jesus Christ himself. How could the one who was without sin be purified, and why? If however, Christ also stands for the faithful who make up the Body of Christ this would be a more likely meaning (Caird 1984,242).

"name..Word of God"- there are several parallels to this usage. *Wisdom* 18:14-16 talked of God's will as a person. The closest obvious parallel is the *Logos/Word* of *John* 1:1-18. If it is correct to assume a connection between Revelation and the Johannine writings, and that Revelation was an earlier work than John, it could be suggested that the Johannine prologue is a sustained reflection on this title. Ford notes similarities to the Qumran writings to the coming of God and of

the Messiah (1975,319-20). John would thus appear to be using imagery which could imply Christ is both God and Messiah. If so, this is making a definite statement of faith that would not be acceptable to all Jews. The Messiah was not necessarily considered to be God by some Jewish traditions.

"armies of heaven"- the fact that these are dressed in fine linen may identify them with the heavenly host of 7:13-17. See also 19:8 for "fine linen" as a distinguishing mark of the faithful.

"sharp sword"- see 1:16.

"rod of iron"- see 2:27, and Note, 2:25 for the significance of an iron rod.

"tramples the winepress of the wrath of God"- the image of trampling the winepress comes from *Is* 63:1-3. A similar image has already been used in 14:20, but here the picture is much more violent. However, the meaning of "wrath of God" must be borne in mind. It has already been seen that the wrath of God is not so much anger, as God letting the consequences of sin take place (Note, 14:10). In this light, the phrase suggests that Christ brings sin to its natural conclusion. Christ is, indeed, preparing something, but it is a cup which the evil have prepared for themselves (17:6; 18:6). What, ultimately, will destroy the evil ones is their own evil.

"written on robe...thigh"- a variety of explanations are given. Ford suggests that the Hebrew *rgl* for "thigh" has been confused with the Hebrew *dgl* meaning "flag, banner" (1975, 323). However, this depends on a Hebrew text being wrongly translated, and there is no direct evidence for any such writing. Caird prefers "leg" arguing that this is where a sword would be hung, and that the title sits in place of the sword which has already been described as a tongue (1984, 246-7). This seems unnecessarily complicated. Perhaps the most straightforward suggestion comes from art. On Roman statues, the name of the person was often written on the thigh of the statue (Cicero, *Verr.*, 4:43; Justinus 15:4-5).

"King of kings and Lord of lords"- see 17:14.

c) The Defeat Of The Beast (19:17-21)

Outline

At this point, the order of events is straightforward. Christ has come, accompanied by his conquering army. An angel now calls the birds of the air to a great supper (19:17). This great supper is not the Messianic Banquet which Christ will eat with the faithful, but a great supper in which the slaughtered enemies of Christ will become the food served to the birds of the air. At the end of the battle the followers of the two beasts have been slaughtered (19:21), and the two beasts, which are the beasts of Ch. 13. cast into the lake of fire and destroyed.

As is so often the case, care must be taken in interpreting John's visions. It should not be assumed that these are literal pictures of what will take place, but are rich symbolic pictures. For example, the enemies are killed by the rider's sword, which proceeds from his mouth (19:21). If this is pictured literally, it seems improbable. However, it is much more effective as a symbolic picture. If the sword is taken as the Gospel (see 1:16; 19:15), there is here a representation of the way in which being an enemy of Christ, that is, one who has heard and kept the teaching of Christ, results in death rather than life. John, in graphic images, is repeating the old choice of life or death (*Deut.* 30:15,19-20) and showing that the choice depends on the acceptance or rejection of Christ.

As has been said, the order of events is straightforward so far: destruction of God's enemies begins with the weakest followers and then the beasts. Ultimately it will finish with the eternal punishment of Satan. However, there is second battle described in 20:8-9. It will need to be decided whether that scene is a second description of this battle (a recapitulation) or a second battle.

Notes

19:17- "standing in the sun"- Sweet thinks that this may be a reminder of the direction mentioned in 16:12 (1990,285- east). This would make the current battle the working out of the prophecy in 16:12-16, already identified as Armageddon.

"birds" both Ford (1975,314-5) and Caird (1984,247) note that this image is similar to a saying of Jesus (*Mt.* 24.28; *Lk.* 17:37). Both then note that the bird in

the gospel saying is a "vulture" or an "eagle". Whilst modern readers may think of these a dirty, carrion birds, ancient readers would have had a different understanding. To them, these birds were remarkable for the speed with which they found their prey. Thus, the image may rather suggest that the events are coming quickly. See Note 8:13 for "eagle".

"great supper"- this is partly a twist in the Messianic Banquet. However, God's enemies will not be invited to such a meal, but rather become the food for the birds. The passage is based on *Ezek 39:4,17-20*. Sweet suggests that such violent imagery is used to warn Christians about the fate which awaits those with whom they are tempted to compromise (1990:285).

19:18- the fate of destruction awaits all who fight for the beasts, no matter what their status. It should be noted that this battle does not mark the complete destruction of the nations, for they will be seen again in 20:8. The outcome of this battle is that the earthly power of Satan and the beasts have been destroyed.

19:19- "kings of the earth"- see Note, 16:14 and Outline: *The Prostitute's Mount* for possible identification.

19:20 - "beast" - See 13:1-10,18.

"false prophet" - see 13:11-17.

"fiery lake of burning sulphur"- appears to be based on a mixture of images.

"hurled" may be based on the fate of the rebels in *Num 16:30-34*. "Sulphur" suggests the punishment of Sodom & Gomorrah (*Gen 19:24*- see Note, 14:10).

The concept of punishment by fire echoes the image of Gehenna. Gehenna was a valley outside Jerusalem in which bonfires of burning rubbish burned by day and night. Gehenna was used to describe punishment in Jewish apocalyptic and later rabbinic writings (Ford 1975, 33 and 81). Jesus also appears to have used it as an image of punishment in the gospels (*Mt 25:46*). The fate of the beast by being burned may pick up the prophecy of *Dan 7:1-12* in which the fourth beast is punished by fire (Ford 1975, 325).

It is important that we note Christ's victory is not just over the evil people of this world, who are the followers of the beast, but also over the supernatural manifestations of evil, whether described as monsters, ideologies or systems.

The outcome of this battle is that no group or ideology which is hostile to God remains which has power on earth.

d) The Millennium (20:1-6)

Outline

This passage is named for the "thousand years" which it mentions, and is probably one of the most hotly disputed passages of the New Testament. An inkling of the variety of interpretations has been given in the Introduction. Those who wish an accessible summary of this history are recommended to study Grenz's *The Millennial Maze*. Our concern here is not with the history of the interpretation, but rather to focus on the text itself. A close and careful reading is demanded first.

The first event is the binding of Satan, who is imprisoned for a period of one thousand years.

During the time which Satan is imprisoned, those who have been faithful to God take their thrones and give judgment. This is also called their reign, and they reign with Christ throughout this 1000 year period. This period is also called the first resurrection.

Four questions arise:

- *when will the 1000 years take place?*
- *why does John talk about 1000 years?*
- *is this a literal or a symbolic period of 1000 years?*
- *why will Satan be released at the end of the 1000 years?*
- *what is the "first resurrection"?*

1) When does the 1000 years take place?

This question needs to be asked because different answers have been given. See *Approaches to Interpreting Revelation*. However, for John, it would appear that this 1000 year period is yet to come. There are two ways of timing these events.

The first is to say that the righteous already rule, that is, the period of 1000 years is now. This view might be similar to Paul's idea that the righteous are already

saints, that they have already received the inheritance which Christ promised (*Rom* 8:14-17). How would such a view explain the presence of evil in the world? It cannot be denied that we live in a world in which the powers of evil still exert some authority and influence. It would not fit with the outcome of the battle (19:17-21) which destroyed evil power on earth. In reply, it might be answered that any current evil is now explained by the final battle of 20:8-9. However, those two brief verses seem to talk of a short, decisive battle which ends in the ultimate destruction of all evil (also 20:3). That does not square with the persistence of evil in the world.

A second objection is that the events of chapter 19 refer to the return of Christ, bearing the marks of his suffering. This theory, that the 1000 years is now, would have no place for the return of Christ. Any idea of Christ's Ascension and Second Coming would have to be telescoped into the Resurrection. The familiar ideas of resurrection, ascension and second coming would all be explained by one idea, resurrection. Whilst that might make John's theology agree with Paul's, to the extent that the righteous would already have received the promises of Christ, it would lead to a clash with Paul's expectation that Christ would come again (*1 Thess* 5:1-11). This expectation was also shared by the Gospel writers, *James* 5:7-11, *Hebrews* 10:37-9 and *2 Peter* 3:10. To place ourselves in the millennium would appear to set aside an important belief held by many of the NT writers.

It would also appear to clash with John's constant theme that the faithful should remain faithful and struggle to do so. John has repeated this theme throughout his writings (2:3, 2:10 and others). There appears to be little chance that the faithful will fall away in the 1000 year period. Indeed, such an idea is not mentioned here. Yet this is a real threat for John and his audience.

It would then appear better to accept the second option, that the events of the millennium are yet to come, and that our current place is waiting for the destruction of evil on earth which Christ will accomplish when he comes again. This view, of course, leads to the question of why Satan will be set free again after a period of 1000 years (see next section).

2) Why does John talk about 1000 years?

The answer to the first question has already shown that many of the NT writers thought and wrote about the Last Things. Yet, none of them has any mention of this 1000 year period which John mentions. Why does John include a Last Thing which no-one else mentions?

Some critics have attempted to answer this by saying that the period of 1000 years was an idea which John inherited from the Jewish thinking of his time. Ford calls this the "temporary messianic kingdom" (1975,352). It expresses the idea that there is a period when the Messiah rules either a spiritual or earthly kingdom before the Day of Judgment. This temporary kingdom is described in a number of ways. 1 *Enoch* 91-103 talks of a "seventh age" which is followed by a new creation. *Jubilees* 23:26-31 talks of a thousand year period without any evil. *The Sibylline Oracles* 3:46-62, 741-761 and 767-784 suggest a temporary period, a "golden age", before the end. 2 *Enoch* 25-33, whose date (around AD 50) is close to *Rev*, talks of a thousand year period between the end of creation and the eternal age. The *Apocalypse of Baruch* (around AD 70) has three important details, mentioning that the kingdom of the Messiah will come at the end of this world, that it will come soon, and that its coming is linked to the fall of the Roman empire. 4 *Ezra* 7:26-30 describes events that are near. An invisible city will appear, and the Messiah will reign with those who do not die for four hundred years. After this time the Messiah will die and there will be seven days of silence before the general judgment and resurrection, and the final end.

None of these is identical to *Rev*. Whilst it is possible that John was using a contemporary idea, it cannot be said that he was forced to use it whether he liked it or not. John was no more forced to do this than any other NT writer. Furthermore, we have already seen that John was never forced to use traditions, ideas or portions of Scripture in ways which did not suit him. His previous use of such texts and traditions has shown that he was a free interpreter, using ideas, images and passages to suit his own purposes rather than being forced to tailor his thinking to traditional ideas and interpretations. If John has used the idea of 1000 years, it is not because circumstances have forced him to do this, but

because they contain important ideas. The interpreter's task is to try and work out why they are important.

In fairness, the question does not so much centre on the 1000 years themselves, but on the subsequent freeing of Satan. It is that which is difficult for us to understand. We cannot, however, escape the seriousness of the question by saying that John has been forced to include a traditional idea which he did not wish to mention. Such an answer both gives a false picture of John as a slave to traditional thinking, and means that the significance of the passage is diminished (that it does not really have any weight in John's thinking). It is better to take the passage seriously and then look for an explanation.

3) Is this a literal or symbolic period of 1000 years?

Much of the controversy about this passage has come from its being considered to be a period of 1000 years, and subsequent attempts to draw dates for the last battle and Last Judgment (20:7-15).

It is, however, very uncertain that such a literal period is meant. John's use of numbers has, so far, been symbolic rather than literal. It is strange to suggest that, with the visions reaching their completion, he now changes his methods. Further, as we have seen, the idea of 1000 years is not one which contemporary writers use literally. For some, it is a symbolic period representing a complete age, or period of history rather than an exact time. *2 Enoch* seems to use "thousand years" in this way. Furthermore, the difficulties of using a thousand years as a period of time according to our calculations is also difficult. *Psalms* 90:4 describes a thousand years as being like a day to God. *2 Peter* 3:8 is even more confusing saying that, to God, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day!

Such examples should, at least, warn that caution should be used in thinking of the period of 1000 years as a literal period. Given John's previous way of using numbers, together with contemporary thinking, it would appear much more likely that this is not literally a period of 1000 years, but rather means that the Messiah will rule with the saints for a complete period, as planned by God, before the End.

4) *Why will Satan be released at the end of the 1000 years?*

The fact that Satan might still be able to deceive the nations (20:3) provides a reminder that not all the unfaithful died in the battle of 19:17-21. There still exists a considerable people who are in danger of being deceived. They are also the people who will be ruled by the faithful (20:4-5). Despite the fact that Satan has been locked up, he still provides a threat, and that threat becomes a reality in 20:7.

Caird provides an explanation for this strange series of events. He notes that one reason for the appearance of Gog and Magog is because of the prophecies of *Ezekiel* 38-9 (1984,256-7). The battle is there because the prophecy must be fulfilled. However, as Caird notes, it could be argued that this prophecy has already been fulfilled by the battle of 19:17-21, which was also, in part, based on these prophecies. There must be some further explanation. This is explained by the Gog and Magog myth. Gog only attacks Israel when it has become a place of peace and justice. Gog has nothing to do with justice, punishment or retribution. It is the secure, peaceful Israel which is attacked (*Ezek.* 38:8,11,14). It is such an Israel, the place ruled by Christ and the faithful, which is still in danger, even from the entombed Satan. This background begins to answer the question of why the captivity, release and destruction. To show Satan as immediately destroyed (which would appear the most logical event to follow the battle of Ch. 19) would fail to give a complete description of the evil which has been faced and will be completely subdued by Christ.

We must remember that the writings have, from the beginning, been described as revelations: they reveal the truth to God's people. Thus, the events of the revelation must depict the truth of our situation, the power of God and the nature of evil. The events described in John's visions need to be understood not only as events, their wider significance as statements about God and about evil also must be understood. To that end, Caird's conclusions about the meaning of the Final Battle are worth noting:

The powers of evil have a defence in depth, which enables them constantly to summon reinforcement from beyond the frontiers of man's knowledge and control. However far human society progresses, it can never, while this world

lasts, reach the point where it is invulnerable to such attacks. Progress there must be, otherwise God is neither Lord of history nor Lord of creation. But even when progress issues in the millennium, men must remember that they still have no security except in God.

(Caird 1984,257).

It might be possible for God to destroy evil in a flash, but such a description would give us no understanding of God's power, nor of the nature of evil. John's apparently clumsy repetition of battles and a seemingly irrelevant captivity and release serve the function of revealing to his audience more fully the nature and depth of evil, and of revealing the truth that even those who are apparently safe from evil can still be threatened. That threat will always be a part of this world. Even the church and the most faithful are in danger. Even an entombed Satan has the potential to threaten this world., and to wage war on the faithful. Only the coming of a new creation, the heavenly Jerusalem, will see the threat pass. Only God can guarantee safety.

5) What is the "first resurrection"?

John's writing about resurrection is also puzzling because he mentions two resurrections. The first resurrection is only for those who have been faithful to Christ. The second resurrection is the resurrection is for the "rest of the dead", that is, those who have died an earthly death whilst not believing in, or being faithful to, Christ. They are brought to life at the end of the 1000 years in time for the Last Judgment. Rather than talk of two resurrections, which might imply that a group experiences two different kinds of resurrection, we need to think of there being two different resurrections, each one affecting a different kind of people. No-one experiences both, but everyone will experience either the first or the second resurrection, depending on their faithfulness to Christ.

The first resurrection is only for those who have been faithful to Christ, and died in their faithfulness. This resurrection gives continuity of life. The faithful dead live through the 1000 year period as co-rulers with Christ. After the 1000 years, they will take their place in the heavenly Jerusalem (Ch. 21).

The second resurrection is different. These unfaithful dead are only brought back to life at the end of the 1000 year period (20:11-15), when they will be judged

according to their deeds.

These two kinds of resurrection are different in quality. It is not hard to draw the conclusion that the first resurrection is better in quality than the second, that the reward for the faithful is better than the reward for the unfaithful. This can be an idea that makes Christians uneasy, because it can lead to the suspicion that we remain faithful to Christ for no motive except self-interest: it will be better for us to be faithful because it will reward us better. That may be so, but it must be tempered with one realisation. We believe, we have faith, that the reward is better. Without faith and hope, we would not, could not, calculate in this way. Our choosing the better reward is rarely a cool, clinical judgment. Our motives for faithfulness rarely depend purely on the hope that we will "get into heaven", but on our love of God. Those who treat faith purely as a matter of "what they will get" without loving God already have their warning (*Matthew 7:21-24*). Perhaps the best way of thinking about this is to use our imagination and ask whether we would still do what pleases God, even if there was no promise of heaven. If the answer is "yes", we can begin to think of ourselves as people who love God. If we cannot answer "yes", we should think again about those words of Jesus from *Matthew*.

It is worth noting that John does not concern himself with the question of resurrection itself. He makes no attempt to explain the nature of resurrection. The classic explanation of resurrection is found in *1 Cor 15*. Resurrection should not be considered as the continued existence of a person's soul or spirit alone. Such views were common in ancient Greek thought and called "immortality of the soul" or *metempsychosis*. Resurrection is more of a Jewish idea. Resurrection involves a new form of life for the person. If we use the ancient ways of thinking about a person as a combination of body and soul or spirit, soul and body, resurrection would mean that all of these different parts were raised, not just the soul or spirit. So resurrection is resurrection of the whole person, body and soul, or spirit, soul and body. This idea is made explicit by Paul's phrase, "spiritual body" (*1 Cor 15:44*). However, this should not be interpreted as a resuscitation, that is, the returning to life of this body in this form. A person is resurrected but it will be a

form of life that is different from this mode of life, but incorporates and transforms all aspects of it. Elsewhere in the writings of John this transformation of the whole person is explained in story form: the Risen Jesus, can talk (*Jn* 20:19), be touched (*Jn* 20:27) and eat (*Jn* 21:13-15), but is also able to enter a locked room (*Jn* 20:19). The Risen Jesus is both body, and more than body.

It is worth noting that when John's picture of the 1000 year period has been analysed it has key features in common with other passages in Scripture. Satan is destroyed (*Mt.* 25:41). The faithful sit on thrones as co-rulers with Christ (*Mk* 10:35-40). Rev looks very different from these other eschatological passages because of the 1000 year period. There is a difference in timing rather than a difference in content. This difference is, however, reduced if the 1000 year period is a symbolic rather than a literal period of time.

Notes

20:1- "key"- a symbol of authority, The angel is given authority by Christ to open the Abyss. See Notes 1:18. See also Note 9:1. This angel descends and is an angel of Christ. The fact that a good angel now holds this key is a sign of all power and authority returning to Christ.

"Abyss" -see Note, 9:1.

"chain" - Gk- *halusis* can mean a chain, handcuffs or leg-irons.

"primeval serpent"- See Ch.12 for the fullest description of Satan. "Primeval serpent" refers to *Gen* 3:1-15. it may also refer to early Middle Eastern creation myths in which God wrestles with a giant water serpent representing chaos.

20:3 "seal" - Gk- *sphragizo* can refer to sealing a stone so that it cannot be moved, or of a building so that it cannot be entered. *Mt* 27:66 talks of the sealing of Jesus' tomb. This verse may show the superiority of Jesus who was able to escape from a sealed tomb. Satan is unable to break free from the sealed Abyss.

"lead the nations astray"- the fact that Satan might deceive the nations implies that there are still nations to deceive. This means that the nations were not completely destroyed during the battle of 19:17-21. It is the dead from these nations who will be ruled by the faithful (20:4-5). They will also include those who die and are raised for the second resurrection.

"short while"- the power of the freed Satan will be limited.

20:4 "thrones"-to symbolise that the faithful will be co-rulers with Christ.

"give judgment"- refers to power to rule the earth and give judgments on earthly issues. It is unlikely that this refers to salvation (that is, to judge who is saved and who is not) because that would anticipate the Final Judgment and opening of the Books of life and death (20:11-15).

"beheaded"- refers to those who were martyred for their faith. Ford suggests that the rest of the verse was added as an explanation, because of the grammar of the Greek (1975, 349). Taken in this way, the verse would mean that only martyrs were rewarded. However, this second phrase could also mean that not just the martyrs, but all who resisted evil, martyrs or not, have been rewarded. The faithful are praised for not committing errors which have already been listed in Ch.13.

20:5- "the rest of the dead"- those who have died without being faithful to Christ.

"first resurrection"- belongs to the faithful who have died "in Christ". The grammar of 20:5 might suggest that the first resurrection belongs to "the rest of the dead". Such ideas are contradicted by 20:6 which obviously refers to the faithful.

20:6 "blessed" -see Note, 19:9.

"second death"- Jewish thought held that there were two kinds of death. The "first death" was the kind of death which occurs when a living person dies. The second death refers to ultimate destruction or being cast into Hell. It is sometimes called the death of the soul. *Lk.* 12:4-6 uses this distinction to advise Christians that they should not fear earthly persecutors as much as God, who alone has power over the second death.

e) The End Of Satan (20:7-10)

Outline

The period of 1000 years ends with the release of Satan from the Abyss. He gathers the nations, that is, the people who still are not faithful to Christ who have been ruled by the faithful for a final assault. These forces are named Gog and Magog after the prophecies of *Ezekiel* 38-39 about the forces who threaten

Israel. The army attempts to destroy the faithful, symbolised as a city. However, there is no earthly battle: they are destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and sulphur (*Gen* 19:24). The description of Gog's destruction in *Ezek* 38:23 is more detailed, but fire and brimstone are both included. This implies that evil is ultimately destroyed by God alone. Satan is finally cast down into the lake of fire where the beasts have already gone. This marks the final destruction of all evil and potential for evil.

Whilst sharing features in common with the battle of 19:17-21, this is a separate conflict. First, its timing is different: it is placed after the 1000 year period. Second, the leader of the army is different: it is Satan himself, not his creatures, who leads the attack. Third, there is no battle as such. In Ch.19, the forces of Christ overcome the forces of the beasts. In this conflict there is no fighting: Satan's army is destroyed by fire from heaven.

Notes

20:7- "nations"- identified with Gog and Magog. This identification of Gog and Magog as two people is common in Jewish writings of this period. In the OT, Gog was an individual who came from the land of Magog (*Ezek* 38:1-3). Here they are identified as the last force of evil to confront the faithful.

"sands of the sea"- possibly a contrast to the descendants of Abraham (*Gen* 22:17) or to the enemies of wandering Israel (*Joshua* 11:4). A similar expression for Israel's enemies is found in *Judges* 7:12.

"four quarters"- the use of the number 4 again indicates the size of the army. Four suggests that the army comes from all over the earth.

20:9 -"camp of the saints"- "camp" was used for Israel when they were still in the wilderness (*Ex.* 29:14). Its use here may indicate that the faithful should still think of themselves as a people journeying to God who still have to reach their final goal. *Heb* 13:13 uses the imagery of the camp to describe where Jesus suffered (outside the city of Jerusalem) and, thus, the place where his faithful followers also suffer.

"beloved City"- this may suggest Jerusalem, signifying the faithful people rather than any earthly city. Ford notes that the term "beloved City" is not used to

describe the earthly Jerusalem (1975,356). She suggests this may anticipate the heavenly city to come. This would seem, however, to do violence to the order of events: it would be an impossibility for the heavenly Jerusalem to be attacked. Better to take it as standing for the faithful people.

"fire from heaven"- Sweet notes that "from God" is a gloss (a phrase added by a later writer to give an explanation- 1990,292). It should be noted that God alone, not even Christ, is credited with the eventual destruction of Satan.

"tormented"- see Note, 19:20

"night and day"- the defeat of evil has no end, just as the praises of God are constantly sung (7:15).

f) The Judgment Of The Dead (20:11-15)

Outline

The scene changes. Satan has been destroyed. John's attention is now focused on God alone. Heaven and earth are described as "fleeing away": there is no sign of the world as we know it. A new age, a new period of time has begun.

In this new age there is a judgment by God of all people. These are divided into two groups. There are those whose names are found in the book of life: these are the faithful who have already been raised (20: 4-6). The judgment of the faithful by Christ has also been described in the prophecies of 14:14-20. There the judgment of the faithful appeared to be linked with the persecution of the church, but was nonetheless a sign of God's control over history. That judgment, and the salvation of the faithful have been concluded in the visions of 20:4-6, and, indeed, have been anticipated throughout *Rev* by the descriptions of the faithful in heaven (7:1-13; 14:1-5). Chapter 14, whilst concentrating on the judgment of the faithful also hinted at the judgment of those who have not been faithful to God. The true horror of their faithlessness and its consequences now follows. Those whose names are found in the other books are judged by the actions of their own lives. They share the same fate as Death, Hades, Satan and the beasts: they are thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur (see Outline, *The Lamb & The Harvest*; Note, 19:20 for discussions of the significance of this imagery).

This marks the Final Judgment, that at the end of time people are judged according to their faith. John makes their works, what they have done, the basis for judgment. This does not mean that he is disagreeing with the idea of Paul, that salvation comes through grace. Rather, for John, like *James*, faith is revealed in works (see Note, 19:7 and *1 John* 4:7-21).

The picture given here is different from many other descriptions of the Last Judgment in the New Testament. In many NT writings, judgment is the work of Christ (*John* 5:22; *Matthew* 7:22-23, 25:31-46; *Acts* 17:31; *2 Cor* 5:10). Here judgment is the work of God. It is a picture more like that of *Daniel* 7:9-14. Caird: would explain the difference by saying that this is a sign of Christ surrendering his own authority to God (1984, 258). This would fit with the ideas of *1 Cor* 15:24-28.

The "books" from which the judgments are read have already been mentioned in 17:8. Some comment needs to be made. The idea that names have been written from "before the beginning of the world" has been used by some Christians to suggest that there is no question of whether a person can be saved or not, or can come to salvation. The answer has long been given. There is nothing that can be done. This seems to be a very dangerous way of thinking: it can make people victims of pride (they know that they are saved), or despair (there is no chance that they can be saved). Perhaps the hardest criticism of this kind of thinking is found in James Hogg's novel, *The Confessions Of A Justified Sinner*, in which the main character is so convinced of his salvation that he believes no action, not even murder, will be grounds for him to lose the salvation which he has already been promised. This kind of theology sees no value in trying to be good, or trying to reform: all is pointless, and the whole of human morals and ethics are robbed of any value. However, such a theology is not shared by John. *Rev* 3:5 shows that it was possible, as John saw it, for someone to lose their chance of salvation. A major aim of his writing is to encourage Christians that what they do does matter, that it does matter if they surrender their faith. This whole aim would be pointless if John shared the thoughts of the *Justified Sinner* and believed in a

chosen group who could never lose their salvation, no matter what they did.

The passage includes reference to the sea, Death and Hades all giving up their dead; why? In part, this is to show that God's judgments affect all people whether or not they are alive or dead at the time of the Last Judgment. The judgment given here concerns the "second death" and is not just about the end of mortal life: it is about whether the individual will gain the reward of eternal life promised by God. That affects those who continue to live this mortal life, and those whose mortal lives have already ended. This includes those who might have been thought to be excluded from resurrection by the way in which they had died. There was a tradition, for example, that those who died at sea would not share in the resurrection (Ford 1975, 359) . John's view is that they will be raised and judged (20:13a). Similarly, those who have gone to death and Hades, the traditional resting places of the wicked, do not, so as to speak, find any place to hide: they, too, will be raised and brought to judgment (20:13b).

The reference to Death and Hades both being destroyed might then seem puzzling. Why should two places be described as though they are people and be cast down? We must remember that these two names were associated not just with places, but with pagan gods. In 1:18, Christ is claimed to be superior to these gods: he is the one who really has power over death. The claims of the pagan cults were false. This final destruction of Death and Hades is a reminder of that superiority and of the end of false gods claiming powers that is not rightly theirs. It is also a graphic fulfillment of Paul's view that fulfillment of Christ's victory is the destruction of death (1 Cor 15:54-55). This also anticipate the new age to come of the heavenly Jerusalem, an age in which there is no death (21:4)

Notes

"great white throne"- white is the colour of victory, see Note,3:4. For "throne", see Note 3:21; 4:2. If the *bisellium* is the throne imagined, Christ could be understood as involved in the judgment given by God.

"earth,sky, no place"- the world seems to exist as we know it. The following remark is speculation. It might be possible to consider eternal life, or the resurrection life, as a life in which the whole person is freed from the restrictions which time and

place put on us in our current existence.

"book"- see Note, 3:5.

"Death/Hades"- see Note 1:18.

"second death"- see Note 20:6.

CHAPTER 9
AFTER THE READING 4:
THE NEW HEAVEN & THE NEW EARTH
(REV 21:1-22:21)

a) A New Heaven & a New Earth (21:1-8)

Outline

With the judgment of God now complete, the final phase of God's plan begins. This is nothing less than a new creation. The old order of heaven and earth is gone. This new creation also has no sea (21:1). Such a remark should not only be taken literally. Whilst many ancient peoples feared the sea, John is not just saying that a fearful element has vanished. In many myths of the ancient Middle East, the sea was the home of Leviathan, and had a symbolic meaning as the place from which chaos and evil were supposed to come (Note, 4:6; 14:7). When the sea is no more, John is telling his readers that the new creation gives no opportunity for evil or chaos.

The new city which appears is called the new Jerusalem, and is described as a bride. This description of Jerusalem as a bride is similar to some of the Qumran writings in which the bride is a symbol for the community of the faithful (Ford 1975, 366). Wedding imagery has already been seen in the discussion of the Last Things, especially in the Messianic Banquet of 19:9 (see also 19:7). This New Jerusalem provides the standard by which Babylon is ultimately judged: Babylon may have appeared attractive or enticing, but these attractions are base and tawdry compared to the true beauty of God's new city.

John's description of the city "coming down from heaven" is also worth noting. The coming of the new creation is the work of God. Such an idea is a pause for thought. It is common for Christians to speak of "building the city", or making the Kingdom on earth. This passage seems to contradict such thinking completely. It suggests that human beings, that Christians, cannot build the city, or usher in the Kingdom. This happens only through the action of God. Such thinking might lead some to suggest that there is no point to Christians pursuing social or political

action, in which the church speaks out on, and acts against, what is seen as damaging or bad in our society. However, to do so is to reject the example which Jesus himself gave when he healed the sick, exorcised demons, and fed the hungry. Such activity remains important because it is work which Jesus saw as important. It should not, however, be confused with making the Kingdom of God. If a perfect society were created tomorrow in which there was no social injustice or problems, it would be tempting to think that this was the Kingdom. John's advice is otherwise. Such a world cannot be the Kingdom because it still the old order of heaven and earth. Only God's intervention can bring in the Kingdom. But this is most certainly not an excuse for Christians to give up working for a better world.

The appearance of the heavenly city as it comes down to what used to be earth shows a crucial difference between the new creation and the world as we experience it. In our world, heaven and earth are separate. They are different in kind: we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the new creation there is no separation of heaven and earth. The hymn that follows in 19:3-4 explains this using the language and imagery of *Exodus*. God's presence among his people was called the *Shekinah* (Note, 7:15). This image of God's dwelling with his people is now the hallmark of the new creation. *Jn* 1:14 also used the *Shekinah* image to describe the incarnate Logos, Jesus, thus implying that Jesus' earthly life anticipated this new creation, and God's ultimate plans for the world. Those who know Christ, thus, know God dwelling with them, and have experienced a foretaste of the new creation.

Several images are used to describe this new creation. It is described as a city (21:2, 9-27), and as water ("spring" [21:6], "river" [22:1-2]).

Notes

21:1 "new heaven and new earth"- God's plan is completed with a new creation, not with a correction of the existing order.

"sea"- Note 4;6; 14:7.

21:2 "city" the description of the new creation as a city will be amplified in 21:9-27

"bride"- Jerusalem is also described as a bride in the Targum (Jewish

commentary) on *Ps* 48.

The Targum on the *Song of Songs* interprets the bride as the assembly of Israel (Ford 1975, 361). *Is* 61:10 uses the image of a bride to describe the righteous who have been saved by God.

21:3 “home/dwelling”- Gk- *skene* literally means a tent. It is related to Gk- *skeno-ein* (Note, 7:15).

These may also come from the same root as the Heb. *Shekinah*.

“they shall be his people”- the fulfilment of the prophecy of Sinai (*Lev* 26:12; *Jer* 7:23, 11:4). In the NT this promise is thought to be realised in Christ (*Rom* 9:25; *1 Pet* 2:10).

“God himself will be with them”- the promise given to Moses at the burning bush (*Ex* 3:12). It was also repeated in the name “Emmanuel” (*Is* 7:14; *Mt* 1:23). Christ has anticipated the coming of the heavenly city.

21:4 “death” was destroyed before the coming of the new creation (20:14). Just as the new creation has no sea, which could be considered the source of evil and chaos, neither will there be the results of such evil and chaos. These results are listed in 21:4.

“Mourning and crying”- The removal of tears was anticipated in 7:16.

“first things”- a further reference to the end of the current order. See 21:1.

21:5 “one seated on the throne”- for “throne”; see Note 3:21. God himself now speaks. A voice from the throne has already been heard (16:17), but here seems to be the first time that God speaks directly to people. This is a sign of the dwelling of God with people (21:3) and that the former distance between God and creation is ended (Sweet 1990,299).

“write this!”- the command to write might be an indication that this section is not part of the scrolls (5:1; 10:2- see Note 5:1) which have been opened in earlier visions. What would be the point of telling John to write what was already written on the scroll? Against such a view it can, of course, be pointed out that John has, in fact, written down the contents of the scrolls within the text of *Rev*.

“trustworthy and true”- will be repeated in 22:6.

21:6 “it is done!” Gk- *gegonan*. See Note, 16:17.

“Alpha and Omega”. See Note, 1:8.

“beginning and end”- compare the similar titles, “Alpha/Omega” and “first/last” in 1:8 and 1:17. This title is used of God in *Is* 48:12.

“thirsty”- those who wish to enjoy the waters of life are those who know their need, unlike the people of Laodicea (3:17). However, to be thirsty is not enough, those who will enjoy the water of life will also be those who conquer (21:7)

“water”- The most famous use of water occurs in *Jn* 4, when Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman.

In *Jn* living water is promised to those who are faithful, and stands for eternal life. *Rev* uses the image in a related, but different way. This theme of water will be taken up again in 22:1-2 where the new creation is depicted as the place where the waters of life can be found and are enjoyed by God’s faithful people (21:7).

21:7 “those who conquer”- means “those who remain faithful to God”, and “those who did not give in to the temptations of worshipping the beasts”. This is a fulfilment of the promises made in the *Oracles To The Seven Churches* (2:7,11,17,28).

“children”- this seems to be based on the Messianic prophecy of *2 Sam* 7:14. Here, it is God’s faithful who are called “children”, not the Messiah. Whilst *2 Sam* uses “father” to describe God, *Rev* never identifies God as “father of Christians” because this was felt to be a relationship purely between God and Christ (Sweet 1990, 300). It is worth comparing John’s and Paul’s use of the phrase “children of God” (*Romans* 8:14-17). John appears to put this identification in the future, but Paul puts it in the present. For Paul, those who are children of God are those who are inspired by the Holy Spirit to call God, “Father”. However, John’s view is not entirely futuristic. Indeed, to think in terms of past, present and future might distort his meaning. It should be remembered that he has already identified groups as faithful (7:1-8,9-17; 14:1-5) in anticipation of the new creation.. Paul called Christians children of God on the grounds that they shared by adoption and grace what Christ had by nature (*Rom* 8:15).

21:8 “cowardly” put first in contrast with “those who conquer” (21:7).

“polluted”- Gk- *bdelugmenois*. The Jewish language of purity to describe those who been corrupted by taking part in what is unlawful.

“fornicators”- may refer to idolatry rather than sexual immorality alone. See Note, 2:14.

“sorcerers”- the practice of magic was part of pagan religion. See Note, 2:1.

“idolaters”see Note, 9:20-1.

“liars”- Gk- *pseudai*- put last to sum up the list. It means those who hate the truth, not just those who speak lies. (Sweet 1990, 300).

“lake” see Note, 19:20.

“second death” see Note, 20:6.

b) Jerusalem: The Bride (21:9-27)

Outline

The vision continues with a description of the heavenly city (21:2). The vision appears to be given by the same angel who introduced the description of Babylon (17:1). This shared messenger suggests that the two visions are to be linked. This would make sense given the interpretation of Babylon outlined above. There, it was suggested that Babylon was not just Rome, or Jerusalem, but rather a description of idolatry, which could include members of the church. If such an interpretation is correct, the two visions, of Babylon and Jerusalem, are linked. Both cities represent the consequences of religious behaviour: Babylon, of idolatry, the heavenly Jerusalem, of true worship. The visions of the cities are a further example of John’s encouragement of the churches to consider the choices which they must make, and the results of those choices.

The introduction to the vision repeats other features already mentioned. John is “in the spirit” (1:10). He is taken away to a mountain. In 17:3, he was taken to a desert to see the vision of the woman. The difference in locations may partly reflect the sources and traditions which John is using. The desert, as the place associated with Satan and evil (*Mk* 1:13; Note,12:6), might be the obvious place to see a vision of evil. The association of the heavenly Jerusalem and a mountain is probably associated with *Ezekiel* 40:2, part of a vision of the city of God. It is

likely that this vision has been one of John's sources. As has been noted before, John does not merely copy the earlier vision. There are differences between his vision and that of *Ezekiel*. It is necessary to consider their significance.

Such talk should immediately give a warning that the description that follows is not merely a description of a place. Indeed, there could be serious, but not impossible, difficulties in such a view: the size of the city, the size of the walls, the number of streets, the materials and so on. The person determined to literalise can, of course, answer that God can do anything, and that our criticism of the heavenly city should not be based on human ideas about building. The person who does argue in this way will, of course, have to explain how different literal descriptions (say, those about the City of God given by *Ezekiel* and *Rev*) can be so different if they are descriptions of the same place.

If an alternative method of interpreting is used, which sees the descriptions as theological rather than geographical, such differences are not such a problem. In this method, the principle, the "City of God", is described in different ways to highlight what each writer sees as significant about it. It is much easier for such descriptions to complement each other. The different concerns of writer and readers are also important. Differences in thinking about time have already been noted, namely, that Jewish writing of John's period is more focused on principles rather than past, present and future (Introduction, p. 19-21). The same interests may also affect thinking about place: John would be interested primarily in the significance of the city, not its geography.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the descriptions given of the size of the city have a symbolic meaning.

This can first be seen in the compass points and the order in which they come: east, north, south, and west. This order differs from the ordering of the twelve tribes in *Numbers* 2:3-31, and the city in *Ezekiel* 48:31-34. Some writers have suggested that this change comes because of ancient astrology. Astrologers were people who claimed to tell the future from the movements of the stars and planets. It is claimed that John has used an order that is based on such theories. However, John has not followed the astrological order, but ignored it. If there is

any message about astrology in the order, it is that John treats it as useless and ignores it.

Others have claimed to see a similar significance in the order of the jewels (21:19-20), but again this is not so. John has specifically broken any such connection by making the jewels into foundation stones, not gates (Sweet 1990,306; Caird 1984,272).

Other writers have laboured over the differences of the jewels listed by John and how this compares to other lists. Special concern has been given to the list of stones on Aaron's breastplate (*Exodus* 28:17-20 and 39:10-13) and the robes of the king of Tyre (*Ezekiel* 28:13). However, care must be taken that such arguments are viewed realistically. Firstly, these lists of stones involve translation from Hebrew to Greek, and there was a great deal of variation in translation. In short, differences may come from a change of language. Secondly, the list of jewels is not uniform in Jewish literature (Ford 1975,334). Different writers put the jewels in different orders. If all other writers used a set order, and John broke that order, we might be in a position to say that there was some significance for the change. Without a set order, such a claim cannot be made. It would seem to me more likely that the different order may reflect the problem of translation and the problem of remembering such a list: we should bear in mind that John might not have had access to read and copy from his reading as modern scholars have. His working by memory rather than reading could explain the difference.

It is more likely that the image works in a general sense. Its primary purpose is to suggest the priestly character of Christ, and thus, the tribes, and the community of the faithful (see also Note, 12:1). If there is any further reason for the change in order it is that John has broken up the associations of jewels with particular tribes, but has not identified the jewels with the individual apostles. Farrer:1964, 219 suggests that the primary purpose of the order is so that it will sound good when it is read aloud: the beauty of the sounds will thus speak of the glory of God's city.

The shape, too, is important: the city is "foursquare" (21:16). The evenness of length and breadth is a further mark of perfection, and was used in *Ezekiel* 48:15-

16 to describe the holy city. John goes a step further: his city is a cube, even more perfect than a square.

The city described would be huge. 12,000 *stadia* is a distance of approximately 1500 miles or 2400 kilometres. In comparison the wall would be tiny. If a cubit is taken as the length of a man's forearm, it would be 60 metres high, which would be tiny compared to the height of the city. This is puzzling. However, it must be remembered that a wall is an irrelevance for the heavenly city. There are no enemies who will come to attack the city. The wall serves to mark the boundaries of the city, and would be considered a necessary part of an ancient city. However, it does not need to serve the purpose of defence which walls traditionally had.

The most frequently repeated number is twelve, which is significant on two counts. Firstly, mathematically, twelve equals three times four. Twelve is thus a symbol of wholeness and perfection (Introduction, p.18). Secondly, it is significant as the number of the twelve tribes of Israel whose role has now been assumed by the faithful (7:1-8). The number 1,000 is an intensive which further stresses that meaning.

The description of the city thus is based on traditional symbolism, but this is not worked out in precise detail. John is content to use the symbolism to describe the city as the place for the new tribes of Israel, the faithful people of God, who keep the faith of the apostles.

The description of the city finishes with some remarks about the Temple. The Temple is traditionally the meeting place of heaven and earth in the old order, where God met his people. The new order, in which there is no distinction of heaven and earth in the former sense, has no need of such a meeting place. The idea of a new order is repeated in the description of having no sun or moon. On one level, this again shows the passing of the old order. On another, light has long been used as a symbol of God (*Jn* 8:12). However, the symbol is now redundant, because the reality can be seen clearly.

One last point concerns the gates. In the description of the walls it has already been seen that the city does not need to be defended. The description of 21:25

makes the same point. The gates allow the nations to enter. This generosity of John's vision, that the nations will be allowed in, has already been seen in 11:13. Chapter 20 implied the survival of the nations (20:4) in the final stages of this world. The work of the faithful has continued to include the gathering in of the nations. It is possible to say that, for John, the work of mission is the work not just of the church in this world, but in all of its stages. Despite the scenes of carnage and destruction God's purpose has been the saving, not the destroying, of the nations.

Notes

21:9- "one of the seven angels"- see 15:1. One of the angels was guide to the vision of Babylon (17:1).

"Bride"- see Note, 21:2.

21:10- compare with 1:10.

"mountain"- two traditions may contribute here. The first was a widespread belief, found in many Ancient Near Eastern religions, of a mountain of the gods to be found in the north (Caird 1984, 270). This appears in the OT in *Is* 14:12-14 and in *Ezek* 28:12-16. This second passage further identifies the mountain with Eden. The picture that will follow in 22:1-5 also draws on the myth of Eden (see below). The second is the tradition of Mount Zion found in the Old Testament (*Ps* 48:2). John appears to be following OT examples in combining the ideas of a holy city, a holy mountain and Eden.

"coming down"- this need not imply a second descent (21:2). The idea of "coming down" may describe the state of Jerusalem rather than precise timing, see Note 18:2.

21:11- "jasper" -see Note, 4:3.

"gates"- the Gk- *pulon/ pulonas* literally means "gatehouse". It can also mean "vestibule" or entrance" (*Gen* 43:19; *Lk* 16:20; *Acts* 12:13). This interpretation, in which the gates would be the ways through which the nations enter the heavenly Jerusalem would fit better with John's vision than the idea of a gate as a defence.

"twelve tribes"- see also 7:1-8. The traditional tribes become the tribes of the new Israel.

21:14- “twelve apostles of the Lamb”. Gk- *apostolos* appeared to change its meaning in the NT period.

Whilst Paul could talk of himself as an apostle in the letters (*Gal* 1:1), later writings restricted the term to the twelve historical apostles of Jesus (*Acts* 1:2). John appears to follow the Lukan usage.

Ford points out that this picture differs from other NT “building” metaphors because it does not mention Christ (1975, 333-4). Indeed, the apostles seem to have taken Christ’s place as the foundation (*1 Cor* 3:11). However it should be noted that the apostles are the foundations because they are “of the Lamb”, that is, of Christ. Ford’s argument rests on the claim that “of the Lamb” is an interpolation (a later addition by a second editor). However, there is no textual evidence for this. The only argument she offers is that “apostle” is only found at two other points in *Rev* (2:2; 18:20).

“Lamb”- see Note, 5:6.

21:15- “measuring rod of gold” Similar imagery is found in *Ezek* 40:3 and *Zech* 2:1-5. The temple in the holy city was also measured to keep it safe (11:1-2). Here there is no threat and no need to measure for protection. Rather, the measuring shows the holiness of the city.

21:16- “twelve thousand stadia”- a distance of approximately 1500 miles or 2400 kilometres.

21:17- “cubit”. The cubit was the distance from a man’s finger-tip to the elbow. It is difficult to know whether an angelic cubit is the same as a human one. Sweet suggests that in saying a human cubit is the same as an angel’s, John is suggesting that human being beings are transformed and become divine (1990, 305).

Caird points out that John’s measuring of the holy city is similar to a description given by the Greek historian, Herodotus, of Babylon (*Herod.* I. 178; see 1984, 274). Both descriptions measure length and breadth using *stadia*, and the heights of the walls using cubits.

21:18- “jasper”- see Note, 4:3.

21:19- “sapphire”- blue, transparent, precious stone.

“agate”- Gk- *chalkedon*. Its precise identification is uncertain. It could be a kind of jasper or emerald (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 37.7.92), or a brown, opaque semi-precious stone.

“emerald”- Gk- *smaragdos*- green, transparent precious stone.

21:20- “onyx”- Gk- *sardonux*. Deep brown, opaque stone with white bands.

“carnelian”- see Note 4:3.

“chrysolite”- Gk- *chrusolithos*. Yellow topaz.

“beryl”- Gk- *berullos*. Green or blue precious stone.

“topaz”- Gk- *topazion*. From bright yellow to pale brown in colour. Semi-precious stone, used to make signet rings and other seals used to stamp molten wax (Note, 7:3, 13:16).

“chrysoprase”- Gk- *chrusopazos*. Apple-green, translucent stone.

“jacinth” - Gk- *huakinthos*. A gemstone, described by some as blue, by others as like a sapphire or yellowish-red.

“amethyst”- Gk- *amethystos*. Purple or violet clear quartz.

21:21- “pearl”. A jewel grown inside shellfish of the oyster family.

21:22- “temple” -either a temple (*Mt* 23:17) or a sanctuary (*Acts* 17:24). See Note 11:19. *Jer* 3:15-17 anticipates that there will be no need of a temple (ark of the covenant): the whole city assumes that role.

21:22-23- “and the Lamb”- Ford would argue that there are further interpolations here to an earlier text (1975,337). However, it may be that the awkward Greek constructions are John’s way of making a point which has already been seen in the sharing of titles: that the Lamb is to be considered equal to God the Almighty (see Note, 1:8)

21:24 “bring glory in”- Ford notes two different traditions about the role of the nations in Jewish literature (1975,337-8). They either battle against the holy city or come in pilgrimage. John has maintained both. The nations fought with the beasts against God but were defeated (19:19). However, the nations were not completely destroyed. A remnant became the subjects of the faithful who ruled with Christ during the millennium (20:4). A remnant presumably survives the final battle with Satan (20:8-10) and is given the chance of salvation. This vision

shows that John is not limited in his views of who may achieve salvation: the chance of entering the new Jerusalem remains open. This is not, however, to say that he believes everyone will be saved, no matter what they do. Such a conclusion would be completely the opposite of the bulk of the prophecies of *Rev.*

“gates never shut”- the gates are not for defence: an open gate is no use. Rather the way in which God welcomes in the nations and the faithful is stressed.

21:27- “nothing unclean”- John sets limits which show he does not hold everyone will be saved (the doctrine of universalism). There are limits on who may come in. Gk- *koinon* is used here for unclean. It literally means “common” and implies ritual uncleanness, that is, that the actions of a person have made him or her unfit to worship.

“abomination”- Gk- *bdelugma* refers to idolatry, the principal error of the enemies of God. See Note, 21:8.

“falsehood”- Gk- *pseudos* is related to Gk- *pseudesin*. See Note, 21:8.

“book of life”- see 17:8, Note, 3:5, Outline, *The Judgment Of The Dead*.

c) *The River Of Life (22:1-5)*

Outline

The final scene describing the heavenly Jerusalem shows a river and the tree of life. 21:10 described the heavenly Jerusalem as a mountain; that mountain might be identified with Eden (see Note, 21:10). Such an identification is made explicit by the river and the tree of life. Both of these were images of heaven and of Eden, the original paradise. The river is mentioned in *Gen* 2:10-14. The idea of a river as part of the city of God is also found in *Ezekiel* 47 where a river is described as flowing out from the Temple. This river is surrounded by trees whose fruit gives life (*Ezek* 47:7-12). John appears to have adapted *Ezekiel's* vision to talk of the city

The trees are also part of the Eden story, not just a detail from *Ezekiel*. *Genesis* 3:22 talks of the tree of life. Adam and Eve were banished from Eden after their fall into sin in case they also ate the fruit of that tree. It is this fruit that is the

reward for the faithful. Thus, the new creation of *Rev* is equally well a return to what God originally planned: it is paradise regained.

Let us think of the *Genesis* story. God planned that people should live in paradise, but they chose to break his commands and were exiled from Eden. This exile cost them the chance to eat the fruit of the tree of life, and of eternal life. In *Rev*, the faithful people of God are admitted to a new creation, which is described like Eden. In short, the new creation means that God has brought his faithful people back to the place, to the state of life, which he always planned they should have, but which was lost through sin.

This idea of paradise regained is not only found in *Rev*. It is present, in some ways, in Paul's description of Jesus as a second Adam (*Rom* 5:12-17). It is also found in *John*'s account of the Resurrection. In *Jn* 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene is the first to speak to the risen Lord. She meets him in a garden (Eden), and mistakes him for the gardener (an Adam figure- *Jn* 20:15). These images may seem insignificant, but they point again to what Christ's work has done: it has restored humanity to the state which God planned.

However, there is a further side to *Rev*'s use of such imagery. In 1:12, Christ was described using the symbolism of the *menorah*, the seven branched lampstand (see Note, 1:12). The tree of life was associated not just with Eden but also with the person and work of Christ. Later Christian art and hymns came to speak of the Cross as the tree of life, because it was Christ's death that restored life to God's people. A fine modern example of this has been seen in a "Hunger Cloth" produced by the German Aid Agency, *Misereor*. The picture is by a Haitian artist, and depicts Christ nailed to a tree which is covered with all sorts of fruits. Its may seem puzzling at first, but that picture has neatly brought together all the elements that John wishes to describe using the picture of the tree of life:

- a new creation which is paradise regained (Eden)
- a paradise which has been regained through Jesus' life and death.

Notes

22:1- "water of life"- *Jn* 4:14 uses water as a symbol of eternal life. *Zech.* 14:8 describes living water flowing from Jerusalem on the day of the Lord. Some

writings associate living water with the Spirit (*Ezekiel* 36:25-6; *Jn* 3:5, 4:10; *1 Jn* 5:6-8). In *Jer* 2:13, God describes himself as a fountain of living water.

“crystal”- see Note 4:6, but a river cannot be still like the sea. The colour is associated with purity , and is in contrast to the waters which have been polluted with blood (16:4).

22:2- “the tree of life”. The English translations are puzzling here, and talk of “the tree of life on either side of the river”. The passage does not literally mean one, single tree. Rather than talking of one tree, the passage talks of one type of tree found on both sides of the river.

“twelve”- may refer to perfection (p.173) or to the tree giving fruit constantly (every month).

“healing of the nations”- the love of God is shown by this aim and purpose. It also shows that the work of healing cannot be completed by anyone except God.

22:3 – “accursed”- Gk- *katathema* literally means “curse”. If “accursed” is adopted, the verse is similar to 21:27a. If interpreted as “curse”, it is more like *Genesis* 3, but here there is no curse on the inhabitants of the city as there was on Eve and her children.

“throne”- see Note, 3:21.

“worship”- like the heavenly creatures of chapters 4 and 5.

22:4 - one of the recurring traditions of the OT is that God could not be seen face to face (*Ex*33:20). However the hope that this would one day be possible is expressed in *Psalms* 17:15 and the NT writers (*Mt* 5:8; *1 Cor* 13:12; *1 Jn* 3:2).

“name...foreheads”- see Note, 7:3.

22:5-repeats ideas already seen in 21:23, but without giving any role to the Lamb. A similar changing between God and God together with the Lamb is also seen in descriptions of the throne (see Note, 3:21).

“will shed light on them”- compare with the blessing of Aaron and his sons (*Numbers* 6:23-7). This may imply that the faithful inhabitants of the city share in Christ's priesthood.

d) The Truth of the Vision

Outline

This section finishes with some remarks by the angel in which he stresses that the visions are true because they originate with God, and a comment that keeping the vision will be a source of blessing.

Notes

22:6 “he”- the passage seems to suggest that the angel is speaking (22:1), but the last words “I am coming soon” might suggest the speaker is Christ. It is possible that “I am coming soon” might be a quotation within the angel’s speech. The angel, like an OT prophet, might be able to speak directly (“I”) on behalf of God (Sweet 1990, 314).

“the spirits of the prophets”- implies that God inspires and directs all true prophecy. Compare this with Jezebel (2:20).

“servants”- might refer only to the prophets, but is more likely to refer to all Christians. See Note 1:1.

22:7 “I am coming soon”- this need not mean that John expected to come soon. He may mean that he will come unexpectedly. See 2:16 and Note, 3:11.

“blessed”- For this form of utterance see Note 14:13. Here the blessing also contains a warning. It implies a terrible fate for those who will not keep the prophecies.

“Worship God”- could be a summary of all that has gone before. The letters and visions have all shown the dangers of giving in to sin and of following what is not God. The faithful have been encouraged to maintain true worship and faithfulness. The faithful have been described as those who worship God (4-5). The final command is given: which of John’s readers could now refuse the command?

CHAPTER 10

THE EPILOGUE

(*REV* 22:8-21)

Chapter 1 showed that *Rev* shared many of the introductory features of a letter (1:4-8, Introduction, p.16-17,21. Chapter 22 shares many of the features that are found at the end of such writings. Amongst these we can note the repetition of John's name (22:8), warnings (22:18; *1 Cor* 16:22) and the Benediction (22:21).

At first sight these final verses appear chaotic, as though they had been put together carelessly. Closer examination reveals that there is an order to them.

The order of verses here needs to be compared with the order in chapter 1.

In 1:1-2, the order "John-angel-Jesus" showed the way in which the revelation was made known: to John, by means of an angel, from Jesus. The same order is repeated in 22:8-12. First John is mentioned (22:8), then the angel (22:9-11), then Jesus (22:12-13). 22:13 further mirrors 1:8 in the use of the title "Alpha and Omega". However, the speakers appear to be different: the Lord God in 1:8 and Jesus in 22:13.

There is no equivalent of the blessing and warning (22:14-15) in chapter 1. Such items are, however, more appropriate at the end of a letter rather than the beginning.

The speech that follows in 22:16-19 has similarities to the speech of 1:17-20. Both are spoken by Jesus. Both start with titles which show Jesus' authority (1:17-18; 22:16). Both include commands: to write (1:19), and neither to add or delete (22:18-19). Both commands again are suitable in their context.

22:20 is again familiar from letter writing. It was normal for the writer to add his or her own name at the end of the letter (*1 Cor* 16:21; *Col* 4:18). John, however, has omitted his own name, and stressed the name of Jesus. He has stressed that the contents of *Rev* come from Jesus, and not from himself, just as he did in chapter 1. John has continued to make himself a secondary agent, not the primary source of the visions. He has also put in references to the coming of Christ, which are also found in the closing sections of some letters (*1 Thess* 5:23; *1 Tim*

6:14). 22:21 completes the book with a final blessing.

a) John's Testimony (22:8-9)

Outline

John stresses his personal experience of the visions which has gone before. This experience leads him to worship the angel delivering the last message. As in 19:10, this attempt at worship is forbidden: even a good angel, delivering God's visions, cannot be put in the place of God. It may even be possible that John, by showing his own temptation to worship the wrong person, is subtly reminding his readers that they are in the same danger. It is not just the obviously corrupt who can make a mistake, even the faithful can worship wrongly.

Notes

22:8- "John"- see Introduction, pp.5-12 for a full discussion of John's identity together with the date and place of writing.

"Fell down to worship"- see Outline, *Opening The Scroll*, Notes, 4:10 and 19:10.

22:9- "prophets"- may refer to one of the early offices of the church (1 Cor 12:28), or to the OT prophets (Heb 11:33). It is unlikely to refer to all Christians since the prophets are requested to show the message to the servants (22:6). The qualification "brothers" implies they are contemporaries of John, not just historical characters.

"those who keep"- the faithful followers of God, that is, faithful Christians.

b) The Angel's Testimony (22:10-11)

Outline

The angel commands John that he leaves the book open so that it can be read. This is a contrast to similar writings in the OT (*Dan* 8:26; 10:14) and Inter testamental literature (1 *Enoch* 1:2). These other writings place the writer far away from the events described. In part, this is because they are examples of pseudonyms (Introduction, p.13). The writer has chosen to adopt the character of a person from long ago as narrator. Thus there needs to be a space between the time of the narrator and the time of the events. The "sealing up" allows for this

gap. John, who is not using a false name, or, at least, not a false name from long ago, needs no such space. He can leave the book “open” to stress that it must be read “now”. Thus he also forces the reader to make a choice now, based on the reading of the visions.

22:11 is an odd command based on this timing. On the surface it could look as if John was advising the faithful not to concern themselves with the unrighteous, that there be no work of mission, of telling the good news. Such an interpretation would clash with what has already been seen in Ch.11 and 21-2: both of these show God’s concern to actively gather the nations in, not just to let them be. This verse should be taken as if it was read at the last moment, when indeed it will be too late to repent and receive a different, better reward. The point is, of course, to say to the reader, “Later, it will be too late, but now something can still be done...”. The verse encourages conversion, not indifference or despair.

Notes

“do not seal”- *Rev*, as we have it, cannot be the scroll of 5:2 or the little scroll of 10:4: both of these had been sealed up. *Rev* should never have a seal put on it.

“time is near”- see Note, 1:3. Given all the events described in *Rev*, it is unlikely that John believed that the end of the world would happen close to his own time. However, these events should be treated as crucial in forming the thoughts and actions of his readers. The sense is “The moment is now”, meaning the moment at which the faithful must choose Christ. Such a choice cannot be delayed.

“filthy”- compare *Zech* 3:3-4, in which filthiness describes the corruption of the high priest.

c) Christ’s Testimony (22:12-13)

Outline

The fact that the speaker come soon, and describes himself using divine titles suggests that these words belong to Christ. The words of 22:10-11 appear to come from the angel (22:8), but the speaker changes without any indication being given in the text. A similar change of speaker has taken place in 22:7, and mirrors the way that OT prophecies sometimes jump from speaker to speaker

with little or no indication.

The verses repeat themes and titles already used in *Rev*. The claim that Christ will come soon has been seen in the Oracles to the Seven Churches as well as in the epilogue (2:16; 3:11; 22:7). The titles have also been used earlier in the book. Their appearance here stresses the constant presence and activity of Christ at every stage of God's plan for the world. Whilst it is tempting to think of events, John seems to stress that the person of Christ is much more important (Sweet 1990,316). 22:12 stresses what some Christians often find unpalatable: that our actions may be influenced by the reward that we hope to gain. It can be argued that the idea of "rewards" debases ethics: we do the right thing, not because it is right, but because it is more profitable. Two answers can be given. The first is that the rewards cannot be separated from faith. Doing the right thing only appears profitable because it is part of our hope in the promises of Christ. The second depends on that relationship between faith and works. John appears to hold, like Paul, that good works are not what give rewards. Rather, good works are the sign by which a true faith and right relationship with God can be judged. See Note, 14:10. To say that we act well to be rewarded does not do full justice to the thought of Paul or John.

Notes

22:13- "Alpha and Omega"- see Note, 1:8.

"beginning and end"- see Note 21:6.

"first and last"- see Note 1:8, 1:17.

d) Blessing (22:14-15)

Outline

22:14-15 put together a blessing and, implicitly, a curse. The "blessed", meaning the faithful, are told that they will live in the heavenly city, eat the fruit of the tree of life, and be at one with God. The curse denies a share in any of these blessings to those who have not been faithful.

Notes

22:14- "blessed"- for the form of blessing, see Note, 14:13.

22:15- “dogs”- A variety of interpretations are given. Sweet suggests that it refers to false Jews (1990,317; see also 3:9). This usage would be similar to Paul (*Phil* 3:2). This view is based on the understanding that dogs were unclean animals, and could thus mean non-Jews (see also *Mt* 7:5; 15:26). Others suggest that it may mean “homosexual”. This suggestion is based on *Deut* 23:18, and a contemporary Greek idiom. It should be remembered that homosexual activity in the ancient world was sometimes, but not exclusively, associated with pagan cults. John may be interested in the religious (rather than specifically sexual) context.

“sorcerers”- possible those who practised magic or abortion (Ford 1975,345).

“fornicators”- may refer to prostitution, or to the worship of false gods, see Note, 2:14.

e) Jesus’ Testimony (22:16)

Outline

John gives priority to Jesus, naming him as the author of the witness given in *Rev*.

Notes

22:16 “root”- One of the titles for the Messiah was “root of Jesse” which showed his lineage from the patriarchs.

“Son of David”- see Note, 5:5.

“morning star”- based on the prophecy of Balaam (*Numbers* 24:17). In 2:28, the believer was promised the morning star as a reward. This is now identified with Christ himself. See Note, 2:28. The believer has a share in Christ, the conqueror of evil and magic.

f) The Spirit & The Bride (22:17)

Outline

Who is to come? A first reading suggests that the reader is being invited to come, but first there is actually a call from the Spirit and from the Church for Christ to come. He then invites each of the faithful, those who are thirsty, to come to Him

and receive the water of life.

Notes

22:17 –“spirit”- The Spirit of God, see Note, 1:4.

“Bride”- the church. See Note, 21:2.

“thirsty/water”- see Note, 21:6.

g) Warning (22:18-19)

Outline

John now adds a warning that the book should neither be shortened or lengthened. Caird reminds us that John wished the book read in church and to be treated as Scripture (1984:287). Scriptural texts were not to be altered. Warnings not to alter Torah are found in *Deut* 6:2; 12:32). A similar warning is found in the Intertestamental *Letter of Aristeas* 310-11. It seems that this may have been a common literary or theological practice. The choice lies in sharing the fate of Babylon or being a citizen of the new Jerusalem.

Notes

22:18 “plagues”- may refer specifically to the seven plagues of 15:1-16:21 which were the punishment given by God to the unrighteous.

22:19 – “tree of life”- see Note, 22:2 and Outline, *The River of Life*.

“Holy city”- see 21:1-22:5.

h) Final Testimony (22:20a)

Outline

The final word is given to Jesus, the one who is to come. John repeats the hope that Christ will come again to save his people from their persecutions.

Notes

22:20 – “soon”- see Note, 3:11.

h) Final Prayer (22:20b)

Outline

The faithful, represented by John, pray that Christ will come as he promises.

Notes

22:20 – “Come”- may be based on the Aramaic *Maranatha*. (1 Cor 16:22). If so, this might suggest that the coming of Christ is linked with the Eucharist. This view is based on the collection of texts found in the *Didache*. Sweet suggests that its presence here means *Rev* was read at the Eucharistic rites of the early church (1990, 319).

i) Benediction (22:21)

Outline

The book finishes with a blessing. Sweet suggests that “saints” might be a later addition (1990, 320).

Notes

22:21 –“grace” - God’s favour, and his good intention (supported by his work) for his people.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Introduction

- 1) Which approach to interpreting Rev is closest to your own ideas?
- 2) Which is the better date for Rev: AD 68 or 96?
- 3) What are the main features of apocalyptic writing?

Chapter 1

- 1) How did John receive his visions?
- 2) What do titles tell us about Jesus?
- 3) Which titles do God and Jesus both use? Is this important?
- 4) What are "heavenly poles" and "earthly poles"?

Chapter 2

- 1) Describe the basic shape of the Oracles?
- 2) Which congregations are behaving well, and which are not? Would your church/denomination/ congregation be described as behaving well, or not?
- 3) What are the dangers that the different congregations face? Which dangers does your church/denomination/congregation face?

Chapter 3

- 1) What do visions about heaven tell us about God,the church and the world?
- 2) Who is the Lamb? What has he done?
- 3) Who is the rider on the white horse (6:2)?

- 4) Why do so many bad things happen in the seal visions?
- 5) Does God like people to suffer?
- 6) Who are "sealed"? What must one do to be "sealed"? Would you describe yourself as "sealed"? Why?
- 7) Why do so many bad things happen in the trumpet visions? Can we do anything to stop them?
- 8) Are the scroll (5:1) and the little scroll (10:2) the same?
- 9) What is the work of the church?
- 10) Is everyone who calls themselves a Christian safe?

Chapter 4

- 1) Who is the woman?
- 2) If the woman is safe, are all Christians safe?
- 3) Who is the dragon, and who are the beasts that help him? Are the dragon and the beasts to be found in your circumstances? Can you give them new names?

Chapter 5

- 1) How does this passage compare to *Exodus*?
- 2) What does the *Exodus* story say about salvation and liberation? What is John telling us about these?
- 3) Is destruction, or what is painful, always bad? How can good come from what is painful and unpleasant?

Chapter 6

- 1) How might the church compromise itself today?
- 2) Can we identify Christian groups today who have chosen compromise with earthly powers rather than following Christ?
- 3) Are we ourselves in any danger of making such a compromise? How?

Chapter 7

- 1) Why do people hate to see the destruction of what is evil?
- 2) Do we enjoy the blessings brought by evil in our lives?
- 3) Does our tribe/area/nation enjoy the blessings brought by evil?

Chapter 8

- 1) Is all religious activity “worship”?
- 2) Can we distinguish “veneration” and “worship”?
- 3) Can we undertake traditional religious activities without compromising our faith?
- 4) Are there other things we do which are so important that we might call them “worship”?
- 5) If “yes” to 4), are we right to keep on doing them?

Chapter 9

- 1) What does God promise to his faithful people?
- 2) Can we make the Kingdom of God come?

3) If “no” to 2, are our good actions and attempts to help others still important?
Why?

Chapter 10

1) What is Jesus asking us to do by leaving *Rev* unsealed?

2) Which rewards do wish to receive?

3) How will you achieve them?

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