

THE BOOK
of
REVELATION

A Paper for My Friends
from
Bruce Van Blair

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

I have decided that I do not want to write a book about The Revelation of John, the last book in the New Testament. I have many notes. I have done much research. I have even written many chapters, and designed a format of some merit. But it seems clear to me now that if I proceed, this will become a book of considerable length and complexity. Few would read it. It would be expensive to publish. So this is an explanation (and perhaps an apology) to all my friends who know that this has been a long-expected project of mine. I believe this project would be mostly of benefit and interest to me. But I have already received the benefit. What is clear to me now is that what I really want to do is write a paper for my friends. Doubtless it will not seem short or simple to you, but it will be much shorter and simpler than what was planned. Besides, what I really want to say, in a much less formulaic and argumentative way, is something about what I find in the Book of Revelation, why I love it, and what I think it really means.

So I will not write this for the cynic, the fundamentalist, or the stranger. I will write for you, my friends. I will say some of the things I want to say about this rather incredible book, and I will say some of the things I want you to know about it. But I will not defend or protect my opinions with anywhere near the completeness (or passion) that was planned. If what I do say in this paper intrigues or surprises or increases curiosity, well, you know how to reach me. I would be glad to explain more of why I hold the opinions presented here.

It will be very helpful to you *and* me if you have the Book of Revelation (*Apocalypse*, in Greek) open beside you as you read this paper. That simple interest and willingness on your part will save me pages of extra explanation. And if you do read this paper, I thank you. I have needed to get it "off my chest" for a long time now.

Some of the impetus for wanting to write about The Revelation in the first place is annoyance and anger at the way this book has been used in the past and is still being used to this day. Beyond that, I have been surprised many times at how gullible many of my own parishioners have been regarding The Revelation. On the other hand, why is *their* fault if the amount of sane preaching, teaching, and writing about The Revelation is

so sparse and unknown. So I am also providing a Bibliography of some really good books about The Revelation. It's a pretty short list, and there are about fifty bad books out there for every good one.

Back in the 1970s, Hal Lindsay (who wrote *The Late Great Planet Earth*, among other things, and filled the radiowaves with "biblical prophecy") made a fortune without any understanding of what he was talking about. But nobody seems to have noticed that everything he predicted, expected, and proclaimed with such "authority" has been discredited. And so the scene is set for new charlatans to make new fortunes telling lies about the Book of Revelation. Doubtless they do not mean to "mislead" any more than I do. They hope that their portrayals of the Christian Message will wake people up and help bring those people into the Kingdom. They can always point to the huge responses they have achieved because of the way they dramatize and market. The only thing that is left behind is honest scholarship, truth, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is always a price to pay, whether we cling to truth or whether we change it to suit our opinions or our inner psyches. The Gospel offends us. It does that every day of our lives. We are ever angry at God because he allows our friends and loved ones to be hurt. And we are even angrier at God because he does not kill, punish, or at least delete the people we hate. Often we do not even admit that we hate them (it might bring punishment), but every day we wrestle with such feelings, and realize we are still far from "His WAY." (A friend of mine just commented: "We ought to blow the whole bloody lot of them into the sea." Well, I cleaned up his statement just a bit. I was dutifully appalled, of course. He was venting, no doubt. If actually given the possibility and the responsibility – and a little time to consider and pray – no way would my friend actually want to do this. What was truly appalling was that I had just been thinking the same way myself.) The Gospel is always offense. When that ceases, we have changed it around into something far more comfortable, and false.

So what truly annoys me is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is insulted and repealed by the popular explanations and proclamations about the Book of Revelation. Grace and mercy pale to insignificance in the anger and vengeance of God and Jesus toward those who have not bought the "party line" of whatever preacher or writer is explaining the true meaning of The Revelation. In no way do I believe this is what John is saying or intending

as his message. But that is what the book is being made to say. Instead of calling sinners to an open-armed invitation into love and transformation, the emphasis is on the wrath and punishment awaiting those who do not catch on fast enough, or in the right way, or with the right words. And instead of John's rejoicing in the plans and purposes of the God who sent Jesus to save us (a plan John believed was working even as he wrote), the popular and modern explanations of the message of The Revelation leave most people believing that the Jesus of the rest of the New Testament will, in the "end times," undergo a complete personality change – a complete change of approach and Message – and that He will punish, torture, and kill hordes of humans (from all ages) who, for whatever reason, did not "get with the program."

So this paper is an appeal to you, my friends, that you never believe that the last book in the New Testament reverses the truth of the Gospel. We will "stop off" at a number of places in and around the book – sometimes for fun, sometimes for interest – but mostly to suggest that John's Revelation has been carefully planned and written to proclaim the Gospel of God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ – clear to the end. And hopefully the result will be that never again will you give credence to the preachers or authors who say otherwise. Beyond that, I might even hope that from time to time you will pick up the Bible and read the last book with pleasure and delight, unafraid that suddenly you will be transported into a sadistic torture chamber. Jesus has come for the lost and for those who find it hard to believe, and it does not surprise Him when we struggle with the issues and realities of this broken realm. It is only some of His "followers" who delight at the thought of people who do not agree with everything they think or say being thrown into burning lakes of fire to writhe throughout eternity.

Because of the atrocities of our world, many of us have wondered at times how we would fare if we were caught in circumstances where somebody was torturing us on purpose. But to accuse the Omnipotent God, or his Messiah, of wanting to treat us that way is perhaps the greatest blasphemy of all. Certainly it is this sort of sin (separation, fear, mistrust) toward God that brought Jesus to earth in the first place – and that He has lived, died, and risen again to free us from forever. So if that is the message of the Book of Revelation, it is a huge lie. It is dead wrong. And in fact, that is the opposite of what John is trying to reveal to us.



JUSTICE & PERSPECTIVE

Because I am writing to friends, I do not have to do this in some formal or wooden way. So here is the first "aside" (there may be several). Many conservative Christians are just as thoughtful and caring as I am. They start from different presuppositions, and so they arrive at different conclusions. Presumably we shall someday be "one in Christ." In the meantime, it is as if we are not even in the same religion. Inerrancy of scripture, the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming – and much of the

creedal perspective and approaches of the ancient church – are honest errors of a bygone day. The Christian Faith does not depend upon any of them. It depends upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Even more, it depends on the God Jesus reveals to us.

Nevertheless, if we cannot admit our mistakes, we are stuck with them and cannot move on. I would not like to have my appendix removed by a third-century physician, never mind triple bypass surgery. Why would I want all my faith constructs and all my hopes of Heaven reduced down to the imagery and expectations of people who thought the earth was flat, and that all of creation was essentially physical and nowhere near as big as our solar system? Many people (like Paul, John of the Gospel, and John of Revelation) were breaking past their own small constructs all the time. But humans can only grow so fast, and they can expand their minds only so far beyond what they have grown up believing. That is true of us too, of course. But happily, some of us no longer want a religion that freezes all thinking and expanding on purpose.

For example, in many churches, people recite the Apostle's Creed every Sunday. Is it an affirmation of faith, or is it a warning not to think beyond third-century constructs? "I believe in the resurrection of the body"? Even Paul would have insisted on a transformed body. What do we think we would do with a body – a body anything like what we understand as a physical body – in the spiritual realms of dimensions far beyond this physical world?

Most early Christians had no such difficulties with their expectations. Heaven would all take place on a re-constructed earth. There was no other place in their "universe" for the drama to take place. And "Heaven" was just sort of a second-story to a very tiny universe. Of course, not everybody believed the same then, any more than people do now. But mostly you would all be appalled by the smallness and limitations of the mind-set of first-century Christians. So do you really want to go on insisting that your children believe and be taught by people who want to reduce everything down to what made sense two thousand years ago? In what other area of life – physics, medicine, math, economics, psychology, even sports – do we so honor the past that we forbid all attempts to grow or learn from it?

All this is leading up to the subject of justice. If you get in a conversation with serious and sincere conservative Christians (not with the charlatans), and if you question the popular constructs of the Book of Revelation, the conversation will turn to – and turn on – the justice of God. God must be just. God must eventually right all the wrongs. God must, in the end, punish the wicked and exonerate the righteous. God must establish a kingdom of righteousness and peace – which is only imaginable if God destroys the wicked, and wickedness itself. Therefore it is right and just (and even loving, in the long view) for God to punish and destroy Satan and all who have opposed God. Justice, after all, is only the other side of love.

This is a serious argument (perspective) and should be taken seriously. Being a liberal Christian is no excuse

for being Pollyanna. And I do here assume that there are still some liberal Christians who are serious about their faith, who still believe Jesus is the Messiah and their Savior, and who still believe that conversion leads to New LIFE which stretches into all eternity. But the question is: Does the justice of God lead to and require punishment and destruction in the end? In other words, does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveal only part of the nature of God—only the first part—only the first half? That behind the smiling face of the Gospel, there still waits what we all primordially fear: the wrath of a fierce and angry God?

Put the question another way: Does God finally accomplish his purpose by what humans logically imagine to be justice? Or does Jesus reveal that the true power and dynamic of God's approaches is the transformative power of love? So far, God seems to be incredibly patient and long-suffering toward us. It is one of our chief complaints. It has annoyed everyone from Satan to the child who has lost their first pet. Why doesn't God stop the evil? The Message of the New Testament is that God stops evil by transforming it. And worse, God asks us to be patient and long-suffering too—so that we can help with the transformation.

Sometimes I remember that Jesus was not the only person ever to be crucified. This was standard punishment for criminals and enemies of the Roman Empire, and other empires used it too. Thousands of people were crucified in the era just before and after Jesus. It was a punishment to teach people to not misbehave, and to not oppose the empire. Hard to imagine a more effective punishment, or a death more cruel. So why didn't it work? Why didn't it stop all criminal activity? Why didn't it transform humanity and bring peace and prosperity on earth? It didn't because that is not the "fruit" which punishment brings. Punishment does not transform. Have we no learning curve?! Are we brain-dead? So now, after all these centuries, we are still going to put our faith in punishment as the solution? And worse, we think it will be the "final solution" that God chooses? If Christians do not awaken (or return) to the true Message, will we not deserve to lose the whole world?

Alas, I am not fully redeemed, of course. I hate to hear about mercy and grace and forgiveness when I think about others who need to be stopped, or corrected, or taken out of here. But I don't hate or dispute it nearly as much when I think about myself. Has *my* heart ever been changed by punishment? (My *behavior* has sometimes been changed by punishment, but in every case, it has ended up being a thin veneer.) The power of the Cross—and here I dispute endless sermons—the power of the Cross is not the threat of punishment, or the claim that this is something I deserve, or the fear that but for Jesus, God would do this to me. The power of the Cross is the magnitude of the love and caring which is there revealed. We are (or at least I am) transformed by love, not by punishment. It is startling to become aware that God's Presence knows us—knows how hard life is here; knows how and why we have become the way we are; knows with sympathy and with love that we are worth something even though that seems impossible to believe at

times. And it is shocking to realize that God trusts our inner beings—our true selves—enough to know that in time we will awaken to our true destiny and identity and begin to move toward him and his purposes because there is nothing else we truly care about any longer. Or, perhaps it would be better to say: all the things we care about, we care about in this new light.

The justice of God *is* the love of God—because nothing else will ever accomplish the purposes of his Kingdom. Nothing else has the power to transform. And there is no "backside" to God's love where God finally says, "Well, you've had enough chances, and so now I'm going to smash your soul to smithereens for the rest of eternity." No, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the truth—it will stay the truth—and it will never be repealed. It is my only hope. And I hope it is your only hope too.

So what happened to the Book of Revelation? Weren't we going to talk about that? Yes, that is what I want to talk about. But the only reason I want to talk about the Book of Revelation is because I think John is proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ just as clearly and creatively as he can. Only, he is so brilliant and full of imagery—and he has so much time on his hands, in exile on the Island of Patmos—that he can be truly thoughtful ... and profoundly subtle. So Satan has found a way to allow folks to use the imagery of Revelation to go right back to the former ways we have all normally thought and believed. I will eventually suggest that John takes Old Testament views (some of them full of God's love and high purposes) and changes them on purpose to reveal the newness of what Jesus' coming has revealed. So I have made these few introductory comments in the hope that you will start out seeing the real issues. Is the Book of Revelation proclaiming the Gospel—or is it telling us that after the Gospel has played out for a while, we will go back to the wrath of God? (Back to the "same old, same old"—because we don't really trust or believe in Jesus.)



APOCALYPTIC THINKING

I don't mean to get complicated or delay our look at the Book of Revelation any more than necessary. But it really is important to know what kind of writing we are dealing with, or we end up with endless confusion and false assumptions.

The Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are parables, not history. To go looking for the actual identity of the Prodigal Son would miss the point. (I have had friends in Bible Study groups who didn't bother to distinguish between the stories Jesus told and the actual events being reported about His life.) Anyway, the identity of the Prodigal Son is easy. It is me. If I cannot find myself in a parable, I am wasting my time dealing with it. So there is a difference between myth (Adam and Eve) and history (the Crucifixion). There is a difference between poetry (psalms) and short story (Jonah). How many people have gotten lost in the belly of a whale because they are too literal to figure out that Jonah is

Israel (the Jewish people) and that the great fish is the Babylonian Captivity?

In any case, the Book of Revelation comes under the genre of "apocalyptic writing." It is one of the last and, for my money, the best of all such writings. It still helps a lot to realize that this is the framework of John's book, and that it is not nearly as strange in that context as it might otherwise appear.

I will mention some specific apocalyptic writings in the next section. It is my opinion that John uses the apocalyptic genre with conviction and purpose, but also that he changes it dramatically. That is, there is more "Gospel"—more compassion and hope—for the sinners in Revelation than in any other apocalyptic writing. But we shall see if I can convince you of this.

Meanwhile, the most important thing for us, if we want to understand The Revelation, is to grasp something of an overview of where apocalyptic writing and perspective come from. The short answer is that the apocalyptic perspective comes out of pathos—out of a faith crisis so huge that it completely staggers us, at least until we get familiar with it. For the long answer, and to comprehend the apocalyptic mind-set, we must put ourselves into the context of Jewish history and experience. (We often think we already have, or should have, but let's try again anyway.) I will not slow down this description with details and "proofs" because what we are after is the sweep of history.

The father of our faith and identity is Abraham. God gives special revelation and amazing promises to Abraham. The children of Abraham by descent (and later by faith) are to be a special "Chosen People"—called apart to a different and better way of life and obedience, and carrying in themselves and in the very existence of their community a message for the world. They are to be a light to the nations. God will use Abraham (because Abraham has been willing to listen to and trust God) to introduce "The Way"—the right kind of life that will redeem life on earth. So Abraham and his descendants see, perceive, and believe themselves to be in a special Covenant with the unseen God who has revealed himself—or at least his plans and promises—to Abraham.

Of course, this new people (for indeed this begins a new people on the face of the earth) wonders along the way if this is real. Could this really be true? Are we really special—or at least called to demonstrate a special way of life? And will this unseen God actually stay with us, continue to reveal and bless and protect, and move us toward the promised destiny and purpose? And though we start with Abraham leaving everything (in Ur, near Babylon) and heading into the unknown (and eventually settling in Canaan), the design and destiny, however high, seems to be working. That is to say, Abraham prospers. Nothing is easy or automatic; there are lots of pitfalls and mistakes. But overall, it seems to be coming together. Abraham ends up one of the most powerful, if not *the* most powerful, chieftain of his entire area. And the story goes on. The story of the patriarchs brings us to Jacob and his twelve sons, who eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob's new name becomes "Israel" after he wrestles with God). And they are well

on the way to becoming a nation in the new land (of Canaan).

The amazing Joseph saves the day in the time of the great famine. Most of Israel (that is, the sons of Israel—the twelve tribes) ends up in Egypt, where Joseph has abundance for them. But then comes the first great disaster. They stay too long, in their prosperity (how familiar), and forget their destiny. "*There came a pharaoh who knew not Joseph.*" (Exodus 1:8) And so the Israelites end up as slaves in Egypt. The first great faith crisis. Where is God? What happened to our destiny? What about the Covenant and its promises? Then the great sinking feeling—the hardly-to-be-mentioned-or-admitted awakening: Who broke the Covenant first? Why did we not go back to Canaan where we belonged, and back to fulfilling our destiny? So, is it all over? Are we slaves forever?

But as soon as God can "put it together"—deliverance! Moses. And not only deliverance, but in the most dramatic, unusual, unexpected manner conceivable. Therefore, proof positive that it has not all just been in our imaginations. Abraham was true, and got it right. God really does care! So the Covenant is renewed (and expanded, or at least clarified) on the Holy Mountain. Everybody is re-sworn to keep it. But God does not make it easy. This time we have to fight our way back into the Promised Land. (Easy come, easy go. Hard to get back where you belong, once you have wandered. Maybe some of us can relate...)

Nevertheless, with much travail and many close calls, the children of Israel make a comeback. With enemies all around—and they are no match for superior Philistine weapons and chariots—the Israelites stick to the rocky hill country between the Jordan rift valley and the lovely plains along the Mediterranean Sea. But they establish themselves, believing all along that God is supporting them and raising up special leaders (judges/warriors) to help them. Often they survive and move forward in circumstances that seem unlikely without the hand and protection of their God. With tentative but growing confidence, they think that maybe they are back on the track of their destiny. It culminates in King David. And of course, David has been chosen (after a false start with Saul) by God, via the seer and holy man Samuel. So we come into "The Golden Age" of Israel. The greatest fortress city of the region is finally captured. Jerusalem becomes the capital and center of the new nation's life. David arrives just as there is a great lull in the fortunes of the great empires all around (no empire is strong in the areas of Egypt, Babylon, Macedonia, the Hittites, the Assyrians). So David is able to unite the Israelites, and by the time he dies, Israel "rules" the territory that corresponds roughly to the promise made to Abraham—from the Euphrates to the borders of Egypt.

What could be greater confirmation that God is with us—that our destiny is clear and true—that we *are* The Chosen—that we will become the most prominent and influential nation and people on the face of the earth? Wonderful! Wonderful! Wonderful!

Only, politically and militarily speaking (that is, from the outer physical perspective of our world), this

would be the last wonderful time in Jewish history. There would be other grand moments, but no grand circumstances or results. Solomon is a disaster. He starts out well but bankrupts the country, and far worse, he leads it into severe and widespread idolatry by trying to be nice to his foreign wives by building them temples, even in Jerusalem. These wives are his peace treaties with surrounding nations. His father, David, was a man of war, but Solomon sees himself as a man of peace. (Don't we approve? Surely idolatry is better than war.) On Solomon's death, the ensuing civil war splits the country into north (Israel) and south (Judah). How could such a disaster come upon the Chosen People?

With the surrounding empires coming back into power (and enormous threat), the Jews respond by having endless wars with each other, decimating their resources and manpower. (Sound familiar?) Most of their kings are far from faithful to Yahweh, or the Covenant. Under Ahab and Jezebel, the entire northern kingdom comes within a whisper of becoming entirely devoted to Baal (and the Asherim). Under Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah – who marries the king of Judah, and on his death becomes queen – the entire southern kingdom is close to the same fate. Seemingly only Elijah (and later Elisha) stands in the way of the entire demise of the faith, purpose, and destiny of all Israel (north and south).

There are moments of encouragement, especially under the great twin influences of a faithful king and a great prophet (Hezekiah and Isaiah; Josiah and Jeremiah). But the hopes are soon dashed and the results keep getting worse and worse, until we end up with the second major "enslavement" – the Babylonian Captivity. Nothing is left in either kingdom in the land of Israel except a ruined temple and torn-down walls. Assyria has devastated the northern kingdom, carrying all the useful citizens up to Nineveh and shipping its own unwanted people down to what's left of the northern kingdom, where they intermingle with the useless Jews left there, eventually to become the hated half-breed Samaritans of Jesus' day. Jerusalem and Judah (the southern kingdom), which had miraculously survived the Assyrian onslaught, are similarly devastated by the Babylonian Empire, and all its useful citizens are carried off.

The Covenant, the promises, the trust and faith in Yahweh – it all now seems far-fetched and foolish at best. The exiles in Babylon ponder and wonder what has happened. Many desert their faith and their identity. But "the remnant" – those who do not desert regardless of circumstances – become more faithful, more prayerful, and deeper and more profound in their thinking and in their hope than Judaism had ever been before.

Wonder of wonders, out of the blue (so to speak), Cyrus, the king of Persia – who has conquered the Babylonian Empire – decides to let the exiles return to Judah and rebuild their temple. He even restores the fortune (gold and silver implements) stolen from the temple. Kings who reign after him support the restoration with money and protection. What?! Maybe God is real after all! Maybe, like with Moses, the deliverance means we really are The Chosen, and God will yet fulfill the promises and give us back our destiny.

So Zerubbabel (who many think is the Messiah) and Nehemiah and Ezra begin the huge task of restoration. But it is a mere shadow of what had been real under David. Before things can get well started, Alexander the Great defeats the Persians. He dies very young, and his empire is divided between ten generals, who quickly become three. Three Hellenistic kingdoms rule "the world" – Egypt (Ptolemaic), Syria (Seleucid), and Greece (Macedonian). Antiochus Epiphanes IV, king of the Seleucid Empire, is a gung-ho Hellenist, imbued with Alexander's dream of uniting the world in a new Hellenistic culture. He ends up with the remains of Judaism in his back yard, and they are freshly inspired at their deliverance from bondage by the mighty hand of God. So Antiochus decides to unite his empire by destroying Judaism. He sacrifices a pig on the altar in Jerusalem (a message, which the Jews call "the abomination of desolation"). It does not endear him to Jewish subjects. His edicts make it punishable by death to be caught with Jewish scriptures, to circumcise a son, or to gather for any sort of Jewish worship. And he sends armed delegations throughout the land to insist that everybody worship the Hellenistic gods and ways.

We were just starting to come back! Where is God now?! How could God let this happen? Why doesn't God do something? Does God really exist, really care? Does God have any power? Where is the hope now? (We think *we* have had a faith crisis!?)

One day a small delegation of Seleucid soldiers comes to the little village of Modin. It is just a routine visit, carrying out the king's orders to make sure all the citizens prove loyal to the new regime. But when one of the villagers steps forward to obey the command, old Mattathias "loses it." He strides forward, killing the faithless villager in one blow, and the surprised soldier in the next. All the pent-up anger and frustration erupt into one of history's most amazing "Robin Hood and his band of merry men" rebellions. Mattathias has five sons, and when one falls, the next takes up the leadership of the cause. They and their followers conduct some of the most amazing guerrilla warfare in the history of the world – fighting with odds ten to one, fifty to one, even a hundred to one – as Antiochus sends larger and larger armies to quell the rebellion. Of course, the Maccabees know the rocky foothills of Judea, and every cave and spring within them. The Seleucid soldiers are well-armed and well-trained, but in ways that do them little good in such terrain. And so the unbelievable happens (much like in the American Revolution): A ragtag army with no chance outlasts the much superior forces, until it wins by default. Hanukkah (the Jewish Fourth of July) – the Feast of Lights – celebrates the rededication of the temple, and a new freedom. Back on the path – the destiny is real. God has delivered us yet again.

Each time, the lore is magnified and the belief sinks even deeper: If we are faithful enough, we can survive any odds. God will make us victorious if we just believe it enough, and stay courageous and determined enough. We have a whole history of heroes and miracles to prove it – from Joshua and Gideon, to the Maccabees.

But the faith crisis is getting pretty huge too. We have been defeated over and over – by Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks; by all our lesser neighbors, especially the Philistines, who have nearly destroyed us several times; by all our fights with each other. If our faith in God cannot even give us unity with each other, what good is it?

Apocalyptic writing is born in the maelstrom of this faith crisis. We think we have a great purpose and destiny, but it keeps getting destroyed and put down faster than we can build it back up, or even survive. We keep getting beat up, destroyed, killed, and enslaved. God has to do something! God has to bring the Messiah – usher in the Great Age. God has to come and right all the wrongs, and bring us an altogether new kind of life on the earth, or there is no real hope for us. That is the backdrop and message of all apocalyptic thinking and writing: God is about to do something momentous! And God, we are the faithful ones who believe you are going to do it. You are going to take out our enemies and make us successful, prosperous, and influential ... like we have always believed has been your true will for us. After all, it was your idea—not ours—that we should lead the world into prosperity and peace.

And then the Romans come. No amount of courage, faith, determination, or prayer can stand against the power of Rome. Roman legions are better trained, better armed, and more numerous than anything the world has ever seen. Zealot appeals for a new "Maccabean Revolt" are foolish and pointless. They only get Jewish people killed, and for no purpose; they make no dent on Rome's power. But the zealot bands continue to try, and die. The tension, by the time of Jesus, is enormous. The Roman governors and soldiers are getting weary of the constant turmoil, and the death of a soldier here and there, being caused by the ungrateful, uncooperative "terrorists" among the Jews. Hasn't the Roman Empire made their lives safer, more prosperous, more comfortable than they have ever been before? Aren't most of the taxes spent to improve the standard of living right there in Palestine? For all practical purposes, aren't they allowed to govern themselves and worship as they wish? Why is hatred of Romans so widespread and popular?

Finally Rome gets tired of it. In 68-70 A.D., Roman legions march against Palestine. They destroy every stronghold, tear down the temple, decimate the population (killing many thousands from Dan to Beersheba). Jesus had warned them: "When you see the signs of the great conflagration coming, flee from the wrath. I will need you afterward." Many of Jesus' disciples confused this warning with predictions of what is now called the Second Coming. In any case, no "political or military or temple" establishment of Judaism has existed on earth from 70 A.D. until your lifetime (1946). What exists now is precarious, mostly secular, and dependent on the United States and the United Nations, which undoes it about as much as it supports it.

But back to our subject. By the time of John's Revelation, perhaps twenty-five or thirty years after the destruction of political Judaism, Jews still meet in established synagogues throughout the Empire. They had fled

in the Diaspora, to friends and relatives wherever they could find them. Their good standing in the Roman Empire has suffered much since the destruction in 70 A.D. And Christians are meeting in homes – small pockets of believers – very much in replication of the synagogue movement, which in turn is all that is left of Judaism. Meanwhile, the Roman Empire is evolving away from some of the greatness that made Paul admire it. The deification of emperors has gotten out of hand. Bad rulers (Caligula, Nero, Domitian) are a far cry from Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius. The tension between Rome and the Christians (who will not burn incense to Caesar as divine, or participate in the trade guilds connected with pagan temples) is increasing, making life very precarious for Christians. And in John's view, Rome has become pure evil—with no regard for God, or justice, or the true welfare of its people. So Rome is like ancient Babylon, only worse. It has become "THE BEAST." But it is too powerful for any or all human opposition. Only God can take it down. Only God can restore the faithful to their destiny and purpose. Only God can right the wrongs, and bring a "New Age" that makes anything make sense or be worth the pain and suffering. So we wait and stay faithful at any cost – trusting that God has the true plan and will move as soon as the time is right. So John reminds us of the "real" story – and urges us not to switch sides at this critical time, even though everything looks hopeless from the perspective of this world.

That is the apocalyptic perspective. And it is the despair of this world, and the faith crisis it engenders, that brings it to be. It is what we hold on to as they mock us, starve us, burn us, crucify us. Either God will do this – right the wrongs and reward the faithful – or there is no God, no truth, no purpose ... and no HOPE. And John is certain that it is going to get worse before it gets better.



APOCALYPTIC WRITINGS

Some Old Testament writings are apocalyptic (like Daniel), or have some apocalyptic leanings (like Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah). Most of the apocalyptic writings did not make it into the canon of our scripture. The oldest (third century B.C.) is probably First Enoch, but they include First and Second Enoch, Fourth Ezra, Second and Third Baruch, Jubilees, and the Apocalypse of Abraham. The genre declined in Judaism after the first century A.D., but continued in Christian circles down to the Middle Ages. (Our most famous being The Revelation, of course, but the "Shepherd of Hermas" was very popular among early Christians.)

Apocalypse (revelation) is revealed by angels and discloses a supernatural world, and it "corrects" our attitudes and beliefs about what is really happening and how things will end. Most often, apocalyptic writings have been written in the name of well-known heroes of the past, and the actual author remains unknown.

The period before "the end" is marked by catastrophic events. Then order (and salvation) comes by the

power of God. Often the land (Israel) is restored, or reworked into a new era. Most often the emphasis is on a transition to a very different world order, or a new reality altogether.



THE SEVENS

So if the message is simple, why does John make it complicated? I don't know why people even ask this question. All our lives, we are busy making simple things complicated. Why should it suddenly surprise us here? "Simple" does not mean easy – or automatic. "I love you" is simple. But it takes a lifetime of endlessly complicated and complex actions, choices, mistakes, new awakenings, and new resolves to act it out, or the whole thing is lost and forgotten. Why send roses? Why put on a ring? Why make love? Why have children? Why buy a house, or cook meals, or go to work day after day for years and years? Why not just say "I love you" and be done with it?

John tries to sink the message deeper than it has ever been sunk before. His people are under duress, and he thinks it is about to get worse than it has ever been before. So he plays with every symbol he knows and paints a vision of what is really going on – in the hope that his people will see behind the trials and troubles of everyday reality and stay true to the real TRUTH: God is, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. But the world is not making it easy. So there is a lot of suffering between here and the Golden City.

REVELATION IS A BOOK OF SEVENS (777 OR 666)

John knows numerology, as well as the "philosophical" meaning of numbers. It is not a precision body of knowledge, and I can no longer remember all my sources, and I do know many sources that do not agree (at least not wholly) with what I think I have learned over the years. What is indisputable is that the ancient world did assign special meanings to numbers. Start with Sabbath—you shall remember the seventh to keep it holy.

For the moment, suffice it to say that Revelation portrays a battle between 666 and 777. It names the Beast 666. It expects you to know that the number of Christ is 777. (Some scholars will refute this, but this is just a paper to friends. ☺)

While many play with numbers (and come up with many interesting possibilities), six is incompleteness, judgment, and evil (it falls short of the seven). Carried to the "third power" of the "three," three sixes is the strongest symbol of evil possible. "Learn to recognize evil when you see it" is one of John's strongest messages. Those who have played with numerology until they have made Hitler or Stalin fit the 666 code are well within Revelation's message. 666 is not a one-time problem. Many hated people down through history have been given the number 666. One person skilled in gematria (numerology) has estimated that one person in every ten

thousand has a name that will correspond to 666. Evil is always arising to fight against God's plans and purposes.

I am convinced that John also means to identify Nero (the first emperor to persecute the church). (Domitian can be made to work as well.) "Neron Caesar," in the Hebrew spelling, adds up to 666. Going back to Hebrew for a "true identity" is not much of a stretch. Adding the extra "n" to make it come out right seemed far-fetched and drew the scorn of many scholars – until they found Nero's name spelled that way in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The *Sibylline Oracles* (Greek) give Jesus the number 888. (Eight is sometimes used as the number of resurrection.) So there is more than one tradition. A much stronger one, in my mind, is the 777 derived from Aramaic—**"King of kings, Lord of lords."**

Of course, I also like the message found on the walls of Pompeii: "I love the girl whose name is phi mu epsilon." (545) If numbers do have any real significance, making love with her must have been a revelation all its own.

So among other things, John is claiming that the battle between good and evil—light and darkness—is also portrayed in the meaning and spirit of the difference between 666 and 777. He writes "The Book of Sevens." There are many sevens within the structure of the sevens, but here is what his framework looks like to some:

SEVEN SERIES OF SEVENS

- I.) Seven messages to seven churches
 - 1) Ephesus, 2:1-7
 - 2) Smyrna, 2:8-11
 - 3) Pergamum, 2:12-17
 - 4) Thyatira, 2:18-29
 - 5) Sardis, 3:1-6
 - 6) Philadelphia, 3:7-13
 - 7) Laodicea, 3:14-22
- II.) Seven seals
 - 1) The white horse, 6:1-2
 - 2) The red horse, 6:3-4
 - 3) The black horse, 6:5-6
 - 4) The yellowish-green horse, 6:7-8
 - 5) The souls under the altar (martyrs), 6:9-11
 - 6) The earthquake, 6:12-17
 - 7) The seventh seal *is* the next seven (the trumpets)
- III.) Seven trumpets
 - 1) The earth is set on fire, 8:7
 - 2) The sea is turned to blood, 8:8-9
 - 3) The rivers and springs become bitter, 8:10-11
 - 4) The heavenly bodies are dimmed, 8:12-13
 - 5) The locusts, 9:1-12
 - 6) The horsemen, 9:13-11:14
 - 7) The seventh trumpet *is* the next seven (the signs)
- IV.) Seven signs
 - 1) The woman with child, 12:1-2
 - 2) The dragon, 12:3-6
 - 3) The beast rising out of the sea, 13:1-10
 - 4) The beast rising out of the earth, 13:11-18
 - 5) The Lamb and the virgins, 14:1-5
 - 6) The seven angels, counting one like a son of man, 14:6-20
 - 7) The seventh sign *is* the next seven (the bowls)

- V.) Seven bowls
- 1) The bowl poured out on the earth, 16:2
 - 2) The bowl poured out on the sea, 16:3
 - 3) The bowl poured out on the waters, 16:4-7
 - 4) The bowl poured out on the sun, 16:8-9
 - 5) The bowl poured out on the throne of the beast, 16:10-11
 - 6) The bowl poured out on the Euphrates, 16:12-16
 - 7) The seventh bowl *is* the next seven (the stages of the fall of Babylon)
- VI.) Seven stages of the fall of Babylon
- 1) The description of Babylon, 17:1-6
 - 2) The explanation of Babylon, 17:7-18
 - 3) The fall of Babylon, 18:1-8
 - 4) The mourning for Babylon, 18:9-20
 - 5) The final ruin of Babylon, 18:21-24
 - 6) The song of praise at Babylon's fall, 19:1-5
 - 7) The seventh stage *is* the next seven (the final scenes)
- VII.) Seven final scenes of the end times
- 1) The rider on the white horse, 19:11-16
 - 2) The supper of God, 19:17-18
 - 3) The capture of the two beasts, 19:19-21
 - 4) The angel of the abyss, 20:1-3
 - 5) The first resurrection, 20:4-10
 - 6) The judgment scene, 20:11-15
 - 7) The new Jerusalem is the final end and fulfillment, 21:1-22:5



FIRST, THE CONCLUSIONS

I want one last chance to draw loose threads together before diving into the book itself. It is fairly obvious that a good deal of preaching (and other biblical commentary) is guilty of reading our own situations and opinions and attitudes back into the words and passages of the scriptures. If it isn't guilty of this, it certainly ought to be. Only a very "pure" and disinterested approach would study the Bible without caring what it means today, or to us, or to me. Scholarship without intention of "living The Life" is not very commendable when it comes to the Bible. It is an inherent contradiction in terms to pretend we know anything about the Bible or its people, unless we are also engaged in a relationship with the Living God as intentional and passionate as the lives of those we study. If you write about love and have never been in love, clearly you have no notion of what you are talking about.

If we want to live The Life, then we are hungry to know how those who tried to live it before us felt, thought, decided, and believed. We want to know what their issues were. We "walk alongside them" more, not less, if we realize connections between their lives and ours across the years, and in the very contrast of changing times and circumstances. We make it more complicated, I think, by the tendency we all have to "honor" the biblical words so much that we do not want to think about them in real-life mode. (By the way, the biblical words are not the same as God's WORD, which is a bit bigger and more compelling than anything that can be put on paper.) Even if we are not locked in to concepts of inerrancy, we still have great regard and respect for the

biblical word. But it makes it harder to track what our Christian friends from former times were saying and believing, if we feel compelled to agree with them no matter what we really think or what we have experienced on our own faith journeys. Belief does not come from restriction or compulsion—it comes from recognition and awakening. Therefore we must not simply "swallow" the biblical records. We must think, ponder, interpret, "make it our own." None of the New Testament writers knew they were writing "scripture." They did not pretend to be perfect. Why do we want to pretend it for them? Times have changed. And more than that, sometimes those who wrote must have been tired, worried, frightened. Often they seemed to be writing in their "spare time"—having busy days and living their current lives as faithfully as they could. Nor did they have computers or easy ways to edit, never mind the time to do so. Writing materials were expensive, and writing was slow and arduous. Often they had no time to "fully explain." And do we feel like they were always consistent? None of *us* ever have been. Were they always fully tuned to the Spirit? None of *us* ever have been.

It is now obvious that the entire early church was in error about when Jesus was going to come again. Either that or they were in error about *how* He was going to come again. In either case, as present-day Christians, we are caught between either having to suspend mental activity on the subject, or finding it necessary to reconsider, for our own time, our expectations regarding such things. It is possible (I hope) that we want to know what they thought and believed—and that we are also trying to come to some clarity about what *we* think and believe... hopefully trying to be as faithful in our time as they were trying to be in theirs.

But trying to get to this clarity is fraught with pitfalls and obstacles. I am not sure the pitfalls are particularly dangerous (at least not like the danger of pride, or disobedience), but they are at least confusing. I feel like I "hear" John (the author of Revelation) giving us symbols and visions that define his "vocabulary" and his mind-set—giving us keys to his meaning. But tracking this, I come to a very different message from the one most people in our time claim to be the (obvious, they say) message of the Book of Revelation. But perhaps I am only trying to "redeem" The Revelation for myself, being unwilling to "consent" to Jesus reversing His Gospel—and all He means (to me)—and His taking the whole affair back into anger, vengeance, and destruction, instead of on into conversion and redemption and salvation. And while I believe that Jesus never does this reversion, possibly John and the second-century church did believe it. If so, they surely did not mean to be unfaithful or to reverse the true Message. Nevertheless, if they did, we have an apostate religion! The whole construct of the burning fires and the sinners in everlasting anguish serves the opposite theme from the Gospel—and plays directly into Satan's hands. It certainly wouldn't be the first time the church had misstepped and done damage to its own message—nor doubtless will it be the last. We do have some Crusades, an Inquisition, and Jewish persecutions that we are not very proud of. And we could get more

personal, if we were willing, and talk about our own personal crusades, inquisitions, and persecutions that we are ashamed of—or surely ought to be.

What might not be as obvious to us, at first blush, is that sometimes people do better than they know, play beyond their own level, write or speak beyond their own level of awareness or understanding. Surely this should be no surprise to those of us who trust the Holy Spirit. That is, in part, why the Bible is never a wooden instrument—why new inspiration and revelation continue to pour forth from it. It is one of the more famous statements in the Congregational (now United Church of Christ) heritage. Spoken to the Pilgrims as they were gathered in worship just before setting out on the Mayflower for the new land (by their pastor who could not come with them, John Robinson): "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word."

How is there yet more light and truth to break forth if it has been written down long since? For most people, it is frozen in a canon we are not supposed to doubt or question. That is a strange conclusion for those who know that we have no text of any original New Testament writings, only copies. Actually, only copies of copies. And we have only fragments of early manuscripts—and three hundred *thousand* variant readings exist among New Testament manuscripts. But that is a whole different story.

First of all, the words on the page are not the WORD. They are words about the WORD. The Living God continues to reveal himself. And while the record of the way God deals with the early Christians is valuable beyond description, it does not lock us down or count us out of our own authentic life with the Christ—and from fresh revelation.

In the second place, Jesus comes with such newness and dynamism that even His own closest friends and followers are hard-pressed to comprehend all that He is telling them. In fact, they are unable to do so, and the New Testament story itself makes it clear that they are often confused and unable to understand. ("*Get behind me Satan*" and "*Have I been with you so long and still you do not understand?*" and "*Could you not wait one hour?*" and "*Will you also go away?*" as well as endless other indications, such as the rooster's cry.) So we have every reason to conclude that even the twelve—never mind the rest—are often nonplussed by what Jesus is doing and teaching. By what logic would we then turn around and suppose that there are no misunderstandings in a book *clearly recording* that there are endless misunderstandings, partial understandings, and great consternation in and around this MAN who is so different—who thinks and chooses and calls "valuable" those things the world has never thought, chosen, or called "valuable" before?

So it is not only possible but likely that on many occasions, the disciples have "reduced" the teachings to levels they can understand, to constructs that are more familiar to them. (And of course, we do that too.) The New Testament is not something Jesus wrote. Nor is it what Jesus meant or taught in any pure sense. It is what people *think* He meant and what they have gotten from

what they heard Him teach. And while that is still enough to stun us and carry us for a lifetime here, attempts to lock it down to absolute realms without error and beyond questioning are ludicrous. So we have every reason to suspect and believe that Jesus—as Holy Spirit among us—continues to reveal and correct and expand our understanding of His mission and His truth. So John Robinson was not being far-fetched to declare that "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from his holy word."

In any case, I do not read or understand the Book of Revelation in the manner or meaning that is usually put forth in our time. Moreover, I suspect that the way The Revelation is usually taught, preached, read, and contemplated is very far away from anything its author has intended. And since it gets pretty complicated, I will set forth here, in the beginning, my conclusions. And as this paper unfolds, I will try to show why I think The Revelation supports these conclusions rather than the ones usually proclaimed in its name. The sooner you agree, the sooner you can stop fussing with the details of this book and get back to living it. Hallelujah! Or, as will doubtless happen with some of you, you can go back to the way this book is usually explained and understood.

So let us set forth our conclusions first and then see if the Book of Revelation itself will support such constructs. This will be no "clear and obvious" task—no simple key that will suddenly allow us to know for sure what John means, or where we need to go even beyond his own constructs. Often the spiritually gifted speak better than they know. And stories we tell have dimensions beyond what even we notice as we tell them. It is one of the marks of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are only "instruments" and not entirely in control—even of what we think we are revealing and telling. But it is fairly obvious that even John expects history to come to an end within a very brief span of time. In other words, we know he is mistaken about one of his biggest claims. (And still this does not ruin the message, or make it irrelevant to us.) John almost certainly expects the reign of Domitian to be nearly the last period in human history. And many of us have realized that not only history, but even the Roman Empire itself, has lived far beyond the limits of what John imagines or expects. It never occurs to him that an emperor of the Roman Empire could end up a Christian, end the persecution of the church, and help turn the entire Empire toward a very different destiny. In short, Constantine ends up converting, or at least taming, "The Beast" of Revelation. (Yet Constantine is in no way foreseen in The Revelation.) But enough.

THE CONCLUSIONS

1.) The "Second Coming" has been a misunderstanding—and of enormous magnitude.

It is impossible to estimate the amount of time and energy that faithful people have poured into the teaching, preaching, writing, and believing of the Second Coming construct. It is a logical continuation of apocalyptic thinking: A Messiah will come. The Messiah will usher

in a new age—the close of the present age. God (at last!) will right the wrongs and vindicate the righteous.

As already mentioned, time itself has made it clear that this expectation is inaccurate. By all fair assessments, the "soon" part of "coming soon" has already been discredited. And we know that the early church did indeed expect this great transformation to occur within their generation. As time passed, more and more people tried to "understand" in a different manner. But for the most part, the church has continued to transfer the error from generation to generation, instead of wondering where we misunderstood and what this should mean to us.

Jesus is, beyond question, a very different Messiah from the one expected. So different, in fact, that much of Judaism could not and still cannot see any way to comprehend why some of us match up Jesus to everything Messiah is supposed to mean. Jesus' purposes and methods are otherworldly (*"My Kingdom is not of this world"*) in ways we still have not fully grasped. It is not entirely foolish to suppose that His purpose is as different from what we have expected (and hoped) as His methods and approaches have proven to be.

For many, this simply ends up a reason to throw it all out. For those of us who believe Jesus is the Messiah—however unlike (beyond) our expectations—this is not possible. We try to find the places of our misunderstanding and let them lead us to what may be a better understanding. And indeed, they lead us to things far greater than anything we had ever imagined or predicted.

In this case, Jesus is a true Spiritual Leader/Messiah (Redeemer, Reconciler, Revealer) far beyond what could be contained in the old constructs and expectations (Son of David, the triumphant and victorious warrior/king who would restore the fortunes of Israel and set up a righteous kingdom on earth—the Great Day of the Lord). In this case, the Second Coming is Pentecost (well, Easter evolving into Pentecost). The Second Coming is Jesus back with us—as Holy Spirit—to guide, direct, and lead us in our pilgrimage from here to eternity. And instead of the traditional Second Coming, we get The Church—intended to be Christ's faithful and obedient (not perfect, but evolving) people at work in the world—teaching, inviting, and sharing the faith journey with each other and all the others they can include (not by coercion). Jesus' methods—great surprise (and disappointment for many)—do not include compulsion, force, coercion, threats. Jesus "wins over"—dies for—persuades—heals—teaches—invites. So do His faithful followers. And generation after generation, instead of focusing on a closeout, we are supposed to be focusing on being witnesses, ambassadors, evangelists, healers, carriers—of the great Message of acceptance and Christ's Presence with all who will receive and make room for Him in their own lives. And we are supposed to be creating faith families—support groups—for those who want to walk this New WAY.

Without getting into all the fun and glory of it (and disappointment, for we are impatient): This world is boot camp (classroom), training us as we prepare for the next (even larger and more demanding) realms. Realms of far

greater possibilities and opportunities—and I suspect still fraught with choices and chances to be unfaithful. Otherwise, why make such a big deal out of obedience and prayer in *this* realm? We all die here (walk into our own Close of the Age), and we doubtless experience our own Day of Judgment—evaluation session—as further preparation for the new realm we will be entering. Only, it is not a fear thing. We trust Jesus! Not that the revealing will be all pleasant, but Jesus truly saves, and He is very good at what He does. If He loses any of us, in the final analysis it will not be many of us. For He is not some lame, half-hearted, or half-empowered Savior.

How I wish that all Christians everywhere would hold a big conference, admit that the Second Coming belief scenario has been a very unfortunate misunderstanding, and all agree to concentrate on being the faithful church (*ecclesia*—the people of God) in the world for the duration of our lives here.

- **The fall of Jerusalem.** For all of Jesus' then-current disciples, the Fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) was an event in the future. I believe the evidence is clear that these followers mixed (confused) Jesus' sayings about the coming Fall of Jerusalem with their own already-assumed convictions about apocalyptic expectations of the Close of the Age. Hence, "the time is near"—which was very true of the coming Fall of Jerusalem (a horrible, earthshaking event in Judaism)—jumped track or bled over onto already-held assumptions about the Close of the Age.

This "mixture" (of apocalyptic expectation with Jesus' warnings about the Fall of Jerusalem) is clear in Matthew 24:4-51 (note verse 34) and Luke 21:10-36 (note verse 32), and is also mentioned in the thirteenth chapter of Mark.

- **The apocalyptic mind-set** (and a reminder of other literature of the time). We have already talked about this, but I want to remind you here that this was the prevailing view of most religious Jews of Jesus' time, and it had been for at least two hundred years prior to Jesus' coming. For the moment, suffice it to say that apocalyptic views came out of deep travail, as the history of the Jewish people seemed to take them further and further from everything they had believed and expected (as God's Chosen People). In the face of ever-growing defeat and hopelessness, it was a matter of either abandoning their faith or switching to a completely outlandish, far-out hope that God would come in some dramatic way and set things right—literally beyond all human possibility or expectation. While I believe this refusal to abandon faith was totally right, I also believe that God did it in a way completely different from (as Jesus was completely different from) any way that humans could have imagined.

- **The end of the world.** The "expectation" of the world ending is still accurate enough for us as individuals. Even though the world does not come to an end "soon"—WE all do! This may seem puerile to some, but it is very real for each one of us. I think the reason the Second Coming constructs have not disappeared long since is because the perspective that comes from them has been and always will be accurate and applicable on

an individual level. It is also why the Book of Revelation itself, though in error on its timing, is still so powerfully applicable to each of us on our own level of faith and obedience.

• **He is coming soon.** Though Revelation shows signs of being "nervous" about the former expectations of a more immediate ending of the age, it holds to the basic assumption nonetheless. And it encourages its readers to stay faithful, even unto death—even though it seems like time drags on and persecutions and trials persist and increase. Nevertheless, The Revelation is wrong about one of its most famous and adamant claims: "*He is coming soon!*" He *did* come back soon... as our Resurrected Lord—as the Holy Spirit. But that was not the expectation or understanding people wanted (not enough instant or total gratification).

2.) **The two-edged sword is "conversion" (persuasion).** Jesus "reaches" them—He reaches the heart, and changes them/us forever. The only blood He spills is His own.

3.) **We are still with "the Lamb."** The Gospel has not been repealed. Those who are "saved" will not be few. Jesus is very good at what He does.

We will have much more to say about these things. I mention them here as the major conclusions to be claimed by this paper.

So now you can see where we are heading. And you will get to track, if you wish, and conclude for yourself whether John's Revelation reveals that these are true conclusions, or whether we should return to the more familiar expectations.

SECTION II

THE TOUR BEGINS

CHAPTER ONE

I am stunned by the audacity of John. Whatever we have concluded about who this John is or when he writes, he is not claiming to tell us his own opinions or views. This is the only writing in the Bible that is written as scripture—the only author who is conscious that he is writing "scripture." This revelation comes to Jesus from God. Then, via an angel, Jesus gives this information to John. Where is the humility? Where is the "safety net" for possible errors, blunders, even the struggle to convey thoughts and concepts in human language? Well, I suppose we could still rightly claim that this is third-hand information. Yet that somehow does not seem to be the flavor here. As we shall see, John makes some blunders. Among other things, the Island of Patmos lacks a library, the Internet, telephones. John probably doesn't even have any scriptural scrolls available to check, and must refer to the scriptures from memory. Nevertheless, this is "the word of God" and the "testimony of Jesus Christ"!

At least that is the claim. Still, we must each decide if we agree. Many make such claims for various writings and we do not agree. I have read the Book of Mormon, the Koran, the Dhammapada, the Bhagavad Gita, endless

portions of the Upanishads. Some of it is fascinating. Some of it has impacted my life. But none of these writings are scripture for me. All of us have friends who consider other, lesser-known writings to be scripture for them. That is to say, they try to live their lives in accordance with such writings. Some writings are scripture for us for a time but then recede into the background. I have lived through many "seasons" when members of my high school youth groups held various songs, by one group or another, to be scripture for them.

All of us, if the truth be known, have "personal bibles" that include some of the books in the Bible and omit others, and that include some writings which are not in the Bible. I have a friend who reads *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis every Lent. I do not think he has ever read the Pastoral Epistles in the New Testament. Thousands (probably millions) of people have Bibles in their homes and consider them Holy Scripture, yet rarely read them. I have known many Catholics and members of mainline churches (Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) who have never read the Book of Revelation all the way through—not a single time.

If we claim something is scripture but never read it, is it still scripture? Perhaps yes, but not for us. If it is scripture for us, we read it, study it continually, and try to live by it—live according to it. So I insist that whatever John claims for his writing, we must each decide if it is scripture for us. There are many writings which claim the authority of being scripture, and none of us can claim all of them for ourselves. (If we tried, the result would be disintegration rather than integration.) Verse 3, then, is poignant indeed.

Nevertheless we are grateful for the audacity. John does not bother to cover his remarks with endless prevarications. He tells it like he "sees" it. That frees us to receive what we can. If we want to quibble or correct, that is our choice. Nevertheless it stands as it is written. And long after all our remarks and thoughts—after all our responses and efforts to live by what we have received—it will still stand as it is written.

Having established the claim to divine revelation and divine authority, John names his own participation: "*John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia.*" A specific man (I think the bishop of Asia Minor in his time), in deep prayer and inspiration, to seven specific churches. But "seven churches," we must suspect, is also *all* churches—at least any willing to pay attention. And John no doubt suspects that some of the specific seven named may not pay attention. But those that do will be blessed.

Already we are into the richness of John's symbol language. Seven spirits before the throne—all the powers by which God creates and maintains what he creates. And there is far more to "enjoy" in the first chapter. Where I do not say enough for you, go to the books in the Bibliography.



CHAPTERS TWO & THREE

I have done a series of sermons on each of the seven cities. You can always get copies through my website, bvbministries.com, if you wish.

The messages to the seven churches are a unit, and it is more fun to think of all seven at the same time. When we come to this section in a Bible Study group, I always ask the members of the group to do three things:

- 1.) Grade each church—A to F.
- 2.) Choose which church you would join if you had the choice, and tell why.
- 3.) Tell which of the seven churches is most "like" the one you belong to right now, and explain.

We never agree on which grade each church is receiving from Jesus (via John), at least not all of us. It is clear to me, for instance, that Smyrna and Philadelphia are both getting A's. I think Sardis is getting an F. Laodicea is getting an F-, yet John seems to have more hope for her than for Sardis. The scorn is maybe worse, but the possibility of repentance somehow seems better. Besides, we all love the image of Jesus knocking on the door, and sometimes it causes us to "awaken" too. "But why are we fond of keeping Him waiting outside?" someone in the group will wonder. Such discussions are fun, and they help the group get really clear about the interplaying messages to each of the churches. Often we end up with more than a little awareness beyond where we started. Often our own church experience has been that a lot of the efforts and energy which the church expends simply fade into the background, without our even trying to have it happen. Somehow John is able to remind us of what we are really here for—what we are supposed to be about.

In remarkable ways, these letters to the seven churches (so brief, and poignant) really do represent "all churches." I suspect that this quickly became obvious to all the churches in Asia Minor, and then to churches throughout the Roman Empire. No Christian could ponder this section of The Revelation without wondering, "How am I doing—and how is my church doing—in the eyes of Christ?" That must have been part of the reason John's book was quickly copied and spread—why ultimately, despite those who disliked it, it ended up part of our canon.

Again and again my mind tries to fathom what the impact must have been as this writing came to the churches of Asia Minor for the first time. Clearly, all the churches got to see all seven messages. All the churches got to read/hear what was said about all the others as well as about themselves. What did this do to the consciousness of the churches, I wonder? Did it make some of them incredibly angry? Did it really cause some people, or even their whole community, to repent? Did it start helpful, even exciting conversations between the churches? Communication was not so easy then, but some people were doubtless traveling and visiting with each other. I suspect the ferment must have been huge. All of the reactions we are able to imagine probably would have been part of the mix, and a good many more

besides. How I wish we had some journal from a person alive at the time, telling what the reactions and responses were as John's Revelation broke on the shores of the seven churches.

Does **Ephesus** wonder why its love has grown cold? Do they know how to rekindle their first love, even if they want to? Why does John choose the image of Jesus walking among the seven golden lampstands as particularly apropos for Ephesus? Are Nicolaitans actually teaching sexual promiscuity, or is it just a symbol of idolatry—or both? I was part of the liberal church in America during the '60s and '70s, so I assume *both*. And I have yet to be convinced that there has been or ever will be an age when both do not plague the life of the church. There always seem to be some individuals in every congregation who "lead people astray," often under the guise of being superior spiritual leaders themselves. And yet, Ephesians get to eat of the tree of life, if they overcome.

Is **Smyrna** surprised by the accolades that come to it? Are they so persecuted (and so likely to be martyred) that they are forgiven for not being effective in the world? (Actually, John has no concern for size, attendance, well-maintained buildings, popular music, good youth groups, or Sunday School. He doesn't even address potlucks or committee meetings—for any of the churches. We should not conclude that programs and practices have no place in the life of the church, but they are not our purpose or our justification for existing, and they are certainly not the measure of our faithfulness—our success.)

For Smyrna, Jesus is the first and the last—the one who has died and come to life (resurrection). Presumably this is comforting to those in such a precarious position (due to Smyrna's super-patriotism for Rome and the emperor). We suspect that Smyrnan Christians are faced with economic straits in everyday life even more than they are faced with the threat of death. How can they earn a living and take care of their families when they cannot participate in the trade guilds without "going along" with the idolatry of their community? Every trade guild is connected to a pagan temple and its meals. It would be "easy" for many to get good jobs and be good providers—if only they would compromise with the beliefs and practices of those among whom they live. (I am always eager to stop thinking about Smyrna and move on to the other churches.) The Smyrnans who overcome will not be hurt by the second death. (Whatever you are enduring, it will be worth it.)

Does **Pergamum** wonder why Jesus is pictured for them as wielding the two-edged sword? Probably not. They live where the seat of Roman government and military power is located (for Asia Minor). Anyone arrested on a serious charge would be sent to Pergamum for trial, and for execution if condemned. They are reminded that Jesus' authority is greater than the two-edged sword of Rome. Apparently the case of Antipas is well known among the Christian community.

Don't be lazy—turn to Numbers 22-24 and read the story of Balaam, if you don't already know it. Behind this account is the suggestion of a more treacherous role

on Balaam's part. (Numbers 25:1, 3, 18; 31:16) It is not biblically provable, but why do I "remember" being taught that Balaam finally went to Balak (king of Moab) and said, "Look, I can't curse these Israelites because their God won't permit it. But there's more than one way to skin a cat. Speak to your women. Have them adorn themselves and be very friendly and inviting to the Israelite men. If then they break their Covenant with their God, you won't need me to curse them. God will punish them for us." (Twenty-four thousand Israelites perished.) In this story also is the issue of idolatry—Israel committing to Baal of Peor (pleasure, health, wealth, popularity) rather than to the Covenant with Yahweh.

Yet he who overcomes at Pergamum gets some of the hidden manna and a white stone with his true identity written on it. (You have an especially tough road, so if you "make it," the honor will be great.)

Thyatira is reminded of the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like burnished bronze. His eyes penetrate all mystery and all secrets. His feet show that He is "established" beyond all power to contest or remove Him. Thyatira, it seems to me, gets pretty high marks (at least a B+) for deeds, love, faith, service, perseverance—and is on the increase. (Unlike Ephesus?) There is one flaw. How interesting that it is the very flaw that liberal churches today *seek* to have, and encourage all their members to have. (And Thyatira is not the only church of the seven to be troubled by this issue.) They tolerate "Jezebel," a nickname, presumably, for an influential woman in the congregation who "teaches" "higher spiritual truth" – apparently including the mysteries of spiritual sexuality, and the wisdom of having a more relaxed and tolerant attitude toward the culture around them. "So, you have friends who invite you to their pagan temples? Don't be such a prude! God knows where your heart is. Be a little forgiving and loving of your neighbors – taking a hard-nosed "stand" just drives people away. We need to be inclusive, politically correct. For us, it is a rare circumstance when offending our neighbors is holier than tolerating them. So yes, we have a Message and a WAY of Life, but for the most part that should be a private affair – and something we keep to ourselves." (Whoa! How did we get from martyr to milquetoast?)

My study groups are always "offended" by the punishment for Jezebel and her followers, and especially for her children. We are supposed to be "forgiving," and forgiveness means there are no consequences for our behavior or for our evil—whether we repent or not. Who started such rumors among us?! Who decided that the principles of life have been repealed? Did Jesus teach such a thing? The very point of the passage is that Jezebel has been given ample opportunity to repent and she will not. (She *knows* more than anybody, so why listen to *any* body?) But in Jesus' imagery, bad trees bear bad fruit – bad principles lead to unfortunate ends – children are in fact impacted by the teachings and lifestyles of those who raise them. It doesn't much matter whether we like it – it is nevertheless true. The consequences will continue to play out ... until or unless we repent.

If Thyatirans hold to their faith, then their authority (in the Word) will be established and strengthened. The rod of iron (unbreakable) sounds very harsh and negative to many. "*Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*" It is comforting and wonderful to know that there is rhyme and reason—that there is an AUTHOR, and therefore true AUTHORITY. Otherwise we could not grow or learn or ever improve—or ever move toward light and LIFE.

I don't know why or how the early Christians started associating Jesus with Venus (the morning star). It is indeed the brightest and most beautiful star (planet) in the sky—except for our own sun. So why not the sun? (Oh well...)

Sardis is greeted by the One who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Similar but not identical to Ephesus. In Ephesus the image is of the stars in His right hand and He walks among the seven lampstands. Here the seven spirits of God are not on earth so much as representing the irrefutable and total power and awareness of Heaven. Since the only hope for the Christians at Sardis is for them to wake up, a reminder of true and total authority opens their message.

The message is cryptic and devastating. Sardis has no specific warning, for there is not enough life left to call it a real "church" (the people of Christ) or to encourage very much of anything. But they must have heard the Gospel somewhere, sometime, in the past. Can they still remember, and reawaken? They are very close to being shut down. I sometimes wonder how many of our churches have been "shut down," though they go on surviving for a while as mere shells of former times and purposes. "Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth." (A saying among Quakers that I remember from my childhood.) It is an epitaph that would fit nicely on the tombstones of many churches.

John's hope seems to be in a handful of individuals who are still faithful. (So why don't they band together? "*Wherever two or three... in my name*") In any case, they will still get their white garments (redemption, true identity, sanctification, a place in the Kingdom) if they stay faithful.

Philadelphia is wonderful. I do not read "perfect." They have much to learn and experience, but they are on the WAY. Usually the favorite church for my study groups, Philadelphia has an open door – for anyone interested in the Christian Message and WAY (not for those who are opinionless or spineless). And no one has the power to open or shut this door – except the Christ. Amen.

I love it that despite the now-severe rift and animosity between Jew and Christian, John is not willing to put down Jews or Judaism. (The twenty-four elders [twelve tribes and twelve apostles] and their thrones in chapter four; those from the twelve tribes of Israel who had been saved, in chapter seven; "*they were singing the song of Moses... and the song of the Lamb*" in chapter fifteen.) John knows that Jews and Christians belong together (both a Covenant people, both chosen of God), and he looks forward to the day when the rift is healed and we are together again. And as equals in the mercy

and salvation of God—that is, the Jews are still singing the song of Moses, the Christians are singing it too, and they are all singing the song of the Lamb.

In any case, at this point in time there are "Jews" who, out of animosity, turn the names of Christians over to the authorities to get them into trouble. ("Hey, so-and-so doesn't burn incense to the Emperor. I wonder if maybe he's one of those insurrectionists.") Instead of blaming Judaism itself or Jews as a group, John says these are not true Jews (they do not live by the precepts of Judaism). They are a synagogue of Satan. Sometimes the faithful, out of zeal for their beliefs and ways, fall under the power of Satan's influence—they move into his ways of destruction, control, hatred, harm. "Maybe if I harm you enough, it will save you." (The Inquisition; the Crusades; the last political campaign for President; whatever.) Don't we wish the world were as astute as John—separating the behavior of the fringe from the behavior of the main body? (Perhaps not, but I still believe that the main body is better than the reputations of our time make it sound. Is that true of Islam in our time?)

The "pillars of the church"—originally pillars built to shore up temples and other important buildings threatened by earthquakes—are wonderful. Of course, there are false pillars here and there. But I have lived among the pillars of the church for fifty years, and they are wondrous indeed—constant in service and prayer and concern for others; enduring and patient in their own efforts to increase their own faith, and the faith of others. On occasion I hear them mocked by the jealous, but they live lives far superior to those who denigrate them. And that is how I perceive the church at Philadelphia, which ended up being the last bastion of Christendom in Asia Minor.

And those from Philadelphia who overcome will get the names—the name of God, the name of the city, and even Jesus' own true name—which, among other things, reminds us that we do not yet know nearly as much as we sometimes imagine. It is high praise and encouragement for Philadelphia nonetheless.

But I do not understand verse 10. I have acquaintances who link it with the *Left Behind* mythology of "The Rapture" (which was actually invented rather recently, from what appears to be mere wishful thinking). Why would the Christians in Philadelphia escape the testing? Do true followers of Jesus want to escape the trials or the testing—despite all that Paul taught us (via a crucified and Risen Lord)? (Romans 8:17 and many, many other passages.) When I was a kid we sang about, "If you can't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown." When one of John's strongest appeals in this book is for his Christian friends to not turn away from persecution and martyrdom (which are going to get worse)—because the time of travail on earth is short, and Jesus and His Kingdom are worth any price—how do we now come to this strange comment? Is Philadelphia so far off the beaten track that most of the current persecution will pass it by? Well, it *is* off the beaten track, but *that* far? And verse 11 seems to belie our first impression of the meaning of verse 10. Why do we have the com-

ments in verse 12 about overcoming, if we are not to be tested? Something is awry, but I do not know how to explain it. Whatever I imagine to be the meaning of verse 10 as it stands alone, it is dead wrong. I am missing something. Well, it is certainly not the only unanswered question we have in Revelation.

Finally, **Laodicea** closes the list. It is not funny, but it is humorous. Here Jesus is the "Amen"—the "so be it," the "it will indeed happen." He is the faithful *witness* to God—not God himself. The link will be extremely close, but Jesus is never God in The Revelation. We are still two hundred years from Nicea. Nevertheless, Jesus started it, and He will finish it.

And Laodicea is tepid. Jesus has good success with enemies and friends, but what can He do with the neutral—those who will not "move," who will not commit, who will not decide? "*I will spit*" "Spew" is not really about expectorating. In Latin, it is *vomitar*—a violent, negative reaction: "You make me sick!!!" Not the kind of thing we would hope Jesus feels toward us. (So much for unconditional love, and all the other bullshit psychobabble of our time.)

I think Laodicea is the hardest of the seven to grade. Some days I think it is rated lower than Sardis. Other days it feels like John still has great hope for them.

Laodicea seems reminiscent of all the suburban, well-heeled American churches that do not take the Christian Mission, Message, and WAY seriously enough to break themselves loose from the culture surrounding them. In Laodicea, people are proud—of their jobs, their accomplishments, the advantages of where they live. How nice, in and of itself. But apparently it has drawn their focus off of following Jesus. And they think that they are well-educated (i.e., they see clearly), that they are handsome because they dress well, and that they have the resources to take care of whatever comes at them. (Then why are they so filled with fear underneath the surface?)

The mark of Christ's love (or God's) is that we are disciplined, challenged, given assignments we can only accomplish with the Spirit's help. (And "*Woe to you when all men speak well of you.*") And finally to the most famous passage in the messages to the seven churches: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me.*" What an incredible promise! Some days it reminds us. Some days it changes us. Some days it keeps us from despair.

And those who overcome? They never lose their relationship— their love-bond— with Jesus (and His Father). As always, and fittingly at the end of these messages to the churches, it becomes obvious once again that it all depends on our repentance— on how we respond to the Invitation and to the Imperative. Thank you, Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come. (Does that always have to be at death or in some other realm? What about here and now?)

Does God really care about me? What a selfish and self-centered question. That is how we try to keep sane, keep our distance, keep our balance. The more objective and "scientific" we can be, the more we can protect our-

selves from the real impact of the Gospel. Does God really care about me? Down to every thought I think, every feeling I feel, every decision I make? We do not love or obey or serve in the grand schemes, the generalities, or the vast social concerns or sweeping disasters of our world. We love and obey and serve in the tiny everyday moments. Does my awareness of God's Presence (mercy, forgiveness, love for me) change the way I "see" my wife, respond to the person in front of me, go about the task that I am working on today?

This is the real problem we have with Christianity – and the huge offense we feel with Jesus. God stops being generic, distant, and community-minded – and yes, God stops being vaguely in favor of justice and peace and good morals and better behavior. "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*" I want in – really and truly IN. Into your life on all its levels. Into all of your ways. How else can I save or redeem? This thing of one hour on Sunday, or even one hour every day, is never going to make it. General but vague intentions and sort of hoping for the best are never going to make it. It's you and me, kid, and all the way – every day – in every dimension of your life and of your ways.

That is the real trouble with The Revelation too! God and our Resurrected Lord care personally and deeply about what is happening in each and every church (community of believers). The wonderful and the awe-filled (awful) thing in the second and third chapters is that repeated phrase as it tolls out the beginning of each new message: "*I know*" "*I know*" "*I know*" I know you, who you are, what you are doing – and I care. And that remains the deep and abiding perspective throughout the Book of Revelation – the reason it has been written, and the only explanation for going to so much trouble.

Does God really care about me? How we answer that question defines the depth and the relevance of our faith. It also changes the layers of our commitment, our joy, our hope, and our gratitude. No matter how much we say we believe, we still have to "try on" the Gospel if we want to be saved, transformed, brought into the Kingdom. Faith is trust. Trust is the foundation of all relationship. Christianity at its core is purely personal – a personal relationship with Jesus the Christ, who reconciles us to God (brings us into a personal relationship with God). From this core all other relationships are formed and defined. And from this core all things spread. The moment anything stops being personal, the bond with Christ is broken (at least for that experience, or category of life). Satan hates the personal, and he destroys relationship at every level every chance he gets. When we start to love Jesus back, we stop appreciating Satan's efforts and stop cooperating with them. Every time we say "I love you" (and mean it), we help to destroy the rule of Satan. And every time we say anything less, Satan starts to smile. Jesus is not the only one who stands at the door and knocks.



CHAPTER FOUR

It may sound elementary, but many times we can avoid confusion if we try to keep track of where we are. John sometimes switches from Heaven to earth without warning. And sometimes he mixes the two without comment, like when the four horsemen ride. They seem to be coming from the four beasts around the throne, yet they are clearly riding on earth.

In any case, the setting of the fourth chapter is in Heaven, as the setting of the first chapter is on earth. Even more subtle for some of us, John has the perspective familiar in the ancient world of his time (especially among Greek philosophers) that anything which exists on earth must have its perfect counterpart in Heaven. ("As above, so below.") There can be no cat down here unless there is a perfect type of true cat in Heaven. Anything we find on earth is a shadow-form of its true being in Heaven. This kind of thinking is not easy for me. Nor do I think John has worked out all the details with precision or consistency. He seems, rather, to assume it like we do many of our own presuppositions. Nevertheless, if a battle is going on down here on earth, it must also be raging in Heaven, or perhaps it has already been waged in Heaven and we are feeling the shadow-aftermath here on earth.

The picture John gives us of Heaven and the great throne is peaceful and ordered. So is this before the battle (between good and evil – light and darkness) or after? We will be told of Michael throwing Satan out of Heaven, but the time line in Revelation is never clear. (Is it happening right "then," or is John just finally getting around to telling us about it?) Has Satan already been thrown out of Heaven? Does the breaking of the seven seals begin things on earth, or does it begin things *both* in Heaven and on earth? Perhaps it does not matter to the purpose of Revelation.

However, we are given much to think about in the images John presents to us. In my opinion, an artist trying to paint a physical picture of what John describes would ruin the majesty and power of what he puts before us, though perhaps those with better artistic awareness would "see" through the images, as the rest of us must try to "see" via the written word. So we will get mundane and "wooden" now, until we lose the beauty and impact of what John is showing us (and what he is being shown). That's okay if we put it back together before we are through. There are other "throne room" scenarios, and clearly John knows of them (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Daniel 7), but John claims spiritual revelation (4:2), not just mimicry or reflection on what others have written.

We are seeing the throne room of Heaven, and therefore a kind of mandala of how things should be – or rather, we are getting a look at the order and power that directs all things and brings them to what they should be. Those familiar with spiritual revelation will also know that when we receive transcendent revelation (theophany), it is still put into images that we can understand. Therefore, we are not seeing the true Heaven. We are seeing what we can understand of the true Heaven. Or in this case, we are seeing what John and his generation

could relate to and understand of the true Heaven. Infinite and eternal truth cannot easily be "brought down" to physical images that mere humans can relate to. And even with images and realities "familiar" to John, he struggles to convey and portray the majesty of what he "beholds." That reminds us of two very important things:

1.) We must not get locked on to details, as if they are more important than what they are trying to reveal to us.

2.) We would not have the same images today (two thousand years later). We are human and we know something of history, so we can still pick up what John is trying to convey, if we want to—at least to some degree. But our cosmos looks different to us than John's could have to him. Our solar system (never mind all that is beyond it) looks vast beyond anything John or his generation could ever have imagined. So at places, his descriptions will be "too small" and too earthbound. That does not ruin anything unless we want it to. We simply have to translate from his language at times – not only from Greek to English, but from 100 A.D. to 2000+ A.D.

Jasper and carnelian, for instance, do not "say" to us what John is saying. Jasper as we know it is not even a semiprecious stone anymore. No certain identification is possible between the gemstones of the biblical writers and those of a jeweler today. Jasper may even have meant diamond. In any case, John sees the throne room as royal and glorious beyond all earthly realities. Why mix a rainbow with an emerald? A bow is not a circle, so "around the throne" probably means that the essence of the Covenant surrounds the throne room, and is beautiful and precious beyond words. (Some forget that the rainbow of Noah's story is also God's war bow, and a symbol of power. The promise not to destroy comes from power perfectly capable of destroying.)

Far more importantly, we come to twenty-four elders. And they are in the outer periphery of the throne scenario we are being shown. There are many possibilities, but I only care about one of them: The twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob's new name after wrestling with God) plus the twelve apostles (and all their followers) are represented here. (Judas was replaced by Matthias, though perhaps the Spirit's choice for replacement was Saul of Tarsus.) Though we know that animosity between Christians and Jews is dramatic by John's time, yet in a number of places in The Revelation, John claims the promised unity of Old Covenant and New Covenant people. How could it be otherwise? Would God fail to honor his promises?

In any case, they are all clothed in white (redeemed and forgiven), and they all wear crowns of gold (purity and authority). They are the leaders of all earth people—at least all who will come to God through either Covenant. John is not worried about Muslims, Buddhists, etc. His world is smaller than ours, Muhammad has yet to come, and political correctness has not yet been invented. He has certainly heard of Zoroaster, Osiris, Socrates, and the many gods of the Roman world, but they are not in his picture except as idols and enemies of God.

The seven torches do not seem to circle the throne, but all seven stand *before* the throne, as if waiting to respond to any command God may give them. Seven spirits of God? Seven archangels? Seven rays of power? Seven qualities by which all reality is maintained? The sea of glass is possibly the heavenly version of the Sea of Bronze (altar on the left, Sea of Bronze on the right at the entrance to Solomon's Temple). On earth, it is perhaps a place of ritual washings, and possibly a place of meditation—or a forerunner to the crystal ball, some say. If so, it is a symbol that God sees all things – past, present, and future. (Some scholars want the sea of glass to represent evil, but I don't track it that way.)

Are the four living creatures inside the circle of seven torches (spirits of God)? Probably not. Precision, as we will note again and again, is not the purpose or object of John's Revelation. It is certainly hard to imagine that the four creatures are more important or more prominent than the seven spirits. The four creatures do ring the throne – that is, one on each side (a square superimposed on a circle). They do represent the four sides of physical reality; the four compass directions; the earth, air, fire, and water from which all creation is made. They do represent the four fixed signs of the Zodiac (and in John's day, whether we like it or not, astrology is the "science" and thought-frame of the time). It is important to earth that the creatures are around the throne. Creation came from God and, before the corruptions of our alienation, creation was good. Leo, Taurus, Aquarius, Scorpio – in that order – are mentioned. And each has six wings (can move in any direction) and eyes enough to see in every direction, within or without (total awareness). And they worship! Always and without ceasing. Hard for us to imagine a physical reality in tune with God – worshipful, loyal, and obedient. The twenty-four elders worship also. There is great beauty as the fourth chapter ends and all "know and love" God. (There are endless explanations for all these symbols, which is what makes symbol language fun. Check other commentaries in the Bibliography for alternate meanings.)



CHAPTER FIVE

This seems to me to be one of the most incredible and inspiring moments anywhere in writing. Of course now familiar, we may not get the full impact of the surprise and shock in store for those who were the first to read or hear this book. Some of the "surprise" may even be reflected in the urgency with which some comments about this fifth chapter seek to minimize its impact. But I must not get ahead of myself, here of all places.

In the right hand of God ("*him who sat on the throne*") is a scroll. John continues to keep God numinous and beyond images. Some say the use of the word "hand" undoes this and that we are returned to the image of a man, despite the ploy. But they are not trying to follow what John is presenting. After all, John must still use *language* if he is to attempt to convey anything to us. Who *cares* which hand?! "Right hand" is symbolic of action. If the scroll is in the right hand, God intends to

perform—to bring into being whatever is written on this scroll. It is more than pondering, more than a dream—even more than intention. The contents of this scroll must take place!

The scroll is also written on both sides—loaded, as we might say, with all that is to be. But we might also remember that this scroll is in Heaven. That is to say, this is not a partial, shadowy, imperfect scroll, as any scroll on earth would have to be. (A thought which might return us to humility, even about sacred scripture.) Nothing in this broken, alienated world—so limited by time and space, and so partial and temporal—can be "perfect." Only in Heaven does the *true* form of anything exist.

In any case, this scroll is in Heaven and it contains God's perfect plans, and those plans are what must come to be. Many of us have pondered the meaning of the Garden of Eden, and the impact of God making for us the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At its core, so to speak, the fruit is our free will. This both ruins God's creation and makes the purpose of creation possible. If we *choose* to return to God—if we long for him, love him back, try as best we can to tune our lives to his ways and purposes—then all the mayhem, pain, and turmoil here end up "worth it." If not, all is lost and continually ruined. But it cannot be a puppet show. If there is no free will, there is no meaning or significance whatsoever. Does such a "small" point really explain all the major travail of life here? Indeed it does. A million people each doing things their own way with no genuine thought or love for God—how could there be peace anywhere in anything? And the tiniest flaw in our willing worship would set off endless repercussions. If our story is correct (the essence of our Jewish/Christian drama), then God patiently waits for us to grow up—in this realm, and doubtless in the next. He waits for us to "return"—to choose him over ourselves and all other things. Free will cuts both ways. Sometimes we think only of the evil it produces. It is also the only chance for obedience and love.

Even so, there is the feeling on our side that the whole world/life/purpose thing is often "on hold." We do not see things moving toward their proper conclusions. And even if we do—or when we do—a few days later, it goes back to the balance between good and evil; darkness and light; faith and doubt. It feels like we are merely putting in time, spinning our wheels. Nations come and go, and so do religious movements, but it is more a squirrel cage than a pilgrimage. Here and there some individuals seem to catch on and move forward. But for the most part, we tread water or jog around the same track. That is, I think, the situation John pictures with the seven seals. Fate and destiny and purpose are on hold until some "agent" is found with power and authority enough to break the seals and move us forward. Even so, if the seals are broken, there will be tremendous danger. Setting true things in motion is never simple, easy, or automatic. Free will is not repealed. It might all go really bad, not just really good. There is reason for the seals to be "unbreakable"—and reason to wait until the true and right agent (Messiah) comes. If some counter-

feit King Arthur is able to draw the sword from the stone, the kingdom is in far greater peril than ever before. It would be Satan's great chance to "win it all" and ruin it forever.

There is huge confidence, and enormous wonder, in John's portrayal. The Great Lion's secret identity and power—the Lamb with marks of slaughter on Him—is the chance, the opportunity, to move on into the true destiny and purpose of all creation. Verses 9-14 try to make it clear. Verse 13 is a note seldom heard: *every created creature* is rejoicing, feeling the potential released at last—feeling the possibility of our true destiny on the move at last.

I still think that we Christians should be more careful of our claims. Without any reduction of our love and gratitude for Jesus whatsoever, we should still stay awake. Judaism is never repealed in The Revelation. (And John probably doesn't know any Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists, etc.) Jesus does not invent God—He reveals God. Jesus does not write the scroll—He breaks the seals that keep it closed, shut, on hold. To hear some Christians talk, it sounds like there was no God until Jesus came. Or it sounds like Jesus was a new god and that nobody had ever encountered the true God until Jesus came. What could be more egregious to Jesus and His mission and ministry among us? The Great Reconciler—and suddenly no God to reconcile us to? Jesus' true purpose, identity, and titles are quite beyond our full comprehension in this realm. We do not need to worry that He will have insufficient honor. But turning Him into the God He has come to reveal does not further His purposes. In endless cases, it actually reduces the love and loyalty the followers should have for Him.

But back to The Revelation. Let us line it out again: John sets up an unbearable tension. The great scroll is sealed with seven seals. Complete protection. All seven powers (spirits, rays) of the eternal realms will protect this scroll from being tampered with by any power on earth or in Heaven. What is written in the scroll must happen. Yet it *cannot* happen. But it *must* happen! Only, what must happen will bring the realities of earth (imperfect) into growing alignment with Heaven (perfect). Indeed this is unbearable tension—and insurmountable paradox. Yet this is the very purpose of God—at least this is what I hear John saying. That which cannot possibly be (the reconciliation of earth and Heaven) is bound to take place. Indeed, this is the astounding message of John's book, though I claim many miss or keep obscuring it.

The tension is not just a literary device. This purpose—impossible and paradoxical as it seems to us—is no easy, automatic thing. It requires someone worthy (someone with sufficient authority) to bring this recalcitrant and rebellious world and its people into alignment—into reconciliation with Heaven. We cannot even imagine it, never mind imagine some agent (human or angel) capable of such a radical transformation.

So the mighty angel wonders for us all: "*Who is worthy to break the seals*"—to set the true purpose of God in motion? But it is beyond imagination. No one could be worthy of such a task—to reconcile earth and

Heaven. Part of the tension and paradox is that it would have to be someone with authority in both realms – with authority both in a perfect Heaven and in a broken world. No one could possibly be found. It is an impossible job description. No one on earth could be that connected to Heaven. No one in Heaven could be that connected to earth. So John weeps and weeps. And his tears represent the tears of all the lost and lonely – all the broken and disappointed children of earth since Adam. After all, we do have souls and we long for Heaven. But in all our experiences here, it is beyond us.

But wait! One of the elders (why an elder? which elder? John gives no clue, or has no clue; maybe it doesn't matter) – "*the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David*" – has triumphed! He is able to open the scroll – to break the seven seals. King David, of course, comes from the tribe of Judah – as therefore, in Jewish lore, must the true Messiah.

So all eyes turn to behold the Great Lion of Judah, He who is impossibly worthy. And we look... and we see ... we are looking in the right place, straight at the Great Lion of Judah, and there can be no mistake. Yet what we see is not a lion at all, but a lamb, with the marks of slaughter on him. All the circuits are blown. All our constructs disintegrate. The only solution to a true paradox is to blow us – or transport us – to a different dimension. What happens when an immovable object meets an irresistible force? The mountains burst! The unbearable pressure forces us out of our present plane. It is a spiritual Vesuvius. All our old patterns and principles – what we thought we knew or understood or expected or hoped in – are all shattered. The Lion can never accomplish this task. Only the Lamb with the marks of slaughter (sacrifice) on Him can reconcile earth and Heaven – open the scroll – take us forward. Lions terrify and conquer, but they cannot reconcile.

Soon the angel anthems will begin to peal forth. In this case, they will be sung by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, but nevertheless. They sing a new song, one never heard or known before. (5:9) It will lead to a New Testament – a New Covenant. It is Christmas! Only, the *real* one, not just tinsel and holly. "*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals*"

This Lamb is no weakling, though that might be our first impression. This Lamb comes with a different kind of power. And this Lamb stands in/at the center of the throne. (We are at A.D. 95, and the Council of Nicea is not until A.D. 325, so no formal doctrine of the Trinity is yet in place. However, we are at the place of the genius and inspiration of John.) The Lamb stands at the center of the throne – no place of greater power or authority can be conceived. And the Lamb has seven horns (total power) and seven eyes (total awareness, and all wisdom). So the Lamb takes the scroll from the One who sits upon the throne, and clearly this is not contested – this is supposed to happen. It has been designed from "the beginning." (While there is much evidence that the writer of Revelation and the writer of the Gospel are not the same man, they do share remarkable similarities of

insight from time to time. And it is likely that they write pretty close to the same time.)

Those who would have read or heard the Book of Revelation early on would doubtless have been shocked by another item that we cannot fully discern from any of our English translations. The word being used for "lamb" is *arnion*. We don't need to be completely carried away here; Jesus is referred to as "lamb" in other writings. For example, "*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*" (Isaiah 53:7) We don't know when Isaiah's passage is first applied to Jesus, but surely by the time of The Revelation it has been. The Gospel of John has John the Baptist identifying Jesus as the "Lamb of God." (John 1:29, 36) The First Letter of Peter refers to Jesus as a "lamb without blemish." (I Peter 1:19) While the writer of Hebrews never uses the word "lamb," the claim that Jesus is the perfect sacrifice is a major theme of the book.

However, there are a number of words for "lamb" in Greek. *Arnos* is normally used. *Arnion* is not used outside the Book of Revelation except once: "*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my arnion.'*" (John 21:15) Here the word is not being applied to Jesus, but the context makes its use clear and appropriate.

Arnion refers to the smallest, most helpless lambkin imaginable. In short, John is rubbing it in on purpose – how helpless and defenseless Jesus appears to us, and how helpless and defenseless we often believe Him to be. Moreover, John is introducing "the feature event" of the Book of Revelation. (Vernard Eller, *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible*.) *Arnion* has come to reconcile earth and Heaven, but there is no such thing as accomplishing such a feat without a fight. Satan owns this world, and anyone who starts to break the seven seals (to allow God's Will to be done) will most certainly be in for the fiercest battle of all time.

"So, ladies and gentlemen, in this corner, weighing 33.3 ounces, helpless and hopeless and still showing the marks and blood of recent slaughter is ... *Arnion* – contestant for the greatest conflict of all time – making His bid to win the hearts and souls of all mankind! And in this corner, weighing seventeen billion pounds – with armor impenetrable and too thick to describe, with every weapon of war and deceit and propaganda and cruelty the world has ever known (and some it does not know) – making his bid to win (or at least control) the hearts and souls of all mankind, stands ... *Therion* – THE BEAST! *Arnion* versus *Therion*! Let the contest – the battle – begin!" (And in chapter six, the Lamb will begin to break the seals, the battle will indeed begin, and the "action" of Revelation will finally get underway.)

As we have commented before, it is almost as if John expects us to have read his whole book before we can read any of it. He alludes to things in the beginning that cannot be clear until we know the end. At least he presumes we will go on reading and come to things that

will clarify what we have already heard. So it is not unusual for him to expect us to pick up the larger drama that he is talking about here in chapter five, though he has not been able to "get there" yet. On the other hand, can you believe that the juxtaposition between Arnion and Therion is an accident? And he almost taunts us: "Look at Arnion, then look at Therion! Who do you think is going to win?! Who will *you* bet on?!" And indeed, John fully expects those who read this book to bet their whole lives on Arnion. It looks obvious; Arnion has no chance. But guess again! Arnion will win the hearts and lives of nearly everyone. Therion can coerce, frighten, control, and terrify us—but only for a while. His day and his power are running out. And for Heaven's sake (and your own), do not switch sides now, just because things look so pathetic and hopeless. Arnion will win in the end! Therion has no chance! (And yes! This is much of the message of the Book of Revelation.)

Revelation starts referring to Jesus as *arnion* in chapter five, verse 6, and it will refer to him twenty-eight times throughout the rest of the book as *arnion*. It will *never* go back to "lion"—though sadly we note that most readers, and a great many commentators, do. Most readers think that Jesus reverts, at the end, to the means and methods we are most familiar with. His Kingdom will turn into the Third Reich at the end and He will torture, kill, and destroy the opposition. At least that is the conclusion I hear most often when people discuss or teach or preach about The Revelation. I think that would make John (and certainly Jesus) very, very sad. What's worse, it would make the Kingdom of Heaven a very sad place to be.

But the fifth chapter of Revelation itself is not sad at all. The rest of the chapter is wild with joy and celebration and worship. Where is Handel when we need him?! Where is the orchestra and the chorus?! Well, we can hear it if we want to—we can remember it if we allow ourselves to.



CHAPTER SIX

With chapter six, the action begins. That is, the Lamb begins to break the seven seals of the scroll. We remember that this is a heavenly scroll, a perfect scroll—that it contains the true purposes and plans of the Creator. It will not only reveal what is coming, but what is *supposed* to come, how all things are to proceed, and how they will end up in the fullness of time. John's despair in the fourth chapter was that maybe no one would ever come with power and authority enough to begin opening the scroll—setting things in motion toward their proper end. Maybe we would go on with injustice and pain and anguish forever. But no, the Great Lion of Judah—in entirely transformed role and identity—is able to break the seals and move things into their intended purpose and end.

It is difficult, at least for me, to get and keep oriented. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (as they are sometimes called) have such poetic and mythological stature that I sometimes have trouble remembering that

Revelation is their source—that Revelation has a right to correct my impressions and give me a clearer awareness of their true meaning. And I must also remember that there are only four horses—but six seals—to consider here. What am I to "learn" from the six broken seals? Where are we? What time is it—in terms of reality? Is this before or after Jesus (of Nazareth)? Does all this begin to announce the end times?

I have heard many answers, most of which I think are careless, or wrong. John is more interested in truth and imagery than in precision or historicity as my age thinks of it. Often I start to miss his meaning because I get too locked down into wanting to know exactly what he means by everything. I am persuaded that often his meaning is too big for such a "small" approach. I believe, then, that this sixth chapter is telling me what life is like in this broken, unredeemed world. The four horsemen *always* ride here. They always have. They always will. They, plus the two additional seals, reveal what life is like in a temporal realm separated from God. Breaking the seals does not begin this reality, but it reveals it. And, it is very important (and troublesome) to note, it reveals that God has set it up this way on purpose.

The four horsemen are not coming from Satan! They are called forth by the four living creatures who are gathered around the throne of God. The imagery is complex. The four creatures are in Heaven and therefore are perfect servants—and they are also representing concrete physical reality, even though they are in Heaven. That is, they represent the forces that physical reality requires to exist and be maintained. (The four elements, the four winds, the four corners—stability; the power to endure; the possibility of being real and effective and "embodied" [as we think of it]. Two plus two—in a formation that cannot be tipped over.) However, these four creatures call forth four horsemen (John did not know about tanks or planes or cars) who represent their power and possibility, but in a temporal, imperfect form—suitable to earth. These "principles" are therefore subject to misuse and can cause great destruction, pain, and suffering... in a temporal, alienated world. (Especially one where Satan rules, and where Satan is always corrupting and twisting things.) So the horsemen do not come from Satan. Satan is not able to create, only to corrupt. Nevertheless, chapter six shows what it is like here on earth—not in the end times, but throughout all earth history.

In our imagery, ever since Adam and Eve—ever since "The Fall"—it is the price of our separation (rebellion and disobedience) that we continually experience the results of our corrupted reality here. Some of us believe that in conversion (turning our lives over to the guidance and protection of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ), we are no longer as frightened or controlled by the four horsemen. But they still ride in this realm. Even if we do not fear them spiritually, we experience them physically. And though it is hard to remember, in their proper role and true form and purpose (in Heaven) they are not our enemies but our friends. Just as the Seven Deadly Sins, before being corrupted by our alienation from God, are all understandable and useful principles of survival. (For example, before it becomes gluttony,

eating is no sin, and it can be not only nurturing, but a joyful gathering of friends – or even a supper with our Lord.)

The first horse is white. When I was a kid, the good guys always rode white horses (like the Lone Ranger, or Hopalong Cassidy). On the white horse sits one with a bow (a great weapon, with maybe a hint of promise or covenant). He has been given a crown (authority, rulership), and he rides conquering and to conquer. Because this seems and feels like "a good guy," some have supposed it to be Jesus. But John has a much bigger role and much higher respect for Jesus than to make Him merely one among the horsemen. (Some commentators claim this represents the Parthians, great archer horsemen on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. But as Jesus is too big, the Parthians are much too small.) Most make all four horsemen evil (at least they are destructive), which I think also misses the point. So what does the first horseman stand for or symbolize?

The first horseman represents all the "good" leaders who actually do try to bring good on earth by fighting/struggling/leading good causes and righteous wars – causes and efforts to stop harm and bring benefit – to unite us for the better purposes that humans envision. I think of King David, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln (and a great host of others). In my view, the first horseman is not limited to physical war. There are also wars on poverty and disease, and there are causes and organizations that strive to save the environment, fight racial prejudice, unite us against child abuse, and on and on. These really are "good guys" – certainly in intent. Some of them we admire more than others; some of their movements and organizations seem more effective to us than others. Nevertheless, they all bring conflict on the earth! This is not to say they are wrong. It is just the way things are. The first horseman is always riding, in one guise or another. Sometimes we believe in the cause and ride with him. Sometimes we stay out of "good fights," trying to "leave well enough alone" or waiting for an even better cause or leader. Sometimes we ride with the first horseman and die in the cause. At least many around us have, and we owe them more than we can repay—at least that is what we say on Memorial Day. But the truth is, even if we are supposed to ride with them, they never accomplish the hope or dream or purpose they intend. The war "to end all wars" does not. The leader and the cause eventually run their course, and the world still has as many problems as when they began. This is *not* a reason to cease our striving. But the sixth chapter of Revelation reminds us of what life in our realm is really like. There is no way to perfect things here. There is a chasm between the temporal and the eternal; between Heaven and earth; between a reality in tune with God and a reality in rebellion against the authority of God. Or, in a kinder view, this place is boot camp—a classroom where we are given an opportunity to "try on life" and knock off some of the rough edges, and learn for all eternity what it really is like to be and act like we are gods—like we are in control—like freedom means we can do whatever we want. In any case, many

people die, are wounded, are ruined – even in the good fights.

The second horseman is red. He carries a great sword. Normally the red horseman is said to represent war. This time not righteous war – purely war. The red horse represents all the conflict and destruction that go on—not for justice or righteousness, but for greed, power, anger, domination. I suspect the red horseman represents all anger between us—all jealousy, resentment, and conflict that lead toward our killing, destroying, and hurting each other. When Cain slays Abel, it is the red horseman riding. If I lose a friend, or when I know a couple and love them both but they get divorced, is that not the red horseman riding? Lots of times the white horse and the red horse run at the same time. King David is surely representative of the white horse, but when he kills Uriah, is that not the red horse? Life would be much simpler if we only got one horse at a time. Seldom, if ever, does that happen. But at its worst, the red horse is the Hitler, the Stalin, the terrorist – the bid for wealth and power that does not care who gets hurt in the process. (And yes, sometimes it starts out with a good motive in the mind of the leader, but quickly the methods reveal that Satan has taken over.)

The third horseman is black. I think black represents despair, loss of hope – depression and discouragement. More specifically, the black horseman represents all the mayhem of economic realities – inflation, loss of jobs, wrong jobs, economic injustice. Most of the population finds economic survival a great and often tragic struggle. And there are endless thousands who see no hope of ever "rising" to any level of comfort or satisfaction. When we worry about paying bills, or we cannot buy the house we dreamed of, or even if well-heeled, we find ourselves worrying about losing investments or what we would do if an economic depression came—the black horseman is riding. Some think that not harming the oil or the wine is a sign of mercy. It may just as easily be a reminder that many people live on the edge of survival, not quite starving yet not making any progress either—a perpetual, grim "eking out" our subsistence from day to day, stretching into the grayness of hopelessness. On the other hand, maybe there is always hope, as long as there is oil and wine.

The fourth horseman is pale green. Many confuse the last two horsemen because both have to do with death. (As if the white and red horses do not?!) The fourth horseman represents death through disease and pestilence (plague). If my friend has cancer, the pale rider is near. And always we have friends with cancer these days, or with drug addiction, Alzheimer's, or whatever. Not nearly as many, in our culture today, are attacked by wild animals. But there is also a sinister aspect to the fourth horseman, as if he represents the fear of death and Hell in whatever way we die.

Not just my friends, but many commentaries object that the four horsemen cannot be "of God." John makes it very clear that they are summoned by the four living creatures who are around the throne of God (chapter four). There is no doubt, for me. The four living creatures represent the four elements (earth, air, fire, and

water) that God uses to "make" creation. And they are his servants, and they worship totally. So if they summon the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, how are they *not* from God? But (it is objected) they cause such destruction. Yes, all forces that are not totally devoted and obedient to God do "turn to the dark side." More to John's point, however: in a broken world, God's obedient servants often cause destruction because there is a war going on between light and darkness, between good and evil. (How can we keep forgetting the animosity toward Jesus, or indeed toward all of His faithful followers?)

But mostly I am amazed at such questions. "How can there be such destruction in our world?" Where have you been?! Do people live forever in our domain? Have you never noticed death, illness, and accidents going on all around you, all your life long? Is John forbidden to call it like it is because we don't like to be reminded that every day on this planet, thousands die? If they did not, there would very quickly be no room for those being born. (And some say the quality of life here is in jeopardy because we are not dying off fast enough.) The four horsemen always ride here – always have, and always will. *Of course* we don't "like it." What has *that* got to do with anything?

The fifth seal represents the martyrs. I think this is not just Christian martyrs (certainly they are included), but it reminds us that in every age some of God's best servants are killed, persecuted, imprisoned, hated. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*" (Matthew 23:37) John seems to have a special awareness that this is one of the most serious charges to bring against the earth, and one of the "wrongs" that demands God's vindication. He also reminds us that the quota of martyrs has not yet been filled. He does not believe, of course, that the world as we know it will last nearly as long as it has. But *we* know it. And so The Revelation still reminds us that we may be called on for ... for what duty we never know. *Martyrios*, I am sometimes reminded, means "to bear witness." The fact that we sometimes die for doing that is a side effect – the occasional result or repercussion of bearing witness to our Lord. Nevertheless, the object is not to die, but to bear witness. And to do that right, we must not be afraid to die. (We must already have faced our death, or, in the language of the early church, we must have been baptized – drowned – already born anew, and thus we have moved past the fear [control] of earthly death.)

The sixth seal represents all natural disasters: earthquake, flood, typhoon, tsunami, volcano, cyclone. Not that it matters much, but John's cosmology again reveals a different understanding of how the universe is put together. In our reality, no "star" could fall to the earth. That is, no star is subject to the earth's gravity, and our earth would vaporize long before we got anywhere close to a star – even one as small as our own sun. Nevertheless, when nature comes up with one of its catastrophic surprises, we feel very much the way John describes it. "Where can we hide?!" Is natural catastrophe wrath?

Well, maybe more for John than for most of us. Yet one of the dimensions to wrath is the consequence of natural principles working their way out. If I jump off a cliff, I encounter the wrath of God – or I experience the law of gravity. Since the ancients were more likely to attribute all things to God, they were also more likely to describe my broken body as a result of God's "wrath" rather than (forgetting who made the laws) attributing it to one of the laws of nature.

In any case, the sixth chapter reminds us of what life is like here on earth. Only, now that the Lamb has broken the seals, these forces all get drawn into the great battle between light and darkness, between good and evil. We are not "on hold" any longer. There is new meaning to the conflict. The Lamb is moving to redeem the world – to win it back to God. John knows this means the conflict will get far worse. All neutral ground will disappear. There is no hiding place down here – no place to sit it out in comfort and ease (though many of us try to find such a place). All will be drawn into the battle between Arion and Therion. They say that if you sit in a poker game and cannot tell who the sucker is, it's you. If you live on this earth and cannot tell that you are in a great battle, Satan already owns you.

SECTION III

THE TOUR CONTINUES

We are about to delve into some of the more "confusing and complex" imagery of John. So perhaps I will be forgiven for a few more introductory comments. From here on, I will break pattern and not go strictly by chapter or verse. Nor will I make any effort to cover all the details or explain what each of John's images and comments mean. (That would have been like the book I was intending.) We will only stop off here and there to comment mostly about the message – to keep asking if John really is telling us about the "new truth" of the Gospel, or if he is reverting to expectations "that know not Christ." ("*There came a pharaoh who knew not Joseph.*" And today there has come a Revelation that knows not Christ...)

I have much agreement with the several authors you will find in the Bibliography, as well I should – they are true scholars. Thankfully the number of responsible books about The Revelation has been slowly increasing over the past fifty years. This also corresponds to my "term" as an active pastor. Therefore it was my impression, especially as a young pastor, that there was not much being said (or written) to help Christians gain perspective concerning this last book in the Bible. Either the members of my churches did not want to study this book at all because of what they had already heard or read – or they were eager to talk about it, but with so many preconceived and misinformed opinions that it was very difficult to proceed.

A couple of young men from my high school youth group in Altadena, California went off to college

(LaVerne College in LaVerne, California) and ran into Dr. Vernard Eller. This was in the early 1970s. He was an unusual teacher, they said. We met and I read some of his books. In *The Most Revealing Book of the Bible*, Dr. Eller struck some surprising chords (especially about chapter five – Armon versus Therion), and The Revelation has been fascinating me ever since. It cannot mean what most people think it means. There are too many hints and claims that it is grounded on grace and Gospel.

The situation is greatly improved as I write in 2006 – for the few who find their way to the handful of really good books now available. Many times in recent years I decided not to continue my own writing about The Revelation because others have been doing such an excellent job. I first read Eugene Boring – one of the most misnamed men in history – when laid up with a broken foot. That was back in August of 1991. And I thought, "Wow, this is wonderful!" But I also thought, "Oh good! He has just saved me endless months of labor."

But to my amazement, a number of my Bible Study folk were unable to see how good his book really was – they could not track it well enough to free themselves from all the "baloney" being preached and written about The Revelation in our day. Boring is an incredible scholar and he writes really well – but like a good scholar should, he stays polite and reasonable and balanced. Some people cannot hear that?! I wish we all could, but truth is not the only thing we seek. Since reading Boring, a small string of other fine books has come to my attention. But where is the impact? When does the whole culture wake up and throw out all the trash still being peddled in Revelation's wake and name?

Beyond that, I now love the Book of Revelation myself. And when I read the comments of others about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, for instance, it never feels like they "get it right." Do **I** have it right? There is no such thing as "right" with such symbol pictures and the huge "inspired" panorama that John sets before us. It is not about being right, but about getting onto John's wavelength – and then tuning our own hearts and minds to the Lord of Life. Somehow, "being right" never gets to the passion, the conviction, the excitement – to the gratitude and the LOVE that make all other affairs in life pale to insignificance in comparison to who Jesus is and what He is doing here. John is not just casually commenting. He is on fire with the vision, and in the Spirit. Knowing the Book of Revelation without participation in that passion and conviction is to miss it – to not really know it at all. Christian scholarship without any real love for Jesus is anemic. Some subjects cannot be known or understood objectively. Love is one of them. The mind can serve its Master very well indeed. But when the mind thinks *it* is the Master, there is no rudder and no true purpose.

In any case, I keep wanting to tell my friends what I see and hear in this book. So here we are. And to keep some control of the length of this paper, I am going to neglect many important details, especially where it seems to me that the good commentaries provide ample help. If you begin to care about what John is trying to convey, you will start reading some of them too. But

most important, you will keep reading the Book of Revelation for yourself and keep trying to hear John talking to you, even though from a very different time and age. So now I will go on jumping from scene to scene. What I hope most, if you read this paper, is that you will come to enjoy, instead of avoid, The Revelation. Enjoy because the real issues somehow stay the same, even if the Beast and all the other symbols change their shapes and names from time to time. Most of all, I hope you will know from now on that John has written of the power of the Gospel of God's love, in Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord.



CHAPTER SEVEN

John does not divide the book with chapters and verses. That comes much later, by others. So do not try to link the seventh chapter with the profound meanings of the sevens. In fact, we have already discovered the major themes – the mind-set and message of The Revelation – in the first six chapters. The rest is repetition for emphasis. Seven bowls are not seven new plagues, but they are taking a closer look at the meaning of breaking the seals. And some of it, of course, is John building the power of the drama, increasing the urgency, building suspense ... hoping we will not be misled – that we will not forget what is really happening – and go faithless before the end.

Even the last chapters about Heaven and the New Jerusalem are no addition or surprise now. We already know how the story will end. (In fact, for people of our time, the last chapters are the weakest part of The Revelation. Images from the first century are woefully inadequate to carry our expectations, although it may be fun to compare John's images with our own.)



CHAPTER SEVEN, VERSE NINE

I do not mean for you to neglect the context or skip reading the rest, but as it is impossible, once we see clearly the meaning of the Lamb in chapter five, to hear the Book of Revelation in the usual vindictive and destructive mode, so it is impossible, once we feel the impact of chapter seven, to think God's plan is to save only a few.

We will start out with the one hundred forty-four thousand. Twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Most of you have met people who insist that only one hundred forty-four thousand will be saved period. There are over six billion people on the face of the earth just today, not counting those who came before us – and God will only save one hundred forty-four thousand? Not much of a God, to create so much more than he can redeem. Not much of a Savior, if in the battle with Satan that is all Jesus can manage. But never mind what *we* think. Is that ever even remotely implied by John himself? Are there only twelve elders around the throne?

How can we remember that numbers and math are not a precision language in John's time? We never know for sure when John means a precise digital number (if ever), or when he uses numbers as a symbol of something (nearly always). Arabic numerals are not yet known in John's time. Have you ever tried to multiply with Roman numerals? You ought to try it once, just so you won't ever forget again what mathematics must have been like in John's time – in all biblical times, for that matter. For most people in those days, numbers beyond twenty or thirty are just a general impression. Moses wanders in the wilderness for forty years. Do you think somebody is marking calendars as we think of them? It is "long enough" for the younger generation to grow up and get a second chance to go into the Promised Land. Jesus is forty days in the wilderness. It is "long enough" to figure out what His new identity is since His baptism – and long enough to break Satan's hold (authority) over Him. Is somebody standing there with a stop watch? If you were telling His story, would you say "thirty-seven days"? It doesn't feel right. "Forty" is sufficient, complete – the amount of time it takes.

Can you have eleven tribes of Israel (or thirteen)? Jacob has twelve sons, and we presume that twelve is the actual number in this case because they are named and known. But for the completeness of "Israel," there have to be twelve tribes. Twelve is the symbol that "all of us" are here. When Judas commits suicide, the disciples have to choose another. Eleven months in a year do not make any sense – in our world. You cannot have eleven or thirteen signs of the Zodiac. It is hard for us; with equal ease and speed, our calculators can figure any numbers we feed into them. But ancient people do not "think" this way – their minds do not work this way.

Is there significance to the tribes John leaves off his list? No doubt there is to him. Some say that Dan was to be the tribe from which the Antichrist would come. But does John know this? Does the Antichrist have to be Jewish? Doesn't John think the Antichrist would be (or even already had been) a Roman Emperor? So what happened to Dan and Ephraim? Isaiah 7:8 says that within sixty-five years, Ephraim would be shattered and would no longer be a people. John knows the Old Testament well, but seems to love Isaiah most of all. Perhaps this is the explanation? Possibly.

But why are the tribes listed in the order in which they appear? Traditionally, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were listed among the twelve because Joseph had saved everybody, and because Levi didn't need a portion of the land since the Levites were to be the priests. Back to twelve, at least for dividing up the land. But now Joseph is back on the list, as is only one of his sons (Manasseh), and Dan is unmentioned. Judah is maybe first on the list because the Messiah is to come from Judah, and Joseph and Benjamin are last because they are the sons of Rachel. But in between, the order is all mixed up. We are not used to John saying anything without a reason, but I cannot make this out.

What is the real point? Twelve times twelve equals one hundred forty-four ... carried to the thousandth power. Well, to us it is literally only *times* a thousand,

but to John it would be like being carried to the thousandth power: "*Your descendants shall be as the stars of the sky and as the sands of the sea.*" (Genesis 22:17-15:5; 32:12) A multitude beyond counting. If John means one hundred forty-four thousand as a headcount, like we so often do, then he is dead to the promise to Abraham and the patriarchs. Or at least he thinks God's promise is a dud – that there will be myriads of descendants, but the vast majority of them will live short and meaningless lives. I know some people who make empty promises, but I don't think of God in that category. And I don't much like others who try to put God in that category.

Even so, we have only gone halfway, so to speak, in the seventh chapter. What about verse 9? Well, I have to quote verses 9-15:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence."

Can there be any question about it? There are twenty-four elders around the throne. The one hundred forty-four thousand (complete multiplied by complete, carried to the thousandth power) covers the twelve tribes of Israel. But after this – beyond this – we come to the twelve disciples, and their "harvest." And they are from every nation, not just the United States, Europe, England, or whatever I happen to identify with and approve of. From every language – from all tribes and peoples! And the throng is beyond numbering. Perhaps we want to *think* that only a few will be saved. But that is *not* what John thinks. He thinks we have a really amazing God, who sent to us a truly incredible Messiah and Savior. The battle is fierce in this world. The story is far from over. But hordes we do not see as "saved" yet, will be. That is the real vision, and what John claims to be the real purpose.

Can there be any question about it? They are before the throne of the Lamb. They are clothed in white robes. And what is the topic? Salvation! It does not belong to the preachers, or the churches. It does not belong to the

narrow-minded, or the judgmental, or the resentful little bigot inside us. It belongs to God, and to the Lamb! John makes sure (to no avail, in many quarters) that we cannot mistake his meaning. So he has one of the elders "rub it in" (if you notice).

In many instances, John takes former tradition, scripture, or expectation and reworks it in the light of our incredible new Messiah. Or he tells familiar stories and reworks them to a higher key. Here is Palm Sunday – only done right: They have palm branches in their hands. We did that once before, and we cried "*Hosanna!*" ("Save us now!") And then we let it slip through our fingers because our allegiance to our true King was so partial. We declared Jesus our true and rightful King, but confusion, betrayal, Roman steel, and other incidentals stole it back away. Not this time! This is Palm Sunday done right! "*And he shall reign forever and ever.*" And He will reign in the only way He will ever consent to reign: because finally and truly we choose Him—because finally He reigns in our hearts. Inside first, outside second. That was, is, and always will be His WAY.

We could, it seems to me, close the case for Revelation on the basis of chapter five and chapter seven alone. John is not doing traditional apocalyptic. This is a different breed of apocalyptic, with a different light and truth behind it. Despite all the trauma going on here, everybody – or nearly everybody – will end up saved. This is not a book of the damned, as so many still picture it. This is a book of the saved. The process is real, and hard, and difficult. And indeed we find ourselves in a broken world where God is not known or loved or obeyed—and all too often, not even by us. But the clear purpose and destiny that God is bringing to be – via his Lamb – is to gather in, transform, and redeem his children. Hallelujah! And this is no "Hallelujah" for the pitiful few that I know and care about. Chapter seven, verses 15-17. Go read it. Then go back and memorize it!



CHAPTER EIGHT, VERSE ONE

As is John's pattern, we get to the seventh series, and it introduces another seven. But I love the silence that begins chapter eight. How often we skip over the silence. The silence of thought. The silence of pondering. The silence of prayer. Has there ever been a true conversion that was not accompanied by silence? "Don't just do something – stand there!" Some things have to sink in. Some things have to get deep and personal before they get real. Appropriate silence would save us so many mistakes, so much despair, such needless pain and confusion. The mind is the only thing about us as fast as the speed of light. (And prayer is the only thing faster than the speed of light.) But it has to go quiet, focus, and concentrate to get any real benefit from its true capacities.

This time of silence is dramatic however we take it. But I have never had a Bible Study group that did not rush past the verse to get on with the "action." "John can talk about silence if he wants to, but we want nothing to do with it. We're busy and we must hurry to get on with

understanding his book." And so we never shall. The silence is not just for the "drama" of introducing the seven trumpets, the next phase of the book. It is also necessary to stop and ponder (review) all that we have heard and learned so far.

In many ways, if we have paid attention through the first seven chapters, we already know the book. Very little will be added. John will go around again. He will muse, emphasize, build suspense, and hope to sink it in even deeper. Sometimes I even suspect that John is dragging it out because he has nothing else to do. Patmos is only ten miles long and six miles wide. If he finishes this book too quickly, *then* what will he do?

In any case, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls do not do much for me. I have spent far too much time working away at the details of their symbols. God is giving people lots of opportunities to repent. Few of them do. The problems and travail of this life are real and difficult, but we don't need Revelation to tell us that. So I will go over some of this material less thoroughly than some people will appreciate. But you have the Bibliography, and other better scholars, to turn to when you wish to dig further.



CHAPTER TEN, VERSE NINE

This is far from the most important place (or message) of Revelation, though it would have been one of Martin Luther's favorite biblical passages had he noticed it. If you don't want to cheat, stop reading this paper for a minute, pick up your Bible, and read the tenth chapter of Revelation. Now imagine yourself sitting in a group of twelve to fifteen friends in a Bible Study group, and you have just finished reading this chapter together. What do you make of it?

I can tell you what usually happens in the real situation. People say: "It seems very confusing to me." "I don't get what this has to do with anything that matters to us." "It's just more symbols from some time we can no longer understand." And so on ...

"Okay," I say. "We can move on in a minute if you like. But first let's at least give it a shot." So we start with verse 1. A strong angel. (Are there weak ones?) An angel is a "messenger" (by definition). This one is coming down from Heaven, so the message is straight from Heaven. Must be pretty important. Maybe we don't want to be too hasty about moving on without "getting the message."

Clothed with a cloud, face like the sun, feet like pillars of fire – and we get a very impressive scene of might and power and awesomeness. But we get a lot more than that if we read our Bibles very much. "*And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night; the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.*" (Exodus 13:21-22)

Does it cross John's mind that we would be so busy watching movies and playing golf that we would not

know the story of Moses? That we would not realize how clearly he is introducing this scene and announcing what he is about to talk about? And what about the rainbow upon the angel's head? What is a rainbow, in our tradition? (John is always coming from our tradition – from scripture – however "new" he sometimes tells it.) So we are already into Moses in the wilderness, and now we know it is about Covenant. Wilderness plus Covenant... "Oh, now I remember!" The Holy Mountain, the Decalogue, Torah (Ten Commandments and all that stuff). So is John really being obtuse, or are we just being dense?

Does this interpretation match the passage? John's language does everything to honor (not minimize) this message, this little scroll. It does indeed contain the "truth" – the purpose of God. John starts to write it down, but there is no need. The book is open. It is already known – it has already been written. (And the prophets have been trying to make it ever clearer. [10:7]) No need to write what is already written and known and open to all who will pay any heed.

It will taste sweet as honey in your mouth but, when you swallow, very bitter in the stomach. Sweet because "the Law" (Torah – known and open) contains the precepts of righteousness that could make life on earth so very beautiful for everyone – prosperity and peace for everyone. No more lying, cheating, killing, deceit. Everyone could trust everyone else. All of us would love God and obey the commandments, which are designed for true community. It seems so "close" – so "possible" – that it makes the mouth water. Can't we all just "see it" and agree to keep the precepts? If only everyone would keep the Covenant, it would be so beautiful we could barely stand the thought of it. Sweet in the mouth indeed!

And how very bitter in the stomach – because we cannot keep the Covenant. Somehow, some way, we and all those around us are forever breaking the Covenant in ways large and small. And how bitter is the bitterness of our pride and sin that keeps us alienated from God and each other? It is the bitterest bitter there is. *"All have sinned and fall short" "Who will deliver me from this body of death"*

Suddenly the tenth chapter is not obtuse or foggy at all. John's language and symbolism are only reminding us – making it fresh and real again. Will that not also be true of many passages of The Revelation, if we pay enough attention – and know our Bibles well enough to catch the connections? (Try it with the measuring rod that comes next.)

By the way, if John truly knows that Torah cannot save us – that we cannot "make it" by merely trying hard, making promises, or clenching our fists about morality or loving our neighbors ... if John knows that only the Lamb, with the marks of slaughter on Him – only the Lamb who transforms from within – can save us ... then what are the chances that he is trying to write a book which will threaten us into being good by trying to scare us with punishments, however dire? If I cannot save myself no matter how hard I try, what difference does it make how badly you scare me? What is the purpose of a

lake of fire if I cannot save myself in the first place? (Unless, of course, the purpose of fire is purification, not destruction.) Whether I am terrified or unterrified by any kind of Hell makes no difference. The Lamb is my only hope. And not because of anger. Because of love. Will we remember that when we get to the nineteenth chapter? John will.



CHAPTER ELEVEN – TWO WITNESSES

The two witnesses pretty much have to be Moses and Elijah. We do associate Moses with the plagues of Egypt (including turning water into blood). At God's word, Elijah stops the rains (I Kings 17:1). Later (II Kings 1:9ff), when the king tries to coerce him, at Elijah's word fire comes down and consumes the squads of fifty that have come to arrest him. John is not doing theology, he is telling Bible stories – and identifying the two witnesses. These are also the two "witnesses" who come to visit Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, sealing His authority for the disciples to remember. (We revisited Palm Sunday in chapter seven. Now we extend the significance of the Transfiguration.)

John does give us a stretch here, but not impossible. These two witnesses (dead or alive) do constantly point toward the true identity, authority, and purpose of Jesus. Certainly this is the view of the early church. Repent; keep the Covenant; be a holy, obedient, and righteous people. These two witnesses have always been a plague to every nonrepentant person or people. They are marvelous in their own right, but they also point beyond themselves. As John remembers, we do not know a gravesite for either. (Elijah was carried in a chariot up to Heaven. Moses was buried in some unmarked grave in the valley of Moab [Deuteronomy 34:5-6], and was it God himself who buried him?) In any case, from John's perspective, these witnesses will never stop their witness until all has been completed. (I don't know why the forty-two months [or twelve hundred sixty days] is the period from now until the completion of earth history. But John uses it often, and as usual I presume it is not a digital number, but a symbolic "name" to designate the necessary time. John uses a lunar [or thirty-day] calendar, remember.)

John's seven seals, as they are broken, fascinate me. When he goes over it again with the seven trumpets – well, as usual, the sequel is not as good as the first movie. But it's okay for those who get hooked (and I have spent too much time tracking the images myself). But when John connects it all back in with our history and tradition, then I am with him again. The Old Covenant and the New Covenant (of chapter ten), the two witnesses, and now the coming of the ONE for whom the witnesses are harbingers. (And yes, He has already come in chapter five, so we know we are "going around again" – but this time connecting it to all we, as first-century Christians, know of our spiritual history and tradition.)

We pause for Handel's chorus to remind us that this is a great story with a good ending, even if we are not yet at the end.



CHAPTERS TWELVE & THIRTEEN—THE WOMAN

I hope I am not taking all the fun out of this. You are still thinking for yourself, aren't you? We are not woodenly working through the woes or the bowls, but we are trying here and there to get into John's thought-frames.

Arnion and Therion are reintroduced now. At least I think John loves to "unveil" the doublets—the good guys against the bad guys. On the one hand, Arnion—on the other hand, Therion. On the one hand, the dragon—on the other hand, the Christ. On the one hand, the marvelous woman—on the other hand, the whore of Babylon (and then the bride of Christ). And so forth.

We come to the unholy Trinity. The red dragon is Satan. The beast from the sea is Rome (the evil empire already established). The beast from the land is also Rome (the evil empire about to get worse—Rome of the immediate future), as well as the great false prophet who pretends to be a savior. And what possible "force" could challenge this empire of unbelievable wealth and power that is so completely in control of all the known world? Especially when the true patron that runs and inspires it is Satan himself?! Well you see, there is this woman, and she is about to give birth to a son.

Do we think we know Christmas? Christmas as we celebrate it is an amateur sideshow in comparison to what John is describing. This woman is clothed with the sun (the power of God, represented by Michael, God's greatest warrior [12:7]), so this woman has God's own protection. And the moon is under her feet (Gabriel is archangel of the moon, and patron saint of Israel [though other commentaries disagree]). This woman's very foundation is the nurture and love of God. And in her crown (glory) will come the twelve disciples (who, in John's view, represent the twelve tribes of all the Gentiles who will be gathered into the Kingdom). (I know the other interpretations, but I get to tell it my way.)

The dragon realizes the threat (as the Devil knows he must "stop" Jesus in the wilderness after His baptism). The dragon is poised to devour the child before anything can even get started. Some think John already knows Matthew's story of Herod killing the babies, though I doubt that it has been tacked on to Matthew's Gospel yet, even by 90 A.D. But the principle of evil trying to destroy good is still certain.

The male child, who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron, is reference no doubt to Psalm 2:9—one of the most famous passages connected to the coming Messiah. So the dragon strikes, but the child ascends into Heaven (John thinks we know the story, so he paints with broad strokes). And the woman (who is not only Mary, but the church—the "elect lady" [II John 1:1]) goes underground, to await the necessary time (twelve hundred sixty days) until the Lamb returns to complete things and make all things new. And John cannot help himself, but he has to

jump to the outcome of the story. (12:10-12) We don't mind—it is good to be reminded. He also reminds us that in the meantime, the church (Christ's body) is under dire straits here and now. And also that our primary task and purpose is to be faithful (witnesses) while we wait for the true Savior. Nearly all liberal churches in my generation have concluded that we live in a "New Age" where we are wise enough and powerful enough to save the world ourselves. That in fact we are unfaithful if we do not proceed to do so. Usually it flies under the flag of "love your neighbor," or sometimes "humanitarianism." (But if that is "love," it is not a love that redeems.) Meanwhile... waiting, prayer, bearing witness (evangelism), Bible Study, humility, personal loyalty and devotion to Jesus (piety), individual relationships, and spiritual growth—none of these have true priority in the lives of the liberal congregations of my time. John would be amazed. Are we really so naïve? We think there is no dragon, or that he is a pushover—and so we can play in this world and fix its problems by just applying our own kind of love and logic? We don't even have to bother to tell people about God's Messiah, or the real plan? Or about the rescue, or the protection? Or about the relationship that is possible with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord?

Sufficient scorn and sarcasm are impossible, perhaps, but H. Richard Niebuhr comes close: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

So it is a nice world now—not like in John's day. And nobody is getting their head beat in by the dragon any longer. (Well, only all day, every day—everywhere I have been!) (12:17)



CHAPTER FOURTEEN—BEHOLD THE LAMB

One of the most dramatic moments in the book. The woman is in flight, and everything is getting worse. Michael wins the battle in Heaven—which is a grand "preview of coming attractions" perhaps—but it makes it even worse here on earth, since Satan has nowhere else to go. Clearly it is the darkest hour, so to speak. All seems to be lost. And then the real Lamb reappears (not the pretend lamb, the propaganda agent of the evil empire). The real battle is about to ensue. It is about to be finished. Therion will not win this time.

It is hard to deal with the Book of Revelation because if you slow down, you lose the thread. Yet if you do not slow down, you miss the implications. It is the only book I know that must be read and digested pretty thoroughly before we can read it with any understanding in the first place. We are at the very end—the final scene is about to unfold. But John will want to muse about it and turn it over in his mind—and ours—for several chapters before getting on with it.

John has already made it clear that the one hundred forty-four thousand is a number beyond counting. And that this is about something entirely new (not like the Old Covenant—not like punishment, vengeance, or

destruction), and we are at the core of Heaven – at the throne, with the four creatures and the twenty-four elders. This is not a rebel movement, but the very essence of what God has designed and willed from the beginning. They all follow the Lamb, not the Roman emperors who claim to be gods. It is one of John's main themes. The reference to being defiled with women may be a warped perspective on John's part, but probably not. Some sects (even Essenes, which predate Jesus) were celibate. In the main, Judaism and Christianity have honored family life and tried to protect the sanctity and meaning of sexual union. (Why all the rules, if it is worthless or evil?!) It is not forbidden – it is protected. Even Paul, who does not wish to be distracted because he believes the time is so short, makes it clear that he is not against sexuality or family life *per se*. And Roman Catholic aberrations that honor poverty and celibacy as ways to lift up spirituality have not yet been invented. (The first Pope was married!) "Celebrate, not celibate" – as the old story has it.

Anyway, fornication has long been used (Old and New Testaments) as a symbol of idolatry. It is about screwing around with allegiance to false gods. Those who follow the Lamb have not defiled themselves with emperor worship or pagan worship of any kind.

Not many people get excited about verse 6. So many dramatic images, so many angels, too much imagery to take in. But this angel is flying in the midheaven – the tenth-house cusp – the very purpose of God. And that purpose is an eternal gospel. All people – everyone everywhere – are always invited into the kingdom of love and light. (Another of John's doublets – the eternal gospel versus the lake of fire.) (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Now, quite remarkably, John predicts (prophesies) the fall of Rome. At this point in history, I think such a prospect would have been beyond most people's imaginations. Rome's wealth and power are endless. Some commentators make much of the Parthian threat. The Parthians are great horsemen and famous archers, but they are as a flea to the lion. In 100 A.D., nothing is able to threaten or stand against Rome. On very rare occasion Rome might lose a battle, the more remarkable because so rare and surprising. A careless or overconfident commander, perhaps, but hardly a threat to the Empire. Rome rules the land and the seas. Her ships, legions, cities, temples, and governors are in command of all peoples in all lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea – the known world of the time. Rome is invincible. No one in John's day is able to imagine a world in which Rome does not rule. It is, therefore, part of the impact of this book. John is writing to tiny handfuls of Christians in house churches here and there – frightened, persecuted, wondering how they can survive, raise their children, and make it through the day. And he is saying: "This huge beast is about to fall. Have no fear. Stay faithful to Jesus. The evil empire is built on falsehood and it will soon crumble. If you die staying true to the true King, you will be victorious. If you compromise or go over to the Beast, you will very shortly lose far more than you gained." Not an easy message in any age – and always

hard to believe. But that is what John is saying throughout The Revelation, and specifically here in 14:7-13.

I think this next section is one of the toughest in the book. If it were not for all the other powerful passages that reveal a different message and perspective on John's part, I would not go looking for a different understanding here. I would throw the book out as being another sad return to human perspective and unfaithful to the Message of Jesus, and to the God Jesus reveals. (A portion of chapter nineteen is difficult too, but it is easier to understand than this section.)

In general, we can call this passage (14:14-20) "the grapes of wrath." Revelation has inspired more art and music than any other book in the Bible. "He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." The "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is stirring and we love it. But it does not normally conjure up good theology or Christian sentiment. "He died to make men holy" – but never mind, we have our own agenda. Thus the world always rejects the Christ.

I need to digress, or appear to. We have mentioned John's special love for Isaiah. John usually alludes to Old Testament passages, but often quotes Isaiah. (Causing me to wonder if maybe he has been able to take a scroll of Isaiah with him to Patmos.) In any case, John seems to have "ingested" Isaiah, yet he still rewrites that book's message in the new light of Christ Jesus. (As a small sample, try reading Isaiah 46:22-25.)

More specifically, I am thinking of Isaiah's perspective on the destiny of Israel. (Isaiah 48-49) God is sovereign over all the nations and uses them to "punish" Israel for abandoning the Covenant. Yet the purpose is to refine, purify, and send Israel back to its true destiny and purpose (which, among other things, is to convert the Gentiles – bring them into God's Covenant too). With this backdrop deep in mind and soul, how does John "understand" what is happening in his own time? The destruction and captivity of Israel in Second Isaiah's time were not dissimilar to the trials and persecutions of the church in John's time. As Babylon seemed invincible to them, so Rome seems even more invincible now. And as God was "proving" the Israelites in captivity then, is God not also "proving" the Christians in John's own time? And we must remember, pain and death on earth are not pain and death in Heaven. If we forget John's perspective on this, we cannot track him at all.

So the harvest. And who are the grapes? And who is the reaper? One like a son of man (Jesus' favorite title for Himself), with a golden crown on His head. Jesus is looking for faithful followers to help Him complete His mission – gathering them now, as He once called on His followers to meet Him in Jerusalem for the final showdown of His last week on earth. (Remember how chapter fourteen begins.) Grapes and wine are "good" symbols in Judaism. They are even better in Christianity because of the Last Supper – communion. The death of our Lord is commemorated in the communion meal, but it also invites us into life with Him – into sacrifice and even death with Him. All we who are baptized have died with Christ – died to this world – that we may live with Him. (Romans 6:3-8) And so, the church is the body of Christ

—sworn to carry on His mission in this world—and many times warned and promised that we may be called upon to suffer and die with/for Him. (John 15:20)

The wrath of God is not always judgment against the wicked. Sometimes it is simply the principles of life at work—the inevitable consequences of what has been set in motion. Sometimes the "wrath of God" is to let mankind have its own way (free will). We love to blame God for our being kicked out of the Garden, no matter how often we have been invited to come back in. The result is the Beast ruling over us, which is NOT FUN! In any case, these "grapes" are the faithful, not the unfaithful. And they will be called upon to die in Christ's battle to redeem God's people. The grapes of this communion—this unity with Christ—will be trodden outside the city, as Jesus had been crucified outside the city. Quite the reverse of what is usually understood here. But then, John is deeper into our story, and the meaning of our faith, than most—deeper than we often want to go.

Do we want to get into the harlot affair? It is fascinating to me that John is sad for all the people who have depended on Rome and will suffer at her fall.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

We stop again (thankfully) to honor and praise God before getting to the seven plagues (or bowls). What I also notice in this section is verse 3. Despite all the trauma which we have heard described, here are many who have come through it victorious. They are standing on the sea of glass (so it is not evil, as some have claimed), and with harps they are singing. Most of all I like that they are singing both the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Once again John views the two Covenant People together (twenty-four elders, etc.). Clearly the seals could not have been broken (promises kept or destiny fulfilled) without the Lamb. So I must conclude that in John's view, the Jews owe everything to Christ, just as the rest of us do. Yet it also seems clear that He will go on honoring their identity and purpose as the Covenant People of God. And somehow they will join in the final victory without losing their identity or their own covenant relationship with God (that is, without having to "join any church" and without renouncing Judaism).

In any case, the last seven bowls are poured out, and points are made. But mostly it is going around again.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN—THE HARLOT

Now for two chapters we will muse over the fall of Rome. John's huge animosity toward the empire that called upon its people to worship the Caesars as gods is here revealed. Rome is a harlot because she uses her wealth and power (counterfeit beauty and blessings) to seduce people into false worship. Christians have died, and many more will die, rather than acquiesce to this idolatry and blasphemy. It is a very big issue for the Christians of John's time. How very sad and tragic if it is

not a big issue to the Christians of our time. (But this in no way implies that we have to make everybody else think our way, worship our way, or believe our way. It *does* imply that we might know our *own* WAY, and that we would refuse to comply or participate with the ways of others when this denies or prevents our own WAY. There are endless dimension to being faithful. Watching "Christians" on a Sunday morning, minor as some people think that witness is, quickly reveals the extent of our apostasy.)

In any case, John describes the harlot, and he makes it clear that she is the enemy of the Lamb. Then we get another surprise. Without excuse or justification for those who have cooperated with the Roman Empire (nearly the whole known world), their dismay at her fall is poignant and sorrowful. They will be "lost" when the great empire which has sustained them is suddenly no more. John seems to feel much sympathy for this plight. But there is no choice but to destroy the Roman Empire. The blood of prophets and saints and martyrs is found in her. And God's purposes will not be able to move forward until she falls. I am ashamed of how "fuzzy" I sometimes get about this. Worshipping a false god, however seemingly benign, is never a minor issue. With our eyes or hearts on the wrong gods, we can never move toward life or truth. They are profoundly in the way (and usually far worse). I must turn, repent, and depose them—or I cannot be or go with God. Hence, the mystery of John knowing that the Roman Empire is going to fall is suddenly revealed: It *cannot* last. It is built on false foundations. Sometimes a Jeremiah or a John or a John the Baptist seems inexplicable. How could they know what nobody else knows? But if we stop to remember that they really believe in God and trust God, then some things *have* to change—new things have to come into being, and old things which do not match the purpose cannot survive. Sometimes, if we do not know this—and remember it—we fight wildly (with or without lifting a finger) against things that cannot possibly survive.



CHAPTER NINETEEN—A TWO-EDGED SWORD

Hopefully we do not skip over the celebrations and the worship as much as this paper seems to. Sometimes I suspect that the Book of Revelation feels or seems negative to many people because they skip over the hope, the rejoicing, and the great celebrations. (The "voice of many waters" I think must be intended to remind us of a great waterfall.) In any case, we are being led up to the marriage celebration of the Lamb. The church is the bride of Christ. It is an image and analogy that is both famous and neglected. We are the body of Christ, and we are the bride of Christ. Both are troublesome images, and very beautiful and full of more meaning than we can grasp. Both reveal and clarify huge areas of Christian theology that are otherwise missed or forgotten. Gospel is always relational! Love is always more than—and beyond—Law. Jesus' concern for us is always more than we can fathom—and always about more than performance, or behavior, or good deeds. He

wants to be with me? How can I fathom that?! What about my experience with my own bride? Do I only care about what she cooks or mends, or what she accomplishes for herself or for the family? And when she is focused only on her behavior or shortcomings, does she not entirely miss the very nature of "my love for her"? When things are not awry, she does not have to do anything to please me. *Being with her* pleases me! *Who she really is* pleases me!

The church is the bride of Christ. (You don't go to church—you *are* the church. *You* are the bride of Christ.) Sometimes women have to translate a bit to keep biblical language and images clear. This time the men have to translate a bit. But it is not difficult unless we want it to be.

Here we are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. And I suppose it is taking place in—and will more or less be morphed into the closing chapters about—the New Jerusalem. But for the moment (19:11-21) we come to the climax of the great confrontation between Arnion and Therion. Much of the plot of the Book of Revelation has been leading up to this dramatic moment—and in my opinion, the great import of this passage is most often missed. It is critical to the message of the whole book.

We have a figure on a white horse. This is no mere "Horseman of the Apocalypse." The images roll from John's pen, and they clearly speak of the Christ of God. His majesty is beyond description, yet His robe is dipped in blood. It is still the Lamb with the marks of slaughter upon Him. (The Word of God—*"In the beginning was the Logos"*)

The rod of iron again alludes to the familiar prophecy of the coming Messiah. And He gathers His followers – and again we must reverse the winepress imagery to the gathering of the faithful for the final showdown. And His NAME?! We have been hearing much of the Beast, and Satan—the 666. But this is "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." This is 777!

After all these chapters and images and seals and trumpets and bowls—suddenly it is all over. The birds are called (the cleanup crew) before we even know the battle has started. The Beast and the false prophet (we already mused about the fall of Rome) are disposed of. They have, in fact, lost their reality because it was founded on false authority in the first place. Fire purifies, tests, burns away the false. This may not be what John means to say. If not, it is what he should have been saying. And it is what we need to know and remember.

Then the whole battle takes place and is over—in a single verse! (19:21) Everybody else is converted. The sword that comes from His mouth is the WORD. It is not steel, it is His MESSAGE. It is the Gospel—the Message of God's love for all his children. Where do all the vast numbers of followers – from every tongue, nation, and tribe – come from? The Savior converts them, saves them, speaks the Word of Truth to them in a way they can finally hear and understand. He loves them. He saves them. And yes, it slays them—as His love and mercy and grace slay us all when we truly hear it. We die... and are born anew. That is what it has always been about. If that is not what The Revelation is about, it is a false book.

666 wins out over 777 after all?! Many prefer to believe that, but I never will.

In the great battle and chaos of life – the warfare between good and evil, between light and darkness – many are wounded, hurt, brutalized, killed. It is a broken world. Everyone who comes here eventually dies, one way or another. Not only do all of us die, we all sin and fall short. But in this vast conflict, the only blood *He* sheds... is His own. He does not kill us. He does not hate or destroy us. He saves us! (In point of fact, *we* shed His blood, and we hate and kill Him. As has been said: When Abraham's son was on God's altar, there was no safer place he could have been. When God's Son was on man's altar, there was no more dangerous or brutal place He could have been.)

In any case, if we miss the meaning of the two-edged sword, we miss it all. Why does the sword come out of His mouth? Because it is His Message! He is the Word of God and the Message of God—and to our utter astonishment, it is a Message of grace and forgiveness and love. Is that not why the Gospel continues to surprise and convert us – change our hearts – throw everything into a new light and a New WAY? (So you will want to stop for a while, now, to think and to pray. And along the way, you might want to read in and around Hebrews 4:12, and Ephesians 6:17.)



CHAPTER TWENTY—THE MILLENNIUM

I am sorry that chapter twenty is in this book. It fits just fine, no doubt, from John's perspective. John wants to reassure everybody that they have nothing further to worry about. And he wants to honor those who have been particularly faithful in their trials on earth, especially the martyrs. Then it is time for the great evaluation. But so much controversy and baloney have been gathered around this chapter, especially verses 4-6—the only place in the Bible to mention a millennium. If no light has come from it, at least many people have made a lot of money from it. (That is a good thing, if they spend it well.) But what good has come from chapter twenty to make up for all the falsehood, heated arguments, and sidetracking of the faithful?

As most of you know, I think the so-called Second Coming is one of the great blunders (errors) of the early church (passed down to the later church, of course). All early Christians believed Christ was "coming soon." It was part of the legacy of apocalyptic thinking (which we already mentioned in the introduction of this paper). Two thousand years should have tipped us off by now that we have misunderstood something. Instead of the Second Coming, we get the church. Jesus is not coming back here—we are going there. Jesus is not coming back here because He has *already* come back! The Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord is with us now – and has been since Pentecost. The Ascension is not relevant – Pentecost is. Or if you like the countdown:

The First Coming. Christmas. Incarnation. Jesus is born here.

The Second Coming. Easter. We kill Him, but it will not stick. He comes back, and begins appearing to us.

The Third Coming. Pentecost. So closely related to the appearances that we cannot distinguish clearly between Easter and Pentecost. "*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*" (I Corinthians 15:8) And for the rest of his life, the Apostle Paul governs his life according to the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord, whom he met on that Damascus Road.

The Fourth Coming. Our death here on earth – when, in our language, He takes us unto Himself. Our going there.

So when most people speak of the Second Coming, they refer to an error—an event that has never taken place, and never will. I cannot enter the argument rationally, because none of it matches my expectations or beliefs. I do not think we wait around in graves when we die, but I think we are "processed" and then begin the next phase of our eternal lives immediately. Hence, the "Day of Judgment" – though I have certainly experienced many days of judgment, and doubtless will experience many more – is not something we all get put "on hold" for so we can experience it all at the same time, in the same way, on some specific Great Day. Nor do I think (however it takes place) that it is something any Christian who trusts Jesus (and believes in the Gospel) should fear or try to escape. I do assume that any time and way we "face" our Lord will bring us to "judgment"—evaluation—things we are ashamed of and are eager to change, correct, or grow into. But that is hardly what most Christians mean by the Day of Judgment. Are we not eager for every new encounter with Jesus? Do we not yet know that He will always greet us with love, compassion, mercy, and healing—rather than anger, rejection, or a desire to hurt or destroy?!

I know that sometimes I consider His correction to be punishment—for a while. I know He can be stern, and that hurts my feelings—mostly because I am so eager to please Him. But how many times do we have to go around before I figure out that it is always with my best interests at heart? How long must He be faithful before I realize that love is the foundation of everything He does? How long before I learn to trust Him?

Nevertheless, if you wish to track the arguments that go on regarding chapter twenty, then you must go back to old and rather ridiculous constructs.

PREMILLENNIALISTS are those who believe that the Millennium comes *before* (pre) the New Heaven and New Earth are set up, but *after* the Second Coming. So we get the (traditional) Second Coming, and then the Millennium takes place with the choice few but all the rest of us are "on hold." After the Millennium, the New Heaven and New Earth begin.

POSTMILLENNIALISTS are those who believe that the Millennium comes *before* the (traditional) Second Coming. A select few are granted a thousand

years with Christ while the world goes on in travail. (The *Left Behind* scenarios are one expression of postmillennialist thinking.) *After* (post) the Millennium ends, the (traditional) Second Coming begins, and the New Heaven and New Earth are set up after the Judgment Day.

AMILLENNIALISTS are those who believe that the age we are in *is* the Millennium. The thousand years are symbolic of "this age," and when this age ends, we will get the Second Coming. Then after this Day of Judgment, the New Heaven and New Earth will be instated.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE—ETC.

Perhaps I will be unable to contain myself and will talk about the gemstones, the twelve gates, and other things that I have wasted endless hours trying to fathom. Certainly I enjoy the imagery of the tree of life and the river (first thing we need to do is build a bridge so we can visit each other). It's fun to play with John's imagery of no sun or moon (day or night), the ways he celebrates God's closeness, and the delight of life without any more tears or pain.

But John's imagery of the afterlife is the thing I like least about the Book of Revelation. The mind-set of the first century A.D. is much too small. In a surprising number of places, Christians act "stuck" with ludicrous ideas and expectations because they are afraid to acknowledge that the Bible is the product of faithful witnesses who, however faithful, are human and limited, and just as full of errors as we are. So let me come at it this way:

COSMOLOGY HAS SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THEOLOGY

It is no great wonder, I suppose, that humans tend to describe and understand spiritual reality within the borders of their understanding of physical reality. While spiritual reality is always breaking past our borders, expanding our awareness and our possibilities, nevertheless, without intending to, we struggle against this expansion simply because it threatens to take us into confusion and chaos beyond what our finite minds can fathom.

So we are "stuck" with a flat-earth Bible in a round-world reality. (Just so with all other sacred writings.) And of course, today's cosmology goes far beyond the awareness of our own solar system. What happens, then, to writings that imagine "a flat earth encased in an egg-shell" creation—set in the midst of endless water? Is there any way to suppose that the biblical writers held a different image or idea of creation?

The fact is that theology continually struggles to free itself from minuscule notions of God, and God's creation, and therefore of the purposes of God. In most places, theology keeps losing this struggle, as hordes of people continue to revert to concepts, creeds, and hopes that face backward instead of forward. ("Jesus ascended into Heaven" rarely troubles us if we swing to a spiritual

perspective. But what is still taught and "got" in many places would simply send Jesus into orbit, not to some new dimension where He is sitting at the right hand of God.)

We can already feel the tension of such concepts in the New Testament. And scholars still argue over whether Jesus is "apocalyptic." (If so, He is dead wrong.) Apocalyptic thinking is the major backdrop and worldview of Jesus' time (and of the Judaism of His time). There is considerable evidence that Jesus is way beyond such concepts, but that His followers are unable to track it very well. Stories of the thief on the cross, the Transfiguration, and comments to Sadducees about the God of the living, etc., suggest that Jesus is thinking far "bigger" than His age (or ours). But the general mind-set of the time is that God is about to close out the age (the Great Day—the Last Judgment), and this will happen within the lifetime of Jesus' followers. These expectations live on today in what is usually called "The Second Coming."

But the cosmology is stuck in a flat-earth, minuscule comprehension of physical reality. There is no solar system or space beyond. The entire drama is to take place in a very limited "place." The flat earth is the only viable real estate. Only a few can be saved (for lack of space). And we can feel Paul (rabbinically trained) still assuming that those who die must wait in their graves until the Great Day, because there is only one stage on which the drama can take place. But that was Paul in his earliest letters – First and Second Thessalonians. Does he not have a much larger view by the time we get to Romans, Colossians, or Ephesians? (Well, some say he did not write Ephesians, or even Colossians, but that will turn out to be erroneous.)

Nevertheless, in the old view, we must close down one phase of earth history before our world can be re-constituted for the blessed and glorious phase of everlasting life. Then (in two waves, but to keep it simple) everybody will be processed. The unworthy will be taken out of the picture (Gehenna – the garbage dump), and the righteous will live forever ... but still on this earth, only remodeled. (They do not worry about the sun burning out, or asteroids, global warming, or ice ages troubling this place.)

From my perspective at least, one of the biggest blunders of Christian thought is this concept of a Second Coming, which is totally corrupted (time-wise, dimensionally, and meaningfully) by this very tiny cosmology. Intriguingly, if the Creation is small, then the Creator is conceived of in ways so small that they now seem ludicrous.

What happens if we "enlarge" our promises and expectations? We get endless dimensions of the eternal realms: continued evolving and growing and possibilities of relationships; a God of such scope that it forces finite minds to stop all pretense of comprehension and turn to worship and trust – and at least to an eagerness to obey whatever guidance we can discern (always with great humility). And it also expands hope, promise, meaning, and expectations to limitless dimensions.

Will the Christian Faith ever admit its blunder (misunderstanding), and claim a fuller hope and faith?

Doesn't look like it in most places. But if not, will it not also grow increasingly irrelevant and superstitious? That seems to be the case so far.

Not attempting to be exhaustive, but we could trace this same "problem" in every world religion. In Hinduism, for instance, concepts of reincarnation are locked in to this same minuscule, flat-earth cosmology. We only have one stage to play on, and therefore all souls have to keep recycling to the same place because "God" is too small or too unimaginative to create endless dimensions for growth and experience. In the end, we must evolve into a personality-less, love-less, identity-less "nirvana" because there is no place to put us. The only real estate available is already being used as the process plant (*samsara*). Some few, of course, rework their notions of reincarnation to match a greatly expanded universe. But will it ever reach the mainstream?

It is possible to suspect that we will never find unity (unity is *not* "sameness") – or the bonds of respect and love that God has in store for us – until we all break past the concepts that were spawned when our cosmology viewed the entire creation as far smaller than from earth to Mars.

Suffice it to say that most expectations of Heaven sound boring, trivial, and pointless. The Revelation does not help us with such images. Sitting around playing harps is not going to enthrall us for very long. All the preparation we go through here for the realms to come is going to be a big, fat waste if "Rest in Peace" is really the best epitaph we can imagine. I have long suspected that one of the reasons so many people do not get more excited about the incredible "newness" of the kind of life Jesus lives and teaches and invites us into is that we have such small notions about what is coming.

No errors? No challenges? No vocatio? No repentance? No love (real and powerful)? No reconciliation with the people we blew it with here? What is it all for and about here, if there is nothing vital or meaningful or challenging in the realms to come? "Perfect," in our language, means static – don't change a thing. That may be okay for a vase or a painting. It does not apply well to living beings if they are growing, learning, expanding – and have eternal destinies. So when we picture a "perfect" Heaven, we get a place more boring and meaningless than anything we have known on earth.

SECTION IV

Perhaps it does not fit well into this paper on Revelation, but I want to add a short section about where new possibilities of hope and expectation might begin to take us.

E + S + F = X

In many areas of science, humans have developed formulas – equations whereby we can gain information about the unknown from deductions using two or more knowns. Mathematics does this as a matter of course, be-

ginning for many of us with the Pythagorean Theorem. Something about "The area of the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the areas of the squares of the other two sides." Working from formula to formula, we get our understanding of the physical reality around us. From "assumptions"—the idea that you can know, by deduction, the "unknown" if you correctly use the information from known facts—we have physical sciences.

Yet if we try to use the same approaches on spiritual instead of physical subjects, many people scoff, mock, and deride. A certain amount of scoffing (doubt) seems appropriate to me. While I do not doubt that we know, and will continue to learn more and more, about both physical and spiritual realms, it also seems clear to me that we are more certain than we ought to be about much of our assumed knowledge. We do build on layer after layer of conclusions and assumptions. We quote the quoted until sometimes we have faint remembrance of where our theories came from, or why the first person thought it plausible in the first place. (Concepts of "The Rapture" are a marvelous illustration.)

Others are better able to speak of illustrations from science, but I do know that in the area of theology (or biblical or church history), people sometimes assume conclusions from authors who have assumed them from other authors and on and on, down through many layers of claims and assumptions—some of them quite false.

Are eggs and milk really bad for you? Does masturbation lead to blindness? Will you really go to Hell if you do not believe in the Trinity (whether you have any clear notion of its full meaning and implications or not)?

How does Jesus know that people are not married in Heaven? (Matthew 22:30) Well, He didn't actually say that nobody would already be married when they got there; He said that in Heaven, we are neither married nor given in marriage. Nevertheless, the comment seems to imply that nobody is married in Heaven, but that we are like the angels. What are the angels like? Are they sexless? All the angels I know of, from either biblical or Jewish mythology, are male, but they are not genderless. My point is that the comment is too vague to give us much information. Such comments have a tendency to draw out our own prejudices rather than given truth. I have heard this passage used to "prove" that sex is bad and there is no sexuality in Heaven. I have heard this passage used to "prove" that there is free love in Heaven, and since there is neither venereal disease nor jealousy, we get to make love with anybody we want to. I would use this passage to suggest that relationships are no longer based on paper (legal contracts), but that they only rest on the true bonds of love and caring. But you see, I don't get there from any reliable information; I get there from my own personal desire to have Mariana in my life when we get to the other side. If I didn't much like my marriage, would I have the same views about this passage? I doubt it. Will Mariana still want me in her life in Heaven? Well, that's her problem. But it is pretty clear, even by third-grade logic, that if a person has to be in a relationship they do not want to be in, it wouldn't be "Heaven." Already that has implications

about how I should be dealing with the relationship here —if I want it to survive the great transition.

As most of you know, I have a lot of hope for the realms to come. I believe life is far greater than we can tell from here — from our tiny experience on this one planet. I believe we will pick up there where we left off here; that we will be recognizable to each other; that while we will not have a physical body, we will have a spiritual body far superior to the bodies we have here. It seems probable to me that a ten-dimensional body can do anything a three-dimensional body can do, only lots more. (The appearances of Jesus make it clear that His new "body" was far superior to anything we are running around in.) I presume the mind and soul will come into far greater capacities also (according to whatever is appropriate to our growth so far).

Clearly this is not the "normal" or usual expectation. The expectations I hear most of the time, from Christians at least, are rather stale and boring. I would like to presume that God is at least as imaginative as I am. So if somebody reduces Heaven to levels that seem obviously unappealing, if not downright horrid and ridiculous, I object. Because of Jesus, I think that trusting in a loving and omniscient God is at least as certain as a Pythagorean Theorem.

Perhaps I am wrong. What if we never do have to learn to get over some of our bad habits? What if some of our best-guarded secrets really never do have to come to light? (Luke 12:3) What if some of the people we have treated badly will never again cross our paths? Maybe it really is okay to work hard, pay our bills, leave a legacy to our children — and never worry very much about the people outside our own circles; the ideas outside our own minds; the whole vast reality of spiritual dimensions, or the capacities of our souls. Wouldn't that be wonderful — I mean, if we could be sure? What a weight off our minds! Eat, drink, and be merry — and in a short time, it really will all be over. What a relief. Deep responsibility and true destiny are just for suckers and worrywarts ... It's no wonder that so many people in our culture want very little to do with the Christian Faith, at least not in any depth — not as a WAY of Life. How free and wonderful, in the here and now, to be your own boss and do whatever seems most beneficial for yourself and those you love. Of course that feels lighter and easier to most people, at least on the surface. God can be a real pain in the neck — or at least in the heart and soul. Burning bushes are not for fun or entertainment. Reread the story. Pharaoh is a mean, and very powerful, son of a bitch. Why would anybody want to go back to Egypt?

So naturally, many people are quite willing to trade any genuine belief in eternal life for a much simpler and more natural perspective. Live here a few years — die — and it's all over. Quite a few people supplement this with a slight variation: There is a Heaven, but when we die, God flicks a switch and suddenly we're perfect. The mere fact of dying takes away all our bad habits, and fixes it so we don't need to learn or grow anymore. Wouldn't that be nice — except, of course, for the incredible boredom, and the fact that none of us would have any character or love left in us. Live here a few years —

die – go to Heaven ... but all the fun, challenge, and excitement are over. Yuck!

Do we stay really awake and aware here, in this life, trying to learn who we are and what our true destiny is? Do we remember, even in the midst of fun and changes of pace, that we are eternal, and that we *are* THE CHURCH – the body of Christ – and that everything we do is teaching us and training us for true LIFE in a far-greater realm? And do we stay aware that, though we are supposed to live in the present, we also live in HOPE – and if we forget to live the present in honor of that hope, we cannot possibly stay faithful or be who we were created to be? "*Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is ...*" whichever one we are most neglecting at the moment.

Anyway, here is this formula I want you to learn and use: $E + S + F = X$. Only, I don't want it to feel locked-down in some way. The formula is not about being right, it is to play with. Experience plus Scripture plus Faith equals X (the unknown – the future – Heaven). X represents at least a hint about the future.

What comes first? Experience! I am appalled at how often we try to deal with Christianity without the ingredient of experience. *All* really-mean-it religion comes out of experience. *All* authentic faith is based on a personal relationship with God. The scripture ingredient means we try to learn from the *experience* of others. We keep making the Bible into an issue about how holy or perfect it is. Only, that is not the issue. What matters is how much we learn from it. The Bible tells us about people we can learn from – like Abraham, and Moses, and Jeremiah, and Jesus. A book is just a way to talk with or learn about people who are not present in person at the moment. If Jesus were standing here in the flesh, would you put The Book down and talk with Him? Listening to many Christians, we can only surmise that they would tell Jesus to get lost, and go back to reading their Bibles. I am reminded of a *The New Yorker* cartoon from years ago. It pictured a sheik, sitting in his harem, surrounded by scores of daintily clad, absolutely gorgeous women. He was paying no attention to any of them. Rather, he was immersed in the latest edition of *Playboy* magazine. Maybe you don't understand, but I think that's pathetic. Just as it is pathetic if we spend all our devotional time reading our Bibles, and none of it praying.

So some people don't get it – they don't know what the Bible is for. They wouldn't put The Book down even if Jesus were standing there, waiting for them to come to their prayers. But even Jesus cannot mean very much to us if we do not let Him IN – if we do not *walk* with Him. It is *experience* that makes it real for us. You don't have to agree; I don't have to persuade you of any of this. This is just a friendly little paper. Play with the formula. Try it different ways. Maybe: Tradition + Scripture + Faith = eXasperation. Who knows if it's real? What do we know of grace or forgiveness if we have never experienced it? What do we know of conversion or devotion if we have never experienced it? What do we know of sacrifice, or putting God first, if we have never tried it? Well, you get the point – whether you agree or not.

Experience is the connector. And please, experience is not merely what has happened in the past. Experience is what we are choosing all the time. We work hard all the time to cut ourselves off from certain kinds of experience, and to get more and more of other kinds of experience. Sometimes life catches us by surprise, but still ... Some humans expend great energy to bring more sex, wealth, family love, baseball, or television into their lives. Some humans expend very little effort or energy toward bringing any experience with God into their lives. It's a free country, so to speak. To some degree, we all get to choose what we want in our lives. Nevertheless, $E + S + F = X$.

We are already living our eternal lives. Sadly that has become a cliché, but it is still true. We are already deeply involved in the choices and expressions of who we think we are – and who we want to be. The more we realize that – and how big life really is, and how many dimension there are within us – the more we are aware of how short life really is. Strange, but playing with grandchildren reminds us that only a few days ago, *we were their age!* A few more days and either it is all over for us, or we will find ourselves in a different realm. Trusting God for eternal life is the difference between the tyranny of time – and knowing we get to keep learning and growing. Trusting God for eternal life is the difference between just waiting it out or giving up – and knowing that everything we do has meaning, and is preparing us for each new step and phase of life, both here and hereafter. If we do not believe in eternal life, we live at half-mast – either from being in too much of a hurry, or from the suspicion that nothing really matters anyway. Look around ... How much of life is driven by fear, or by being frantic, or by depression, or by panic? Sometimes they can even switch-hit, I know.

Someone started a rumor that eternal life is the wishful thinking of the religious – that eternal life is a construct for gullible people who are afraid of death. ("Religion is the opiate of the people," or so says Karl Marx. Karl Marx has never been my favorite theologian.) Why would anybody believe such unfounded rumors?! Nearly all of the bravest people I know, or have ever heard about, believe in eternal life. It has a lot to do with why they are so brave. Nearly all of the people I know, or have ever heard about, who are creative, dynamic, adventurous, and full of life believe in eternal life. It has a lot to do with what propels and inspires them. Why would I believe those who say that eternal life is irrelevant, beside the point, distracting, or just wishful thinking? And by the way, if you track the notions about eternal life, they are not coming from humans. It is revelation, prayers – humans in contact with God – that keep getting to the subject. Humans are not making it up. God keeps insisting that we better wake up and get ready.

Take a Bible you don't care about messing up. If you don't have one lying around or are too lazy to look for it, let me know and I'll send you one. Take a highlighter. Choose three books in the New Testament. One must be a Gospel. One must be one of Paul's letters. The third can be whatever you like. Read the three books care-

fully, highlighting every verse that mentions, implies, or assumes that eternal life is real. You will learn a lot just from doing this exercise, but it is only preparation. When you are finished, go back and read the book as if the highlighted passages were not there. See what you have left. See what Christianity would be about without the concept of eternal life. (Absolutely nothing! Even the most trimmed-down ethic of neighbor love is based on the premise that other people are God's children and have eternal worth.)

The fact is that the New Testament is a book about the hope of Heaven, both in its uncompromising proclamation of Heaven's reality, and in its persistent instructions about what we need to be doing here to get ready for there.

Some people feel considerable conflict at this point. They feel that too much of life is wasted or ruined when people are always looking to the future. But that is a strange perspective. The only way we can live fully in the present is to be aware of the past—and full of a trusting hope in the future. My point, of course, is that the more clearly we picture Heaven and trust God's promised future, the more we enhance our present moments—and the more we can live in the "now" with bold and fearless enthusiasm.

I, at least, have never met a person who started living less creatively once they got excited and began to genuinely believe in the promise of Heaven. I *have* known some people who started acting more rigid and frightened and repressed because they started focusing on Hell. But that only shows that humans can go negative with even the most positive of all promises. And it shows how important it really is to get our hopes right, and to trust God to be loving and not hateful. Some say that the real reason Jesus came is to make this clear—that it is the thing He lived and died and rose to reveal to us.

Let me try a different tack. It seems to me that the most difficult attitude for a student to handle is the attitude which comes from feeling that there is no connection between what is being taught in the classroom and what they will need to know in "real life." Let's think of all of us, for the moment, as students. It is nearly impossible for most of us to get excited enough about a subject to learn very much about it unless we believe that the knowledge is important and relevant. The subject must have some purpose, some application, some value that we can connect with. Nobody gets really interested in theology or the Bible, for instance, until after they begin to believe that there really is a spiritual dimension—until after they think that communication with God is really possible—until after they suspect there is a realm of real life beyond this one.

Anyway, if all the classes seem irrelevant, it is flunk-out time for most students, no matter how brilliant or full of potential their minds may be. Boredom, not lack of ability, is the scourge of the classroom. For the most part, a good student is not somebody with better brain-power, but somebody who is interested in the subject. The fear of a bad report card can carry some of us a little way for a little while. But there is no brilliance, no creativity, no real comprehension from any of us until

we become fascinated by the subject itself. Just so, people who live out of a fear of going to Hell can never learn LIFE.

Boredom, not lack of ability, is the scourge of God's classroom too. More and more I suspect that when we are having trouble with life, it is because we have failed to see a connection between what we are learning here and what we really need to know in the coming realms. Or, like some of our children, we get to thinking that school is the only reality—that we will never need to know any of this stuff once we get out into "the real world." When we do not see the connection, we just "mess around," as the kids say, and end up hating school. Or we try to live off the fear of coming home with a bad report card. Then we just go through the motions, memorizing and regurgitating "canned information"—not because we understand or care about it, or because we are letting it have any real effect on us, but just to get a "good grade" to take home to Daddy. How exciting can that ever be?! (Why is church life boring to so many people?)

This is religion at its worst. To study the scriptures to try to make a good grade—not because we see any connection between how we live now and the life to come, or because we care about love or character or devotion or purpose, but only so that God will give us a "passing grade." Dear friends, this world *is* a classroom. And while there is real life at school and this classroom does simulate the reality to come, the truth is that real life awaits us in endless dimensions more vast and more real than anything we know here. It is terribly important for us to trust and remember that everything we learn here is necessary—essential—to our quality of life in the realms to come. That is why, despite all our trials, the Christian Life does not feel like "I have to." It feels like "I get to. I want to. This is fantastic. Please don't make me stop right now—just one more hour or two, please?"

For those of you who wish to use it, here is a formula for getting all the information you can handle about Heaven: $E + S + F = X$. Experience, plus Scripture, plus Faith = X—the unknown—Heaven (with a hint about the future).

What truly works here, will work there—only square the potential. What is fulfilling and satisfying here, will be found in some fashion in the hereafter—only square the potential. What makes life meaningful, beautiful, and worth the bother here, will be the same there—only square the potential, or carry it to the tenth power. That is how we know the church is wrong when it tries to teach us that helping the poor is the only important thing in life. (I am constantly amazed at how many Christians think that helping the poor is the real core of the Christian Life, when Jesus spent so little of His own time and life trying to help the poor—I mean by giving them things.) It is important, but far from the only thing that is important. Art is important. Adventure is essential. Religion is not what is important—it is only what teaches us that *everything* is important, and that everything is interconnected because it all comes from the Creator.

I suppose we should also mention that what messes up life here—makes it painful or boring or ugly—will be intolerable there, only square the disaster.

And we should also mention Scripture: the holy history of God revealing himself and his purpose; the story of Jesus, how He lived, and what He lived for; the power of love, the mystery of grace, and the endless reassurance of mercy and forgiveness and new chances; the Spirit's willingness and desire to stay with us—to help and guide us whenever we are willing.

Does the formula work? Not perfectly. Not in some simplex or automatic way. But better than we can keep up with. We can know more about Heaven than we can handle—more than sometimes we want to know: Love is the purpose. The way we treat each other is terribly important. Justice, caring, forgiveness, empathy, humility, patient endurance—all major principles of life—here and hereafter. Track it. Does it work? Much too well, thank you very much. Try it the other way around: Greed, resentment, jealousy, complaint. Do they work? Everything gets really miserable, really fast.

Try out the formula on some familiar categories. What about sex—physical affection? Will there be anything like that in Heaven? We don't know for sure, and certainly not the details. But God sure makes a big deal of it here. None of us would even be here without it. But have we noticed? Some approaches make it incredibly special and beautiful, and other approaches turn it into something incredibly ugly and devastating. But nobody ever comes to earth without having to deal with it in one way or another—even if they don't want to. What does it take to give us a hint? In some fashion, we are going to need to know a lot about affection and intimacy in Heaven—a lot about building genuine bonds of love before expressing it sexually. $E + S + F = X$.

What about survival? Work? Doing our share? Sharing? Being responsible? Learning the difference between helping and enabling? Learning how to prioritize? Choosing between what we value and obedience to God? $E + S + F = X$. Why do so many people think there is no work to do—no *vocatio*—in Heaven? Work is so important here, why would there be nothing like it there? Your last day on earth will be the last time you ever *accomplish* anything?! Does that make sense?

What about thanksgiving? Did you ever know a happy person who wasn't a grateful person? What about allegiance and obedience to God? You see? The hints are everywhere, and they are a lot stronger than we often admit or pretend. The themes and principles of Heaven surround us. There is a great deal to learn. It has to sink deep into the soul before it really takes effect and gets exciting. There is not much chance of running out of things to learn, try, get good at, and build into our way of living and thinking and being.

Sometimes we get stuck on a lesson. We try to ignore it, bypass it, or move on to the next lesson and take an "incomplete" in the area we don't like. Only, there is no way to "get away with it" in God's classroom. Love is not always soft. Life keeps bringing us to that same lesson, to that same experience. There may be some changes in the way it comes—different people, or

different places—but it is the same lesson. That ought to tell us how important it is for us to learn. As long as we give the wrong answer, the question keeps coming in various guises until we are sick of it. For a time, we try to believe that it must be somebody else's fault, or bad luck, or a string of weird circumstances. But the truth is that we are stuck with a wrong answer for as long as we are willing to give it—like a broken record... like a broken record... like a broken record... (Keep drinking—maybe next time it won't make you drunk.) And when we are finally willing to give a different answer, it is a whole new day—and a whole new life—and we get to go on to another lesson.

Well, enough of that from me. Do you have your own picture of Heaven? You need to picture your hope as clearly and as fully as you can. $E + S + F = X$. It is hope that guides us, changes us, draws us, corrects us through every day, and through all of our "nows." May your hope be big—and so beautiful that it often brings tears to your eyes and boundless energy to your living. And may you know more surely each passing day that the future, like the present and the past, belongs to God.



THEMES OF REVELATION

In summary, here are some themes you may find helpful:

1.) Persecution is coming. Not only is life hard, here in a broken world—it is going to get worse. The "warfare" between light and dark—God and Satan—is going on all the time, but coming to culmination. You are caught in it and must be ready to fight (by dying)—that is, by the "Way of the Cross"—in the manner and method shown by your Lord.

2.) God's mercy is enormous—all through the warfare the offer of repentance and conversion (switching sides) is clear and extended. Almost everything that is happening is happening with this as its aim and purpose. BUT: It is possible to side with Satan so deeply, for so long, that the possibility of repentance is finally and totally rejected (not from God's side, but by the sinner).

3.) The vast majority of mankind (all nations, tribes, languages, etc.) will be won over. They will be won by the sacrifice of Christ—by His love. And part of this love is the continuing sacrifice of His witnesses (martyrs)—His followers—those who truly believe in Him. (We are the body of Christ in this world. It is Paul's image, but it is Revelation's message too.)

4.) The Whore (Egypt, Babylon, Rome) is all structures (civilizations and structures) of mankind that do not worship (acknowledge) God. Thus, material wealth and all the cruelty, uncaring, and injustice that come when people focus on their own pleasure, money, comfort, personal gain—instead of caring for God (and God's creation and children)—stand over against religious life, worshipful life, life dedicated and devoted to God (with meaning, love, character, service, and an eternal future in mind).

5.) Stay faithful. Live (and die) for God. Do not be seduced by the power and wealth of this world. There is nothing wrong with power or wealth, as long as it is acknowledged as coming from God, and is used to serve God. Do not be confused by the way things look at the moment. What matters – the real plot, what is really going on here – is not what you see at the moment. The Beast looks convincing, huge, and powerful. But bet your life on the Lamb, and follow the Way of His Cross.

SECTION V

THE NEW CARRIERS OF THE WRONG REVELATION

For many people, the Book of Revelation seems too complicated, too ancient, and too full of no-longer-relevant symbols and concerns to be worth reading today. Yet people are "reading" The Revelation in endless forms of books, movies, and television shows all the time. Do they not realize that our great thirst for superheroes who are powerful enough to fight against the forces of evil are thinly disguised "Messiah stories"?

If the Book of Revelation is no longer relevant, shall we also argue that nobody went to see *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*? (Or *Batman*, or *Zorro*, or *Superman* ... and on and on.) Some have indeed seen through the idiocies and not-very-well-disguised pride and self-centered favoritism of the *Left Behind* books and movies. Yet millions have not. Every normal "western" movie is a fight between the good guys and the bad guys. And no western is satisfying unless some hero-figure emerges to outdraw, outshoot, and outfight the bad guys and save "the rest of us" – the townsfolk, the homesteaders, or whatever.

What all of these carriers of the apocalyptic themes have in common is the complete unawareness of Jesus and His Gospel. All of them revert to the "popular" notions about the message of The Revelation. There is no Jesus (as Lamb, Savior, Reconciler) in most people's view of The Revelation. Jesus saves by defeating the enemies – by killing off the bad guys. This reverses the Christian Message: Jesus saves by converting – by transforming us! And we are in bondage to powers within and without that have turned us into the bad guys. "All have sinned." All of us must be born anew. All of us must go into the waters of baptism to drown and be lifted into an entirely New Life, new allegiance, new identity, new purpose and reason for being. And apart from that, there is no hope.

But what is the two-edged sword in all of our stories? Anakin Skywalker, out of love for his son, turns from the dark side and sacrifices his life to destroy the Sith Lord. A great moment. An almost Gospel moment. Yet throughout the *Star Wars* stories, we are far more immersed in a Maccabean revolt than we are in a mission of Jesus to transform human lives. Why does C.S. Lewis go back to the lion (Aslan) when he knows only the Lamb can save us? In the *Narnia* movie, Aslan

does not convert, transform, or change the heart of the evil Queen—he kills her. That means there is no hope for any of us.

From *Shane* to *Superman*, we are being told the old apocalyptic themes just as they were told and understood before the coming of Jesus. The sword "out of his mouth" is not a message of love and mercy to transform and reveal the New Life we are invited into. It is back to the same old, same old: We are better than others. If we are good enough, train hard enough, fight courageously enough, God will give us the victory and destroy all our enemies.

As long as we are content to believe and accept such false truth, God cannot reach us and the Savior cannot transform us. There is no way to get through such pride and self-delusion – no way for us to let the Holy Spirit enter in – as long as that is our hope, as long as that is the apocalyptic scenario we believe in and live by. There is no Jesus in the Book of Revelation unless we truly and finally turn to the Lamb who sees into our own hearts, loves us anyway, and offers us forgiveness and grace—an acceptance and a love which we can never ever earn or deserve. That alone can save and transform and change us from the inside out. And that means we must never again go back to the Lion or put our faith in the ways of the Lion. We cannot even begin to realize that the power of the Lamb is greater than the power of the Lion... until the blood of the Lamb breaks our pride – breaks our hearts – breaks our determination to win, succeed, or even survive by our own skill, determination, expertise, or even luck.

Sometimes I try to imagine what would happen if Jesus were to somehow get back into the Book of Revelation. How long would it take before He began to also get into all our other forms of apocalyptic storytelling – the movies, books, television shows, comics, video games, etc. And it reminds me of how alienated and separated our world really is from God – how far our hearts still are from the Christ. Only, I am quite sure there can be no Heaven for any of us until we go through the transformation, and see ourselves and others through the different eyes of the Gospel. As long as we only want our enemies destroyed and not converted, we are in Hell. And there is no way out by killing each other off.

There is still so much work for Jesus and His church in our world. If I didn't know it any other way, I would know it because I still love *Shane*, and *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, and all the others. Each time I read or watch, I have to shake myself and try to return my inner being to a gratitude and a willingness to love and obey my true Lord.



FINAL REMARKS

In the midst of all the prejudices of modern-day teachings about the message of Revelation, it is not easy to break free and come at it fresh. Looking at passages that support the Gospel and then at passages that seem to support the damnation constructs, what do

we conclude? Many will end with some kind of compromise or merger: The Gospel is real. The offer of God's love is real. But we have to "accept" the grace and love or we go bad, stay bad, and eventually must be destroyed or discarded to preserve the possibility of Heaven for others. Essentially I agree with this. Only, I think those who will reject and be rejected will be few, in the end. I suspect that God has many more dimensions and experiences and possibilities—beyond earth—to work toward his ends and purposes. I suspect that our rejection of his love and purposes would have to be far more serious than one earth experience could provide, before we would be "let off the hook" and dismissed from life. I suspect that if and when that happened, it would be *ex nihilo* (ceasing to be) that resulted, not eternal punishment. Besides, by that time there would be no way to adequately punish.

When I was eight years old, I was walking along Whittier Boulevard with my dog, Brownie. We were far off to the side of a wide shoulder, as we had been trained to be. A guy in a fast-moving car swerved clear off the highway to hit Brownie. His car screeched and swerved, spewed gravel, and went on its way. I carried Brownie home in my arms. She was bleeding and whimpering, yet licking my face. But there was no help for her. She died not long after we got home. Now, I know that an eight-year-old does not have a fully developed theology. But there is not enough fire in Hell to punish the bastard who did that to Brownie. So what are you going to do with a Hitler, or a Stalin, or the many others?

The problem of evil cannot be solved with punishment. It can only be solved with conversion – transformation. There is no "overcoming" of evil except with good—changing foes into friends, changing enemies into companions on the WAY. But the mind logically goes to "What if?" What if an enemy of God will never change? The purpose would still not be punishment for them, but would be to protect the experience and quality of life for those who do choose to change – who do choose the Christ and His Way. But then, from my perspective, choosing life and choosing obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ are synonymous. That is my language, and those are my constructs. I suspect that many choose life—at least enough of it to go on with the great adventure—who do not name Jesus or understand such things in "my language."

But what does *John* think? That is the real question. Does The Revelation support Gospel, or damnation? My deep suspicion is that John has seen, claimed, and bought the Gospel. But being human like the rest of us, he is not entirely consistent. He is a child of his age and belief systems. Apocalyptic constructs sneak in, even though I am thoroughly convinced that John writes his Apocalypse to go beyond, and see beyond, the normal expressions and conclusions of apocalyptic messages. There are too many indications of a dramatic break beyond the traditional conclusions. His last battle is very different from a simple casting of all the opposition into Hell. Ultimately the two-edged sword converts, it does not destroy. Well, it destroys the old life, and brings us into a New WAY. But we have already spoken of it at

length. The power of the Christ is reconciliation and redemption, not destruction. The method of the Lamb is to take on suffering until we comprehend that all our ways and approaches are alienated from the Father's Will. Christ wins us, He does not coerce or kill us. Christ changes the heart and soul with grace and forgiveness and love. Our old nature is destroyed in a joyful release and recognition of a truer (deeper and higher) identity, and of a soul within us that is truer and greater than we knew or believed existed—certainly one we never before trusted. In the great battle, we are slaughtered by love, compassion, and understanding—not by anger, torture, or condemnation.

I certainly have experienced relationships where it seemed to me that the other person was shut off from repentance, forgiveness, and love. Either they were, or I was! So it is possible for my mind to entertain the possibility that such a condition might endure through all of God's efforts to win and change us. God gave us life. If worse comes to worse and it becomes obvious that, through enough time and experience, a person hates life and will go on trying to ruin and destroy it, then surely God will take back—take away—the life that has been given. But I cannot imagine that this is some vast, impersonal, punitive process. I think that scenario is the residue of our own anger and frustration and pain – wanting vindication, and wanting to be freed from the people who destroy us and those we love. And I certainly do not imagine that the brief experience we have on this planet will be enough to convince God that there is no more hope for us. Suicide is stupid, not damnable. Skipping to fourth grade is not going to solve third-grade problems for most of us. And I suspect that the very reason God starts us out in a temporal realm is so we cannot make mistakes so big that they cannot be fixed (corrected).

So John is not perfectly consistent. Neither am I. Sometimes, for all my delight and trust and joy in the Gospel, I still get angry. I still hope some person will get creamed. I still fall back to old constructs and assumptions. (If we hurt them badly enough, they will learn and change. At least it will teach them to never act that way again.) But it has never worked. So I "come to myself" again. Still, for the most part, I think John sees through the old constructs and their blunders. The Lamb will be victorious. Arnion will never change back to our more familiar techniques and expectations. Love will conquer – or nothing will. We will choose the Christ in love and recognition—not in fear of punishment – or Heaven will forever be a charade. And if I am wrong about this, it will have been a mistake of the deepest honesty and integrity of which I am capable – backed by years of prayer, study, thought, wonderment. If I am wrong, I will go to Hell. And I will deserve to, by all the light of the assumptions and expectations of more familiar ways of belief. That will have to be all right with me, whatever the cost. Why would I want to have anything to do with a God who matches the beliefs and constructs of the traditional views of The Revelation anyway? Certainly it would be no God of the Cross or the Resurrection, or guidance by the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

So instead of *releasing* me from Hell – which has been *my* experience of the Presence of Christ in all my life here so far—I will get thrown *into* Hell as punishment for my bad teaching and wrong beliefs. So be it! Then The Revelation is a horrid book with a terrible message, and I want no part of it. I still choose to trust Jesus the Christ—the Lamb of God—who loves poor sinners like me. Who tracks us from here to eternity—whispering to us, inviting us, calling to us, waiting for us to respond in every way, large and small—until we start to love Him back, and can no longer get loose from the greatest and most beautiful "hook" in all Creation: I LOVE YOU.

I think John has taken apocalyptic vision to a whole new level, and his book is full of mercy and love. But it has been "reversed" by our animosity and impatience, and even by our eagerness to get everybody onboard. And so it is most often "twisted" to serve ends far from the mind and heart of Christ – far from His revealed purpose. John would weep. And so I write this paper that few will read, and that perhaps no one will remember after many years. It is nevertheless my salute, out of gratitude, to John—and to the Lamb he tries to reveal.

Come, Lord Jesus!

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