Notes on Revelation

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The general impression that we receive from the story of Rome’s fall is that vast cosmic forces were at work which frustrated the counsels of the wisest statesmen, and rendered nugatory the skill and valour of the greatest generals; ... if ever in human history we can discern the working of destiny or inevitable fate, it is here.

Gamaliel Milner  
*The Problem of Decadence*  
Williams and Norgate: London, 1931

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Revelation 19:11–16
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Preface

These notes on Revelation were compiled in preparation for a six month course that I taught to the singles class at Prestoncrest Church of Christ in Dallas, Texas in 1990. The primary sources for these notes were the commentaries on Revelation by Jim McGuiggan and William Barclay. My initial suggestion to anyone opening this volume is that he or she read these books first before turning to the present text. These notes were particularly influenced by McGuiggan’s commentary—many of the references and ideas in these notes are due to him. In addition to these two primary sources, I have also included material from approximately seventy other sources ranging from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* to Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*; that is, from the sublime to the ridiculous.

As you read these notes, please keep in mind that they were compiled in preparation for a class that I taught. In particular, they were not originally intended for distribution and have only been put into their present form due to the persistent prodding of Marion Williams. As such, the present work has much in common with lecture notes: except for a brief mention in the bibliography, my sources remain largely uncredited; some notes appear only in outline form; and much of the material is presented in a rather conversational style. Although I have tried to go back and give credit where credit is due I am sure that certain sections are still not properly cited. Finally, please keep in mind that in compiling these notes I have followed, as I always do when studying the Bible, the advice of Mark Twain who said “Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority it’s probably time to change sides.”
1 Matthew 24

Before we begin our study of Revelation we will first exercise our interpretive skills by studying Matthew 24. This chapter in Matthew (and parallel chapters in Mark 13 and Luke 21) describes the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in the same way that Revelation describes the fall of the Roman empire. Both Jerusalem and Rome were fierce enemies of the church and God’s message to each is the same.

1.1 The Last Days

The New Testament often speaks of “the last days.” What are or what were the last days? In Acts 2:16–21 Peter quotes Joel 2:28–32 and claims that his listeners at that time were living during the last days. Continuing to quote from the prophet Joel, Peter said that the following events would occur during the last days:

1. God would pour out his spirit on all flesh.
2. People would prophesy and see visions.
3. There would be wonders in heaven and signs on earth.
4. There would be blood, fire, and vapor of smoke.
5. The sun would be turned into darkness.
6. These events would precede a great notable and day.
7. All who called on the name of the Lord would be saved.

Are there any other clues regarding the last days? In 1 Peter 1:20 we see that Christ was manifested at the end of the times. In Hebrews 1:1–2 we see that God spoke through his son during the last days. Thus, whatever time period the last days refers to it must include some part of the first century.

Are we still living in the last days? Note that an affirmative response would cause the “last days” to refer to nearly 2000 years (and still counting). Clearly, to answer this question we need to determine what the word “last” refers to.

The Bible tells us that the “last days” would be a time of judgment. The images used in Acts 2 are taken directly from Old Testament passages that dealt with judgments of God against oppressors of his people. The New Testament has much to say about a coming judgment that was very near. In James 5:8–9 we read that “the coming of the Lord is at hand. Behold, the judge standeth before the doors.” In Matthew 24:33 Jesus says, “When you see these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.” In 2 Timothy 3:1 we see that in the last days grievous times would come. In Luke 21:20–22 we see that those days would be days of vengeance. In 1 Peter 4:17 Peter writes, “For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?” Thus, the last days seems to refer to a period of time preceding a judgment of God against the house of God. What does this mean? What judgment has God ever sent against his own house? In A.D. 70 the Jewish age came to a rather abrupt and final end when God destroyed the Jewish temple— His former house. Jesus had warned Jerusalem that God’s judgment was coming:

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a
bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41–44)

The last days are just that—last days. We are not living during the last days that are spoken of in the New Testament. The last days are the last days of the Jewish age and mark the division of the Christian age that started in A.D. 33 and the Jewish age that ended completely and finally with the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. The Law could never be fully kept again. The tribal lines were gone forever. The Levitical priesthood could never be restored.

### 1.2 The Fall of Jerusalem

In A.D. 65 a Roman named Florus was in charge of Judea. His reign caused a violent Jewish rebellion. Cestius Gallus, called in to put down the revolt, promptly surrounded Jerusalem and prepared to enter it. Without warning, however, he suddenly ordered his troops to withdraw. Josephus wrote that this happened “without any reason in the world.” We are told that many Christians escaped the doomed city during this momentary lapse. In A.D. 67 Nero sent Vespasian to take over for Cestius Gallus. Vespasian subdued all of Judea except for Jerusalem. In A.D. 68 Nero committed suicide and Vespasian promptly returned to Rome leaving his eldest son Titus to take care of the Jerusalem problem. Titus besieged the city and the Jews, expecting Messianic intervention, resisted. In A.D. 70 Titus took the city and the sacrifices on the altar ceased to be offered. The Roman legionary standards were set up in the temple, the holy of holies was ransacked, and a pig was slaughtered on the altar. The temple was burned, the city was destroyed, and thousands were killed. In total, over one million died in the Roman siege. Josephus wrote, “It is impossible to give every instance of the iniquity of these men [the Romans]. I shall therefore speak my mind here at once briefly: that never did any other city suffer such miseries.”

How does the Bible view these events? In Daniel 9:26 Daniel wrote nearly 500 years earlier that because they cut off the Messiah, the people of a prince that was to come would destroy the city and the sanctuary. In the parable of the faithless husbandmen who killed the owner’s son Jesus says that the owner will “miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen.”¹ The destruction of Jerusalem was a divine judgment from God. Hebrew history began with the divine call of Abraham and ended with the destruction of the temple by divine decree and the call of all men to follow Christ.

### 1.3 Matthew 24

As this chapter opens, Jesus tells his disciples that the temple they are looking at would one day be so utterly destroyed that not one stone would be left on another.² The disciples were naturally astonished and asked when this would occur. As one might expect, they seemed to feel that such an event could only occur when the world itself came to an end. Thus, the ask when the temple will be destroyed and when the world will end. Jesus answers both questions in the remainder of Chapter 24.

¹Matthew 21:41
²The present temple had been rebuilt 600 years earlier upon the Jews’ return from Babylon. After the temple was burned the Romans discovered that much of the gold had melted and run in between the stones. As you might imagine when they were finished not one stone was left on top of another.
Jesus first gives the following signs of “the end.” Our goal will be to determine the “end” to which Jesus refers— the end of the temple or the end of the world. Billy Graham and Hal Lindsey feel that the signs refer to the end of the world.

1. Many shall say “I am Christ” and deceive many.

The Jews expected Messianic intervention when their city was besieged. In Acts 5:36–37 we read of two false Messiahs.

2. There will be wars and rumors of wars.

Before the fall of Jerusalem, four Roman emperors died violently within 18 months. Tacitus writes during this time of “disturbances in Germany,” “commotions in Africa,” “insurrections in Gaul,” and “intrigues among the Parthians.”

3. Famines, pestilences, and earthquakes will take place.

Acts 11:28 speaks of a famine throughout the world that occurred during the reign of Claudius. Tacitus and Eusebius speak of famines in Rome, Judea, and Greece that occurred during this time. Suetonius wrote of a pestilence in Rome during Nero’s day that killed 30,000 people. Josephus and Tacitus speak of pestilences in Babylonia and Italy during this period. Seneca wrote in A.D. 58, “How often have cities in Asia and Achaea fallen with one fatal shock! How many cities have been swallowed up in Syria! How many in Macedonia! . . . News has often been brought us of the demolition of whole cities at once.”

4. Great persecution will occur.

It did. Read Acts.

5. False prophets will arise.

They did. Read the epistles.

6. The gospel will be preached to all.

The gospel at this time was preached to all— it was not confined to just one nation or one race.

Acts 2:5 The gospel was preached to men from every nation under heaven.
Acts 8:1, 4 Disciples went everywhere preaching the word.
Romans 1:8 “Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.”
Romans 16:26 The gospel has been made known to all nations.
Colossians 1:23 The gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven.3

7. The abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel will occur.

This may be the desecration of the holy of holies that we saw earlier. Recall that a pig was slaughtered on the altar. More likely, however, it refers to the encircling of Jerusalem by pagan forces since it was given as a sign for Christ’s followers to escape. In the parallel passage in Luke 21:20 we read “but when ye see Jerusalem surrounded with armies, then know that her [Jerusalem’s] desolation is at hand.”

8. There will be great tribulation such as never has been seen and never shall be seen again.

3Revised Standard Version
Recall the description of Jerusalem’s fall provided by Josephus. Over one million were killed and nearly one hundred thousand were carried away into slavery.

Immediately after the tribulation we read in Matthew 24:29–31 that the following events would occur:

1. The sun would be darkened.
2. The moon would not give her light.
3. The stars would fall from heaven.
4. The powers of the heavens would be shaken.
5. The sign of the Son of man would appear.
6. All of the tribes of the earth would see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.
7. The angels shall gather the elect.

Do these signs point to an event that has yet to occur or do they point to an event that has already occurred? (We should ask this question first before asking what the signs mean because if we can determine the proper time frame for the prophecy it will be much easier to determine its meaning. Determining a time frame for a prophecy is crucial to understanding the prophecy.) Matthew 24:34 tells us when these events would occur. In that verse, Jesus says “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” That is, all of the events that Jesus spoke of in Mathew 24:1–34 were to take place during the lifetime of his listeners.

“But wait,” you say, “In my modern version of the Bible a footnote says that the word generation actually means race. That is, Jesus said that these events would occur before the Jewish race ceased to exist.” A very good way to locate verses that cause problems for denominationalists is to look for footnotes in modern versions of the Bible. Although most are not so dishonest as to actually change the text,4 they do not hesitate to put into the footnotes what they wish the verse actually said. The Greek word for generation is γενεα (ghen-eh-ah) from which we get “genealogy.” This is the word used in verse 34 and also in Matthew 1:17 and Matthew 12:41 where for some reason footnotes seldom appear. Does “generation” mean “race” in Matthew 1:17? The Greek word for “race” is γενοζ (ghen-os) from which we get “genocide.” This word is used in Acts 4:6 to denote the “kindred of the High Priest” and in 1 Peter 2:9 where the church is described as an “elect race.” Instead of rewriting the Bible to fit our theology why don’t we change our theology to fit the Bible?

Verse 34 is the key to understanding Matthew 24. It marks the division between the answers Jesus provides in response to the apostles’ two questions: When will the temple be destroyed? When will the world end? In response to the first question Jesus says that it will happen during their lifetimes (verse 34) and history tells us that it did. In response to the second question (after verse 34) Jesus says that no one will know or even expect when the when the world will end. (Indeed, in Mark 13:32 we find out that even Jesus did not know when the world would end!)

What then does verse 29 mean when it says that the sun would be darkened, the stars would fall, etc.? These events did not literally occur when the temple was destroyed. Recall, however, the passage in Acts 2 where Peter quoted Joel and said that the sun and moon would be darkened during the last days—a period of time that he made clear was already underway. The image of the sun and moon being darkened is used many times in the Old Testament to depict figuratively the downfall of nations. There, as here, we should not take the language literally. Consider the following passages where similar language is used to describe the judgment of God:

**Ezekiel 32:7–8** Read this description of God’s judgment against Egypt.

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4Unfortunately, there are exceptions. See, for example, Acts 2:38 in the “translation” by Charles B. Williams.
When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness upon your land, says the Lord God.

Daniel 8:10 Calamities to befall the Jews are symbolized by the casting down of stars and hosts of heaven to the ground.

Amos 5:18–20 a day of darkness, and not light.

Amos 8:2–9 The end is come ... I will darken the earth. The sun will go down at noon.

Zephaniah 1:4, 15 a day of darkness and gloominess.

Isaiah 5:3, 30 a land of darkness and sorrow. Light is darkened in the heavens.

Jeremiah 4:3, 23, 28 The heavens are black and have no light.

Jeremiah 13:9–10, 16–19 God will cause darkness unless the people repent.

Ezekiel 34:12 The people will be scattered in a cloudy and dark day.

Micah 3:6, 12 The sun shall go down and there will be darkness.

Isaiah 13:9–10 The host of heaven will be dissolved. The heaven will be rolled together as a scroll.

Isaiah 13:9–10, 17–21 God's judgment against Babylon is described as occurring at a time when: The stars will not give light. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not shine.

Ezekiel The destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 B.C. is described by Ezekiel in language very similar to that used in Matthew 24.

In Ecclesiastes 12:1–2 the expression “while the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened” is used to symbolize good times. Also, in Isaiah 60:20 a promise of good times for Israel is described as a time when the “sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself.”

What about verse 30 where Jesus says that the people would see Jesus coming in the clouds? Did this happen in the first century as verse 34 suggests? It did not happen literally in the first century but it did happen figuratively. Indeed, in Matthew 26:64 Jesus told Caiaphas that he would personally witness Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven and sitting at the right hand of power. The judgments of God are often described as a coming of the Lord to seek justice for his people. Compare the following passages from the Old Testament where clouds and comings of God are used to depict judgments:

Isaiah 19:1 The burden of Egypt. Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud, and shall come into Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at his presence.

Ezekiel 30:3 For the day is near, even the day of the Lord is near, a cloudy day.

Daniel 7:13 The son of man is pictured as “coming with the clouds of heaven” to receive his sovereign power.

Isaiah 31:4 So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion.

Isaiah 35:4 Behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you.

Isaiah 59:20 And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord.
Isaiah 66:15 For, behold, the Lord will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.

Angels are messengers. Thus when Jesus said that the angels would gather the elect he may have been referring to the spread of the gospel that would be unhampered by the Jews. There may also be an allusion here to the freedom of slaves in the Year of Jubilee.

1.4 Review

Remember the following points about Matthew 24 as we study the book of Revelation:

1. Jerusalem was a center of persecution against the early church and God judged them accordingly.
2. God’s judgment came in the form of the complete destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.
3. That judgment was described as a coming of the Lord.
4. That judgment was described by vivid imagery borrowed from the Old Testament.
5. Jesus said that this judgment would occur during the present day generation and it did.
6. This judgment did not include Christ’s followers. Although, some Christians certainly suffered during the siege, many others heeded Christ’s warnings and escaped. The judgment was not directed at them.

Revelation, as we will see, also speaks of an imminent judgment against an enemy of the Church and of the Church’s complete victory over that enemy.
2 Introduction to Revelation

2.1 Rome and the Church

All agree that the book of Revelation describes a powerful false religious system that stands in opposition to God. As we will see, this false religion is the worship of the Roman emperor. Julius Caesar was killed by those who feared that he was leading Rome toward a monarchy. His death in 44 B.C. marked the end of the Roman Republic. His adopted son Octavius became Augustus, the first Roman emperor. As the Roman empire spread east, the Romans found rulers who thought themselves divine. The conquering Romans were called gods by the people they defeated. These attitudes quickly caught on and spread back to Rome. Although Augustus was never actually worshiped in Rome he encouraged cults in the provinces. Tiberius was against his own deification. Caligula thought himself a god and died before he was able to fulfill his goal of erecting a statue of himself in the Jewish holy of holies. Claudius did not want to be worshiped and in fact commended the Jews for refusing to worship Caligula. Nero did not want to be thought of as divine because he did not want his talent to be attributed to divinity. Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, and Titus did not have enough time to worry about such things. Domitian thought himself a god and actively persecuted those who disagreed. His policies grew into terrible persecutions against the church.

At first, Christianity was thought to be just a Jewish sect and was ignored. Any cult that passed the following three tests was tolerated by Rome:

1. Will the cult upset the dominant position of the Roman cults?
2. Is the cult politically unsafe?
3. Is the cult morally desirable?

Christianity upset the Roman cults because it taught that all men were lost without Christ. Christianity was considered politically unsafe because it was centered around the worship of a criminal who had been executed by Rome. Christianity was not even considered morally desirable since Christians were accused of practicing cannibalism and incest. Christians would not pray to the king, they refused military service since such service required them to wear idolatrous insignias, they preached universal dominion by Jesus, and they refused to acknowledge the emperor as god.

The persecution of the church by Rome was particularly intense during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. In A.D. 66 a fire destroyed much of Rome. A rumor spread that Nero had set the fire to further his plans to rebuild the city. To dispel the rumor Nero blamed the Christians who, as was well known, predicted a fiery end of the world. Tacitus describes the situation as follows:

To scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and gave

1 John 6:54
an exhibition in his circus, mixing with the crowds in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

This fierce persecution was reduced for awhile after the death of Nero but began again with renewed intensity when Domitian came to power. Tertullian called Domitian “a limb of the bloody Nero.”

2.2 Apocalyptic Language

Revelation is called Apokalupsis in Greek and it is from this word that we get the word apocalyptic that means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed. Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. Instances of such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, as well as in Revelation, the minor prophets, and the gospels. See for example, Isaiah 13, Isaiah 34, Micah 1, Zephaniah 1, and Jeremiah 4.

What is the purpose of such language? It denotes conflict and victory. It is used to describe what happens when God smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. It is used to describe times of crisis. Why did God use such language? It may have been to shield the Church from retaliation from Rome. The reason may have been similar to that given by Jesus concerning his use of parables. There may not be any reason at all. As Psalm 115:3 reminds us, God does whatever he pleases! Some have described such language as being oil paintings by God.

In studying such passages we should pay particular attention to numbers and periods of time. Further, such language always has historical significance and we should study history in order understand the images. The usual approach to scripture is to understand a passage literally unless forced to do otherwise. This is reversed for apocalyptic language— that is, one should understand apocalyptic language figuratively unless forced to do otherwise. In any case, consistency is vital. God did not always intend for prophetic language to be taken literally. To do so with the first prophecy in Genesis 3:15 would cause it to apply to a conflict between humans and snakes. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly but sometimes uses “dark speech.” Hosea told Israel that they were going into Egyptian captivity yet they actually went into Assyrian captivity. Hosea knew that to a Jew Egypt meant captivity and oppression. Many modern commentators are inconsistent in this regard. To Hal Lindsey the 144,000 Jews in Rev. 7:4 are literal yet the locusts in Rev. 9:3 are Cobra helicopters. To John Walvoord, the 10 days in Rev. 2:10 are figurative yet the 1000 years in chapter 20 are literal.

Attempting to take prophetic language literally can lead to big problems. To literalize Isaiah 11:6–10 is to deny that Paul applied it correctly to the first century in Romans 15:10–12. To literalize Ezekiel 16:53–55 would require the resurrection of the inhabitants of Sodom to their former prosperity despite what we read in Jude 7. To literalize Ezekiel 37:22–25 would require that David and not Jesus be Israel’s eternal king. To literalize Isaiah 34:5–17 would require that the land of Edom will exist eternally here on earth and burn eternally while weeds and animal live in it. To literalize Micah 5:2–7 would require that the Assyrian empire rise again and attack Israel.

Matthew 13:10–12.
2.3 Approaches to Revelation

2.3.1 The Historical Approach

This view is sometimes called the standard Protestant interpretation and is taken in the Gospel Advocate commentary by Hinds. This approach views the book as a forecast in symbols of the history of the church. The Roman Catholic church often plays the role of the villain in this approach.

This view ignores John’s clearly stated time frame for the book. In particular, John says that all of the events dealt with in the book would occur shortly after the book was written. See Rev. 1:1; 1:3; 22:6; and 22:10. The meaning of these passages would not be disputed in any other context. In Revelation, however, the passages conflict with men’s interpretation of the book and instead of changing their interpretation many change the clear meaning of these important verses. Walvoord recognizes the proper meaning but ignores it. Hinds inserts a word in order to have John say that his writings concern events that were to shortly begin to come to pass. This, however, is not what John said.

Daniel received a vision in 550 B.C. (described in Daniel 8) that was fulfilled 400 years later in 165 B.C. when the sanctuary was restored after the desecration by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king. In Daniel 8:26 Daniel was told to shut up the vision because its fulfillment was a long way off. In Rev. 22:10 John is told just the opposite— Don’t seal up the vision because the time for its fulfillment is at hand.

What about 2 Peter 3:8 where we see that to God 1000 years appears as 1 day? Time does not mean the same thing to God as it means to man yet in Rev. 1:1, 3 God is not talking to himself— God is talking to man. Which time frame do you think he would use? In Daniel 8 he said that 400 years were “many days.”

In addition to ignoring the time frame, this approach makes the book to be of little significance to its initial readers. Further, it quickly becomes absurd in its attempt to match historical details to the visions in the book. As in the popular book by Nostradamus, something in Revelation can be found to fit almost any historical fact if the context and time frame are ignored.

2.3.2 The Futurist or Eschatological Approach

This approach claims that nothing in Revelation from chapter 4 until the end of the book has been fulfilled yet. Instead, the entire book will be fulfilled at some time immediately preceding the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. This approach includes the very popular dispensationalist view that is summarized below:

1. Jesus came to establish a visible rule on earth.

2. The Jews did not accept Christ so the offer to rule was withdrawn.

3. The establishment of the kingdom was postponed until his return.

4. The church was established for the interim period. The church is a parenthesis in history and is not a fulfillment of any Old Testament prophecy.

Many of us seem to be under the mistaken impression that God is confined to exist in time as we exist in time. That is, we imagine a Heaven and a Hell with clocks on the wall marking the passage the time. Such is not the case even in the physical realm! What may appear at one point to last a few seconds may appear from another frame of reference to last for centuries. Einstein’s Theory of Relativity has actually been observed— it is now Einstein’s Fact of Relativity! The idea that those in Heaven will one day be able to say that they have “been there 10,000 years” betrays our misconception. When we leave this world behind to live with Christ I suspect that we will leave our notion of time behind as well. If length and weight have no meaning in Heaven then why should time be any different?
5. The church age will end with a “rapture” in which all believers will meet Christ in the air. This is the first stage of the second advent.

6. During the next seven years, the antichrist will rule the earth, the Jews will be restored to Palestine, the temple will be rebuilt, and the sacrificial system will be reinstituted. Those saved during this time are called tribulation saints.

7. The antichrist will break a covenant with the Jews after $3\frac{1}{2}$ years and a terrible persecution will follow.

8. After another $3\frac{1}{2}$ years Christ will appear, defeat the antichrist, and rule on earth for 1000 years.

Some proponents of this view are even more imaginative. Hal Lindsey presented the following scenario of the final seven years before the millennial reign:

1. For $3\frac{1}{2}$ years Satan will rule the world through a Jewish antichrist in Rome.
2. The Jews will be allowed to rebuild the temple.
3. Many Jews will be converted and a worldwide evangelism program will be undertaken by 144,000 Jewish preachers.
4. After $3\frac{1}{2}$ years the antichrist will set up his own image in the newly rebuilt Jewish temple.
5. World War III will break out.
6. Egypt will invade Israel.
7. Russia will invade the Middle East and trample both Egypt and Israel.
8. The Roman dictator will invade Israel.
9. Rome will launch a nuclear attack against Russian forces in Israel.
10. 200,000,000 Chinese troops will march on Palestine to battle the Roman army.
11. The battle of Armageddon will begin and lead to worldwide destruction.
12. Jesus will return to reign on earth for 1000 years.

Space does not permit us to discuss everything that is wrong with such an approach. First, it ignores the time frame as did the first approach that we considered. Further, it causes the book to have little significance to its initial readers. Finally, it changes as quickly as the headlines. Many thought Hitler was the antichrist—some still do. The political scene that caused Lindsey to reach his conclusions in 1974 is quite different in 1992. Many saw Gorbachev as the antichrist—he even came complete with a built-in ‘mark of the beast’! More recently Hussein became their antichrist du jour as he threatened Israel with destruction while based near the site of historic Babylon. When asked about his changing views, a local dispensationalist preacher in Dallas said he wasn’t worried because everything he had said (and later retracted) was biblical!

Although the purpose of this study is not to expose premillennialism, we will now briefly consider a few points concerning that popular but badly misguided approach.
2.3.3 Premillennialism

First, does it make any difference what we believe about this subject? Is it all just a matter of opinion? John Walvoord, a leading proponent of premillennialism has the following to say in this regard:

If premillennialism is only a dispute about what will happen in a future age which is quite removed from present issues, that is one thing. If, however, premillennialism is a system of interpretation which involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible, defines the meaning and course of the present age, determines the present purpose of God, and gives both material and method to theology, that is something else. It is the growing realization that premillennialism is more than a dispute about Revelation 20. It is not too much to say that millennialism is a determining factor in Biblical interpretation of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection.

It does make a difference what we believe about this subject. The premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel. Preachers in the church of Christ betray their ignorance when they proclaim that our views about the end of the world are of little consequence and hence shouldn't be a test for fellowship. Consider the following premillennial positions and their associated consequences:

The Restoration of the Levitical Priesthood

Premillennialists teach that the Levitical priesthood is going to be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 44. The role of the Levitical priests was to offer the sacrifices for sin that were demanded by the Law of Moses. Jesus’ perfect sacrifice put these people out of business permanently (Hebrews 10:12, 18). The Levitical system was imperfect, weak, and useless (Hebrews 7:11, 18) and was set aside by Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:18). The coming of reality in Jesus Christ meant that the shadow of the Levitical system was removed forever.

Further, Jesus could not be a priest if the Levitical system were still functioning. Under the Law of Moses (Numbers 18), only Aaron’s sons could be priests. The Law of Moses and the Levitical system cannot be separated— one cannot exist without the other (Hebrews 7:12). In addition, the old and new covenants cannot coexist (Romans 7:1–6). The first covenant was taken away so that the second could be established (Hebrews 10:9–10). Jesus could not be priest on earth under the Levitical system (Hebrews 8:4).

The Restoration of the Sacrificial System

Premillennialists teach that bloody sacrifices for sin will be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 43–45 and Zechariah 14. Animal sacrifices were never able to cleanse the soul. They simply shadowed the coming sacrifice that would provide true cleansing. Jesus’ sacrifice was all sufficient. His perfect once-for-all sacrifice meant that future sacrifices were unnecessary (Hebrews 10:17–18). Those who have remission of sin have no further need of sacrifice. The premillennial view undermines the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrificial atonement. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:21 that “if justification were through the Law, then Christ died to no purpose.”

The New Covenant is not in force now

Premillennialists teach that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31ff is not yet in force and that it will not come into force until the millennium. Walvoord says that the new covenant applies only to Israel and has no relation with this present age. What does the Bible say? In Luke 22:20 Jesus says “this cup is the new covenant in my blood.” In Hebrews 9:15 we read that Jesus is
the mediator of a new covenant. In 2 Corinthians 3:5–6 Paul writes that “our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant.” The problem of sin is the motivation behind both covenants. The new covenant provides forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Walvoord claims that Christ’s blood produced two new covenants. The new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is the covenant that we are under today. This covenant provides salvation and forgiveness through the blood of Christ and there is no need for any other covenant.

**Jesus is not presently ruling over Israel**

Premillennialists deny the complete Lordship of Jesus. They insist he is not presently ruling over Israel. Walvoord and Lindsey both claim that although Jesus has the right to rule the earth, he is not exercising that authority at this time. For proof they point to the mess that the world is in. This argument parallels that of Epicurus who argued that God could not be both good and all powerful. (If God wills evil then he is not good. If God does not will evil then he is not all powerful since evil exists.) What does the Bible say? Psalm 29:10 reminds us that God rules at the time of the flood even though the world was in a mess at the time. Paul told the Ephesians in Eph. 1:21 that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” in this age. Acts 2:36 says that Jesus is Lord over Israel. In Rev. 2:26–27 Jesus claims to have already been given the authority over nations that was prophesied in Psalm 2:8–9. In Rev. 1:5 we see that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Psalm 110 depicts Jesus as sitting at God’s right hand and ruling in the midst of his enemies. (This passage is quoted many times in the New Testament as having been already fulfilled.) Hebrews 10:12 says that Jesus is now a priest sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus’ office is a royal priesthood. What does Walvoord say? He claims that although Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 110:4 have been fulfilled, the remaining verses in Psalm 110 have not been fulfilled.

### 2.3.4 The Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach

This approach applies the book primarily (or completely) to the conflict between the Church and Rome. (Some taking this approach apply the book to the conflict between the Church and Jerusalem. As we will see, however, this idea doesn’t hold water.) This approach does not violate John’s claim that the prophecies in Revelation were to come to pass shortly. This approach makes the book meaningful to its initial readers in that it gives comfort and assurance of victory to those being persecuted. According to this approach the book is not eschatological—that is, it is not concerned with the end of the world. Since the remainder of this book is devoted to developing this position, we will not expound upon it here.

### 2.4 Principles of Interpretation

The following general rules for interpreting Revelation will be used throughout our study:

1. The writer must be assumed to have written primarily for the benefit of the initial readers to whom it was addressed.\(^4\)

2. As with any apocalyptic book we should reverse the ordinary rule of interpretation. That is, we should look for a symbolic meaning unless forced to do otherwise.

3. The meaning of symbols should be ascertained by considering how similar imagery was used in the Old Testament. No other book in the New Testament contains as many Old

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\(^4\)As the year 2000 approaches, I suspect that many will read the “signs” of the time and say that the end is near. The same things were said when the year 1000 rolled by! See the book *AD 1000: Living on the Brink of the Apocalypse* by Richard Erdoes.
Testament references as does Revelation. One has estimated that out of 404 verses there are 278 allusions to the Old Testament.

4. As we would look at an oil painting, we should study an image in this book by looking at it as a whole and not by dividing it up into many disjoint pieces that are examined separately.

5. Revelation is an impressionistic book that appeals to the imagination. Details are often given to increase a scene’s emotional impact rather than to relay specific information. This book is much different from a book such as Romans which is designed to appeal chiefly to the intellect.

Finally, note in Rev. 1:3 that the book contains a blessing for those who read it and keep what is says. That is, God intended the book to be understood.
3 Prologue

3.1 The source of the revelation

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

“The revelation of Jesus Christ” means that the revelation is given by Jesus Christ, not that it is a revelation about Jesus Christ. The Greek word for Revelation is Apokalupsis: Apo meaning away from and kalupsis meaning a veiling. Thus, the revelation is an unveiling. In Gal. 1:12 we see that Paul received the gospel by apokalupsis from Jesus Christ and in Gal. 2:2 Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem “by revelation” to preach.

The time frame given here is crucial to understanding the book. John was shown things that must “soon take place” and was told that the time was near. The Greek word eggus meaning near or soon is used. The same word is used in Mark 1:15 where we read that “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”

A blessing is given to those who read and keep the book. Thus, the book is meant to be understood. Unfortunately, the book tends to be either ignored or elevated to a position shared by no other book in the Bible. Luther thought the book was of little account and Calvin refused to comment upon it. (Considering what Calvin did to other passages this is probably a blessing!)

3.2 The salutation

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

The seven churches mentioned in this book were not the only churches in Asia. In particular, Colossae (Col. 1:2), Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), Troas (2 Cor. 2:12; Acts 20:5), and Miletus (Acts 20:17) also had congregations. Why then single out these seven? Some suggest these seven churches were the centers of seven postal districts. Others feel that John must have had some special relationship with these seven churches. Still others feel that since the number seven is used 54 times in this book in a manner that often depicts perfection or completeness, this may have been John’s way of addressing the book to all churches.

“Grace and peace from him who is, who was, and who is to come”: This is similar to other descriptions and titles for God. For example, in Exodus 3:14 God says “I am who I am”; in John 8:58 Jesus says “Before Abraham was, I am.”; and in Hebrews 13:8 Jesus is described as being the same yesterday, today, and forever. As Barclay points out it is interesting to note that John bends the laws of grammar to show his reverence for God. Where we have “from him who is” John retains the nominative case and in effect has “from he who is.” John’s reverence for God will not allow him to alter the form of his name even when the grammar demands it. Further, where we have “from him who was” John has “from the ‘he was’”. John uses a grammatically impossible construction to avoid using a form of “to become” that might imply that God could change. Those suffering persecution were particularly concerned with the changelessness of God. He had saved his people in the past— he would save them now.
With regard to the seven spirits see also Rev. 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6. Beatus said that the Spirit is one in name but sevenfold in virtue. This may then represent the sevenfold gift of the Spirit. Compare Isaiah 11:2 where we read of the Spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord. Also, the seven spirits may correspond to the seven churches. Hebrews 2:4 speaks of God as giving “gifts” (shares in Greek) of the Spirit and thus these seven spirits may be the seven shares of the Spirit given to the seven churches.

Jesus is called a witness because he has first hand knowledge of God. John used this title for Jesus in John 3:11 and John 18:37. Jesus is the first born; that is, the prototokos. He is the one with power and honor, the one in first place. In Psalm 89:27 God said of David that “I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.” David was not the first-born son of his father Jesse but he was certainly the preeminent son of Jesse. (See also Col. 1:18.) Jesus is the ruler of kings. Earlier, Satan had promised to give Jesus all of the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus would worship him. Jesus obtained these kingdoms not by compromising with Satan but by accepting death on a cross.

Lindsey claims that Jesus is not ruling now. What does the Bible say? In 1 Peter 3:22 we see that all powers have been made subject to him. In Eph. 1:22 we read that all things are in subjection under him. In Rev. 2:27 we see that Jesus has power over nations. In Ps. 29:10 we see that God ruled even at the time of the flood. Finally, in Matt. 28:18 we see that Jesus has all authority.

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

What did Jesus do for mankind? He freed us from our sin. The phrase “washed us from our sins in his own blood” should read “set us free from our sins at the price of his blood.” He redeemed us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). The popular phrase “washed in his blood” has little basis in the scripture. The best Greek manuscripts have ‘luein’ (to set free) and not ‘louein’ (to wash). He loves (present tense) us and set (past tense) us free. Further, Jesus made us a kingdom of priests to God. In Exodus 19:6 God said “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” Under the old law only the priests had access to God. Through Jesus Christ everyone now enjoys this access to boldly approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

Does the refer to the coming of Christ at the end of the world? If so then it would seem to violate the time frame for the book given a few verses above. Further, recall that although Matthew 24:30 uses similar language, it cannot refer to the end of the world due to the time frame given by Jesus in Matthew 24:34. A better interpretation of the current passage in view of John’s time frame would have this verse apply to the figurative return of Christ to judge Rome. The theme of this book is an assurance that Christ will return to rescue Christians being persecuted by their enemies. In Daniel 7, Daniel had a vision in which four powers depicted by beasts ruled the earth. The fourth beast was the Roman empire. (We will treat this in more detail later.) After the days of that beast’s power we read in Daniel 7:13–14 that Daniel “saw in the night visions, and, behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, . . . and to him was given dominion, and glory, and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.” To the enemies of Christ his return is a threat. Compare Zech. 12:10 where we read “When they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born.” with John 19:37. When was Zechariah’s prophecy fulfilled?

In Acts 2:23 we see that the Jews killed Jesus by lawless (that is, by Roman) hands. Jesus came in judgment against Rome as he came in judgment against Jerusalem. In Rev. 22:7 he said he would come without delay.
8  “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and
who is to come, the Almighty.

God is the Almighty— that is, the pantokrator or the one who has dominion over all things. The word occurs seven times in the New Testament; once in 2 Cor. 6:18 where the Old Testament is quoted and six times in Revelation. Even though no earthly empire had been able to withstand Rome, John is reassuring the church by reminding them that their God is the Almighty.

3.3 The voice and the vision

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

John did not refer to himself as an apostle or as a close associate of Jesus but as a brother who shares in their tribulation. As Barclay says, John did not preach endurance from his easy chair. Banishment to Patmos for John involved hard labor at the quarries. Sir William Ramsay says that John’s banishment would have been “preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground, a dark prison, work under the lash of the military overseer.”

“In the spirit” means under the influence of the Spirit. The reference to Sunday as the Lord’s day given here is the first such reference in literature now existing.

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; 14 his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; 16 in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

John uses Old Testament descriptions of God to describe the risen Christ. His head and hair were white, as white wool, like snow: this description is used in Daniel 7:9 to describe the Ancient of Days. His voice was as the sound of many waters: a similar description of God’s voice is found in Ezekiel 43:2. He had seven stars in his hand: Job 38:31 says that God controls the stars. A girdle was worn by a priest only when he was officiating on behalf of the people. White is the color of justice and nobility. As in Micah 4:13, his feet of bronze provide the power to trample. The sword from his mouth denotes judgment. In Isaiah 11:4 God smites the earth with the rod of his mouth. Read Hebrews 4:12–13.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

What John sees is so incredible he falls as if dead. The purpose of the vision was to show Jesus’ power to judge. The command ‘Fear not’ is directed toward Christians. Jesus is the first
and the last: Compare the descriptions of God in Isaiah 44:6 and Isaiah 48:12. Jesus is the living one: Compare Joshua 3:10; Psalm 42:2; and Hos. 1:10. Possessing the keys of death means that he conquered death— he controls it. John is told to write what he is now seeing (what is) and what he is about to see. Jesus tells him to write down everything.

In the New Testament a mystery is something that was formerly not understood but which has now been revealed. Read about the mystery of godliness in 1 Timothy 3:16, the mystery of marriage and the Church in Ephesians 5:31–32, the mystery of the hardening of Israel in Romans 11:25, and the mystery of the promise to the Gentiles in Ephesians 3:4.

The churches are lampstands. They are not the light and they do not provide the light. The church is an earthly container for the true light— Jesus Christ. Although we are the light of the world, we are not the source of that light.

What is the angel of the church? Milligan says that the angel of a given thing is that thing itself in its essential nature. It is invested with angelic personality in order to act out its part in the scheme of the book. Later in Revelation we will find rivers, winds, bowls, trumpets, and books that also have angels.
4 The messages to the seven churches

4.1 The message to Ephesus

Rev. 2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

Notice that each message begins by speaking to the group yet ends by speaking to the individual. Ephesus was called the “first and the greatest metropolis of Asia” and “the light of Asia.” It was the greatest harbor in Asia. Ephesus was the greatest and wealthiest city in Asia. Ephesus was one of the few “free cities.” That is, it was within its own limits self governing and could never have Roman troops garrisoned within it. Ephesus was the center of worship of Artemis or Diana. The Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Read Acts 19. Ephesus also had temples dedicated to Nero and Claudius. In Ephesus, pagan religion was at its strongest. The population was very mixed. It was a center of crime and immorality. The temple was filled with hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes. Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, attributed his tears to the fact that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality.

Although Ephesus seemed very unpromising soil for the word of God, some of the Church’s greatest triumphs occurred there. R. C. Trench wrote “Nowhere did the word of God find a kindlier soil, strike root more deeply or bear fairer fruits of faith and love.” Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other city (Acts 20:31). Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos were in Ephesus (Acts 18). Paul’s great farewell address was delivered to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

Today little is left of Ephesus but ruins and it is no less than six miles from the sea. The coast is now a harborless line of sandy beach, unapproachable by a ship. The great harbor is now a marsh dense with reeds.

As verse 23 implies these principles apply to all churches. In verse 1 the message is addressed to the angel yet in verse 7 it is addressed to the church itself. The Nicolaitans were a sect that developed from Nicolas, one of the first deacons in Acts 6:5, that was known for “loose thinking and loose living.” Note in verse 5 that we have a coming of Christ that is clearly figurative. As in Matthew 24 it means that Jesus would come in judgment.

4.2 The message to Smyrna

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 9 ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11
He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.'

Smyrna was the loveliest city in Asia. It was called the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia, and the flower of Asia. Smyrna stood at a crossroads and was a great trading city. Its harbor was Asia’s safest and most convenient. Smyrna was founded in 1000 B.C. as a Greek colony and destroyed in 600 B.C. by the Lydians. It was rebuilt as a planned city around 200 B.C. In a sense, Smyrna had also “died and come to life.” Smyrna was a free city having cast her lot with Rome long before Rome was the undisputed leader of the world. It had erected a temple to the goddess Roma as far back as 195 B.C. The city was a center of culture housing a large library and many famous temples. It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer. The Jews in Smyrna were very influential and numerous. It was in Smyrna that Polycarp was martyred.

Smyrna was a leading center of emperor worship and had a large population of hostile Jews. Its leading god was Dionysus, the god of wine. Who are the Jews that are not really Jews? In John 8:39 Jesus told some Jews that they were not truly Abraham’s children. In Romans 9:6ff we see that all Israel is not Israel. In Romans 2:28–29 we see that to be a true Jew one must believe in Jesus Christ. What is the state of the Jew today? It is the same as in the days of John— their synagogue is a synagogue of Satan. See Appendix B.

The 10 day tribulation may simply refer to a short period of trial. Compare Daniel 1:12 and Genesis 31:7. What about the second death? Stay tuned— we will discuss this when we reach Chapter 20.

4.3 The message to Pergamum

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 13 ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. 15 So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.’

Pergamum was historically the most famous city in Asia. By the time of Revelation, Pergamum had been a capital city for 400 years: first of the Seleucid kingdom which appeared after Alexander the Great and then of the province of Asia formed by Rome. It was situated on a hilltop from which the Mediterranean could be seen 15 miles away. Pergamum was a center of culture surpassing even Ephesus and Smyrna. It had a library which was second only to that in Alexandria. The word “parchment” is derived from “Pergamum.” In the third century B.C. a Pergamene king attempted to lure away the librarian at Alexandria. The Egyptians imprisoned the librarian and banned the export of papyrus. Pergamum, in response, invented parchment from the skins of beasts. Pergamum was a great religious center housing two famous shrines. It contained a great altar to Zeus set 800 feet up on a hillside which looked much like a large throne. (Satan’s throne in verse 13.) Pergamum was a center of medicine and healing by both priests and doctors. Pergamum was the administrative center of Asia and thus was a center of Caesar worship. Roman governors were divided into two groups: those who had the right of the sword and those who did not. The Pergamum governor did and thus had the right to execute
The message to Thyatira

4.4 The message to Thyatira

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 "'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; 25 only hold fast what you have, until I come. 26 He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, 27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

The longest of the seven letters was written to Thyatira, the least important of the seven cities. What importance it had was derived from its geographical location. It was on a road connecting Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. This made Thyatira a great commercial town. It was strategically important because it was a gateway to Pergamum, the capital of the province. It contained a garrison to act as a first line of defense against any attack. Thyatira had no special religious significance and was not a center of persecution of the Church. It was a center of trade for dye and woolens. Lydia, the seller of purple in Acts 16, came from Thyatira. It had a very large number of trade guilds. These guilds held meals in the temples where they ate meat sacrificed to idols and engaged in drunkenness and immorality. The Christians thus would refuse to join and hence suffered commercially. The big threat came from within the Church from a group who pled for compromise with the guilds.

The confession that Caesar is lord was often required before one could buy and sell. The slogan of those who compromised was ‘A man must live.’ In verse 19 we see that the church had been patient—perhaps they had been too patient. Some believe that the “deep things of Satan” in verse 24 refers to some who felt they had a duty to experience every kind of sin. Their goal was to swallow in sin yet keep their soul unaffected.

Jesus said that at this time he possessed power and authority over the nations. When will we share this power? We already do. In Romans 8:17 we are described as fellowheirs with Christ, in 1 Cor. 3:21-23 we find that the world and all things are ours, in Rev. 8:3-5 we find that
our prayers have a powerful effect on the world, and in Romans 5:17 we find that we are now reigning in life through Jesus. Why then did Jesus promise them something they already had? Often a promise is simply an assurance that a present blessing will continue. Jesus’ promise here means that the blessing will continue, be renewed, and be strengthened.

4.5 The message to Sardis

Rev. 3:1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. ‘’ I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. 2 Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Sardis has been called the greatest example of the contrast between past splendor and present decay. Sardis was a city of degeneration. 700 years before John, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the world. The original city stood 1500 feet up on a hill in a position which was almost impregnable. Later, the city spread to the foot of the hill. Sardis is really a plural noun — there was a city on top of the hill and one in the valley beneath it. Sardis was an extremely wealthy town. Cyrus of Persia had once besieged the city and offered a reward to any one who could find a way to enter the city. A soldier, who had seen a Sardian soldier climb partially down the hill to retrieve a lost helmet, led a group up the hill following a fault line at night. They discovered the battlements completely unguarded and took the city. It is to these people that Jesus says, “Watch!” The city slipped into obscurity under Persian rule and later surrendered to Alexander under whom it became a center of Greek culture. But, history repeated itself, when Antiochus besieged the city after Alexander’s death and took the city using the same trick by which the city had earlier fallen to Cyrus. Again, Sardis fell because no one was there to watch. The city was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17 but was rebuilt by Tiberius. The city, as had the Church within, had by the time of Revelation lost its life and its spirit.

What are the seven spirits? In 5:6 they are equated with seven eyes. They depict all seeing power and wisdom. (Compare 2 Chron. 16:9 and Zech. 4:10.) This church was at peace and that peace had allowed them to drift into a coma and die. In 1 Peter 2:11 we see that a Christian is always at war. Jesus’ promise to come as a thief causes one to recall the city’s history.

In verse 5 we find that one’s name can be blotted out of the book of life. What does this say about the doctrine of ‘Once saved— always saved’?

4.6 The message to Philadelphia

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 “’I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of
Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie — behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. 11 I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities. It was founded by colonists from Pergamum under the reign of Attalus the Second who ruled from 159 to 138 B.C. It was founded so that it might be a missionary of Greek culture and language to Lydia. By A.D. 19 the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greek. Jesus speaks of an open door that is set before Philadelphia. The city was a center of diffusion for Greek culture to surrounding areas. Now the city could be an open door, not to spread Greek culture, but to spread the Gospel. The city sat next to a very fertile volcanic plain and was a great grape growing area and producer of wines. For a time the city was constantly beset by earthquakes and tremors and most people lived outside the city in huts. This time was never forgotten. Note the promise that the people “would go out no more.” Its name was changed to Neocaesarea and later to Flavia although neither name lasted and Philadelphia was eventually restored. These people new what it was like to receive a “new name.”

This church was weak in influence compared with their Jewish opposition. Jesus had the true authority of David. There is no path to God except through Jesus Christ. See Appendix B for more information about the present state of the Jews.

Jesus’ promise to keep these Christians did not mean they would be spared from suffering. In Ezekiel 9:1–8 God promises to keep his people yet in Ezekiel 21:3–4 they experience suffering and death. God’s provides spiritual deliverance.

In 2 Chron. 7:16 God said he would put his name on the literal Jerusalem forever yet now he puts it on the new Jerusalem. The words “forever” and “everlasting” must be studied in context. See, for example, Gen. 17:8, 13; Ex. 21:6; 40:15; Lev. 16:34; 24:8; Num. 25:13; and Deut. 28:45–47. This new Jerusalem is the city that came down from heaven whose builder and maker is God— it is the Church, the new dwelling place for God’s people.

4.7 The message to Laodicea

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ’The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. 15 “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing: not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Laodicea was the only church about which Jesus had nothing good to say. The city was founded in 250 B.C. by Antiochus and named after his wife. It was called Laodicea on the Lycus
to distinguish itself from the other six cities of the ancient world which bore its name. It was positioned on the most important road in Asia which connected Ephesus to Syria. This road made the city a great commercial and strategic center. It had originally been a fortress but had the unfortunate problem of having to get all of its water from springs over six miles away. The peace provided by Rome allowed Laodicea to flourish. It was one of the wealthiest cities in the world and was a center of banking and finance. When the city was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 61 the people refused Roman help and rebuilt the city on their own. Laodicea was proud and felt that it had need of nothing. It was a center of clothing manufacture and was famous for its soft, violet-black, glossy wool. The people did not realize that they were “naked” in the sight of God. The town was a medical center which housed a medical school. The school was famous for ointment for the eyes and for the ears. The people did not realize that they were “spiritually blind.” The city had a very wealthy and influential Jewish population. The beginning of the creation in verse 14 is the source of the creation. (See Heb. 1:2; John 1:1–3; and Col. 1:16.)

With regard to the Laodiceans, George MacDonald writes:

You must note that in this last message to the Laodiceans, He has not a word of praise for them—not a word of praise. Almost all the rest have some praise given them, but there is not a word of praise for these halfhearted Laodiceans. They want to go comfortably on, and not to be troubled much, and they will get into heaven as they please, in some sleepy way or other. They won’t find themselves comfortable there. It is not the halfhearted, simmering kind of hearts that the kingdom of God and His Christ is for. Had God been halfhearted you would never have had a chance of life eternal. It is because God is true-hearted, unselfish, out and out devoted to His creatures that there is any world at all.

And He won’t have you as you are! If you correspond at all to this description of those that made up the church of the Laodiceans, God won’t have you—you won’t do! What a word of indignation this is!

Oh! you are quite wrong if you have the fancy that Jesus Christ is one who is always speaking soft words. He is indignant sometimes, He is angry sometimes, but there is not one atom in that indignation, in that anger that is not love. But His love will not make His blow lighter, and you are afraid of that kind of love because it demands so much. It demands that you shall be fit to come into His very arms, to His very heart, and less than that will not do. It cannot be that He shall embrace evil things; He will have us free, cost what it may; if it takes an eternity to clean us, we must be clean.

Neither cold nor hot: What a word almost of contempt! Only there is no contempt in Him. Using our language it sounds like it, but I call it “indignation,” and the strong effort of His heart of love to make them feel what a low condition they are in. “Neither cold nor hot—I won’t have you; I will spew you out of my mouth.” That Christ should speak like that to us and we deserve it— who will endure it? But, oh! it is of the mercy of God that He speaks to us like that.

How is it that we can be spoken to like that? Because we are made after His image. If we were not made in His image He would not speak to us thus. Oh, it is a mark and a sign, true as heaven, that we are of God’s kind, and therefore deserve to be spoken to so because we are not of His kind. I speak by a contradiction, but it is right. You are His children; why will you not be His sons and His daughters? He, the Father of us, to be driven to use such words to us because we love darkness more than light!

He speaks very plainly what He thinks of them, and He shows very clearly how His thought about them ran counter altogether to their own judgment of themselves. “Oh, we are all right! We accept this and that doctrine; we believe so-and-so; we are all right.” Or, on the other hand: “We have broken free from the traditions of the elders; we have got a better way, and so we are all right.” Are you doing the things that Jesus Christ tells you? If not, you are all wrong. Your ideas, your opinions, your
systems, let them be as correct as astronomy, and you are no better, but probably much the worse for them. The simple heart that just goes to do the thing for Jesus for love’s sake, or the thing that his Father makes him feel is the right, noble, God-like thing— that is the man whom the Lord will acknowledge and confess before the Father.

It is terrible to think how we shroud the Son of God in a cloud of our foolish, low, paltry ideas about Him. We have swathed Him in the doctrines of the Church and the traditions of men, and the Lord Christ, the Brother-man, we scarcely see. The individual heart does not turn to Him as to its very goal of thought, and feeling, and judgment, and hope. You think you are rich and have need of nothing. All right, you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. Does the Lord say this for the sake of abuse or for the sake of telling us we are that? No; He wants to rouse us— “I counsel thee”— He wants to rouse us up, to open our treasure houses that He may fill them, to open doors and windows that the breath of God may blow through our souls. That is why He says the hard words, but hard words in the right places are the kindest thing.
5 The vision

5.1 The heavenly worship

Rev. 4:1 After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

We should thank God that the door into Heaven is an open door. This voice is the same one he heard in the first vision (1:10). John is invited not just to look in through the door but to enter through the door. The things that must take place after this would occur soon (See 1:1 and 1:3).

2 At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! 3 And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald.

Compare Ezekiel's vision in Ezekiel 8:3. (The Spirit lifted him up between earth and heaven.) The throne which rules the world is not in Italy. The throne of God is mentioned 38 times in the book. All things are viewed in regard to their relation to the throne. The Bible is very clear that God is enthroned in Heaven: Ps. 99:1; 1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; Isaiah 37:16 — God sits enthroned upon the cherubim. The rainbow reminds us of God’s mercy and that he keeps his covenants. A similar description is used in Ezekiel 1:28.

4 Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads.

The 24 elders represent royalty in the presence of supreme royalty. They sit on thrones surrounding God’s throne indicating that their power is derived from God. Their white garments represent the righteous deeds of the Saints (19:8). These 24 elders also represent a priesthood. Recall from 1 Chron. 24:7–18 that their were 24 orders in the Levitical priesthood. In Rev. 5:8 we see the 24 elders performing priestly duties. Thus we have a royal priesthood. 1 Peter 2:9 describes the church as a royal priesthood. Jesus combined the priesthood with kingly power. Zech. 6:9–15 depicts the high priest being crowned with a crown. Ps. 110 tells us that Jesus is both a king and a priest.

5 From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; 6 and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

Thunder and lightning are commonly used to depict God’s wrath and power to judge. The seven torches of fire are the seven spirits of God which, as before, represent the Holy Spirit. In the tabernacle the seven lamps were kept burning in the holy place before the holy of holies. The Holy Spirit is the revealer; he makes all things clear. This sea stresses separation. In Solomon's temple a sea stood between the priest and the holy place where God dwelt (2 Chron. 4:2–6).

And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"
The four living creatures are the cherubim. In the Old Testament God was pictured as sitting enthroned above the cherubim which sat atop the ark of the covenant. In 1 Chron. 28:18; Ps. 18:10; Ez. 1 and Ez. 10 the cherubim are God’s chariot on which he rides to judgment. The purpose of the cherubim is to defend God’s holiness. They kept Adam from the tree of life. The were woven into the veil which stood between man and the presence of God in the temple. The stood over the ark of the covenant looking down upon the law of God. They would have demanded immediate justice were it not for the mercy seat which covered the transgressions because of the blood which was sprinkled there. These creatures are the judge of all who enter the presence of God. They are endlessly concerned with God’s reputation and the vindication of his character. They never cease to say, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” The lion is a predator on earth. The eagle is a predator in the air. The ox is powerful and relentless. Man balances the blind savagery when justice is wrought. Six wings? They have four in Ezekiel. They are full of eyes: They miss nothing.

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 11 “Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.”

The elders cast their crowns before the throne and worship God. Their song is directed to God the Creator. They owe their existence and present status to God’s power and will. The scene of this chapter is one of unending worship of God by the cherubim and the Church. The creatures worship the Creator. Contrast Romans 1:25 where sinful men are depicted as worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. (Was Jesus created? Obviously not!)

5.2 Prelude to the seven seals: the scroll opened and the Lamb adored

Rev. 5:1 And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals;

The contents of this scroll will be revealed in the ensuing chapters. It contains the will of God for the immediate future, the terrors which lie ahead for both Saints and the ungodly, and the triumph of the Church over Satan and Rome. It is written within and the back: It contains the full will of God (Compare Ez. 2:10). The seven seals indicate that it was perfectly and completely sealed. That the scroll was sealed indicates that the judgments within it had not yet been executed.

2 and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, 4 and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to into into it. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, “Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

The question is who is worthy (not able) to open the scroll. Whoever opens the scroll is responsible for controlling what follows. Even the strongest angel was not worthy. Under the earth: the place of the dead (Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:7). Why did John weep? If the scrolls were not opened then there would be no protection for the Saints, no judgments against the persecutors, no ultimate triumph for believers, and no new heaven and new earth. He was told to quit crying
Prelude to the seven seals: the scroll opened and the Lamb adored

and look at Jesus — good advice in any circumstance. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, the root of David: Isaiah 11:1,10; Heb. 7:14; Rom. 1:3. Jesus has conquered — he overcame the world: John 16:33 — “I have overcome the world.” This picture is intended to emphasize how great a thing it is to which Christ is here called. He will sustain the kingdom he died to create. Note that God did not need to search for Christ. The searching, waiting, and weeping are presented for dramatic effect.

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; 7 and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints;

The Lamb had the marks of slaughter upon it. The Lamb is Jesus who overcame the world through his perfect sacrifice. The seven horns represent his complete and perfect power. Jesus alone was able to accept and carry out the commission contained within the scrolls.

9 and they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.”

This new song is a song of redemption. Compare the song of Moses in Rev. 15:3 and Ex. 15 which was also a song of deliverance and the goodness of God. A greater deliverance required a new and greater song. The song depicts a new expression of God’s love.

We were ransomed or purchased: 1 Cor. 6:20 and 7:23 — “You were bought with a price.” The price was the blood of Christ: 1 Peter 1:18,19 — “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”

We were made a kingdom and priests to our God: Exodus 19:6 — “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” 1 Peter 2:9 — “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” The kingdom and the priesthood was taken from Israel and given to the Church. Compare Mt. 21:43.

They reign (ASV) or They shall reign (KJV, RSV). Neither translation contradicts the fact that we also reign now. Romans 5:17 — We reign in life through Jesus Christ. In Rev. 20:6 we read that we “shall be priests” yet in Rev. 1:6 we find that we already are priests. The promise is that the Christians would continue to reign with Christ and would continue to be priests.

Message to Rome: There is but one eternal kingdom.

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, “To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!” 14 And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Jesus was worshipped by angels and by every living creature: This emphasizes Christ’s worthiness and power. Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus upholds the universe by his word of power.

Did literally every creature worship the Lamb? No. The language here stresses the worthiness of Christ to receive worship from every creature. The later judgments in the book would not allow Jesus to be worshipped by literally every creature at this point.
The fulfillment of Biblical prophecy often seems to contradict the magnitude of the prophecy to our Western minds. Recall Ps. 2:1–2: “Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed.” Acts 4:25 says that this was fulfilled in Herod and Pilate. Also, recall Jer. 31:34: “They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

5.3 The vision of the seven seals

5.3.1 The first seal: the white horse

Revelation 6:1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” 2 And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

Seals keep things closed and hidden. Tearing off a seal uncovers and reveals what is to come. Only the Lamb is worthy to open the seals (5:5). The creature speaks “with a voice of thunder” indicating perhaps that these seals contain judgments from God.

Who is the rider on the white horse? Opinions range from Christ to the antichrist. I believe the rider is Jesus. This rider opens the entire affair because he is in charge of the whole affair. He is the conqueror. Not only is Jesus a conqueror but Christians then and now are conquerors. Recall Romans 8:37 — “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” He wears a crown because he has overcome. His white horse symbolizes victory.

The picture of a rider with a bow on a white horse was a common portrayal of a Parthian warrior. In 53 B.C. the Parthians had killed 20,000 Romans. This image of the conquering Christ may have been particularly meaningful to the Romans.

Why not the antichrist? The color white is used in 15 other places in the book and always carries moral overtones. Jesus rides on a white horse in 19:11. The word conquer refers to Christ and Christians everywhere else in the book except for 11:7 and 13:7. But doesn’t the first horse cause the strife and famine which follows? Maybe, but nothing says that the first seal causes the other seals. Anyway, recall Matthew 10:34 — “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.”

One last possibility: The horse might represent the Gospel. This would fit in well with the next 3 horses which as we will see represent historical forces.

5.3.2 The second seal: the red horse

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

This horse represents war. The wars in this book seriously affect the welfare of God’s people. 2 Timothy 3:12 indicates that persecution always follows Christ: “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

This war is unrelated to the wars discussed in Matt. 24:6 — “wars and rumors of wars.” SIMILARITY OF SPEECH DOES NOT PROVE IDENTITY OF SUBJECT.

5.3.3 The third seal: the black horse

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; 6 and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, “A quart of
wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and
wine!"

This horse represents famine and economic hardship. A balance was used to weigh food.
Ezekiel 4:16 predicts famine by saying that the people would eat bread by weight and with
fearfulness. A denarius was a day’s wages. “Do not harm oil and wine” indicates that this
famine was not too extreme. Food is still available to be weighed. This horse was told not to
do too much. Things will get much worse later when the bowls are poured out.

5.3.4 The fourth seal: the pale horse

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say,
“Come!” 8 And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider’s name was Death, and
Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with
sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

This horse represents death. Revelation regards both death and Hades as defeated enemies
who must do what the Lamb bids. The word pale comes from Chloros which means yellow-green.
Compare Ezekiel 14:12–23 with regard to the sword, the famine, the pestilence, and the wild
beasts. In Ez. 14:21 they are called God’s four deadly acts of judgment. That only $\frac{1}{4}$ perish
indicates that this judgment is neither final nor complete.

5.3.5 The fifth seal: the martyrs

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had
been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; 10 they cried out
with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and
avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a
white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and
their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The testimony for which these souls had been martyred was the testimony of Jesus. (Compare
1:2; 12:17; 14:12; and 19:10.) The white robes reflect their righteous deeds. (Compare 3:4 and
19:8.)

They ask how long it would be before they were avenged. Their plea is one for divine
retribution. This question is one of the key passages in the book. They asked “How long?”
and Jesus answered quickly in 1:1; 1:3; 22:6; and 22:10. What support is there for stating that
nothing in the book has been fulfilled yet? They are told to rest a little longer. God had a plan
and they needed to wait until the time was right for their vindication. The wait however would
not be for very long. The enemy was to have a position of power over them for a short time.

Compare Isaiah 33:1 where God told Assyria, “When you have finished destroying, I will
destroy you.” Also, in Daniel 11:36,45 we are told that the king of the North (Rome) would
prosper then be destroyed.

The cry for vindication rises from their blood. Compare Gen. 4:10 — “Your brother’s blood
is crying out to me from the ground.” The blood of the martyrs could not go unanswered.
There was a moral necessity for judgment and retribution. This plea was not prompted by
vindicativeness but by the fact that we live in a moral universe which demands judgment and
retribution for sin.

5.3.6 The sixth seal: signs in the heavens

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

This seal represents the wrath of the Lamb and the judgment of the ungodly. It does not represent the end of time. The language used in this passage is a mosaic of phrases used in the Old Testament to describe past judgments against Assyria, Egypt, Edom, and other enemies of God.

- Blacking of the sun: See Joel 2:31.
- Staggering of earth and mountains: See Jer. 4:23–25.

The manifestation of God at Sinai caused a literal trembling of a mountain. This then became a symbol for the manifestation of God’s holiness. Mic. 1:4 — The mountains will melt. Isaiah 13:13 — The earth will be shaken out of its place.

When the ungodly are dominant and oppressive the world is said to be theirs. Isaiah 13:11 — “I will punish the world for its evil.” 2 Peter 2:5 — He brought the flood upon “the world of the ungodly.” Thus, the picture is one of God dismantling and attacking his world and it symbolizes God’s judgment upon the ungodly. He used the same language against the Babylonians. Was it literal? No. The Babylonians are gone yet the earth remains. The search for a hiding place in verse 16 is also seen in Isaiah 2.

This seal represents a judgment from which, as we will see, the Saints will be exempt. The language is taken, among other places, from:

- Isaiah 13 — a judgment on Babylon through the Medes.
- Isaiah 34 — a judgment against Edom.
- Joel 2 — a judgment on the Jews which Peter says was fulfilled in the first century.

The “Wrath of the Lamb” is one of the most fearful expressions in the book.

5.3.7 Interlude before the seventh seal

Notes regarding Chapter 7: This chapter is a deviation which is intended to provide comfort and to reinforce the theme of the book which is Victory in Jesus. Chapter 7 answers the question which appeared at the end of Chapter 6: Who can stand the wrath of God?

1. Chapter 7 is modeled after Ezekiel 9 which describes a judgment which was to come against Judah from Babylon.

2. Sometimes the innocent suffer with the guilty without being punished with the guilty. Suffering and punishment are not synonyms. Two people affected by a famine might be such that one is suffering and being punished and one is just suffering. For example, children died in the flood but certainly were not being punished by the flood. Ezekiel 18 forbids the idea that God punishes one for another person’s guilt.

3. One may be exempt from a judgment yet still suffer during it. In Ezekiel 9 God’s people are marked so that they would be untouched when judgment came yet in Ezekiel 21:3–4 we see that the righteous died as well as the guilty when that judgment came. The exemption was not a promise that they would be spared physical death. There is a vast difference between suffering with the guilty and suffering because you are guilty even though at the time there may not appear to be any difference.
The sealing of God’s servants

Rev. 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.”

The number 4 is often associated with the earth or the universe: [4 seasons, 4 corners of the earth, 4 great elements (earth, air, fire, water)]. A wind is often used to indicate the activity of God. Gen. 1:2 (NRSV) — a wind from God swept over the waters. A wind is powerful and invisible. It is often translated as Spirit. See also Isaiah 57:13, Jer. 18:17, Ps. 104:4, Heb. 1:7, Ps. 18:10, and John 3:7,8.

The four angels depict a judgment which was about to come from God. The other angel appeared on an errand of mercy. The sun is often used to represent the goodness of God. Ps. 84:11 — God is a sun and shield. Mal. 4:2 — The sun of righteousness shall rise. Light banishes darkness and dread. We are the light of this world. This angel is bringing good news.

A call for delay is given until the righteous are marked or sealed. Compare Ezekiel 9 again. Is the seal the Holy Spirit? No. They were sealed because they were righteous and hence they already had the Holy Spirit. Recall Rom. 8:9 — “The spirit of God dwells in you.” This seal is simply God’s way of marking his possessions. Note that this seal, as in Ezekiel 9, does not assure physical protection.

4 And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel, 5 twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad, 6 twelve thousand of the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manasseh, 7 twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Issachar, 8 twelve thousand of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin.

How many of God’s people were sealed? All of them. The number 12 symbolizes the people of God (12 patriarchs, 12 apostles, 12 tribes). The number 144,000 = 12 × 12 × 1000 is God’s way of emphasizing that all of his people are under his care and protection. The 144,000 are mentioned again in 14:1–5 where they are described as virgins and said to be those redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb. Who does this describe? God’s people. In 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul said he wanted to present the Corinthian church as a chaste virgin to Christ. James 1:18 says that we are “a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” The church is comprised of those who have been redeemed from mankind (Recall our comments on 5:9,10). The 144,000 are sealed with the name of God and the Lamb. The church bears the same mark for preservation in the face of great trial (3:10,12; 22:4).

Why are they called Israelites? Israel is an established name for God’s people. The name literally means “he who prevailed with God.” Recall our earlier comments on what it means to be a true Jew. In Rev. 3:9 Jesus spoke of those who said they were Jews but were not. They were correct from a physical standpoint but not from a spiritual standpoint. See Appendix B.

Note that the tribe of Dan is excluded. See Deut. 29:18–21 and 1 Kings 12:29–30. Similarly for Ephraim. See Hos. 4:17.

The white-robed tribulation saints

9 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, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne,
and to the Lamb!” 11 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, 12 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.”

This section is modeled after the Feast of the Tabernacles. It was a feast of thanksgiving for the harvest. It lasted 7 days and then ended on an 8th great day. The people dressed in festive robes and sang, danced, prayed, offered sacrifices, and poured water from a golden basin around the altar. The water recalled the water Moses obtained from the rock and was a petition for God to give more water. The priest would lead a large crowd singing Psalms and waving palm branches. At the end of one of these feasts Jesus announced that he was the real source of living water. (See John 7:37-38 and Isaiah 12:3.)

The group pictured here is full of joy, also. The Feast of Tabernacles followed four days after the Great Day of Atonement in which the national guilt was removed by innocent blood. The Jews said that one who had not seen the “joy of the drawing water” did not know what joy meant.

Salvation belongs to our God means the salvation is from God.

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?” 14 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. 15 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. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Who are these? They are survivors of and victors of the Great Tribulation. Great Tribulation: Chapter 6 predicts it. The saints are sealed in Chapter 7 in anticipation of it. The Great Tribulation was a judgment on the ungodly from which the righteous were exempt. Did that mean they wouldn’t suffer during it? No. Recall our earlier discussion regarding Ezekiel 9.

Who are “those before the throne”? The 144,000 (all of God’s people) looked at from a different perspective. Many things are Revelation are symbolized by different things at different points in the book. Jesus is seen as a Lamb and a rider on a white horse. Rome is seen as a beast from the earth, a beast from the sea, and as a harlot. It all depends on the throne’s perspective. It is wrong to argue that they cannot be the same group because the symbol is different. The symbol might have changed because God wants to point out something different.

1. The 144,000 were sealed to preserve them through the Great Tribulation and this group consists of those who came out of the tribulation.

2. Both groups are before the throne (7:15 and 14:3).

3. Both groups are led by the Lamb and redeemed from the earth (7:17 and 14:3).

This group serves in his temple: This temple was the inner sanctuary where only priests had access. All Christians are now priests and thus have this access. He will shelter them: At the Feast of the Tabernacles the poor, the stranger, and the homeless were welcome guests at the meal.

They won’t thirst, hunger, or be scorched by the sun: This is used elsewhere to symbolize security and prosperity. The picture is one of a well cared for and well guided flock. (See Isaiah 25:8, Isaiah 49:8-10, Isaiah 40:11, and Psalm 121:5-6.)

Are these people martyrs? People could have survived the great tribulation without dying. In fact, tradition tells us that John did. Further, one may be before the throne of God in John’s vision without actually dwelling there literally. In fact, the phrase “those that dwell on
the earth” is used in Revelation to depict the ungodly. But doesn’t this describe a Christian’s condition in Heaven? (No hunger, no thirst, no tears, etc.) Not necessarily. No hunger or thirst is a promise to those saved by Jesus: Isaiah 49:8,10 — they shall not hunger or thirst. 2 Cor. 6:2 tells us that this prophecy pointed to the salvation which came through Jesus. John 7:37 — Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.

Similar symbols have been used elsewhere to describe God’s victorious people: Israel was told in Isaiah 25:8 and Isaiah 30:18–33 they would weep no more when they were being persecuted by Assyria. Isaiah 25:8 — Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces. Isaiah 30:19 — You shall weep no more.

5.3.8 The seventh seal: making ready the seven trumpets

So far we have seen Jesus’ power and worthiness to judge, we have heard a demand for judgment from the martyrs, we have had a taste of the terror of an approaching judgment, and we have seen that God’s people will be exempt from this judgment. The next scene’s will be ones of tremendous action. Chapter 8 begins with a short period of awed and breathless silence and anticipation.

Rev. 8:1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

The seventh seal contains 7 trumpets which serve as a warning of impending judgment. As did the first 6 seals, the trumpets judge only a fraction of whatever they hit. The ungodly are encouraged to heed the trumpets’ warnings and repent. The trumpets serve the same purpose that the plagues did against Egypt.

The silence in Heaven for one half hour is a drum-roll. An “hour” is often used to indicate a time of critical importance or activity. Compare: John 12:23 — “The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.” John 12:27 — “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.” I John 2:18 — “It is the last hour.” A half-hour hence indicates a delay before a crisis. The crisis is near but has not yet come.

3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; 4 and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. 6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

The altar pictured in verse 3 depicts the golden altar of incense which stood before the curtain separating the holy place and the holy of holies. In a sense it also stood before the throne of God since God was pictured as sitting enthroned upon the cherubim which were on the ark. (See Exodus 25:17–22.) The altar in verse 5 depicts the brazen altar of burnt offering from which the coals were taken for the incense offering. The judges of Israel marched from this altar in Ez. 9:1–2.

Incense is often used to represent prayers. Ps. 141:2 — “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee.” The book of Revelation is itself an answer to the prayers of the Saints.

Why does the angel throw the contents of the censer on the earth? We see the same thing in Ezekiel 10:2 where it precedes an approaching judgment by God against Jerusalem. Here we have the same picture as before thunder, lightning, and earthquakes are used to depict the judgment of God.
5.4 The seven trumpets

5.4.1 The first trumpet: hail, fire, and blood

7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

Compare Exodus 9:24 which describes the plague of fire and hail against Egypt. The trumpets are intended to warn and hence only a third is affected. This is not a bowl in which, as we will see, God’s final judgments will be poured out against Rome. The trumpets allow an opportunity for repentance.

Important Note: This book is an oil painting from God. It is meant to leave an emotional impression with its vivid striking language. It is not like Romans, for instance, which appeals to the intellect with logical arguments. The trumpets act together to depict partial judgments which warn of impending doom. We should not attach a specific chronology to them. They are part of an overall picture.

5.4.2 The second trumpet: the sea becomes blood

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

A burning mountain is cast into the sea and commerce is affected. In Ex. 7:20–21, the Nile being turned to blood was a literal judgment which had a similar effect.

Only God is able to topple mountains. Zech. 4:7 depicts God making a mountain into a plain. Ex. 19:18 depicts God descending upon Mt. Sinai with fire. Amos 4:13 depicts God as treading upon the high places (mountains) of the earth. Micah 1:4 says that the mountains will melt under God. We can only look at mountains; God can remove them.

A mountain is often used to depict a kingdom. Jeremiah 51:25 depicts Babylon as a destroying mountain that God would turn into a burnt mountain. Isaiah 2:2 — “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains.”

Where else do we find a mountain being thrown into the sea? Matthew 21:21 — “If you have faith and never doubt” you could say to a mountain “Be taken up and cast into the sea” and it will be done. The early Christians had the faith necessary to move mountains! The mountain of Rome was cast into the sea by God.

5.4.3 The third trumpet: the falling star

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

A great star falls and strikes the drinking water. Again, the plague against the Nile had the same effect in Egypt. A star is often used to indicate a divine visitation. Matt. 2:2 — “We have seen his star in the east.” Matt. 24:29 — “the stars will fall from heaven” described God’s visit to Jerusalem in A.D. 70. We have seen this before in Revelation. The sixth seal in 6:13 described stars falling to earth. A falling star depicts the judgment of God upon the earth.

Wormwood? It was offered to by the prophets to the rebellious Israelites in Jer. 23:15. Wormwood is a plant whose juice is very bitter. Also called absinthium, it is used to make absinthe, a green liqueur.
5.4.4 The fourth trumpet: the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars

12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

The fourth trumpet, as did the sixth seal, effects the sun, moon, and stars. Such language is customarily used in prophetic speech to depict impending judgments. Isaiah 34:4,5 — used with respect to a judgment against Edom. Isaiah 13:10,13 — used with respect to the fall of Babylon. Joel 2:10 — used with respect to a judgment against Judah. Again that only a third is effected depicts a partial judgment which allows time for repentance. Remember, the trumpets are warnings of impending doom.

13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice, as it flew in midheaven, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets which the three angels are about to blow!”

“Those who dwell upon the earth” is used to depict the ungodly in contrast to the Saints who are seen as “dwelling in heaven.” (See Rev. 12:12 and 13:6.) Dwelling on earth always carries an evil connotation in Revelation. (See 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8; 13:12; 13:14; 14:6; 17:8.) In this context, heaven and earth depict states rather than locations. James 1:27 says that pure religion consists in keeping oneself unstained by the world. Romans 8:5 speaks of those who set their minds on the flesh as opposed to those who set their minds on the spirit. Recall Col. 3:1–2 — “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” God’s people “dwell in heaven” even while still on the earth.

5.4.5 The fifth trumpet: the opening of the bottomless pit

Rev. 9:1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; 2 he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.

This is the first of the three woes predicted by the eagle in 8:13. The star fallen from heaven is spoken of as “he” who has been given a key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; that is, he has authority over the pit. He opens the shaft of the bottomless pit and causes darkness to cover the sun. This star seems to represent Satan. Recall Luke 10:18 — “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” Lightning and stars falling from heaven, as we have seen, are often used to depict God’s judgment. Also, recall John 12:31; 14:30; and 16:11 where Satan is called the ruler of this world. Finally, recall Hebrews 2:14 — “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he [Christ] himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.” Satan is also depicted here as having the power of death and bondage to the fear of death. A dark cloud of smoke is seen rising from the pit to darken the sky. Recall 2 Cor. 4:3,4 — “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.” That is, Satan is depicted as blinding people’s minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel.

The smoke from the pit thus depicts the spiritual and moral blindness which Satan causes. Note that this a punishment from God. Moral and spiritual blindness is a disease which destroys the heart of a person or a nation. The bible often depicts such a condition as a punishment from God:

Rom. 1:24–28 God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...
2 Thess. 2:11 God sends upon them a strong delusion, to make them believe what is false.

Matthew 11:25 At that time Jesus declared, ‘I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes.’

Mark 4:11–12 And he said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven.’

Recall that the lowering of moral standards contributed directly to the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Schaeffer says that Rome fell because it did not have a sufficient inner base. Recall Prov. 14:34 — “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”

3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth; 4 they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; 5 they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. 6 And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them. 7 In appearance the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle; on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; 9 they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails like scorpions, and stings, and their power of hurting men for five months lies in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

Locusts: Compare the eighth plague against Egypt. This is the first trumpet that directly affects man. The first four only affected man indirectly through his environment. This trumpet brings torment but not death. In fact, the torment is pictured as being so extreme that those afflicted seek death. Why 5 months? Some commentators say that this is the usual duration of a locust plague. Their description, which combines beauty with vicious power, further emphasizes the extreme horror and terror associated with this judgment. Decadence often hides its destructive power with a thin veneer of beauty. It looks attractive to the outer man while it devours the inner man with its “teeth of a lion.” Recall 1 Pet. 5:8 — “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour.” Compare 2 Cor. 11:14 — “For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” Thus, Satan is a devouring lion who looks like an angel of light.

Those sealed with the mark of God in Chapter 7 in anticipation of the tribulation were not harmed. Recall our earlier comments on Rev. 7 and Ezekiel 9. The decadence and moral decay of Rome was not a punishment against God’s people but it did affect God’s people. Many lost their lives because of it.

The locusts’ king is Satan. His name means destroyer in both Greek and Hebrew. Satan is king of the abyss. Satan is the prince of the powers of the air (Eph. 2:2). Note that Satan is seen here as God’s instrument of punishment and judgment. A common misconception is that God and Satan are locked in a battle of good versus evil the outcome of which is uncertain. Satan was created and is used by God when and how he sees fit. Satan was defeated at the cross:

John 12:31–32 — “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

Jesus’ death judged the world, not Jesus. Jesus’ death defeated Satan, not Jesus. Jesus’ death draws, not repels, all men. Satan was defeated at what he probably thought was his greatest triumph.
5.4.6 The sixth trumpet: the four angels released

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.” 15 So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of the troops of cavalry was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur issued from their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur issuing from their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound.

The sixth trumpet depicts warfare as an instrument of God’s judgment. This judgment is released by a voice from the altar. Recall (8:3–5) that the judgments in this book were prompted by prayers from God’s people for justice. The four angels represent armies which God would use against Rome. It has been said that ‘War made Rome.’ God is saying here that war will also unmake Rome. The angels are ‘released’ by a voice from the altar; that is, they are under God’s control and direction.

Why are they pictured as being allowed to cross the Euphrates river? Crossing the Euphrates was a vivid picture from the Old Testament used here to represent the threat of military power. The Assyrians and Babylonians crossed the Euphrates river to attack the Jews. See Isaiah 7:20 and Isaiah 8:7–8 where the river is used to depict military might. The threat is also enforced by the huge number of invading horsemen which are seen. ‘Twice ten thousand times ten thousand’ is 200 million. This vast number increases the atmosphere of terror and emphasizes the great power which God has at his disposal. Similar imagery is used in Ezekiel 38 and 39 with regard to Gog and Magog. (We will discuss this passage later.) As before, only a third is killed; that is, this judgment at first is only partial and allows for repentance.

Why are the horses described in this way? The description further increases the level of terror which this picture intends to convey. The intent is to frighten. Joel 2:4ff uses similar language in depicting the Babylonians as locusts invading Judah. Also, Habakkuk 1:8 uses similar language with regard to Chaldean horsemen (fiercer than evening wolves). In the Old Testament such pictures were intended to frighten and did not literally occur. We have the same situation here. Lindsey says this army literally depicts an army of 200,000,000 Chinese invaders yet the horses represent mobilized ballistic missile launchers. Remember our earlier comments regarding consistency.

20 The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts.

These early judgments are partial and allow for repentance. Those remaining, however, do not repent but instead continue with their idolatry and murder. Like the Sodomites they continued, even after being blinded by God, to look for a door to commit iniquity. The trumpets had not been able to convince them to repent. Later judgments will not give them any chance to repent at all.

Notice that Chapter 9 depicted two types of judgments from God: Internal corruption and external invasion. Compare the reasons behind the decline and collapse of Rome that are discussed in Appendix A.

The question at this point is: How will this unrelenting, powerful enemy be stopped? These judgments had an effect on Rome which was similar to the effect the plagues had on Pharaoh — he hardened his heart and increased his persecutions. God’s people need assurance and comfort. Chapters 10 – 12 provide this.
5.4.7 The interlude before the seventh trumpet

John eats the scroll

Rev. 10:1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. 2 He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, 3 and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring; when he called out, the seven thunders sounded.

This mighty angel is a very high ranking representative of God — possibly Jesus himself. Many feel that “the angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament was really Jesus preincarnate — a so called “Christophany” or preincarnate appearance of Christ. The Angel of the Lord told Hagar in Gen. 16:10, “I will so greatly multiply your descendents that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” Later in verse 13 Hagar remarked, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” Who appeared to Moses in the burning bush? The Angel of the Lord (Ex. 3:2) and God (Ex. 3:4). See also Judges 6:11–14, Judges 13:21–22. The ministry of this Angel in the Old Testament is similar to that of Christ’s:

1. The Angel of the Lord reveals God’s word in Exodus 3.
2. He calls leaders in Judges 13.
3. He is a deliverer in Exodus 14 and Judges 6.
4. He is a protector in Psalm 34.
5. He is an intercessor in Zechariah 1.
6. He is an advocate in Zechariah 3.
7. He confirms God’s covenant in Genesis 22.
8. He is a comforter in Genesis 16. (Compare Matthew 11:28.)

Thus, although Jesus is not an angel, this angel may be used here to depict him. The description of this angel is similar to descriptions of Jesus which we have seen elsewhere in this book (1:12–16). He stands on both sea and land; that is, he has universal authority and great power.

The seven thunders may represent the seven bowls containing God’s wrath which will later be poured out on Rome. They would then signify a complete judgment.

What is the little scroll or little book? This is the commission to John. It represents both the message John is to relate and his responsibility to relate that message. By eating the book later in verse 9, John is seen as accepting that responsibility. Ezekiel is also pictured as eating a book in Ezekiel 2:8 and Ezekiel 3:3.

4 And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.” 5 And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven 6 and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, 7 but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.

The pronouncement of judgment by the seven thunders was not to be revealed at this time. John is told not to write down what they said. God chose not to reveal everything about the coming judgment against Rome at this time. The details concealed here may have been revealed later in the book but we cannot know for sure. Deut. 29:29 reminds us that there are some things which God keeps to himself and does not reveal.
The angel lifts his right hand. This, as now, was done when taking an oath. The raised hand signifies that what is being done or said is taking place in full view of Heaven. It emphasizes the solemn and momentous nature of what is being said. What does he swear? That there would be no more delay. In the seventh trumpet, the complete judgment of God against Rome would be fulfilled. John heard Jesus swear that there would be no more delay. What right do we have to insert a delay of 2000 years?

The seventh seal contained the seven trumpets. Similarly, the seventh trumpet will contain seven bowls. As we discussed earlier, this mystery is something which was formerly not understood but which has now been revealed; that is, the conflict of the Church with Rome, the terrors ahead for the Church, and the Church's ultimate victory over Rome. This mystery would be fulfilled without delay. It, like everything in the book, was near and would shortly come to pass (1:1 and 1:3).

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

John is not given the book but is told to take it. This emphasizes his commitment to undertake the responsibility of recording and presenting God's message. As in Ezekiel, John eats the book to signify his acceptance of this responsibility. He makes the message a part of himself.

It was bitter; that is, it contained bad news in that the Church would suffer great persecutions. But, it was also sweet; that is, it had a happy ending in that the Church would ultimately triumph. Compare also Psalm 19:10 and 119:103 — The law of the Lord is sweeter than honey. Jeremiah was also appointed to be a prophet to the nations. See Jer. 1:5,10. John will have much to say about the nations and kingdoms of the world in chapters 17 and 18.

The two witnesses

Rev. 11:1 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told: "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. 3 And I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth." 4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth.

A measuring rod was often used in the Old Testament to make a separation between what is holy and what is common. Ezekiel records a vision regarding the restored temple. In Ezekiel 42:19–20 we read “Then he turned to the west side and measured, five hundred cubits by the measuring reed. He measured it on the four sides. It had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits broad, to make a separation between the holy and the common.”

What is being measured? The temple, the altar, and those who worship there. When this book was written there was only one temple: The Church. Read 1 Cor. 3:16 — “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” and Ephesians 2:18–22 —

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure
The vision is joined together and grows into a holy **temple** in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The word for temple here indicates the inner sanctuary where only priests were allowed. All Christians are now priests (Rev. 1:6) and hence we all have this access.

Why wasn’t the outer court measured? The whole structure is the church or holy city (the inner sanctuary and the outer court). God is telling the church that it will soon undergo a period of intense persecution but that it will be sustained. Rome will be allowed to trample the Church for awhile but it will not be allowed to destroy its heart; that is, its inner sanctuary. God is telling the Church that he will not permit it to be annihilated.

Why 42 months? This is the same as 1260 days (42 months × 30 days) and is also found in Rev. 12:6 in which context it is later called “time, times and half a time” (Rev. 12:14); that is, three and one half (42 months is $3\frac{1}{2}$ years). As elsewhere in Revelation, this time period is used to symbolize a state of affairs. To determine what is depicted, we should first consider where else it is used in the book: 42 months is the period of:

1. The beast’s authority in 13:5.
2. The period during which the holy city will be trampled in 11:2.
3. The period during which the witnesses will prophecy in 11:3.
4. The period during which the woman will be nourished in the wilderness in 12:6,14.

We also see this time period in Daniel 7:25 where it is the period of time during which the little horn will persecute God’s people. In each case it depicts a period of time during which God’s people will be persecuted yet sustained. Where did it originate? Seven indicates completeness. Hence, a broken seven indicates incompleteness; that is, by saying that the persecution will last $3\frac{1}{2}$ years, God is saying that the persecution is temporary. Compare James 5:17,18 —

> “Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.”

Who are the two witnesses? The Church (again!). In verse 4 they are called two olive trees and two lampstands. In Zechariah 4 two olive trees are used to denote two anointed ones that stand by the Lord of the whole earth. They are Zerubbabel of the royal line and Joshua, a priest. God led the nation through them. What combined both the priesthood and royalty? The Church. 1 Peter 2:9 tells us that the church is a royal priesthood and Rev. 1:6 describes Christians as a kingdom of priests. The churches in Chapters 2 and 3 are depicted as golden lampstands. But why two witnesses? These witnesses testify and two is the number of confirmed testimony.

**John 5:31–32**  “If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true; there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true.”

**Matthew 18:16**  “But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

They prophecy in sackcloth; that is, they continue to prophecy even under persecution. The Church continued to operate even while being persecuted. Rome may have trampled the Church, but Rome was not able to stop the Church.

> 5 And if any one would harm them, fire pours out from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed. 6 They have power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with
The seven trumpets

51 every plague, as often as they desire. 7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

Verses 5 and 6 depict the scene from God’s perspective. The two witnesses (which represent the Church) are pictured as being unstoppable. Anyone who harms them is doomed to be killed. They have power to shut the sky that no rain may fall. (Compare Elijah and Elisha.) They have power to smite the earth with plagues. (Compare Moses and Aaron.) They testify for the duration of the persecution, that is for 3½ years (see verses 2 and 3). Recall that 3½ (being half of 7) indicates that the persecution would be temporary. The church continued to operate (and, in fact, flourished) while being persecuted. See Appendix A.

Verses 7 and 8 depict the scene from Rome’s perspective. After this persecution, however, the beast from the bottomless pit makes war on the witnesses and conquers and kills them. John is showing us both sides of the coin. First, (in verses 5 and 6) we see the Church as being powerful and unstoppable and then (in verses 7 and 8) we see the Church being conquered and killed by the beast. Is this defeat a permanent defeat? No. The beast (which we will later see is Rome) does not have a final victory over the Church. The primary message of Revelation is one of victory for the Church. Recall Daniel 7:23–27 which speaks of the Church’s victory over Rome:

Dan. 7:23 “Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces. 24 As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. 25 He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, two times, and half a time. 26 But the court shall sit in judgment, and his dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end. 27 And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.’

Rome will believe it is victorious. Rome will appear to be victorious. The Church may have even thought that Rome was going to be victorious. Hence, for now, Rome is pictured as being victorious. That victory, however, is only an illusion.

What is the great city? Sodom? Rome, also, was a center of iniquity. Egypt? Rome, also, oppressed and persecuted God’s people. Jerusalem? Rome, also, was a center of a false and perverted religion. The great city pictured here is Rome.

9 For three days and a half men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10 and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

Those who hate the Church celebrate and rejoice at its apparent demise. The Church, by not compromising with evil, had been “a torment” to those living in sin. “Those who dwell upon the earth”, that is, the wicked, were glad to be rid of it. Recall Tacitus’ description of the Church as a disease in Section 2.1. How long do they gloat? 3½ days. What does this signify? Their celebration is premature and temporary. It will not last long. Why? The Church’s defeat is premature and temporary.

11 But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 Then they
heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up hither!” And in the sight of their foes they went up to heaven in a cloud. 13 And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

After 3 1/2 days the Church comes to life again. Their defeat, which appeared to be complete, was in fact only a temporary setback. Their ascension into Heaven, like Christ’s, indicates their complete vindication which takes place “in sight of their foes.” The survival of the Church over its adversaries is one of the best evidences of its divine origin.

A great earthquake, as elsewhere, serves as an omen of a coming judgment on those who rejoiced at the apparent defeat of the Church. Only a fraction is affected; that is, this judgment is not final, yet. More is on the way. Why 7000? It foreshadows a complete judgment that is coming and which will not allow for repentance.

Those remaining give glory to God. Why? (These people are not Christians.) Their motive is not love but fear. What did Nebuchadnezzar say after he saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego come out of the furnace unhurt?

Daniel 3:28–29 — Nebuchadnezzar said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set at nought the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”

What was Nebuchadnezzar’s motivation? These people “worship” with the same motivation. Their fate remains unchanged. The time for repentence has passed. (No atheist or agnostic will remain so forever! When sight replaces faith, all will believe.) The third woe which is on the way is the seventh trumpet. This will be the third and final woe of those predicted by the eagle in 8:13.

**Review:** The message John is told to relay is that the Church will undergo severe hardship and may at times appear to be defeated but God is on its side and all will be well in the end. The Church’s final victory is assured. So far, John has relayed this message in two ways:

1. The city of God will be trampled under foot for 3 1/2 years but the inner sanctuary will be protected.

2. Two witnesses prophecy for 3 1/2 years and are then killed by the beast. Their defeat is only temporary, however. After 3 1/2 days they come to life and ascend to Heaven.

In Chapters 12 and 13 this message will be told again in two different ways:

3. In Chapter 12, a woman will be forced to flee into the wilderness for 3 1/2 years yet will therein find a place of nourishment and protection.

4. In Chapter 13, a beast will overcome God’s people. However, his authority will only last for 3 1/2 years.

**5.4.8 The seventh trumpet: the consummation**

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”
The seventh trumpet contains seven bowls full of God’s wrath. This trumpet marks the end of Rome. Recall 10:7 — “but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.”

As the seventh trumpet sounds, the seven bowls containing the full and destructive wrath of God are poured out. Although we will hear the details later, the bowls are poured out when the trumpet sounds. At this point the job is done and the outcome is inevitable. Hence the cry goes out: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” Why does it say the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord? This depicts a public vindication of something that was already true in fact! This verse does not mark the beginning of God’s kingdom or Christ’s authority over anyone. It depicts a public reaffirmation of that authority. Recall:

Rev. 1:5 Jesus is [not will be] the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Eph. 1:21 Jesus sits [not will sit] at God’s right hand, far above every principality and power and every name that is named.

1 Peter 3:22 Jesus “has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.”

Ps. 29:10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.

Daniel 4:17 the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men.

The word “kingdom” as used here includes more than the Church. (The two terms are not always synonyms.) Here the kingdom includes all of the people and nations of the world. Jesus has all authority. In the widest sense, the universe is his kingdom. Jesus does not just have authority over believers. He is king of everyone and everything.

Verse 15 says that he shall reign forever: Again, note that Jesus is reigning now and was reigning then. He reigns now with authority delegated to him by the Father but one day he will bring his work to a close and offer the kingdom to his Father. At that point he will begin to share the rule. See 1 Cor. 15:24–28:

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “All things are put in subjection under him,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one.

But hasn’t death already been defeated? Yes. We were freed from the bondage of sin and death by the cross. Death has been defeated yet it continues. Rome was pictured here as being defeated yet it continued for quite awhile. Christ will reign until death and his other enemies are not just defeated but are in fact destroyed. (Read 1 Cor. 15:26 again.) (The present-day leader of Iraq provides a good example of the not always so subtle distinction between defeat and destruction!)

16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying, “We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” 19 Then God’s temple in heaven was
open, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Thou hast begun to reign: Compare the previous references. God has always reigned and will always reign. He sat enthroned at the flood. This passage speaks of a new expression of his reign. It depicts a public vindication and reaffirmation of his reign.

Thy wrath came: The seven bowls containing God’s wrath were poured out when the seventh trumpet sounded. We will read the details about the bowls later. The details regarding this judgment will be given in Rev. 20:11–15. His servants will be rewarded; that is, the Church will be victorious.

Is this the final judgment? Remember the time frame of the book. It contains things which were to shortly come to pass. The time for fulfillment was near when the book was written. Jesus has already sworn that judgment will occur without delay.

The ark of his covenant provides reassurance that God remembers his promises. It is always in his presence to remind him.

Thunder, lightning, earthquake, hail: He promised to judge and punish the Church’s enemies. He promised to vindicate the Church. These Old Testament symbols of judgment remind us that God has fulfilled his promises. Remember 10:7 — the mystery of God would be fulfilled when the seventh trumpet sounded.

5.5 The seven mystic figures

5.5.1 The woman with child

Rev. 12:1 And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2 she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.

Who is this woman? She wears the sun and the moon which Gen. 1:17 reminds us were designed to give light to the world. She wears a crown of twelve stars. Recall that 12 is the number of God’s people (12 patriarchs, 12 tribes, 12 apostles). Does she represent the Church? No, she is depicted as having existed before the birth of Christ. She includes the Church, however. She represents all of God’s people throughout time. (Isaiah 54:1ff and Micah 4:9ff also depict God’s people as a woman.)

Who is the child? Jesus descended through the Jewish line; that is, he came from those who were God’s people under the old covenant. Thus, the child is Jesus who from a physical perspective was brought forth from out of God’s people. (See verse 5 below.) The destiny of the woman depends upon this child; her sin made his birth necessary.

5.5.2 The dragon

3 And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth;

A powerful, blood thirsty dragon appears waiting to devour the child. Where have we seen this same cast assembled before?

Genesis 3:15 — God said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”
Compare, also, Romans 16:20 — “then the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Who then is this dragon? Satan acting through Rome. That Rome is involved is clear from the dragon’s description: seven heads with diadems and ten horns. The details regarding these descriptions will be given when they appear again in 13:1 and 17:7.

The stars may represent God’s people. Compare Gen. 15:5, Daniel 12:3, Matt. 13:43. Their fall to earth may indicate that the dragon caused them to fall away from God. That is, they become part of “those who dwell upon the earth.” This is a further indication of the power of the dragon.

The dragon waits to devour the child: Satan had attempted to do this while acting directly through Herod the Great, but, of course, he had even then been acting indirectly through Rome since it was by their authority that Herod ruled. See also Jer. 51:34 where Babylon swallows God’s people “like a monster.”

Egypt, who also tried to devour a servant of God as a child (Moses) and who persecuted God’s people, is called a great dragon in Ezekiel 29:3.

5.5.3 The male child

5 she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Here we have further evidence that the child represents Jesus. He was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. (Compare Psalm 2:8,9; Rev. 2:26–28; 19:15.) Before the dragon could devour the child he was caught up to God and to his throne. That is, Jesus ascended to Heaven and out of Satan’s grasp. SATAN FAILED TO DEFEAT JESUS WHEN HE WAS MOST VULNERABLE. HE CERTAINLY WON’T FAIR ANY BETTER AFTER JESUS HAS ASCENDED TO RULE FROM HEAVEN!

The woman is separated from the child for $3\frac{1}{2}$ years. That is, the separation is neither permanent nor complete. God nourishes and sustains her during the interim. God assures his people that although they are being persecuted by Rome and although Jesus is no longer with them in person, that situation will not last forever and while it does last God will be with them to sustain them and protect them. This is the third time and the third different way that this message has been delivered to the readers of this book. Israel was also nourished in the wilderness while running from the great dragon Egypt (Ezekiel 29:3).

5.5.4 The angel Michael

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world — he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

This is not a literal war. Satan was defeated at the cross. Recall John 12:31 — “Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.” Jesus did not need Michael to do something he had already accomplished himself. This battle (like everything else here) is symbolic. This battle and its outcome simply emphasizes the point that if Satan couldn’t defeat Jesus while he was on the earth he certainly can’t defeat him now that he is in Heaven.

The angel Michael serves here as Christ’s representative. In Daniel 12:1 he is called “the great prince” who has charge of God’s people. He may have been the angel pictured in Revelation 10.

No place is found in Heaven for the dragon and his angels. That is, his assault on Heaven is a complete failure. His defeat is decisive. When Jesus ascended he had completely defeated Satan. Recall:

1 John 3:8 The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
John 16:11 The ruler of this world is judged.

John 16:33 I have overcome the world.

Colossians 2:15 He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him. [That is, in Jesus, or as some translations read, in it, meaning the cross.]

Hebrews 2:14 That through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.

The message: THE POWER BEHIND ROME HAS ALREADY BEEN DEFEATED.

10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.
11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

Now have salvation, power, the kingdom of God, and the authority of Christ come. We have seen language like this before. (Rev. 11:15, for example.) As before, this passage does not mark the beginning of God’s kingdom or Christ’s authority. Instead it depicts a public vindication and reaffirmation of those things. (Recall our earlier comments concerning the reign of Christ.) Similar language was used in Luke 21:31 with regard to the fall of Jerusalem.

Satan was conquered by the blood of the Lamb (Christ) and by the word of their testimony; that is, the gospel. Satan was defeated by the death of Christ and by the forgiveness of sins which was made available through his blood. The death of Christ was a defeat — but not for him. The death of Christ was a judgment — but not against him.

Those who conquered loved not their lives even unto death. Recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reminder that “when Jesus calls a man, he bids him to come and die.” Jesus taught that true discipleship began with the denial of self. Many teach that even if God did not exist, the Christian life would still be the happiest way to live. Nonsense! Christianity consists in a denial of self; a forsaking of one’s own concerns in favor of others. Any happiness we derive from following Christ is based upon Christ himself. Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 15:19 that “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.” That would be a Christian’s condition if Christ did not exist. That is, the Christian life without Christ would be a truly miserable life.

Matthew 16:24 If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Acts 20:24 Paul says “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

John 12:25 He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12 Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Those who dwell in Heaven are told to rejoice. Remember that God’s people, even those on earth, are pictured in Revelation as dwelling in Heaven. The phrase “those who dwell upon the earth” always refers to the enemies of God. This parallels the New Testament teaching that spiritually Christians do dwell in Heaven. Recall:
Col. 3:1–2 “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

Phil. 3:18–20 “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

God’s people are told to rejoice because their victory is assured. The Lamb has conquered Satan through his death and the power of his word. He could not defeat Jesus while he was on earth and certainly won’t be able to do any better now that Jesus has ascended to Heaven. The power behind Rome was utterly and completely defeated at the cross. Rome will be the next to go. Satan used Rome without any regard for its welfare; that is, Satan came down to it “in great wrath.”

Satan knows his time is short. That is, Satan’s opportunity to attack the Church through Rome will not last forever. Just as Satan grasped his opportunity and attempted to kill Jesus in his infancy, Satan also saw an opportunity and attempted to crush the Church in its infancy. In each case, Satan failed and was utterly defeated.

13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

The dragon saw that he had been thrown down to earth, so he pursued the mother of the child. That is, Satan realized that his plans to defeat Jesus had backfired so he began to attack Jesus’s followers. (When did Satan realize his plan to kill Jesus was being used against him? Perhaps he was behind the dream Pilate’s wife had in Matt. 27:19.) Remember, persecution does not mean that God is not in control. He was in control at the cross and he was in control while Rome persecuted the Church.

The woman is given wings with which to escape. That is, the woman is protected and preserved by God. Wings are often used to symbolize God’s protection:

Ex. 19:4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

Deut. 32:11 Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead them.

Ps. 36:7 How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings.

Isa. 40:31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

The dragon attempts to kill the woman with a flood yet the earth swallows the water. Where did God literally use dry land to defeat Satan? When Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea (Compare Ex. 14:21–31 and Ps. 106:9). Here, as then, God is pictured as defeating Satan on his own turf.
Note: The conflict between Egypt and the Israelites parallels the conflict between Rome and the Church in many ways. Events that occurred literally in Exodus are frequently used symbolically in Revelation to remind the reader of the earlier similar conflict in Egypt and its final outcome.

The dragon wages war against the offspring the woman. The woman herself and her child are beyond the reach of the dragon. That is, Jesus and the Church (as a whole) are unstoppable and cannot be defeated by Satan. However, Satan still wages war against individual Christians; that is, against the other offspring of the woman.

The promise given in Revelation that Satan will not be able to defeat the Church is not new or unique to this book. Recall Jesus’s statement in Matt. 16:18 — “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” Compare Hebrews 2:14 — “That through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

Chapter 12 ends by saying that “the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.” Chapter 13 provides the details of this attack. In particular, Chapter 13 will introduce us to two of the weapons which Satan used in his battle against the Church: namely, a beast from the sea and a beast from the earth. As we will see, these beasts each represent Rome but do so from different perspectives. Many of the images in this chapter may also be found in Daniel 7. Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 and 17 comprise some of the most impressive examples of predictive prophecy in the Bible.

5.5.5 The beast from the sea

Rev. 12:17b And he stood on the sand of the sea. Rev. 13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.

Who stood on the sand of the sea? Probably the dragon but possibly John. A beast rises out of the sea. The sea is often used to depict the restless, unsettled nations of men. Compare:

Isa. 57:20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.

Rev. 17:15 And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.

Isa. 17:12 Ah, the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters! 13 The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm.

As we will see, this beast represents Rome (which rose from the restless, unsettled nations of the world) from its standpoint as a civil persecuting power.

This beast has seven heads with ten horns and ten diadems. This is similar to the description of the dragon found in 12:3. This beast is a weapon or a manifestation of the dragon. That is, Satan was the driving power behind Rome against the Church. The dragon gives his power and authority to the beast to act on his behalf.

What is represented by the seven heads? Chapter 17 is very helpful in answering questions concerning Chapter 13. In particular, Chapter 17 contains a short commentary in which an angel explains to John the meaning of some of things which he has seen. (See 17:7ff.) The angel steps outside of the vision in order to comment upon what John is seeing.1

1 In literature, one would say that the angel stepped out of the level of the story into a meta-level.
Rev. 17:9–10 — This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman [the great harlot] is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while.

First, the seven heads represent seven mountains. A classical description of Rome was “the city which sat upon seven hills.” Archaeological Note: A coin minted during the reign of Vespasian has been found which represents the city of Rome as a woman seated on its seven hills: Palatine, Capitoline, Esquiline, Aventine, Quirinal, Caelian, and Viminal. If anything in this book should be clear to an honest reader, it is that the earthly villain in this book is Rome!

Chapter 17 tells us that the seven heads also represent seven kings: five of which have fallen, one of which is presently in power, and one which is yet to come but will remain only a short while. Before proceeding we need a short historical review. Consider the following chart regarding the first 11 emperors of Rome:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emperor</th>
<th>Reign</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Augustus</td>
<td>31 B.C.–A.D.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tiberius</td>
<td>14–37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Caligula</td>
<td>37–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Claudius</td>
<td>41–54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nero</td>
<td>54–68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Galba</td>
<td>68–69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Otho</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Vitellius</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Vespasian</td>
<td>69–79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Titus</td>
<td>79–81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Domitian</td>
<td>81–96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, let’s compare the prophecies found in Daniel 7, Rev. 13, and Rev. 17.

Daniel 7:7–8, 19–25 — 7 After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrible and dreadful and exceedingly strong; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. 8 I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. 19 “Then I desired to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrible, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze; and which devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet; 20 and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn which came up and before which three of them fell, the horn which had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and which seemed greater than its fellows. 21 As I looked, this horn made war with the saints, and prevailed over them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints received the kingdom. 23 “Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces. 24 As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. 25 He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, two times, and half a time.
Thus, in Daniel 7 we see 10 horns which represent 10 kings (see verse 24). Three of the horns are uprooted (see verse 8). Another horn arises which makes war on the people of God (see verse 21). This last horn is the eighth horn; that is, we have ten at first, then seven after three are uprooted, and finally eight when the last horn appears.

As we have seen, Rev. 13 speaks of seven heads that represent kings (see the corresponding explanation in Rev. 17:10.) As will be seen in Chapter 17, the ten horns in Rev. 13 are not the same as the ten horns in Daniel 7.

Revelation 17 speaks of seven heads that are seven kings (verse 10). Further it speaks of an eighth which belongs to the seven (verse 11). (Thus, the eighth horn from Daniel 7 is pictured here as the eighth head. That is, the horns in Daniel correspond to heads in Revelation. We will discuss the horns in Revelation shortly.)

Look at the chart again. The seven kings in Revelation are the seven kings in Daniel which remain after three are uprooted. The three uprooted kings are completely ignored in Revelation. The eighth king would then actually be the eleventh to reign; that is, there had been 7 kings plus 3 uprooted kings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seven Kings</th>
<th>Three Uprooted Kings</th>
<th>Eighth King</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Augustus</td>
<td>Galba</td>
<td>Domitian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiberius</td>
<td>Otho</td>
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<td>Caligula</td>
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<td>Claudius</td>
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<td>Nero</td>
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<td>Vespasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Titus</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Who is the fourth beast in Daniel 7 from which these kings arise? Rome. The first three beasts are Babylon (lion; Daniel 7:4), Medo–Persia (bear; Daniel 7:5), and Greece (leopard; Daniel 7:6). Daniel 7:12 tells us that these beasts lost their dominion but didn't die. The beast in Revelation 13 is pictured as being part leopard, part bear, and part lion. Rome, the fourth beast in Daniel 7, embodied all of the wickedness of the first three beasts and much more. Thus, it is described as being composed of pieces of the previous three kingdoms.

When was the book of Revelation written? Rev. 17:10 says that five kings have fallen, one is, and one is yet come who will remain only a little while. The five who have fallen would be the first five: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero. Remembering that Revelation ignores the next three (who ruled and died all within a span of less than two years), the one who is must be Vespasian. Thus the book was written during the reign of Vespasian. The seventh who is yet to come and will remain only a short while would be Titus who followed Vespasian and reigned only 26 months.

Further, Revelation 17:8 implies that the book was written during a lull in the persecution: “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.” Rev. 17:11 tells us that the “beast which was, and is not” comes back as the eighth king (Domitian). The beast who was is Rome under Nero, the beast who is to come is Rome under Domitian, the time when the beast “is not” describes the time between Nero and Domitian when the persecution against the Church subsided.

Tertullian speaks of Nero as “the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when our religion was but just arising at Rome.”

Eusebius writes that Domitian “finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us.” Tertullian called Domitian “a limb of the bloody Nero.” Rumors circulated that Domitian was actually Nero who they said had either returned to life or never actually died.

Why are the three short lived kings ignored? So Domitian would be the eighth king. Why did God want to associate Domitian with the number eight? For dramatic effect! The number
eighth in the Bible refers to a resurrection or new beginning. The eighth day denotes the start of a new week. Male children were circumcised on the eighth day to depict their new relationship with God. The year following seven sabbatical years was the year of Jubilee when all things were renewed (Lev. 25). Domitian was thought to be a resurrected Nero and began the persecution anew. Note that the heads are said to have blasphemous names written upon them. This refers to the deification of the Roman emperors. Domitian ordered himself to be addressed as “Our Lord God Domitian.” Recall our earlier comments concerning emperor worship. The three short-lived kings were ignored for dramatic effect!

What do the ten horns in 13:1 represent? Again, Chapter 17 gives us some hints.

Rev. 17:12 — And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.

Rev. 17:16,17 — And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.

Summary of hints provided by Chapter 17:

1. The horns are kings.
2. These kings do not presently rule but have given their power to Rome.
3. These kings will receive authority at a time of critical importance or activity.
4. They will be partly responsible for Rome’s destruction.

The ten horns represent the client kingdoms and federates of Rome. Michael Grant in his book History of Rome (p. 196) described the client king system as follows:

The client kings were tied to the service of Rome in order to defend its frontiers and serve as listening posts to the outside world. In return, they were supported by the Romans against internal subversive movements and allowed a free hand inside their own countries. Thus Rome was spared the trouble and expense of administering these territories; and the formula worked well.

He described the rise of the federates in his book The Fall of the Roman Empire (pp. 8, 125) as follows:

In 382 Theodosius I took the revolutionary step of allowing whole German tribes to reside in Imperial territory as separate, autonomous, allied or federate units, committed to serving in the Roman army, though under the command of their own chieftains. Thereafter the practice continued and increased, until such federates became a regular and widespread feature of the life of the Empire.

The Visigoths comprised the first such group to receive ‘federate’ status and were allowed to live under their own laws and ruler on the condition that they provided soldiers and agricultural workers for the Romans. Did these groups contribute to the fall of Rome? The city of Rome was sacked in 410 by Alaric, a Visigoth. It was the first time in 800 years that the city had been taken by a foreign invader.

Compare the following descriptions of Rome found in Daniel:
Dan. 2:41—And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. 42 And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 As you saw the iron mixed with miry clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

Dan. 11:39—He [Rome] shall deal with the strongest fortresses by the help of a foreign god; those who acknowledge him he shall magnify with honor. He shall make them rulers over many and shall divide the land for a price.

Why are there 10 horns? E. W. Bullinger in his book Number in Scripture (p. 243) says that the number 10 implies that nothing is wanting; that the number and order are perfect; that the whole cycle is complete. Thus 10 horns may simply represent all of the client kingdoms and federates. It may also refer to the fact that they, in a sense, drove the final nail into Rome’s coffin — they completed the cycle.

3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.

One of the heads seemed to have a mortal wound. A better translation is “And I saw one of its heads as though it had been smitten unto death.” (ASV) The phrase “as though it had been smitten” simply indicates that the head was portrayed as having been slain. It need not imply that the head only appeared to have been slain. Compare Rev. 5:6 — “I saw a Lamb [Jesus] standing, as though it had been slain.” The lamb was portrayed as such.

Did the wound kill the entire beast or just the head? The beast. In 13:12 we see that the wound was mortal to the first beast and not just to one of its heads

Recall that the heads of the beast represent Roman emperors. Which emperor is depicted by this head that is slain? Nero. Why? Compare Rev. 17:8 —

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.” [A clue!]

(Recall that Chapter 17 is a commentary on what John had seen.) The first beast represents Rome as a civil persecuting power. Thus, the death of the beast would represent a relative end of the persecution and the resurrection of the beast would represent a reemergence of that persecution. Recall our earlier comments regarding Nero and Domitian. Tertullian said that Nero was “the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood” and Eusebius wrote that Domitian “finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us.” It was rumored that Domitian was actually Nero resurrected.

The beast was: When Nero died, the persecution temporarily subsided. The first beast (the civil persecutor, Rome) died. Nero is the head which receives the mortal wound and causes the beast to die.

The beast is not: The book was written during a lull in the persecution. That is, it was written after the reign of Nero and before the reign of Domitian. (In fact, it was written during the reign of Vespasian.)

The beast is to come: The persecution would begin anew with Domitian. Tertullian called him “a limb of the bloody Nero.” The beast was resurrected; its mortal wound was healed. Domitian was the eighth head [if we disregard the three that Daniel depicted as uprooted (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius)]— he represented a new beginning of persecution.

4 Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”
The seven mystic figures

The dragon is Satan who was the driving power behind Rome against the Church; that is, he had given his authority to Rome. This beast had died and come back to life. It seemed that even God was powerless to stop it. What hope did the Church have against an adversary which was this powerful? The situation look hopeless, but the next verse should provide hope to an alert reader! (If you don’t see why verse 5 provides hope then it is time to review.)

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; 6 it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. 9 If any one has an ear, let him hear: 10 If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The resurrected beast is pictured as being haughty and blasphemous. Domitian, who required that he be addressed as “Our Lord God Domitian,” seems to have fit the bill on both counts. He had authority for 42 months. Now that we know what the symbol means this statement should provide cause to rejoice. Recall that a period of 42 months (or 3

The resurrected beast makes war on the Saints and is pictured as actually conquering them. This is exactly the same situation which we saw in 7:7 where the beast (Rome) came out of the bottomless pit and conquered and killed the two witnesses (the Church). Here, as in Chapter 7, we are simply being presented the state of affairs from the beast’s perspective. Rome thought they had defeated the Church. The Church may have even thought that they had been defeated. At the time Rome appeared to be the victor and hence they are presented as such. Earlier the persecution appeared to be over and hence the beast was pictured as being dead. Recall in Chapter 7 that after 3

Verses 9 and 10 are a call for endurance and faith which is required to be a conqueror. Verse 10 says that the sufferer is in God’s hands and the persecutor will be punished. Consider verse 8: “and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.” What is the book of life? This verse indicates that it is the complement of “those who dwell upon the earth.” Who are they? As we have seen many times before, the phrase is used exclusively to depict the enemies of God. Thus, the book of life contains the names of God’s people. Compare 20:15.

Recall, also, 3:5 — “He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.” What does this tell us? That it is possible for one to have his name erased from the book of life. That is, it is possible to fall from God’s grace. Calvinists say that the book of life contains the names of everyone who has been or ever will be born. Does that make sense in this context? (No!)

Does this passage support predestination? (It seems to indicate that the names of God’s people were recorded before the world was created.)

First, corporate predestination (as opposed to individual predestination) is taught in the Bible. In Romans 8:29–30 Paul writes that “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.” The Church, as a whole, was part of
God’s plan from the beginning and in that sense we, as a group, were predestined and foreknown. Ephesians 1:4 says that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

Next, the translation of this verse is not precise. So far as the Greek goes, an equally likely translation of 13:8 is “Those whose names have been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world.” 1 Peter 1:20 says that Jesus was “destined before the foundation of the world.”

The phrase in question appears again in 17:8. There the translation is more precise and seems to favor the RSV rendering of 13:8. Thus, 13:8 in all likelihood simply emphasizes that the Church as a whole was chosen before the foundation of the world.

The consistency of the scriptures forbids us from using 13:8 to toss the notion of free will out the window. (If, instead, we toss out the consistency of scripture then why are we here?) God would have all men saved but he wants us to come to him by our own volition and free choice. If we can come to him by choice then we can leave him by choice. He has promised that he will not cast us out but we are still able to climb out on our own.

### 5.5.6 The beast from the earth

11 Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.

The first beast arose from the sea; this second beast arises from the earth. That it arises from the earth stresses its human origin. It is not divine in origin. In verse 18 we will see that it is given a “human number.”

In 16:13 and 19:20 the second beast is called “the false prophet.” That is, this beast is religious in nature but that religion is of human origin. Further, we see that that the second beast causes men to worship the first beast. It looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. That is, it is full of hypocrisy. It is a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

**Conclusion:** The second beast portrays the perverted religious side of Rome just as the first beast portrayed the civil persecuting side of Rome. The first beast depicts Rome as Egypt. The second beast depicts Rome as Jerusalem. Compare 11:8.

13 It works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; 14 and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived; 15 and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

The beast performs false miracles and lying wonders. The Roman priests were ventriloquists and magicians. Vespasian was rumored to have raised the dead.

Stephen Benko in his book *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (p. 128) writes that “certain elements in the official Roman religion were based on magical principles, such as haruspicium (the examination of the insides of animals) and ausplicium (flights of birds and natural phenomena). . . magic was an accepted form of religious piety.”

Busts of the emperors were used to test Christians who were required to confess before them that “Caesar is Lord.”

16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six.
Recall the economic persecution which the Christians suffered at the hands of the pagan guilds, and recall Christ’s message to the church in Thyatira which we discussed in Chapter 2. A confession that Caesar is Lord was often required before one was allowed to buy and sell.

Just as God marked his people in Chapter 7 to indicate that they were his, the beast marks his people in Chapter 13 for the same reason.

The number of the beast is 666, a human number. What does this mean? The number 7 meant perfection and completeness. The number 6 depicted something that had fallen hopelessly short of perfection. Man was created on the sixth day and he fell from perfection. The number 3 is the number of divinity (the God head are three.) Thus three sixes depicts something which has fallen hopelessly short of divine perfection. Does that accurately describe this beast? Yes! This beast represents the false perverted religious side of Rome.

Here, as elsewhere in the book, remember:

1. The book was intended primarily to provide comfort to the first century Christians who were suffering intense persecution by Rome.

2. Numbers in the book have special meanings. In apocalyptic books the usual rule of interpretation is reversed; that is, we assume something is figurative unless there is some overriding reason to take it literally.

We should however use common sense in our interpretations and rely on similar language in the Old Testament to aid our interpretation. Numbers can be made to symbolize anything if one is willing to work hard enough. For example, let A = 100, B = 101, C = 102, etc. and note that 107 (H) + 108 (I) + 119 (T) + 111 (L) + 104 (E) + 117 (R) = 666! For a second example, consider the following “proof” that Shakespeare wrote the King James version of the bible: The 46th word in Psalm 46 is “shake.” The 46th word from the end of Psalm 46 is “spear.” How old was Shakespeare in 1611 when the King James version was written? 46. For similar absurdities simply look at any current “the-end-is-near” commentary on Revelation.

The setting at the end of Chapter 13: A terrible dragon has given his authority to a 7 headed beast which has arisen from the sea. The beast is killed but comes back to life. A second beast arises which looks like a lamb but sounds like a dragon. The second beast performs signs and wonders and causes the earth to worship the first beast. The chapter ends with the whole earth in the spell of the dragon and the beasts.

What does the Church need at this point? The Church needs comfort and assurance, which is exactly what Chapter 14 provides.

5.5.7 The Lamb on Mount Zion

Rev. 14:1 Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, 3 and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.

The lamb is the resurrected Christ. Although the lamb had been slain (Rev. 5:6) it now stands on Mount Zion. Jesus defeated death at the cross: Hebrews 2:14–15.

What is Mount Zion? It is the place from which salvation comes: Psalm 14:7. It is the place from which the Saviour comes: Romans 11:26. Compare Psalm 2:6 — “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.” When was this done? At the resurrection of Christ. (See Acts 13:32–37 where Ps. 2:7 is applied to the resurrection of Jesus.)
Who are the 144,000? The Church. We have already answered this question in our comments on Chapter 7. Recall that the number 12 symbolizes the people of God (12 patriarchs, 12 apostles, 12 tribes). The number 144,000 = 12 x 12 x 1000 is God’s way of emphasizing that all of his people are under his care and protection. Additional clues are given by the descriptions of the 144,000.

1. In Chapter 7, the 144,000 are sealed with the name of God and the Lamb. Rev. 3:12 says that those who conquer have the name of God and Christ written on them. Who are those who conquer? The Church! (See Romans 8:37.)

2. Chapter 7 calls the 144,000 Israelites. Did he literally mean Jews? No, in Rev. 3:9 Jesus spoke of people who said they were Jews but were not. (They were physical Jews but not spiritual Jews.) Who are the spiritual Israelites at this time? The Church! Israel is an established name for God’s people and that is how it is used here. See Appendix B.

3. Chapter 14 says that the 144,000 are those that have been redeemed from the earth. The Church has been redeemed from the earth. 1 Cor. 6:20 and 1 Cor. 7:23 say “You were bought with a price” and 1 Peter 1:18,19 says “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” Finally, Rev. 5:9–10 says that those Christ redeemed became a kingdom or priests and 1 Peter 2:9 describes the Church as a royal priesthood.

4. Chapter 14 describes the 144,000 as virgins and in 2 Cor. 11:2 Paul describes the Church as a “pure bride” presented to her one husband (Jesus Christ). See also Ephesians 5:21–33 where Paul describes the relationship between Christ and his Church as a marriage.

5. Chapter 14 tells us that only the 144,000 could learn the new song. This is the new song of redemption we saw in Chapter 5:9–10. That only the 144,000 could learn this song tells us that the 144,000 include all of the redeemed. No one but the 144,000 could sing this song! The 144,000 is not just a part of the Church. The 144,000 is the Church.

6. Chapter 14 describes the 144,000 as those redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb. James 1:18 describes the Church as “a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

7. Chapter 14 describes the 144,000 as those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. In Luke 9:23–24 Jesus says “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.”

8. Chapter 14 describes the 144,000 as being spotless. Ephesians 5:27 describes the Church as being without spot or wrinkle.

Objection: But don’t the 24 elders pictured here also represent the Church? Yes (see 4:4), but from a different perspective; the 144,000 represent the Church as those redeemed from mankind and the 24 elders represent the Church as a royal priesthood continuously serving God. Remember that Rome was represented by two distinct images in Chapter 13 to emphasize different perspectives.

5.5.8 Interlude: the angelic messages

6 Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; 7 and he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water.”
This angel delivers a gospel — good news to those who follow God and a warning to those who don’t. The righteous will be vindicated. The persecutors will be judged. The beast is not unstoppable. Coming events will show that God alone is worthy of worship.

8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.”

In Chapter 17 we will see that Babylon the Great depicts Rome as a harlot who is drunk with the blood of the Saints. Babylon was a well known persecutor of God’s people and the reason for its comparison with Rome is immediate.

Babylon has fallen: The tense of the verb emphasizes the certainty of the event. In Genesis 17:5 God said to Abraham, “I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” At the time, Abraham had no children! The tense stressed the certainty of the fulfillment.

The “wine of her impure passion” is the the blood of the Saints and martyrs (17:6). The next angel will serve the harlot another drink — the unmixed wine of God’s wrath.

9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.” 12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

God’s wrath is reserved for those who worship the beast. Their judgment is coming. Fire and brimstone (or sulfur) were literally used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and since has become a symbol for other judgments of God. For example, similar language is used in Isaiah 34:8–17 to describe the judgment against Edom. Was Edom literally destroyed by fire and brimstone as Sodom was? No. In Isaiah 34:9–10 we read that the land of Edom would burn endlessly yet in vv.13–15 we read that at the same time wild animals would live there. The language against Edom (and against Rome here) was figurative and was intended to recall the past judgments of God.

Note that Hell is not being pictured here. The context makes clear that this language is used to depict God’s judgment of Rome and not his final judgment against the ungodly. (Similar language in other contexts is used to depict other judgments — the judgment against Edom and the final judgment to name two.)

Further, the judgment pictured here takes place “in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” whereas in 2 Thess. 1:9 we see that the punishment brought about by the final judgment will take place in “exclusion from the presence of the Lord.”

13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” 14 Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” 16 So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth. The “henceforth” implies that they are blessed from that point on. (It does not imply that those who had previously died in the Lord were not blessed.)

Jesus is pictured as riding on a white cloud, wearing a crown of victory, and ready to reap the harvest. Isaiah 19:1 pictures God riding on a swift cloud to judge Egypt.
The hour to reap is the hour of judgment. A common symbol for judgment involves the separation of wheat and chaff. Recall John’s comments concerning Christ in Mat. 4:12 — “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Message: Judgment is coming!

17 And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” 19 So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; 20 and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

In this passage we see two angels; one who carries and sickle and another who comes “out from the altar” and who “has power over fire.” The first angel begins to “reap the earth” when the second angel gives him the go ahead.

The altar from which the second angel emerges is the brazen altar of burnt offering from which the coals were taken for the incense offering. (Recall our comments on 8:5.) The judges of Israel marched from this altar in Ezekiel 9:1–2.

The gathering of the vintage is a classic figure for God’s judgment of the wicked. He tramples them as one would trample grapes. The grapes are trodden “outside the city.” The city could be Rome or it could be the city of God. Ezekiel 62:12–63:6 pictures God as trodding the wine press (against Edom) outside of the city alone. That is, the picture may be one of God leaving his city to trample the wicked who are outside.

The blood depicts the severity of the judgment. 1600 stadia or furlongs is about 200 miles. Thus we have a river of blood which is 200 miles long and as deep as a horse’s chest. Its intent is to frighten. The coming judgment will be terrifying. (This passage causes particular trouble for the literalists. A river of blood 200 miles long, a modest 100 feet wide, and 5 feet deep would contain 3,949,714,285 gallons; that is, enough blood to fill up over 3.5 billion people (at 4 1/2 quarts/person).)

The apocryphal book of Enoch speaks of people who will be “smitten in one place . . . until it streams with their blood like a river . . . and the horses will walk up to their breast in the blood of sinners, and the chariots will be submerged to its height.” Literal? No. Terrifying? Definitely.

5.5.9 Review

1. Before the seals were opened we had a vision of Heaven which assured us that the true throne was in Heaven and not in Rome. (Chapters 4 and 5.)

2. Before the trumpets were sounded we were shown a period of silence in Heaven (a drum-roll) and told that the coming judgment was based upon a call for justice by the saints. (Chapters 8 and 9.)

3. Chapter 15 is a third vision of Heaven and occurs before the bowls of God’s wrath are poured out in Chapter 16.
5.6 The seven bowls of wrath

5.6.1 Preliminary vision in heaven

Rev. 15:1 Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and wonderful, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

So far, the judgments we have seen have been partial judgments which allow for repentance. The judgments contained in the 7 bowls are different. The judgment of the bowls is total and final and repentance does not appear to be an option. We have seven angels with seven plagues indicating that this judgment is complete and permanent. Further, we are told that with these judgments, the wrath of God is ended. That is, this is God’s final word with respect to Rome, the enemy of God about which this book has been revolving.

But doesn’t this language (the wrath of God is ended) imply that the final judgment and the end of the world are being discussed? Not necessarily. First, remember yet again the time frame of the book; it contains things which were to shortly come to pass. Second, to apply this passage to the end of the world would require one to completely ignore the context of the passage; the first 14 chapters contain no reference to that event (if the exposition so far be correct.) Third, the same language is used in the Old Testament to refer to events unrelated to the end of the world. For example, in Ezekiel 7:2–6 we read “An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you . . . the end has come” with regard to a judgment against Israel. The same language is used in Revelation with regard to a judgment against Rome. Although similar language could be used to describe the final judgment, to do so here would violate the context and time frame of the passage. In addition, similar language was used in Ezekiel to describe a specific judgment against a specific enemy which is exactly the same context we have here.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

A sea of glass mingled with fire: This is the sea before the throne which we also saw in 4:6. Recall that the sea stresses the separation between God and his creation; that is it stresses the holiness of God. In Solomon’s temple a sea stood between the priest and the holy place where God dwelt (see 2 Chron. 4:2-6). (Note: A separating sea also had a special meaning to the author John as at the time of his vision he was in exile on the isle of Patmos separated from freedom by a sea.) Further, this sea provides yet another parallel between Rome and Egypt: in Ex. 15 we see that the Red Sea stood between the Israelites and freedom and it was via that sea that God manifested his holiness.

The Williams translation of this verse indicates that the people in question are standing on (not beside) the sea of glass. This would then seem to indicate that the saints have moved closer to the throne through their suffering. Philippians 3:10 reminds us that we become like Christ by sharing in his suffering and Hebrews 4:16 tells us that we should with confidence (boldly) draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Who are those that conquered the beast? Those who remained faithful to God in spite of persecution, temptation, and trials. Those who had conquered included both those faithful who remained alive and those faithful who had been martyred.

3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! 4 Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed.”
The song of Moses (see Exodus 15) depicted a great victory of God over an enemy of his people (Egypt). The song of the Lamb depicts the same thing with regard to Rome. The difference is that the deliverance from Egypt was a physical deliverance and the deliverance from Rome was a spiritual deliverance. Moses could do nothing for a dead Israelite yet in Revelation we read that in the Lamb the dead are blessed.

Who shall not fear and glorify thy name?: This is not a promise of worldwide conversion as some would suggest. We have seen similar language before in this book. One may know of God’s power and in fact may even glorify him without accepting him as Lord. Two examples from the Old Testament may be found in Daniel:

1. After seeing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego delivered from the fiery furnace Nebuchadnezzar said in Daniel 3:29

   “Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way.”

   Did he fear God? Yes. Did he glorify God? Yes. Did he accept God as his own? No. He explicitly referred to God as the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (and not his God).

2. After seeing Daniel brought up alive from the den of lions King Darius said in Daniel 6:26–27

   “I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring for ever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”


   A third example may be found in Revelation 5:13 where we find men on earth glorifying God even though at the time God’s people were pictured as being in Heaven before the throne. (Recall our earlier discussion regarding that passage.)

5 After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened,
6 and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, and their breasts girded with golden girdles.

   In the Old Testament, the tent of witness (or the tent of testimony) held the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary of the temple. Only the high priest could enter this inner sanctuary where God dwelt and then only once a year with the blood of an innocent victim. The priest would carry a censer of incense which billowed smoke to ensure that he did not see God.

   The seven angels with the seven plagues come out of this inner sanctuary. That is, the judgment which they are bringing is coming directly from God. The coming judgment is a divine judgment brought about by the prayers of God’s people (See 6:10). This is further emphasized by the fact that these angels are pictured in priestly clothing — bright linen and golden girdles. Recall that a girdle was worn by a priest only when he was officiating on behalf of the people. These angels dressed as priests come directly from the presence of God to wage a holy war against Rome.

7 And one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives for ever and ever; 8 and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.
Recall our discussion earlier regarding the four living creatures around the throne of God. They are the cherubim who protect God’s reputation and demand the punishment of the ungodly. (See 4:6–8.)

The smoke in the temple may depict that which came from the censer the priest carried. It also indicates the solemnity of the occasion and the glory and power of God. In 1 Kings 8:10–11 a cloud of smoke fills the house of the Lord as an indication that the glory of the Lord fills the house of the Lord.

In 1 Kings 8:10–11 at the dedication of the temple the priests could not enter the house of God because of a cloud of smoke. Note also: Lev. 16:2 — “and the Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron your brother not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is upon the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.’”

The message from the Old Testament was that no one could look upon the glory of God and live. No one could enter the holy place when God came down “in the cloud upon the mercy seat.” In Ex. 33:20 God told Moses that “man shall not see me and live.” How is this related to God’s judgment of Rome?

1. God’s judgment against Rome is described as “a coming of the Lord.” (See Rev. 1:7 and 22:20 and compare Matt. 24:30 which describes God’s judgment against Jerusalem.)

2. God’s judgment against Rome was a manifestation of his glory. (See 11:15–18.)

The Message: The judgment against Rome is a divine judgment. There are many, many theories as to why Rome fell. Gamaliel Milner in his book The Problem of Decadence (London: Williams and Norgate, 1931, p. 198) provides a survey of many of the best known theories including vice, Christianity, despotism, bureaucracy, taxation, the dole, slavery, the birth rate, race, soil, climate, the military, and pacifism. In the end, he pins the fall on destiny:

The general impression that we receive from the story of Rome’s fall is that vast cosmic forces were at work which frustrated the counsels of the wisest statesmen, and rendered nugatory the skill and valour of the greatest generals; . . . if ever in human history we can discern the working of destiny or inevitable fate, it is here.

He was correct that the fall of Rome was inevitable but he missed the mark as to the cause. Rome did not fall because of fate or some unknown vast cosmic force. Revelation makes it very clear that the “vast cosmic force” which destroyed Rome was God. Recall Rev. 10:5–7 —

“And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.”

Recall that in the New Testament the term “mystery” is used to describe something which was formerly not understood but which has now been revealed. In Revelation the conflict between Rome and the Church is called a mystery: that is, the outcome of this conflict was formerly misunderstood but has now been revealed. Chapter 10 indicates that this outcome would occur in the days of the seventh trumpet. Thus, as the seventh seal contained the seven trumpets, the seventh trumpet contains the seven bowls of God’s wrath which were poured out on Rome. Chapter 16 describes these seven bowls which are intended to depict a total and complete judgment against Rome. The judgment of the trumpets was partial and allowed for repentance. The judgment of the bowls is final and complete — no repentance is allowed. The trumpets were intended to warn; the bowls are intended to recompense.
5.6.2 The first bowl: sores on men

Rev. 16:1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.” 2 So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

As we saw in Chapter 15, the seven angels came out from the temple dressed in priestly garments. This indicated that their mission was of divine origin; that is, the judgment of Rome was a divine judgment from God. Since 15:8 indicates that no one could enter the temple until the judgment had ended, the voice in 16:1 is probably the voice of God.

The seven bowls were foreshadowed in Rev. 14:9–10 —

“And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger.’”

The first bowl contains the first portion of this wrath. In particular, it contains painful sores which afflict those who worship the image of the beast. Recall our earlier comments regarding the identity of this beast and its followers. This bowl parallels the sixth plague against Egypt (Exodus 9:11), a previous judgment of God against another persecutor of his people.

Were the Romans literally afflicted with these sores? No. Like everything else we have seen in this vision these bowls are symbolic. If the sores in verse 2 are literal then what about the seven headed beast in verse 2? Is it literal, also?

If they aren’t literal then what is their purpose? What do these bowls depict? Recall 14:9–10; these bowls depict the wrath of God and the judgment of Rome. How does God describe this judgment? He uses symbols which remind us of his past judgments.

5.6.3 The second bowl: the sea becomes like blood

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

The second bowl turns the sea into blood. Again we are reminded of a past display of God’s wrath against Egypt. Is this literal? Did all of the creatures in the sea literally die? No. Similar language was used in the Old Testament. Compare the description given in Zeph. 1:2–4 of a judgment against Judah.

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” says the Lord. “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” says the Lord. “I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests.”

Did this literally occur? Compare the description given in Jer. 4:23–28 of another judgment against Judah.

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. For thus says the Lord, “The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. For this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above be black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.”
Did this literally occur? Compare the description given in Isaiah 13 regarding the fall of Babylon.  

19 And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. 20 It will never be inhabited or dwelt in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. 21 But wild beasts will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there satyrs will dance. 22 Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.

Did this literally occur? No. History tells us that Babylon fell without a shot. The priests opened the gates and let Cyrus in after Belshazzar was assassinated. Note that Isaiah said that Babylon would fall as Sodom fell, that no one would ever live there again, and that no one would ever pass through it again. None of this was literally fulfilled. Alexander the Great headquartered there and later died there. People live there today. What then is meant by this language? Babylon, the kingdom, will fall never to rise again. The language is designed to instill terror and describe the wrath and judgment of God against the ungodly. The language paints a picture.  

Finally, compare the judgment against Edom detailed in Isaiah 34:9–13 —

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into brimstone; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up for ever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it. He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plummet of chaos over its nobles. They shall name it No Kingdom There, and all its princes shall be nothing. Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches.

Did this literally occur? Could it have literally occurred? (Could an ostrich live in burning pitch?)

The prophecies in Revelation are modelled after those in the Old Testament. Those in the Old Testament often used vivid imagery and hyperbole that did not literally occur but were intended to paint a picture in the reader’s mind. Similar language in Revelation is used for a similar purpose. One cannot properly interpret Revelation without studying the Old Testament.

5.6.4 The third bowl: rivers and fountains become blood

4 The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the fountains of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of water say, “Just art thou in these thy judgments, thou who art and wast, O Holy One. 6 For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink. It is their due!” 7 And I heard the altar cry, “Yea, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are thy judgments!”

The second bowl turned the sea into blood. This bowl turns the fresh water into blood. Again, we are reminded of God’s wrath against Egypt. (The first plague in Ex. 7:14–24 turned the Nile into blood.) God’s wrath against Rome will exceed his wrath against Egypt. Here he turns all of the water into blood.

Again, is this literal? No. See our comments above regarding the second bowl. Does anyone teach that these passages should be taken literally? Yes. Hal Lindsey, who has probably sold more books on this subject than every other author combined, has the following to say about this passage:

As if the bloodied sea wasn’t enough, the third angel poured out his bowl of judgment into the rivers and springs of waters, and they became blood also. It gets pretty grim when there is no fresh water to drink anywhere on earth. There’s going to be a big run on Coca-Cola, but even this will give out after a while!
Lindsey says that seven months later 200 million Chinese soldiers will march on Israel to meet the Antichrist in battle. That’s a lot of Coca-Cola (and a lot of nonsense).

Notice the sarcasm and irony in verse 6. The Romans were blood thirsty so God gave them blood to drink. He more than quenched their thirst for blood.

In verse 7, the altar cries out to declare the justice of God. Recall Rev. 6:9–10 —

“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?”

The cry for justice which prompted this display of God’s wrath came from the martyrs gathered under the altar and they voice their approval in verse 7. Read verse 7 and think of heavenly cheerleaders.

5.6.5 The fourth bowl: fierce heat of the sun

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

The fourth bowl causes the heat of the sun to intensify and scorch men with fire. Recall that Nero had used the burning bodies of Christians. Tacitus wrote that:

[The Christians] were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.

The Romans wanted light and God gives it to them by turning up the heat of the sun.

Also, recall the description of God’s people given in Rev. 7:16–17 —

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The condition of the ungodly is pictured as being opposite that of the godly.

Those afflicted by this bowl curse God who has power over these plagues and they do not repent. Again we are told that this is a divine judgment; these plagues are from God just as the plagues against Egypt were. The response of those afflicted also parallels that of the Egyptians; that is, they do not repent.

5.6.6 The fifth bowl: darkness

10 The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was in darkness; men gnawed their tongues in anguish 11 and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

The fifth bowl pours darkness on the throne of the beast and its kingdom. This plague parallels the ninth plague against Egypt. Recall Exodus 10:21. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.’” The darkness here can also be “felt”; it causes men to gnaw their tongues in anguish.

This bowl may depict the moral darkness which we discussed in Chapter 9 where smoke from the bottomless pit darkened the sun and sky. There spiritual and moral blindness was depicted as a punishment from God. Compare 2 Thess. 2:11 where God sent people “a strong delusion to
make them believe what is false” and in Matthew 11:25 Jesus thanked God that he had hidden certain things from the wise and understanding. Recall that Frances Schaeffer reminds us that Rome fell because it did not have a sufficient inner base. The lowering of moral standards and the resulting decadence contributed directly to the fall of Rome. Moral and spiritual blindness is a disease which destroys the heart of a person or a nation. This bowl afflicts Rome with this disease.

5.6.7 The sixth bowl: the foul spirits prepare for Armageddon

12 The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

The sixth bowl causes the water in the great river Euphrates to dry up to prepare the way for kings from the east. (If these bowls are describing literal plagues then where did this water come from?)

Recall that the sixth trumpet also depicted warfare as an instrument of God’s judgment. There we saw 200 million troops cross the Euphrates river to march against Rome. (See 9:13–19.) The war of the sixth trumpet was only a partial judgment — only a third were killed. How much worse must the war of the sixth bowl be — it will be a total and complete judgment.

Recall from our discussion in Chapter 9 that “Crossing the Euphrates” is a vivid picture taken from the Old Testament to represent the threat of military power. The Assyrians and Babylonians crossed the Euphrates river to attack the Jews. Compare Isaiah 8:7–8 where the great river Euphrates is used to depict military might:

“Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the River, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory; and it will rise over all its channels and go over all its banks; and it will sweep on into Judah, it will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.”

The drying up of the waters is a common sign of the power of God. In Exodus 14 God showed his power by drying up the Red Sea. In Joshua 3 God showed his power by drying up the Jordan river. In Jer. 51:36 God threatens to destroy Babylon by drying up her sea. In Zech. 10:11 God threatens to destroy Egypt by drying up the Nile. Here in Rev. 16 we see God drying up the Euphrates river to allow his armies to advance upon Rome even more easily than they did in Chapter 9.

This passage may also be recalling an event from history. In Revelation, Babylon (a past enemy of God’s people) is used to depict Rome (a current enemy of God’s people). When Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon he did so by drying up the Euphrates river which flowed right through the center of Babylon. Cyrus diverted the river into a lake and entered the city through the dry channel of the river. Just as the actual city of Babylon had fallen by a literal drying up of the Euphrates, the figurative Babylon (Rome) would fall by a figurative drying up of the Euphrates.

Who are the kings from the East?

1. Some say that these are the allies of Rome who are pictured as rushing in to her aid. This however conflicts with the parallel passage of the sixth trumpet in Chapter 9 where the armies which cross the Euphrates do so to attack Rome. Further, the passage here indicates that God dries up the river to help the invading kings from the east. They are on His side.

2. In Chapter 9 a huge army of 200 million horsemen crossed the Euphrates to attack Rome. The purpose of such a huge number of troops was clearly to inflict terror. (Recall how the horses were described in Chapter 9.) The description in chapter 16 serves the same purpose. William Barclay writes:
The greatest enemies of Rome, the one nation she could not subjugate, were the Parthians who lived beyond the Euphrates. Their cavalry was the most dreaded force of fighting men in the world. For the cavalry of the Parthians to come sweeping across the Euphrates was a thought to strike terror in the bravest heart.

Did this literally occur? No. None of the previous bowls literally occurred and this bowl is no different. The purpose of the bowls is to paint a picture of compete and total destruction and judgment and that is exactly the picture which this bowl conveys.

13 And I saw, issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three foul spirits like frogs; 14 for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

Who is assembled against the advancing armies of God? The dragon (Satan — the power behind Rome), the beast (the beast from the sea — the civil, military might of Rome), and the false prophet (the beast from the earth — the false religious side of Rome). These three form a hideous contrast to the Godhead — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

From the mouth of each emerges a foul demonic spirit like a frog. These spirits perform signs and assemble the whole world for battle. This section may parallels 1 Kings 22:19–23 where we see lying spirits receive permission from God to deceive Ahab into battle against Ramoth–Gilead.

Why are they compared to frogs?

1. Frogs are connected to the plagues (Exodus 8:5–11). Psalm 78:45 says that God sent frogs to destroy the Egyptians and Psalm 105:30 says that their land swarmed with frogs even in the chambers of their kings.

2. Frogs are famous for their empty and continuous croaking. The sound of a frog is a symbol for meaningless speech which characterized the speech of the dragon and the two beasts.

3. In Zoroastrianism, the Persian religion, frogs are the bringer of plagues and an agent of the power of darkness. Hence, this symbol may have been attached to the symbol of the Kings from the East.

15 ("Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!")

Jesus is coming like a thief. To what does this refer? Similar language is used in Matt. 24:43–44 to describe the final coming of Jesus but to apply that to this passage would require us to ignore the time frame of this book and the context of this passage. (Remember: Similar language is often used to describe different events.) Whatever this coming is, it will be unexpected as would the coming of a thief. Only those who watch and are ready will spared.

What is the context of verse 15? The verse is inserted in a passage describing a great judgment against Rome which Rev. 1:1; 1:3; 22:6; 22:10 tells us would occur shortly after the book was written. The book ends in 22:20 with Jesus saying that “Surely I am coming soon.” Doesn’t this describe the final coming of Jesus? The time frame of the book says no. The context of the book says no. Similar language is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe another past event. Recall Matthew 24:30, 34.

Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. . . . This generation will not pass away till all these things take place.
The seven bowls of wrath

Also compare Matt. 16:28: “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” Matthew 24:30 describes the judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as a coming of Christ. Revelation describes the judgment of Rome as a coming of Christ. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the final judgment of the world is described as a coming of Christ. (Remember, even though the phrase “the second coming” occurs in countless books about the Bible it actually occurs nowhere in the Bible.2

16 And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon.

The armies assemble at Armageddon; that is, at Har–Magedon meaning the Mount or City of Megiddo. What is Armageddon? Barclay writes:

Megiddo is in the Plain of Esdraelon which was part of the great highway from Egypt to Damascus. From the most ancient times to the time of Napoleon it was one of the great battle-grounds of the world. This was the plain where Barak and Deborah overthrew Sisera and his chariots in Judges 5. This is where Ahaziah died by the arrows of Jehu in 2 Kings 9. This is where Josiah perished in battle with Pharaoh Necho in 2 Kings 23: a tragedy which burned itself into the Jewish mind and which the Jews never forgot (see Zech. 12:11).

Armageddon would mean the city of Megiddo; Harmagedon would be the mountain of Megiddo. . . . By far the most likely view is that the word is Harmagedon, and that is describes the region near Megiddo in the Plain of Esdraelon which was perhaps the most storied of all battle-grounds in Jewish history.

Thus, God chose a famous battlefield to depict the complete judgment and utter destruction of Rome. Literal? No. A vivid image? Definitely. Armageddon is the perfect setting for the figurative battle between the Lamb and the dragon. Napoleon once remarked that all of the armies of the world could make battle there.

5.6.8 The seventh bowl: the earthquake

17 The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”

This is the culmination of the judgment of Rome. At this point Rome’s fate was sealed and its fall became inevitable. The verdicts of historians notwithstanding, the book of Revelation makes it clear that Rome fell because they persecuted Christians. Rome’s fall was a divine judgment from God. The most powerful empire the earth had ever seen went up against the Church and lost. With the seventh bowl, God declares that “It is done!”; his judgment is complete.

Does this then speak of the actual end of Rome (usually placed around A.D. 476)? Not necessarily. Rome’s fate was certain long before it actually fell. As a comparison, note that Christ defeated death at the cross yet death still occurs.

Death was conquered at the cross: 2 Timothy 1:10 says that Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” Hebrews 2:14 says that Jesus “likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

Yet death will continue to exist until the end of the world:

1 Cor. 15:24–26 “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”

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2Hebrews 9:28 does refer to Christ’s second “appearance.” As we have seen, however, passages such as Matthew 24:30–34 indicate that Jesus has already figuratively appeared again and has figuratively come again in judgment since his ascension. To be precise, the “second coming” of Christ should instead be referred to as the “second literal appearance” of Christ which will occur as described in 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17.
1 Cor. 15:54 “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immor-
tality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in
victory.’”

Death’s fate was sealed at the cross yet it continued to operate. Similarly, Rome’s fate was
sealed during John’s day yet it continued to operate for awhile even though it had been judged
and sentenced by God.

Note that this bowl is poured into the air. The fall of Rome was a great defeat for Satan.
He had tried to kill Jesus in his infancy through Herod (and indirectly through Rome) and had
failed. He then tried to kill the Church in its infancy directly through Rome and had failed
again. Satan was the power behind Rome and complete defeat with regard to Rome is described
in detail in Chapter 20. Recall from Eph. 2:2 that Satan is the prince of the power of the air.

18 And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earth-
quake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake.
19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God
remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath. 20 And
every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; 21 and great hailstones,
heavy as a hundred-weight, dropped on men from heaven, till men cursed God for the
plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

As usual, a great judgment of God is pictured as being accompanied by lightning, thunder,
and earthquakes. The purpose is dramatic effect and we have seen it many times before.

This earthquake was “such as had never been since men were on the earth.” This indicates
that this judgment is different from the previous judgments we have seen in this book. The
judgment of the seventh bowl is God’s final word with regard to Rome. This judgment is
total and complete. Doesn’t such language imply that this bowl must correspond to the final
judgment at the end of the world? No. Similar language is used elsewhere to describe other past
judgments. Compare the following passage from Ezekiel which describes a judgment against
Judah at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar:

Ezekiel 5:8,9 — “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against
you; and I will execute judgments in the midst of you in the sight of the nations.
And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done,
and the like of which I will never do again.”

Also, compare the following description of God’s judgment against Jerusalem which occurred
in A.D. 70:

Matt. 24:21 — For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from
the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.

The great city which is split into three pieces by the earthquake is Rome. The cities of the
nations which fall with her may be her allies; that is, the client kings and federates which we
first saw in Chapter 13. The division of the city into three pieces further emphasizes the totality
and completeness of this judgment. In Ezekiel 5, God speaks of the complete destruction of his
people by dividing them into three pieces. Compare:

Ezekiel 5:2 “A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of
the siege are completed; and a third part you shall take and strike with the sword round
about the city; and a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the
sword after them.”

Ezekiel 5:12 “A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in the
midst of you; a third part shall fall by the sword round about you; and a third part I will
scatter to all the winds and will unsheathe the sword after them.”
The islands flee and the mountains cannot be found. Huge 100 pound hailstones fall from heaven. This language also commonly accompanies judgments in the Old Testament. Compare:

**Micah 1:3–4** “For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. And the **mountains will melt** under him and the valleys will be cleft, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.”

**Nahum 1:5** The **mountains quake** before him, the **hills melt**; the earth is laid waste before him, the world and all that dwell therein.

**Ps. 97:4** His **lightnings** lighten the world; the earth sees and **trembles**. 5 The **mountains melt** like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

**Ezekiel 26:18** Now shall the **isles tremble** in the day of thy fall.

**Ps. 18:7** Then the **earth reeled and rocked**; the foundations also of the **mountains trembled and quaked**, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens, and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds **hailstones** and coals of fire. 13 The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, **hailstones** and coals of fire. 14 And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth **lightnings**, and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare, at thy rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of thy nostrils.

With the seventh bowl God’s judgment against Rome and her allies is completed. The fall of the city will be described in more detail in Chapters 17 and 18. The battle at Armageddon will be described in more detail in Chapter 19. The defeat of Satan will be described in more detail in Chapter 20.

## 5.7 The judgment of Babylon

### 5.7.1 The great harlot

Chapters 17 and 18 are an obituary for the great city Babylon; that is, for Rome. (If any doubt remains as to the identity of Babylon, the description in this chapter should leave no doubt that it depicts Rome.) Babylon was said to have fallen in Chapter 14 and was pictured as being broken into three pieces in chapter 16. Chapters 17 and 18 provide the details of that fall.

Recall that we discussed Chapter 17 at length when we studied Chapter 13 since 17:7–18 provides an explanation of many of the symbols found in Chapter 13. It is important to note that 17:7–18 is not part of the vision but is instead a commentary on the vision in which an angel tells John the meaning of some of the symbols he saw.

A main character in this chapter is a great harlot named Babylon the Great. Chapters 17 and 18 provide the following description of this harlot. Do they sound familiar?

1. She is powerful: She is seated upon many waters. She rides a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. (17:1, 3)

2. She is successful: She is arrayed in purple and scarlet. She is bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls. She holds a golden cup. (17:4)

3. She is arrogant and proud: Babylon the Great is written on her forehead. (17:5)
4. She sits on seven hills. (17:9)

5. She rules the world in John’s day. (17:15,18 and compare Luke 2:1)

6. She is a terrible persecutor of God’s people. (17:6; 18:24)

7. She is the leading commercial power on earth. (18:3; 18:11–19)

8. She is supported by a great military force. (17:3,7 and compare Chap. 13)

9. She is destroyed by her own military power and inner strife. (17:16,17)

At the time this book was written, Rome was the only nation which fit each of these descriptions. A coin minted during the reign of Vespasian has been found which represents the city of Rome as a woman seated on its seven hills: Palatine, Capitoline, Esquiline, Aventine, Quirinal, Caelian, and Viminal. John uses the same image (which certainly would have been familiar to his readers) to describe Rome as a blood thirsty harlot (drunk on the blood of Christians) sitting upon seven mountains.

Note: Many commentators say that Babylon depicts Jerusalem. Would a first century reader have thought that Babylon meant Jerusalem when in his pocket he had a coin which depicted Rome as a woman seated upon seven mountains? Clearly, no. To understand Revelation, we must strive to see it from a first century perspective.

Rev. 17:1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”

She sits on many waters? Verse 15 tells us that these waters are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. Rome was the city that ruled the world during John’s day. Did Rome literally rule the entire world? No, but her dominion was so large that it was a common exaggeration. Luke 2:1 says that “a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.”

Kings have committed fornication? Fornication in this context means that these kingdoms have made alliances with Rome. In the Old Testament the term most often depicts alliances which involve idolatry. When Israel went after strange gods, she was often described as a harlot. Israel was a theocracy and thus her fornication referred to religious apostasy; she was called an adulteress because she had left God to go after another. The harlot in this chapter is not called an adulteress; her fornication did not represent a departure from God. Are there any examples of this in the Old Testament? Yes. Isaiah 23:17 says that Tyre played the harlot with all of the kings of the earth. Nahum 3:4 says that Nineveh betrayed nations with her harlotries. Their fornications, like that of Rome, involved their treacherous and deceitful relationships with other nations.

3 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; 5 and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.” 6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

Recall Chapter 12 in which the people of God were depicted as a woman chased into the wilderness by an angry dragon. The woman which John sees in Chapter 17 is also depicted as being in the wilderness but as we will see she is quite different from the woman of Chapter 12.

She sits upon a scarlet beast which is full of blasphemous names and which has seven heads and ten horns. (Recall our discussion concerning Chapter 13.) This beast is the beast from the
sea which represented Rome as a civil power. The seven heads and ten horns were explained in
Chapter 13 and will be discussed again in the comments below concerning 17:9–12.

The harlot is dressed in purple and scarlet and arrayed with gold, jewels, and pearls. This
denotes her richness and royalty. Rome was powerful in earthly terms. Rome was royal in earthly
terms. Rome was rich in earthly terms. Rome was beautiful in earthly terms. Revelation says
that, from God’s point of view, the Church (which is an exact opposite of Rome) is powerful,
royal, rich, and beautiful.

She offers a golden cup to other nations. Compare the description of the actual Babylon
found in Jeremiah 51:7 — “Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth
drunken; the nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad.” The nations which
shared Rome’s wealth also shared her guilt.

She wears on her forehead the name “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s
abominations.” She wears this title proudly just as the High Priest wore the name of Jehovah
upon his forehead. In Rome the prostitutes in the public brothels wore upon their foreheads a
frontlet giving their names. Rome was proud of its abominations and fornications and made no
attempt to hide it.

She is vividly pictured as being drunk with the blood of saints and martyrs. She is not just
a persecutor. She is glutted with slaughter and she has revelled in that slaughter as a drunken
man revels in wine.

The next sections contains an explanation of many of the symbols which John has described.
This section is not part of the vision per se but is an interpretation of the vision. We have
already had an extensive discussion of part of this section in our comments on Chapter 13. Our
explanations of these verses will be briefly reviewed below. See Chapter 13 for the details.

5.7.2  The mystery of the harlot and the beast explained

When I saw her I marveled greatly. 7 But the angel said to me, “Why marvel? I will
tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that
carries her.

The mystery of these symbols was something which was previously not understood but which
will now be revealed. Throughout this explanation we should reverse the rule which we have
been using throughout our study of this book; that is, we should accept the explanation as
literal unless there is an overriding reason to treat it otherwise. This section does not describe
something which John saw; it describes something which John was told about what he had seen.

Note: Many commentators have trouble with this section because the angel’s interpretation
does not match their own. Their response often involves figurizing all or part of the angel’s
interpretation. In fact, many treat the image as a literal description and the explanation of the
image in this chapter as a figurative description!

8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit
and go to perdition; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the
book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, because
it was and is not and is to come.

Recall our earlier comments regarding the bottomless pit and the book of life. The beast
represents Rome as a civil, persecuting power. That “the beast was” would then represent
that there had been persecution; that “the beast is not” would indicate that presently the
persecution had subsided; and, that “the beast is to come” would indicate a resumption of the
persecution. Does this fit Rome? Yes. Nero was the first to actively persecute the Church.
The persecution had subsided considerably when the book was written during Vespasian’s rule.
The persecution began again under Domitian’s reign. Domitian was actually thought by some
to be Nero resurrected. Suetonius says that Domitian was an object of terror and hatred to
all and says that he “used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catch flies
and stab them with a keenly-sharpened stylus.” Domitian was the first to make Caesar worship compulsory. Juvenal said that Rome was enslaved to a “bald-headed Nero” and was, of course, then killed. Domitian renewed the persecution against Christians that Nero had started.

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.

The five kings who have fallen are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius who followed Nero and ruled and died all within a span of about one year are ignored. The king “who is” is Vespasian. (The book was thus written during his reign.) The one who will come and reign only a short time is Titus who ruled for only 2 years. The eighth king is Domitian who began where Nero had left off with regard to persecuting the Church. (Recall our earlier discussion regarding this point.)

12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are of one mind and give over their power and authority to the beast; 14 they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” 15 And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. 16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, 17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

Recall from Chapter 13 that the ten horns represent the client kings and federates of Rome. They have given their power to Rome but will receive authority at some critical point and will contribute to Rome’s fall. The Visigoths were the first group to receive federate status from Rome and they sacked the city in A.D. 410.

The Lamb will overcome and conquer both Rome and her allies. We see here in fact that God will use Rome’s allies as a weapon against her. Does Jesus’ victory make him Lord of lords and King of kings? No. Jesus is victorious because he is already Lord of lords and King of kings. Nowhere in this book does Jesus begin to rule over something new. He has all authority when the book begins and he has all authority when the book ends.

Those who overcome with Christ are those who “are called and chosen and faithful”; that is, the Church — not just martyrs but all who refused to submit to Rome.

5.7.3 The doom of Babylon announced

This chapter contains a form of prophetic literature which is very common in the Old Testament. In particular, Chapter 18 is a “doom song” for the city of Rome. Compare Isaiah 13:19–22 which is a doom song for Babylon, Isaiah 34:11–15 which is a doom song for Edom, and Zephaniah 2:13–15 which is a doom song for Nineveh. In each case, the ruin of a great city is foretold in vivid, poetic language interspersed with apocalyptic speech.

Rev. 18:1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor.

This passage brings to mind Ezekiel 43:1–2 where we read that “the earth shone” with the glory of God. H. B. Swete writes that this angel has “so recently . . . come from the presence [of God] that in passing he brings a broad belt of light across the dark earth.” This verse reconfirms that this song of doom and the judgment which it relays are from God.
2 And he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird;

Babylon has fallen. So certain is the fall of Rome, that it is spoken of in the past tense. This was also the case in 14:8 where an angel said “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great.”

The city has become a dwelling place of demons. Isaiah 13:17–22 describes the destruction of historical Babylon by the Medes in the same terms. (Recall that the historical city of Babylon was not literally destroyed and that the land is not literally a wasteland even today.) Why is the city described in this way? Barclay writes:

Surely the most dramatic part of the picture is the demons haunting the ruins. The pagan gods banished from their reign disconsolately haunt the ruins of the temples where once their power had been supreme.

3 for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.”

Rome was a great military and commercial power which enticed other nations to follow her wickedness. Rome was powerful and arrogant and openly boasted of her abominations. Compare the description given in Isaiah 10:12–14 of the “arrogant boasting” and “haughty pride” of the king of Assyria:

By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of peoples; and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped.

Rome had the same attitude as the Assyrian king and ultimately suffered the same fate.

5.7.4 The call to come out of Babylon

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; 5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

God calls for his people to come out of the city before they slip into Rome’s evil ways and share in her destruction. This call is made many times in the Old Testament. God always wants his people to cut every connection with sin and to stand with him. God told Abraham in Gen. 12:1 to “Go from your country . . . to the land I will show you.” God told Lot in Gen. 19:12–14 “Up, get out of this place, for the Lord is about to destroy the city.” God told Moses in Numbers 16:23–26 “Get away from about the dwelling of Korath, Dathan and Abiram . . . Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men.” Isaiah 48:20 says “Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldea.” Jeremiah 51:6 says “Flee from the midst of Babylon, let every man save his life.”

Was this a call for the people to literally leave the city? Barclay writes:

Swete well points out that this cry and challenge [to come out] do not involve a coming out at a definite moment. They imply a certain “aloofness of spirit maintained in the very heart of the world’s traffic.” They describe the essential apartness of the Christian from the world. . . . The Christian is not conformed to the world but transformed from the world (Romans 12:2). It is not a question of retiring from the world; it is a question of living differently within the world.
This very passage may have been on John's mind when he wrote in 1:3 that “blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.”

“6 Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. 7 As she glorified herself and played the wanton, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning. Since in her heart she says, 'A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see,' 8 so shall her plagues come in a single day, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she shall be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”

God commands that Rome be punished and that vengeance be exacted. This command is not however directed toward men; it is directed toward the angel who is acting on God's behalf as his instrument of justice. Vengeance does not belong to man, it belongs to God. God said in Deut. 32:35 that “Vengeance is mine, and recompense.” This passage teaches two lessons concerning the judgment of Rome.

(1) Galatians 6:7 says “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that he will also reap.” A man sows what he reaps. Punishment always follows sin. Although Christians are forgiven and not punished for their sin, the punishment is still inflicted. Recall Isaiah 53:4–6 —

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The first lesson we see here is that punishment and sin always go together. Sin has both eternal consequences and earthly consequences. Even Christians who are spared the eternal consequences may have to face earthly consequences. A forgiven convict must serve the remainder of his sentence.

This passage parallels the command in Jeremiah 50:29 regarding Babylon:

Do to her according to all that she has done; for she has proudly defied the Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

We also learn a second important lesson from Rome's fall:

(2) All pride will one day be humiliated. Rome was judged more harshly because of her pride. She said “A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see.” Rome was full of pride and thought she would never fall. Recall that pride is one of seven things which God hates (Proverbs 6:16–19). The pride which God hates is the arrogance of those who feel they have no need of God. God's punishment for pride in the Old Testament was to inflict extreme humiliation and that is what he promises Rome. She would plummet from her glory to her destruction quickly and her destruction would be total and complete. Compare a similar pronouncements regarding Babylon:

Isaiah 47:7 You said, "I shall be mistress for ever," so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. 8 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children": 9 These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments. 10 You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, "No one sees me"; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, "I am, and there is no one besides me." 11 But evil shall come upon you, for which you cannot atone; disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to expiate; and ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you know nothing.
Both Babylon and Rome were filled with pride and later had to eat their boastful words. Isaiah 14 presents a vivid picture of the Babylonian king going into the underworld after his destruction to be greeted by other fallen nations. This passage implies that Rome would one day receive a similar greeting.

5.7.5 The lament of the world over Babylon

9 And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and were wanton with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; 10 they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, “Alas! alas! thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon! In one hour has thy judgment come.”

Verses 9–19 contain three dirges for Rome: a dirge sung by kings (9–10), a dirge sung by merchants (11–16), and a dirge sung by shipmasters and sailors (17–19). These dirges speak of the greatness, the wealth, and the luxury of Rome. Are such descriptions historically accurate?

The Talmud says that of ten measures of wealth which came down into the world, Rome received nine and all the rest of the world only one. Aristides said that “if there is anything you cannot see at Rome, then it is a thing which does not exist and which never existed.” Seutonius described Nero as follows:

He never wore the same garment twice. . . . He fished with a golden net drawn by cords woven of purple and scarlet threads. It is said he never made a journey with less than a thousand carriages, with his mules shod with silver.

Seutonius says that Caligula would “drink pearls of great price dissolved in vinegar, and set before his guests loaves and meats of gold.” Barclay says that “nothing John could say of Rome could be an exaggeration.” These dirges describe the greatness, the wealth, and the luxury of Rome. They have many points in common with the lament over the city of Tyre found in Ezekiel 26 and 27.

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. 14 “The fruit for which thy soul longed has gone from thee, and all thy dainties and thy splendor are lost to thee, never to be found again!” 15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16 “Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, bedecked with gold, with jewels, and with pearls!

These passages speak of the great commercial success of Rome. Verses 12–14 indicate the vast extent of her trade. (These verses cause a lot of trouble for the “Babylon is Jerusalem” crowd but fit historical Rome perfectly. Verse 13 speaks of slaves. There were some 60 million slaves in the Roman empire.) The merchants weep because of their loss of business. Their lament is not for Rome but for their own losses. They, like the kings, stand far off and watch the destruction. They do not attempt to help the great city. Again, compare the lament for Tyre in Ezekiel 27 and 28.

17 In one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.” And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, “What city was like the great city?” 19 And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, “Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! In one hour she has been laid waste.

The city is pictured as being laid waste in one hour. Recall our comments regarding the use of the phrase “one hour.” In 8:1 and elsewhere it is used to indicate a time of critical importance.
The vision and activity. (My hour has not yet come.) Nero’s fire raged a week and failed to destroy the entire city yet the fire which God sends destroys the city in one hour. Rome’s fall is total and complete and worse than anything she could imagine.

Compare this dirge of the shipmasters with the following passage from Ez. 27:28–30 —

At the sound of the cry of your pilots the countryside shakes, and down from their ships come all that handle the oar. The mariners and all the pilots of the sea stand on the shore and wail aloud over you, and cry bitterly. They cast dust on their heads and wallow in ashes.

Although Rome was not on the coast, the merchandise of the world entered at its port in Ostia. Again, the shipmasters weep over their loss of trade; their concern is for themselves, not for Rome. These men weep because their happiness was based upon the material things which came from their association with Rome.

5.7.6 Heaven’s rejoicing over Babylon’s fall

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

Rome’s judgment is cause for rejoicing. God’s people requested justice and God has delivered it. Again we find parallels in the Old Testament:

Jer. 51:48 — “Then the heaven and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon; for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north, says the Lord.”

5.7.7 Babylon’s doom portrayed

21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more; 22 and the sound of harpers and minstrels, of flute players and trumpeters, shall be heard in thee no more; and a craftsman of any craft shall be found in thee no more; and the sound of the millstone shall be heard in thee no more; 23 and the light of a lamp shall shine in thee no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride shall be heard in thee no more; for thy merchants were the great men of the earth, and all nations were deceived by thy sorcery. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.”

A great millstone is thrown into the sea by a mighty angel to explain how the great city would be thrown down and found no more. A similar image is used in Jer. 51:63–64 to describe the fall of the literal city of Babylon:

When you finish reading this book, bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, ‘Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the evil that I am bringing upon her.’

Rome, like Babylon, would fall never to rise again. There would be no revived Roman empire. The sound of craftsmen plying their trade would never be heard again. The sound of rejoicing would never be heard again. No lights in the houses or in the streets would be seen again. The sounds of weddings would no longer be heard. Compare the following Old Testament descriptions:

Jer. 25:10 (concerning Judah) “Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp.”
Ezekiel 26:13 (concerning Tyre) “And I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more.”

Verse 24 gives the reason for Rome’s fall: She was covered with the blood of God’s people. She like Tyre (Ezekiel 24:6) was a “bloody city.”

5.7.8 Praise to God for judgment: the marriage supper of the Lamb

Chapter 19 begins by showing God’s people rejoicing (as they were told to do in chapter 18) over the fall of the great city and the victory of the Church. The great joy of those who overcame and conquered is compared here to the joy that accompanies a great wedding feast. The picture is one of victory and unrestrained joy.

The battle of Armageddon (that was previewed in Chapter 16) is considered again in this chapter. The two beasts are defeated and cast into a lake of fire. The details of the battle are given after the Church rejoices over its victory; that is, the outcome of the battle is certain. Babylon has fallen. This chapter simply provides some of the details that were left out when the battle was first described.

Rev. 19:1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

A great multitude in heaven rejoice over the fall of the harlot. This great multitude (which we first saw in 7:9) represents all of God’s people both living and dead. Recall that the ungodly in Revelation are referred to as “those who dwell upon the earth” and that God’s people are pictured as dwelling in Heaven. Such a picture does not just apply to martyrs but is true of all of God’s people. The dichotomy between the godly and the ungodly is depicted in this book by dividing mankind into a group that dwells on earth and a group that dwells in Heaven.

God’s judgments are true and just: God’s greatness rests not just on his power but on his character. His judgments are always true and just and this judgment is no exception. In judging Rome, God avenged the blood of his martyrs as they had requested him to do in 6:10 where they cried with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth.”

3 Once more they cried, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” 5 And from the throne came a voice crying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.”

Rome is depicted as a city set on fire by God which burns forever. In 18:9–10 the kings of the earth stood far off and watched the city burn. The shipmasters in 18:18 also watched the great city burn. This is a common symbol for the judgment of God. Sodom and Gomorrah were literally destroyed by fire yet eventually the fire went out. Nevertheless, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah are presently undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. They fell never to rise again and their fall serves as an eternal example. Edom is described in Isaiah 34 as burning forever yet being inhabited by thistles and wild animals. (Could that prophecy be taken literally?) “Burning forever” is God’s way of saying that the judgment of the city would serve as an example forever. Compare:

Jude 7 “Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Isaiah 66:24 “And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”
Rome provides an everlasting illustration of the power of God and his ability to deal with those who oppose his will and slaughter his people. In that sense, it burns forever and the smoke which rises from it is always visible.

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns: God was the one king who was able to stop the military might of Rome. He reigns now as he has always reigned and will always reign. The fall of Rome was a public reaffirmation of his universal reign. God reigned prior to the fall of the Rome and he reigns after the fall of Rome.

The marriage of the Lamb has come: A marriage and a marriage feast is used to depict the joy of God’s people in Chapter 19 just as the feast of the tabernacles was used to depict the joy of God’s people in Chapter 7. Marriage is a common figure in the Bible where it is used to depict many different things. In Matt. 25:1–13 and Luke 12:35–40 it depicts the need for watchfulness. In John 3:28–30 it is used to show that John the Baptist would decrease while Jesus increased. In Matt. 22:1–14 it is used to depict the rejection of the Jews. It is also used to describe the relationship between Christ and his Church in Ephesians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Recall Paul’s statement in 2 Cor. 11:2 —

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband.

A betrothal stage always preceded a Jewish marriage. During a betrothal, the man and woman could be called husband and wife but they could not be described as being “one flesh.” Breaking a betrothal was considered a divorce. Recall Matthew 1:18–19 —

When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

Why is this distinction important? Some of those who believe that Babylon depicts Jerusalem in this book teach that Jesus did not marry the Church (to which he was betrothed) until A.D. 70 and that prior to that time he was still married to the harlot which they take to be Jerusalem. They say that the Church was betrothed to Christ but could not marry him until his former marriage (to Israel) was completely dissolved. His old marriage was ended, they say, in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed.

Is anything wrong with such a position? Aside from the fact that such a position has Jesus married to Israel and engaged to the Church at the same time, its proponents have apparently expunged Ephesians 5 and several related passages from their Bibles. [Note, also, that Isreal was called an adultress (not a harlot) when she left God.] Recall Eph. 5:29–32 —

For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

Here the church is described as being “one flesh” with the Lord. Christians are said to be members of his body and this membership is described as a marriage. Col. 1:24 describes the Church as the body of Christ. Christ and the Church are one body or one flesh and have been since the Church was established. Romans 7:4 says that “you have died to the law through the
body of Christ, so that you may belong to another”; that is, to Jesus. At our baptism, we die to the law of sin and death; that is, our marriage to our old way of life is dissolved. Rom. 7:3 says that at that moment we are then free to remarry. By becoming a member of the Church — that is, a part of the Lord’s body — we become married to Christ. There has never been a time during its existence when the Church was not married to Christ; that is, there has never been a time during its existence when the Church and Christ have not been one flesh or one body.

Well, then, what does verse 7 mean when it says that “the marriage of the Lamb has come”? What is the context? Chapter 19 is intended to depict the joy of God’s people arising from their victory over Rome. How is this joy depicted? By a great marriage and a great marriage feast. Does this passage teach that Christ and the Church were not already ‘married’? No. In fact, Revelation itself provides evidence to the contrary. Ephesians 5:28–29 says that Christ, like a husband, loves and cares for his wife as he cares for his own body. (Why? Because Christ and the Church are one flesh; that is, they are married.) The theme of this book is that Jesus loves his Church and is intimately concerned with its welfare.

The context of this passage is one of unrestrained joy and a marriage is used to symbolize that joy. For more evidence, read the next verse.

9 And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”

What is the main point of this symbol — the marriage itself or the joy which accompanies it? The angel says that those who are invited to the marriage supper are blessed — that is, the guests are blessed. Why? Because they are able to share the joy of the event.

10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

John falls down to worship the angel but is told that such worship is improper. (This happens again in 22:8.) This is God’s way of telling his people that all of the praise and the glory for their deliverance should be directed to him. The angel has played a major role but he deserves no praise or glory. God alone deserves the praise and the glory for their victory.

For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy: Some hold that this testimony is our testimony about Christ and others hold that it is Jesus’ testimony to us. A case can then be made that each is in a sense “the spirit of prophecy.” Barclay suggests John may have intended the passage to carry a double meaning.

5.8 The defeat of the beast and the false prophet

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. 13 He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

Recall that the first seal in 6:1,2 showed a rider on a white horse who wore a crown and went out conquering and to conquer. Here again we see a rider on a white horse. This rider is called Faithful and True and his name is The Word of God — that is, this rider is Jesus Christ, the conqueror of Rome, the righteous judge. Compare the description of Christ given in 1:12–16 with the description here.

We are told that he “has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself” yet in the next verse we read that “the name by which he is called is The Word of God.” How can it be true
that no one knows a name which is given in the next verse? Names in the Bible are often used to denote a person’s status. When one’s status changed his name was often changed (Abram, Jacob, Saul). To have a name that no one else could know thus implied that you had a status that no one else could share. This is certainly true of Jesus — only he can be called The Word of God.

The blood in which his robe is dipped is the blood of his enemies. The picture of Christ presented here is one of a warrior going out to conquer the enemies of his people. The ability of this warrior to conquer is emphasized by showing him drenched in the blood of those he has previously conquered. Although he rides with an army, we will later see that he does all of the work.

14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. 15 From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

Again, compare the description of Christ in Chapter 1 with the description found here. The armies of heaven are the armies which are allied with Christ. They are the ones who conquer with Christ. They are the ones who overcome Rome. They are not the armies of those who dwell on earth — they are the armies of Heaven. Who are the soldiers in these armies that stand with Christ? The Church. Who else? The Church is comprised of those who conquered and overcame. Compare the following passages:

Rom. 8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

1 John 5:4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Rev. 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Rev. 2:26 He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations,

Rev. 3:5 He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Rev. 3:21 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Rev. 17:14 they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

Who stood with Christ when he conquered Rome? Who was allied with him? Who overcame the Roman world through his power? The Church.

16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Did Jesus become King of Kings and Lord of Lords because he defeated Rome in this great battle? No. Here (and elsewhere) he is called King of Kings and Lord of Lords before the battle even begins. Remember, Jesus had all authority when this book started and he has all authority when it ends.

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.”
An angel invites the birds of the air to come and feast on the flesh of all who stand with the army arrayed against God. Does this angel have any doubts as to the outcome of this battle? No, and his message is that the Church should not have any doubts either.

Remember that when this book was written the persecution against the Church was about to begin with renewed strength through Domitian. The purpose of this book was to assure the Church that their ultimate victory was certain and that, no matter how it seemed, Rome would be defeated. The message of this book is one of comfort and reassurance directed toward its first century readers. To properly interpret this book it is vital that we remember this context and look to the Old Testament to understand the symbols which are used. (The same image found here is also found in Ez. 39:17–20 where it used for a similar purpose.)

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

Who is arrayed against God? The beast and the kings of the earth. This beast is the beast from the sea which represents the military might of Rome. (Recall chapter 13.) The kings of the earth lead the armies of the earth which are composed of those who dwell upon the earth — that is, the enemies of God. They are in contrast to the armies of Heaven which are composed of those who dwell in Heaven — that is, the Church.

The beast from the sea and his evil companion the false prophet (the beast from the earth which represents the false religious side of Rome) are thrown into the lake of fire. (This was previewed in 14:9–11.) In John 15:6 we see that a similar fate awaits all who oppose Christ.

“If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.”

The same image is used here to describe the fate of this great enemy of God. Rome is utterly defeated and cast into the lake of fire to join all the others who have died in opposition to God. Why is it cast in alive? Rome was judged and sentenced while it was still very powerful and very much alive.

Those who follow the beasts are then slain and become food for the birds as was foretold at the beginning of the battle. Notice that even here we get the clear message that vengeance belongs to God alone. The followers of the beast are not killed by the armies of heaven but by the sword of the one on the white horse — that is, by Jesus, the righteous judge. Jesus marches with an army but he doesn’t need an army to defeat Rome. He destroys the armies of the earth by the sword which issues from his mouth. What is this sword? It may depict his word which as John 12:48 tells us will be used to judge all who reject Christ.

5.9 The Binding of Satan

A Preview of Chapter 20

What is the context of this chapter? Rome has been defeated and Satan’s plan to destroy the Church through Rome has failed. The Church has emerged from the conflict completely victorious and triumphant.
The main images in Chapter 20

1. A 1000 year binding.
2. A 1000 year reigning.
3. A first resurrection.
4. A 1000 year death.
5. A little season of Satanic freedom.
6. A host from Gog and Magog.
7. An invasion of the holy city.
8. A second resurrection.
10. A judgment scene.
11. A lake of fire.

A Summary of the events in Chapter 20

1. Satan is bound for 1000 years.
2. The martyrs come to life and reign with Christ for 1000 years.
3. Those who died for Rome remain dead for 1000 years.
4. After 1000 years, Satan is loosed for awhile.
5. Satan calls together Gog and Magog and they attack the holy city.
6. Fire devours the armies and Satan is cast into a lake of fire.
7. A judgment scene ensues.

How are we to determine what these symbols and events mean?

1. Remember the time frame of the book.
2. Remember the context of this chapter.
3. Look to the Old Testament to decipher the symbols.
4. Remember how periods of time are used in this book.
5. Be consistent in applying our rules of interpretation.
6. Leave our preconceptions at the door.
Rev. 20:1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while.

An angel from heaven comes down with the key of the bottomless pit. From this we learn two important things. First, Satan has now been defeated since he possessed this key in Chapter 9 but has now lost it. Second, this scene is being observed from earth; that is, John sees the angel come down from heaven. The scene we are about to see is being viewed from an earthly vantage point.

First, how has Satan been defeated? Does this refer to the end of the world? No. Remember the context. The first 19 chapters of this book have dealt exclusively with the conflict between Rome and the Church. Rome has now been completely destroyed. Satan’s plan to destroy the Church through Rome has been completely stopped. How is this pictured? By showing Satan bound for 1000 years. What does this picture mean? That with regard to Rome Satan has been completely bound and defeated. The number 10 represents “completeness” and the number 1000 indicates “complete completeness.” (Recall that 144,000 = $12^2 \times 10^3$ represented all of God’s people. Numbers are raised to powers to emphasize their meanings.) Satan’s defeat with regard to Rome was a complete defeat; hence, he is pictured as being bound for 1000 years. Remember that in apocalyptic language periods of time are often used to depict a state of affairs or a condition. (Recall the significance of $3\frac{1}{2}$ (a broken seven) and the number of times it has been used in this book to denote a state of affairs that was only temporary.)

The “1000 years” of this chapter represents a state of affairs and not a period of time. Here it is used to depict Satan’s complete binding with regard to Rome. Later, it will be used to depict the Church’s complete victory over Rome. Ps. 50:10 says God owns cattle on 1000 hills; that is, his ownership is complete. Deut. 7:9 says God keeps his covenant to 1000 generations; that is, his faithfulness is complete.

Satan’s defeat here is with regard to Rome. (Remember the context.) With regard to Rome he is totally and completely defeated. He can no longer deceive the nations through Rome. He will not be able to defeat the Church using Rome.

After the 1000 years, Satan is loosed for a little while. What does this mean? Just as the 1000 years referred to a state of affairs and not a period of time, so does this “little while” refer to a state of affairs and not to a period of time. To what state of affairs does it refer? What is the context? Although Satan has been defeated with regard to Rome, the Church must have wondered if Satan might not attack again later and perhaps be more successful next time. God assures them in this chapter that although Satan will try again he will never be able to defeat the Church. God will continue to protect the Church in the future just as he protected it from Rome. The “little while” refers to Satan’s inability to defeat the Church now or ever. Satan did the worst he could do through Rome and he failed completely. Although he will gather his strength and try again, his future attacks will be insignificant compared to what he did through Rome. Thus, they are depicted as only lasting a little while. By saying Satan will return for a little while, God is saying that Satan’s future attacks are nothing to worry about. Satan had at his disposal an evil, blood thirsty kingdom that ruled the world and was not able to defeat the Church in its infancy. Why should the Church fear future attacks?

The symbol: Satan is bound for 1000 years and then released for a little while.

The meaning of the symbol: Satan, with regard to using Rome as a weapon against the Church, has been completely defeated, and, although Satan will attack the Church again with other weapons, he will never be able to defeat the Church. Satan has already done his worst and failed.
5.10  The millennial reign with Christ

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Who are on the thrones? The Church. They were the ones “to whom judgment was committed.” (Recall 6:10.) Jesus promised that those who overcame would share his rule over the nations. (Recall 2:26–27 and 3:21.) How do we reign with Christ? Stay tuned.

John also sees the Christians who were killed by Rome; that is, these martyrs were killed because they had not worshipped the beast. Had these Christians been defeated? No. A clear message of this book is that death is not a defeat for a Christian. Defeat would have come if a Christian had renounced to Jesus in order to live. Their death for Christ was a victory over Rome.

What happens to these martyrs? They live and reign with Christ for 1000 years. The RSV more accurately reads “they came to life” and reigned with Christ 1000 years.

John sees a bodily resurrection of those who had been killed for Jesus’ sake by the Romans. (Note: This resurrection includes only those who died because they refused to worship the beast. That is, it includes only those who were killed by the Romans. This is not a general resurrection.) Is this scene literal or figurative? Figurative, like everything else in the vision. To take this scene literally would require that all who were killed by Rome be resurrected shortly after the book was written.

What then does the scene depict? The same thing (in a new setting) that it depicted in Ezekiel 37 where it was used once before. In Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel sees a bodily resurrection occur in the Valley of Dry Bones. In verse 11, God tells him that the bones are “the house of Israel” who had lost all of their hope. The resurrection of those bones is used to depict the restoration of their hope. (Read Ezekiel 37:11–14.) Does such an interpretation fit the context of this passage? Yes. Martyrs are raised to life to depict the restoration of hope which the Church was experiencing. In Ezekiel the symbol was used to depict a national restoration from captivity. Here the symbol is used to depict the restoration of God’s people from the captivity of Rome.

What happens after they come to life? They reign with Christ for 1000 years. Their restoration is complete and perfect. Their victory is just as complete as Satan’s defeat.

5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.

Who are the rest of the dead? Those who died in service to the beast. (We saw them in 19:21.) This group does not come to life until after the 1000 years are over. That is, they have no part in the state of affairs represented by the 1000 year reign with Christ. This group has no part in the victory of the Church and is thus pictured as not being able to share or participate in the triumph of the Church.

What is the first resurrection? It refers to those who rose before the 1000 year reign. Verse 6 says that those who share in the first resurrection will reign with Christ for 1000 years. This excludes the rest of the dead who came to life after the 1000 reign. Why is it called the first resurrection? Because, later we will see a second resurrection.

The first resurrection represents the vindication of the cause for which the martyrs gave their lives. Those who died are raised to show that they participate in the victory and the triumph of those who are still alive. Only Christians experience the first resurrection. In contrast, only the wicked will experience the second resurrection in verse 13.
What is the second death? It is in contrast to the first death which had resulted in the two groups we saw in verses 4 and 5. The first death affected both those who were on the side of Christ and those who were on the side of the beast. The second death will only affect those who serve the beast. The second death (in verse 14) is depicted by a lake of fire and represents the utter defeat of God's enemies.

Those who experience the first resurrection shall be priests and shall reign with Christ for 1000 years. Was this a status that these Christians had not previously enjoyed? No. The Church is called a royal priesthood in 1 Peter 2:9. Rev. 1:5–6 tells us that we became part of a kingdom of priests when we were freed from our sins by the blood of Christ. The “1000 years” simply depicts the perfection and completeness of a status which the martyrs enjoyed even before their death. Recall from Rom. 5:17 that we reign in life through Jesus.

Note that even taken literally, this passage says nothing about the duration of Christ’s reign. The saints are said to reign with Christ for 1000 years. Ahaz ruled with his father Jotham for 12 years. Does that tell us how long Jotham reigned?

5.11 The loosing of Satan

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Satan is loosed after the 1000 years are ended so that he will not detract from the figure of total victory which the 1000 year time period depicts. The “little while” (verse 3) during which Satan is loosed should be contrasted with the 1000 year reign. The Church’s victory was total and complete. Satan’s future victories will never be total or complete. Satan has not been loosed for 1000 years but only for a little while.

What are Gog and Magog? Ezekiel talks about Gog of the land of Magog in Ez. 38:2. There, as here, they represent “anybody yet nobody in particular.” To convince the Jews that under the Messiah their glory will be secure, Ezekiel uses a symbolic battle with the fictitious Gog of the land of Magog to show that they will be able to defeat any enemy with the Messiah on their side. Note the following similarities between the battle in Ezekiel 38–39 and the battle here in Chapter 20:

1. The army is called from the four points of the compass with Gog as their leader.
2. The defeat of Gog and his army is total and complete.
3. Gog appears on the scene after the vindication of God’s people.
4. The size of Gog’s army is huge. (It takes 7 months to bury them in Ez. 39:12.)
5. The defeat takes place without God’s people having to do anything.

The symbol (in Ezekiel and Revelation): God’s people have just been vindicated from a terrible oppressor. A huge army gathers from all over the world to make war against them. God defeats that army without his people having to even lift a finger.

God’s message: I have already defended and vindicated you in this present crisis and I will do so again anytime and anywhere the need arises no matter who rises against you.
The army surrounds the beloved city. What is this city? It is the new Jerusalem which we will see in 21:2. What was the old Jerusalem? The dwelling place of God’s people. What then is the new Jerusalem? The new dwelling place for God’s people; that is, the new Jerusalem is the Church. Satan is cast into a lake of fire to depict his utter and complete defeat. Why has he been completely defeated? Because he has just been told that no matter what he ever does he will never be able to defeat the Church. Not one of his future attacks will ever be successful. His failure with regard to Rome will be the story of his life. His defeat is total and complete not just with regard to Rome but with regard to any army he may use to battle the Church no matter how large that army is.

Verses 4–10 have depicted the triumph of the Church over Rome and the assurance of their future security. Verses 11–15 will show us the other side of the coin.

5.12 The great white throne judgment

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; 15 and if any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

This section depicts a great judgment scene. Is it the final judgment? The time frame of the book and the context of this section indicate that it is not. The picture of God sitting in judgment is a common one and often refers to events other than the end of the world. Psalm 9:4–7 uses a judgment scene to describe God’s past judgments against the enemies of his people:

For thou hast maintained my just cause; thou hast sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. Thou hast rebuked the nations, thou hast destroyed the wicked; thou hast blotted out their name for ever and ever. The enemy have vanished in everlasting ruins; their cities thou hast rooted out; the very memory of them has perished.

Also, recall from our earlier discussion that the fourth beast in Daniel 7 refers to the Roman empire. Read in Daniel 7:9–10 what precedes the destruction of this fourth beast.

As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

Does that sound familiar? Read Rev. 20:11–15 again.

Before proceeding we need to review the first part of this chapter. In verse 4, those who died because they refused to worship the beast are raised and reign with Christ for 1000 years. Verse 6 tells us that the second death will not have power over this group. Verse 5 says that the rest of the dead will come to life after the 1000 year reign — that is, they do not share in the victory and blessings of the first resurrection. The “rest of the dead” do not include any of God’s people. The “second death” will have power over the “rest of the dead.”

What is the point? The “dead” in this chapter do not refer to all who ever died! The contrast is between those who died in service to Christ and in opposition to Rome and
those who died in service to Rome and in opposition to Christ. (Read 20:4–6 again.) **This is the context with regard to which we must interpret 20:11–15.**

Who then is judged here? The dead which are raised in verse 13. Who are they? They are the “rest of the dead” — that is, they are those who died in opposition to Christ and in the service of Rome. These verses show the contrast between those who stood with Christ and those who stood with Rome. Those who stood with Christ experience a complete and total victory symbolized by a 1000 year reign. Those who stood with Rome experience a complete and total defeat symbolized by a death in a lake of fire.

Death and Hades were defeated at the cross yet are considered here with regard to Rome. (They were personified in 6:8.) Similarly, Satan was defeated at the cross but has been dealt with in this book with regard to his relationship with Rome.

The second death pictured here is reserved for those who did not share in the first resurrection; that is, for those who died in service to Rome and in opposition to Christ.

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**Summary of the events depicted in Chapter 20**

1. Those who lived or died in service to Christ and opposition to Rome experience a total and complete victory.

2. Those who lived or died in service to Rome and opposition to Christ experience a total and complete defeat.

3. Satan will attack the Church in the future but will never be successful even if he able to assemble the entire world on his side.

Doesn’t that fit in nicely with the first 19 chapters? Isn’t that a message the initial readers of this book needed to hear?

Chapters 21 and 22 conclude the book with a description of the triumphant and victorious Church. Different symbols are used to depict the Church’s “newness.” These chapters describe the beauty of the Church, the purity of the Church, the stability of the Church, the strength of the Church, the holiness of the Church, and the importance of the Church.

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**5.13 The new heaven and the new earth**

Rev. 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

In 20:11 the earth and sky fled from the presence of God and no place was found for them. The figure of heaven and earth passing away is a common one. In Isaiah 13 God dismantles the earth and the stars to depict the judgment of Babylon by the Medes. In Isaiah 34 the heavens are dissolved and rolled together as a scroll to depict a judgment against Edom. God depicts the judgment of the ungodly by figuratively bringing their world to an end. See Nahum 1 with regard to Nineveh. See Micah 1 and Zeph. 1 with regard to Judah. The destruction of the world in Revelation depicts the judgment of the Roman world just as similar language was used in the past to depict the judgment of Babylon, Edom, Nineveh, and Judah. The end of the world is not being discussed here any more than it was being discussed in Isaiah 13, Isaiah 34, Nahum 1, Micah 1, or Zeph. 1. Remember the context of this chapter.

The language of judgment is language of destruction. The language of blessing which we see in this chapter is just the opposite — it is language of creation. A new heaven and a new earth
are created in which the previous oppressor does not exist. The creation of a new heaven and a new earth in the Bible is used to depict the removal of some specific enemy or some other radical change in circumstances. In Isaiah 65 God creates a new heaven and earth because the former troubles have passed away. 2 Peter 3:13 says that the Church looks for a new heaven and a new earth — that is, the hope of the Church is a new environment. (The new heaven and new earth in 2 Peter may or may not refer to the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21. The symbol of “a new heaven and a new earth” depicts a radical change in circumstance. The particular change under consideration must be determined from the context.)

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; 3 and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

The new Jerusalem is the Church; the new dwelling place for God’s people, the bride of Christ, the holy city. It comes down from Heaven in contrast to the beasts of Rome which came up out of the earth and sea. God’s people have been referred to in this book as dwelling in Heaven and the wicked have been referred to as dwelling on earth. Now that the wicked and their world are gone, the Church is pictured as returning to a world which has been made new.

Why will every tear be wiped away? Why will death be no more? Why will there be no more crying or pain? Because the former things have passed away. Remembering the context of this passage, what are the former things which have just passed away? The blood thirsty harlot and her two beasts. Rome is no more. The condition of the Church has changed dramatically. But couldn’t this language apply to Heaven? Sure it could, but not if considered in context. Has similar language been used elsewhere to refer to events other than the end of the world? Yes, in Isaiah 14:3; 65:19; 30:19; and 25:8 Isaiah says that Israel will have no pain, Israel will cry no more, Israel’s tears will be wiped away, and Israel will no longer experience death. Why does Isaiah say these things? In order to emphasize that Israel’s past troubles will be no more which is the same way the language is used in Revelation. The Roman persecution will be no more.

Not convinced yet? Well, how about this? When will every tear be wiped away? When will death be no more? When will there be no more crying or pain? Verse 3 says that it will occur when the dwelling of God is with men. When will this be true? It already is true. 1 Cor. 3:16 says that we are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in us. Eph. 2:22 describes the Church as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. God dwells with men now. These descriptions concerning crying, tears, pain, and death should not be taken literally. This language is symbolic and we must consistently treat it as such. Here, as in Isaiah, these descriptions depict the state of God’s people after a specific enemy has been removed by God.

What about the phrase “no more death”? Death was a weapon which Rome used against the Church. Death is personified in the book. In Isaiah 28:14–18 the Judean leaders, who bribed the Assyrians to leave them alone, are described as having made a “covenant with death.” Assyria, the oppressor, is called death. Rome, who also had the power of death, could accurately be called “death” and in that sense death would be no more. Further, Ezekiel 37 describes the Jews under Babylonian captivity as already being in their graves. Thus, when the captivity ended, death, in another sense, would be no more. When God defeated Rome he defeated Rome’s power to inflict death. Rome would never again have the power of death over God’s people.

5 And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. 7 He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”
All things are new: The former things (that is, Rome) has passed away and the Church consequently finds itself in a new environment. The world of Rome has been destroyed and a new world has been created for the Church.

It is done: Satan and Rome have been defeated. Their world has been destroyed. The blood of the martyrs has been vindicated. A new world has been created which does not include Rome. The Church has come down from Heaven to enjoy its new environment. Everything has been finished with regard to Rome. It is done. Those who stood with Christ received fountains of living water. Those who stood with Rome received death in a lake of fire.

5.14 The new Jerusalem

5.14.1 The city

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

What are we about to see? Heaven? No. The angel says that we are about to see the Bride of the Lamb. The following verses describe the Church. Although many consider these verses to be a description of Heaven or of the Church in Heaven after the end of the world, the context suggests that these verses describe the Church’s condition after the removal of Rome. Could it also describe the Church in Heaven? Possibly, but we will see below such a view has some rather big problems to work around.

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

Ezekiel’s vision of the temple in Ezekiel 40 also takes place while Ezekiel is on a high mountain. This chapter parallels Ezekiel 40 in many of its descriptions.

The holy city comes down from Heaven and has the glory of God. Again, recall that the city is pictured coming down from Heaven because a new Rome-free world has been created in which it may dwell. The Church is the body of Christ who reflects the glory of God (Hebrews 1:3). The glory of God is compared to the radiance of rare jewels, jasper, and crystal in verse 11.

It had a great high wall: What is “it”? The Church. Recall verse 9. It has 12 gates guarded by 12 angels with the names of 12 tribes inscribed on each gate. The wall had 12 foundations with the names of the 12 apostles inscribed on each. Twelve is the number of God’s people and this city is the dwelling place of God’s people. Eph. 2:20 says that the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The city of God described here is the Church — not Heaven.

5.14.2 Its measurements

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

Why is the city measured? Ezekiel measured what he saw in Ezekiel 40–43 in order to stress its holiness and separation from what is common (See Ezekiel 42:20). John measures the temple in Rev. 11 for the same reason. Recall our comments there.

What are the measurements? The city is a cube — 12,000 by 12,000 by 12,000 stadia. (This description causes trouble for literalists since 12,000 stadia is about 1500 miles.) The walls surrounding the city are 144 (12 squared) stadia high. The foundations of the city are adorned with 12 precious jewels and the 12 gates are made of 12 pearls. The streets are made of gold, transparent as glass.

The Church is described as a precious and beautiful city in the shape of a huge cube. The number 12 (which depicts God's people) appears in every measurement. Note that the holy of holies in Solomon's temple was also in the shape of a cube (1 Kings 6:20). This city is where God dwells — this city is the Church.

5.14.3 Its light

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates shall never be shut by day — and there shall be no night there; 26 they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Why is there no temple? In the Old Testament the temple stressed the separation between God and man. God lived in the inner sanctuary where only the High Priest could enter. In this city God dwells with his people (see 21:3). There is no separation between God and Christians. Every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus.

Why is there no need of sun or moon? Because the glory of God and the Lamb provide all of the light. Isaiah 60:19-20 uses this same image to describe the condition of Israel after the restoration of the temple and the holy city. The gates of the city will never shut. Isaiah uses this image, also. See Isaiah 60:11. There will be no night because the glory of God and of the Lamb are always present.

By its light shall the nations walk: If this is a description of the Church after the end of the world then who are these nations? The Church on earth is the light of the world. We are Christ's ambassadors. The nations of the world are pictured as being drawn to the city by the light which it casts into the world. Compare Isaiah 2:2.

They shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations: Isaiah 60:10–14 uses this same image to describe the vindication of Jerusalem. Here it describes the vindication of the Church. If this is a description of the Church after the end of the world then who are these kings of the earth who live outside the city in darkness?

Nothing unclean will enter: The city is holy and secure. Compare Isaiah 52:1–2. Only those who have been made clean by the blood of Christ are allowed to enter this city.

This chapter has provided a description of the triumphant and victorious Church on earth. The Church shines among the nations and brings light to those living outside in darkness. The nations are drawn to it by the light which it casts. Isaiah 2:2 said that all nations would flow to the Church from the moment it was established. A brief glance through a concordance reveals
that the language used here in this chapter to describe the Church was used in the Old Testament to describe the present Church age under the rule of Christ.

5.14.4 Its blessings

Rev. 22:1 Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

The description of the Church from the last chapter (recall 21:9) continues through the first part of Chapter 22. The entire vision ends at verse 5. The remaining verses serve as the book's epilogue.

River of the Water of Life: Water is a common symbol for the blessings of God. In Isaiah 12:3 God's people were told that with joy they would draw water from the wells of salvation. In John 7 Jesus said that if anyone believed in him then that person would have rivers of living water flowing out of his heart. Ezekiel 47 describes a sacred river flowing from the temple. The water here depicts the blessings which flow from God which the Church enjoys now and forever. (Look at Joel 3:18 and then turn to Acts 2 to find out when it was fulfilled.) Recall our discussion regarding the Feast of the Tabernacles in Chapter 7.

Tree of Life with 12 fruits: This tree provides 12 different kinds of fruit 12 times a year. Where have we seen that number before? This tree provides nourishment for God's people just as the original Tree of Life did. The fruit from this tree and the river of life which flows nearby depict the blessings from God which the Church enjoys. Is this something which the Church has yet to receive? No. Read about the blessings which were promised by the Old Testament prophets then read the New Testament to find out when those blessings were received.

The leaves on the tree are for the healing of the nations. Again, we see nations which need the light and healing which this city — the Church — provides. Who are these nations outside of the city if this is a description of the Church in Heaven after the end of the world? This is a description of the Church now. The Church sheds light on the darkness outside. The Church provides healing to those who come. The invitation in 22:17 below is for those outside of the Church to come and drink of the water of life. Could such descriptions apply to the Church after the end of the world? (No.)

3 There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; 4 they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. 5 And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

There will be no more curse: Zech. 8:13 says that Israel and Judah were once “a byword of cursing among the nations.” God promised that he would make them a blessing instead of a curse. Zech. 14:11 says that “there shall be no more curse; Jerusalem shall dwell in security.” Isn’t that the picture we have here? The Church, too, will dwell in security.

The throne of God and of the Lamb is in it: God rules from his dwelling place which is the Church. Ezekiel 43:7 says that God’s throne is located where he dwells — in the midst of his people forever. Ephesians 2:22 describes the Church as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

We shall see his face: We are members of a royal priesthood. We have direct access to the throne. Hebrews 4:16 says that we may boldly approach the throne of grace. Every Christian has the same access to God as the High Priest had under the Old Covenant. In fact, we have more — we may approach the throne boldly at any time whereas the High Priest could only enter the holy of holies (the presence of God) once a year. Again, this is a blessing that the Church is presently enjoying.

There will be no more night: We are the light of the world. The Church is the only source of light in a world of darkness. There is no night in the Church—Jesus Christ is our light.
They shall reign for ever and ever: Romans 5:17 says that we reign in life through Jesus Christ. Rev. 5:10 says that we are a kingdom of priests who reign on earth. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are a royal priesthood. The Church reigns with Christ now and forever.

Revelation 21:9–22:5 has provided a description of the Church and the blessings which are enjoyed by those belonging to the Church. We have seen how each description applies to the Church on earth and not just to the Church “in eternity.” Further, we have seen several descriptions which could only apply to the Church on earth.

The great persecuting power of Rome has been destroyed and Satan has been put in his place. The hope and security of the Church have been restored. God promises to protect them forever just as he rescued them from Rome. The book ends with a description of the triumphant, victorious Church which reigns forever with Jesus on its side. The message to the first century Church was not “Wait until the end of the world and you will enjoy these blessings.” The message to the first century Church was “As the body of Christ you enjoy all of these spiritual blessings right now.” That was the message they needed to hear and that was the message they received.
Epilogue

6.1 Testimony to the truth of the revelation

6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. 7 And behold, I am coming soon.” Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

As in the prologue, the epilogue begins with the time frame for the vision. Rev. 1:1 says that the events in the book must soon take place. Rev. 1:3 says that the time for fulfillment is near. Here in 22:6 we see that what John had seen must soon take place. Later in 22:10 we see the same message. **What can be said for any interpretation of this book that ignores these clear declarations? One must certainly work hard to misunderstand them!**

I am coming soon: The Greek “taku” or “takos” means quickly, speedily, and without delay. To what does this refer? In what way did Jesus come quickly soon after the book was written? He came in judgment against Rome. Look at Matthew 24:30. To what coming does that verse refer? Jesus’ coming in judgment against Jerusalem. Matthew 24:34 does not allow us to apply Matthew 24:30 to the end of the world. Similarly, the comings promised here refer to Christ’s coming in judgment against Rome. Applying these statements to the end of the world violates the time frame of the book and the context of the book.

8 I John am he who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; 9 but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

John has been told before not to worship this angel. The message here as in 19:10 was that the deliverance of the Church from Rome was the work of God and all of the glory and honor for that deliverance belongs to him.

6.2 The distinction drawn

10 And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” 12 “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood.

John is told not to seal up the book because the time for its fulfillment is near. In Daniel 8:26 Daniel gets the opposite command regarding a vision which he saw. God tells Daniel to seal up his vision because its fulfillment pertains to many days hence. When was Daniel’s vision fulfilled? 400 years later. John receives the opposite command because what he saw will be fulfilled soon. Many commentators say that nothing in the book of Revelation has been fulfilled yet. What do you think?

Again Jesus promises to judge Rome soon. He tells the wicked to continue in their wickedness because their time is short. Rome was so entrenched in their evil that Jesus knew they would
never change. He sarcastically tells them that if they want to do more wickedness they had 
better hurry. (Again, this verse is difficult to apply to the end of the world. Does Jesus want 
all sinners to continue sinning?)

The tree of life in the holy city belongs to those who have washed their robes in the blood 
of Christ. (Recall Rev. 7:14.) The wicked are pictured as being outside the gates.

6.3 The invitation given

16 “I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the 
root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” 17 The Spirit and the Bride 
say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let 
him who desires take the water of life without price.

Jesus is the root and the offspring of David. He is the promised Redeemer. He is the 
fulfillment of prophecy.

The Spirit and the Church invite those outside to come and drink the water of life. When is 
this invitation extended? Now. No invitation will be extended after the end of the world. The 
water of life is a blessing which Christians may enjoy on earth.

18 I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one 
adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if any one 
takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in 
the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

The plagues in this book depict the judgment of God and thus may (in that general sense) 
befall anyone at anytime. This verse causes problems for literalists who claim that the plagues 
in this book depict, among other things, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. How could such 
a plague be said to befall one who added words to this prophecy?

What happens to those who take away from these words? They lose their share in the tree 
of life and in the holy city. That is, the right to the tree of life we saw in 22:14 can be taken 
away. The doctrine of “Once saved, always saved” is not a sound doctrine.

20 He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, 
Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Jesus came in judgment against Rome just as he came in judgment against Jerusalem. The 
book ends with encouragement for those suffering persecution. They had nothing to fear — 
Jesus was coming soon.
An Overview

1. **The Purpose of the Book:** Revelation was written to provide comfort and assurance to Christians who were being persecuted and murdered by the Romans. To properly understand this book we must study it from a first century perspective.

2. **The Time Frame of the Book:** The book describes events that were to come to pass shortly. The time for its fulfillment was said to be near when it was written. The judgments in the book were to take place without delay. John was told not to seal the book because the time for its fulfillment was near. One should view with suspicion any interpretation of this book that ignores these clear statements.

3. **Old Testament Parallels:** Revelation describes a judgment by God against a great oppressor of his people. We see a prelude to the judgment, we see the judgment itself, and we see the aftermath of the judgment from the perspective of the victors and from the perspective of the vanquished. The language used to describe these events is taken from Old Testament descriptions of past judgment against Babylon, Edom, Judah, and Nineveh. The language used to describe the blessings of the victorious church in the later chapters of Revelation is used in the Old Testament to describe the blessings that Christians are presently enjoying under the reign of Christ. To understand Revelation we must study the Old Testament.

4. **Preconceptions:** We must study this book without preconceptions. In Matthew 24:30, 34 we see a coming of Christ that is not his final coming. In Daniel 7:9–10 we see a great judgment scene that is not the final judgment of the world. In Daniel 12:2 we see a resurrection that does not refer to the final resurrection of the saints. In studying Revelation we should not jump to conclusions that violate the time frame and historical context of the book.

5. **The Message for Today:** Jesus loves his church and will always protect and sustain it. The blessings described in this book are spiritual blessings that may be presently enjoyed by anyone willing to submit to the reign of Christ.
8 References


References


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A Constantine and the Church

A.1 Babylon the Great

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?”

One of the primary purposes of the book of Revelation is to provide an answer to this cry for divine vindication found in verse 10 of Chapter 6. Revelation is a book of judgment and of victory — judgment by God against the enemies of the Church and the Church’s triumphant victory over those enemies.

In response to the Church’s cries for vindication, Revelation depicts God pouring out His divine judgment against a fierce, persecuting power. This persecuting power is shown from several perspectives. One of the most vivid may be found in Chapter 17 where the great enemy of God’s people is depicted as a great harlot called “Babylon the Great” who is drunk with the blood of the Saints. The description of the harlot in Chapters 17 and 18 provides the following clues to the identity of this fierce enemy of the Church:

1. She sits on seven mountains (17:9).
2. She ruled the kings of the earth during John’s day (17:18).
3. She is a terrible persecutor of the Saints (17:6; 18:24).
4. She is the leading commercial power on earth (18:3, 11–19).
5. She is part of a false religious system (17:3).
6. She is supported by a great military power (17:3, 7, 14 and compare 13:7).
7. She is destroyed partly by her own military power and inner strife (17:16, 17).

Does Rome fit this description? A classical title for Rome used by Ovid, Virgil, and others was the “city which sat on seven hills.” Rome ruled during John’s day. Rome, particularly under Nero and Domitian (both contemporary with John), was a terrible persecutor of the Saints. Rome was the leading commercial power in the world. Rome was a center of pagan religion and emperor worship. The Roman empire was supported by a vast military system. That the harlot represents the Roman empire appears evident. Her description matches that of Rome point for point. It is against this great power that the Saints requested vindication. In response, God pronounces the following judgments against “Babylon the Great” in Chapter 18:

And he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird; for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.” (18:2–3)

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more; . . . And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.” (18:21, 24)
If the harlot does indeed represent the Roman empire then according to these passages the fall of the Roman Empire was a divine judgment by God. Revelation 18 indicates that the harlot would be “thrown down with violence” and be “found no more” because “in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints.” Some natural questions which arise in this context are:

1. When did the Roman empire fall?
2. How did the Roman empire fall?
3. What factors contributed to the fall of the Roman empire?
4. How was the fall of the Roman empire a divine judgment?
5. Did the fact that “Christianity” had become the official state religion indicate that the enmity between the Roman empire and God had ended?

A.2 The Decline and Fall

The imperial period of ancient Roman history began in 27 B.C. when Octavian, later called Augustus, became the first emperor of Rome and ended in A.D. 476 when the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown by the German king Odoacer. The decline of Rome which culminated in its downfall in A.D. 476 was not a swift decline. Three primary reasons stand behind the eventual collapse of the Roman empire: ¹

1. External invasion.
2. Inner decadence.
3. Inner strife.

Daniel described the inner weakness of the yet future Roman empire as follows:²

And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things; and like iron which crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with miry clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever.

²Daniel 2:40–44.
Recall in Revelation 17 that the beast and the ten horns which supported the harlot in verse 3 were in verse 16 said to “hate the harlot” and to “make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.” As we study the book, we will see that the beast represents the civil power of Rome and that the 10 horns represent Rome’s allies and client states. These passages indicate that Rome would fall apart partially from within and that is exactly what happened. Francis Schaeffer wrote the following in this regard:³

As the Empire ground down, the decadent Romans were given to a thirst for violence and a gratification of the senses. . . . Even though Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of the Christians and Christianity became first (in 313) a legal religion, and then (in 381) the official state religion of the Empire, the majority of the people went on in their old ways. Apathy was the chief mark of the late Empire. . . . As the Roman economy slumped lower and lower, burdened with an aggravated inflation and a costly government, authoritarianism increased to counter the apathy. Since work was no longer done voluntarily, it was brought increasingly under the authority of the state, and freedoms were lost. For example, laws were passed binding small farmers to their land. So, because of the general apathy and its results, and because of oppressive control, few thought the old civilization worth saving.

Rome did not fall because of external forces such as the invasion by the barbarians. Rome had no sufficient inward base; the barbarians only completed the breakdown — and Rome gradually became a ruin.

But hadn’t Rome become a “Christian empire” by the time it fell in A.D. 476? It certainly appeared so and many historians treat it as such, but was it in reality? In order to answer this question, it will be helpful to first consider the life and supposed conversion of Constantine the Great.

A.3 Constantine the Great

Constantine the Great, as he was later called, was born in about A.D. 285 to Constantius (Roman emperor in the West from 305 to 306) and Helena. His father had protected Christians as far as possible probably because Helena was an espoused Christian. In 305, the Empire had four emperors, Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius. After Diocletian and Maximian abdicated and Constantius died, the army proclaimed Constantine emperor. After a period of conflict, Constantine eventually emerged as the sole Roman emperor after he defeated the Eastern emperor Licinius in 323. At this point, his primary concern centered about how to unify the empire under his authority. With this aim, he embraced Christianity as a unifying force, staked everything he had on its support, and began to use it for his own purposes. Was Constantine’s conversion genuine? This question has long been a subject of debate and speculation. Gibbon described Constantine’s conversion as follows:⁴

In one of the marches of Constantine, he is reported to have seen with his own eyes the luminous trophy of the cross, placed above the meridian sun, and inscribed

⁴Gibbon, 1845, Volume II, p. 175.
with the following words: BY THIS CONQUER. This amazing object in the sky astonished the whole army, as well as the emperor himself, who was yet undetermined in the choice of a religion: but his astonishment was converted into faith by the vision of the ensuing night. Christ appeared before his eyes; and displaying the same celestial sign of the cross, he directed Constantine to frame a similar standard, and to march, with an assurance of victory, against Maxentius and all his enemies.

Gibbon later (correctly) pointed out that:5

The Protestant and philosophic readers of the present age will incline to believe, that in the account of his own conversion, Constantine attested a wilful falsehood by a solemn and deliberate perjury.

Michael Grant has the following to say regarding Constantine’s motivations:6

The emperor’s motives have been endlessly analyzed and discussed. But it appears that he and his advisors experienced a growing conviction that, however un-influential the Christians might be at present, the course of events was working, or could be made to work, in their favor — since they alone possessed the universal aims and efficient, coherent organization that, in the long run, could unite the various conflicting peoples and classes of the empire in a single, all-embracing harmony which was “Catholic,” that is to say, universal.

Although Grant does not attribute Constantine’s sole motivation to such cold and calculating logic as this quote seems to indicate, he correctly points out that if Christianity had not served Constantine then Constantine would undoubtedly have not served Christianity (if, in fact, he did serve Christianity.)

Although Constantine’s motivations may be questionable, it appears that he recognized the power of the God of the Christians. His decision to march against Rome’s 175,000 troops with his own 40,000 troops seems to have been based at least in part upon his belief that the Christian God was on his side. Further, he had noticed that the Eastern empire, while persecuting Christians, had been in constant turmoil, whereas the Western empire, which was not actively persecuting Christians at that time, had been enjoying an era of relative peace and prosperity. His belief that God would make him victorious and his subsequent victory seems to have greatly influenced his future attitude toward Christianity. It is interesting at this point to note the following comment by Michael Grant:7

Constantine always felt a strong, impulsive need for a divine companion and sponsor. For a time the Sun god, whose worship was ancestral in his family, had been his choice. But although this deity continued to be depicted on the coins until 318–319, Constantine had already disclosed, at the time of the Edict of Mediolanum, his own personal adherence to Christianity; and the One Supreme Power, to whom the literature and inscriptions of the time made numerous vague allusions, was identified, more and more explicitly, with Jesus.

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5Gibbon, 1845, Volume II, p. 176.
7Grant, p. 409.
Constantine not only ended the persecution of Christianity but he began to treat Christianity as though it were a state religion which, in fact, it later became. He authorized state money to be used for the construction of elaborate church buildings. Constantine’s favoritism of the church, however, seems to have resulted more from expediency than conviction. He saw the church as a center of unity and culture with which he could preserve the empire. His lack of conviction is evidenced by the facts that he had his son, Crispus, put to death, his wife, Fausta, put to death, and he retained his position as the chief priest of the pagan state religion. Ramsay Macmullen wrote the following with regard to Constantine’s view of Christianity:

Few of the essential elements of Christian belief interested Constantine very much — neither God’s mercy nor man’s sinfulness, neither damnation nor salvation, neither brotherly love nor, needless to say, humility. Ardent in his convictions, he remained nevertheless oblivious to their moral implications.

Alistair Kee described Constantine’s attitude toward religion as follows:

[His attitude toward religion] played an important part in his ambition to conquer and unify the Empire. His religious policy flowed from his own personal religion. Religion played a part in his imperial policies. This guided not only his beneficence towards the church but also his intervention in the internal affairs of the church. Religion was too important to his strategy to leave in the hands of the ecclesiastics.

A.4  Constantine’s Impact on the Church

Was Constantine a positive influence on the Church? Alistair Kee makes the following point with regard to this question:

Because of his relationship to the church, Constantine was able to influence it and Christianity at a profound level. We must now consider how Constantine’s values infiltrated the church: not how he was converted to Christianity, but how through his religious policy he succeeded in converting Christianity to his position.

Kee states later that “the values of Constantine replaced the values of Christ within Christianity” and that “Christianity was enlisted in his own personal crusade to gain control of the Empire and in the process Christianity was transformed.” The Roman empire’s embrace of Christianity seems to have been initiated by Constantine merely as an act of political expediency and unfounded superstition. Neither Constantine nor the empire acknowledged the moral or philosophical demands which that embrace logically demanded. In fact, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that the Roman empire’s embrace of Christianity did more to damage the

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Church than did the earlier persecutions. Persecution, in a sense, allowed the Church to remain “pure” by effectively excluding anyone not willing to face death for his or her beliefs. Alistair Kee mirrors these thoughts when he states:  

Only a sadist would wish that persecution continue in the church, only a masochist welcome it, and yet suffering seemed an inescapable experience for early Christians. ... [T]he history of the church till the fourth century was of random and often intensive persecution. Whenever the Emperor or the traditions of the Empire seemed threatened, it was open season on persecuting Christians. And yet this tiny minority, insignificant, weak and defenceless, not only survived but grew. ... To Christians ... it was not at all incredible that persecution could actually strengthen the church: it brought precisely the experience in which God was made known to them in strength. The later Roman influence effectively weakened the Church from within.

Currell and Hurlbut quote Latourette as follows in this regard:  

Under Imperial favor the Church experienced a rapid growth. Many who thronged into it did so from expediency, rather than deep religious conviction, and the moral and spiritual quality of the Christian community suffered.

The marriage of Rome and the church was an adulterous one and the resulting offspring matured into Roman Catholicism. Although it is both common and, in an initial sense, understandable to treat Constantine as a great champion and benefactor of the Church, a close examination reveals that his influence was far from beneficial. F. W. Mattox described Constantine’s influence as follows:  

Out of respect to Constantine for the favors he showed, the church gave up her independence and began to rely upon the head of the state for its organization and authority. The leaders seemed too concerned with present problems to see the danger in these developments.

Alistair Kee described Constantine’s influence by stating:  

The fundamental issue is not whether Constantine called himself a Christian or not, but how he actually used Christianity and how, in the course of using it, he transformed it into something completely different. ... [I]n gathering up lines of thought often already present in the church and developing them in a certain way, they combined to effect something which had never been accomplished hitherto, the replacement of the norms of Christ and the early church by the norms of the imperial ideology. Why it has been previously thought that Constantine was a Christian is not because what he believed was Christian, but because what he believed came to be called Christian.

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Finally, the following excerpt, also from Dr. Kee’s book, provides a sobering lesson in the dangers of compromise. The argument that Constantine never accepted Christ leads to the logical conclusion that the church of his day, in embracing Rome, rejected Christ. (Did Rome become more like the Church or did the Church become more like Rome after Constantine? Ask a Roman Catholic.) After commenting upon the strength that the Christians had obtained through their persecution and suffering he notes:17

![17Kee, 1982, pp. 155–156.](image-url)