REVELATION

A Shorter Commentary

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G. K. Beale

with David H. Campbell

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Preface

In 1999 Eerdmans published my commentary titled *The Book of Revelation* in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series. Since the publication of the commentary I have heard continual requests that I write a shorter commentary on Revelation that would be more accessible for pastors, students, and Christians in general. So, after fourteen years I have decided to respond to these requests. The present "shorter" commentary on Revelation is the result. G. K. Chesterton once remarked, "Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his own commentators" (*Orthodoxy* [New York: John Lane, 1908; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995], 21-22). It is my hope that Chesterton would not include my 1999 commentary nor this "shorter" one in this assessment.

When embarking on the task of commentary writing, one often asks oneself whether it is really necessary to write another commentary. In the case of Revelation, I believed back in the late 1980s there was still a need for a commentary which did the following things: (1) study the Old Testament allusions in a more trenchant manner than previously; (2) study how Jewish exegetical tradition interpreted these same Old Testament allusions and how such interpretation related to the use in Revelation; (3) trace more precisely the exegetical argument in Revelation, which some say is difficult to do because of the sometimes ambiguous nature of visionary literature; (4) interact with the vast amount of secondary literature published since the time of the monumental commentaries by Charles and Swete in the early part of the twentieth century. My intention in writing the commentary was to provide an exegesis of Revelation that would be especially helpful to scholars, teachers, pastors, students, and others seriously interested

in interpreting Revelation for the benefit of the church. This was also a commentary on the Greek text of Revelation, though I usually provided English translation in parentheses after Greek words or phrases in order that those who were not proficient in Greek would nevertheless be able to benefit from reading the commentary.

However, in this shorter commentary I have for the most part eliminated references to Greek, references to secondary literature, and references to and discussion of Jewish interpretations of OT passages that are used in Revelation. Accordingly, there are ideas in this commentary for which there are no references to primary and secondary literature. Those references appear in the longer commentary, which can be consulted by those wanting more substantiation of what I say here. Ultimately, the longer commentary serves as one big footnote to this shorter commentary. Nevertheless, I have kept a focus on discussion of many of the OT allusions that were included in the original, though without most of the Greek verbal basis for the allusions. I have also preserved most of the important exegetical argument throughout Revelation

The most obvious difference is that this shorter commentary is much "shorter" than the original. The small font single-space excurses have been cut out from the original commentary and the essential content and argument from each chapter have been preserved in revised form. Some nuances of interpretation and options in the interpretation of problem texts have not been kept; the focus is now on the most probable interpretive alternatives.

I have not attempted to interact with secondary literature published since the appearance of my commentary in 1999, since my intent has been even to cut out most of the secondary literature references from the original. Indeed, this shorter commentary is "longer" than most shorter commentaries, and to have tried to engage much of the secondary literature published since 1999 would have only made it longer yet. Furthermore, while some of my interpretations of particular passages would be influenced by some of this subsequently published material, my overall argument and the essential substance of the commentary would not be significantly altered. Finally, engaging with subsequent secondary literature would not be suitable for the purpose of this shorter commentary: to make my first commentary more accessible to pastors, students, and Christians in general.

A special word to preachers and teachers: the full-sentence titles at the beginning of each major section or subsection of the commentary

represent the exegetical conclusions of that section and can serve as the basis of homiletical ideas. And for all readers of this shorter commentary, in addition to my longer commentary in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series (1999), I recommend the following commentaries and other works on Revelation as particularly helpful. Some are serious works of scholarship and some are more popular works.

Richard J. Bauckham. *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation.* Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993.

———. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

G. B. Caird. *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine.* London: A. and C. Black; New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

Colin J. Hemer. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting.* Sheffield: JSOT, 1986.

William Hendriksen. *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962.

Alan F. Johnson. *Revelation.* Expositor's Bible Commentary 12; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, 397-603. Published separately, 1996.

Dennis E. Johnson. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation.* Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001.

Martin Kiddle, with M. K. Ross. *The Revelation of St. John.* Moffatt New Testament Commentary; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940.

R. H. Mounce. *The Book of Revelation.* New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.

Grant R. Osborne. *Revelation.* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002.

Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation.* Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000.

Stephen S. Smalley. *The Revelation of John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979.

J. P. M. Sweet. *Revelation.* Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1979.

M. Wilcock. *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975.

I am especially thankful to David Campbell in encouraging me and helping me to produce this shorter commentary. He aided me in deciding what to preserve from each chapter of the original and he put it into an

initial revised form, which I then revised. This would have been a much longer project and may have never been finished if it were not for David's labors. Nevertheless, I am responsible for the final form of this shorter commentary.

A few comments about some stylistic aspects of the commentary are in order. The New American Standard Bible is the default translation; where there are differences, it is the result of my own translation. Pronouns for God and Christ are capitalized in keeping with the style of the NASB. In general references to the Septuagint I refer to the eclectic Greek text of the Rahlfs edition, and sometimes I have used a text dependent only on Codex B (= *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha with an English Translation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], published by special arrangement by Samuel Bagster and Sons, London). When the Rahlfs Greek edition differs in chapter or verse numbering from the Greek-English Bagster edition (codex B), I always place the Rahlfs reference first and then that of the Bagster edition in parentheses or brackets. For example, in Daniel 4 and parts of Exodus (especially chs. 35–40) and Job (especially chs. 40–41) versification is different between the different printed editions of the LXX, including the Rahlfs edition and the Bagster edition. Such a stylistic convention will enable those not knowing Greek to follow the Septuagint in a readily available English edition even in those places where it differs in versification from the standard Greek edition of Rahlfs. In addition, in Daniel I sometimes use "LXX" to refer to the Old Greek version (and sometimes I merely refer to "OG" or "Old Greek") and "Theod." to refer to Theodotion's translation, which is in accordance with Rahlfs's system. Now there is also available the *New English Translation of the Septuagint,* edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), where dual translations of the Greek OT may be found (for example, Daniel's Old Greek and Daniel's Theodotion).

G. K. Beale

Preface

I would like to thank Professor G. K. Beale for the privilege of working with him in this effort, in the hope that it will make his original commentary accessible to a much wider audience. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of my former pastoral intern David S. Balmford, who meticulously checked for accuracy every one of the thousands of biblical references and offered many helpful suggestions toward improving the readability of the text. Thanks also to my friend Chris Homans for holding me to deadlines. I am grateful for the support of the elders and congregation of Trinity Christian Church for their willing release of the time needed to complete this project. I am thankful for the support of my children, Katie (Josh), Anna (Chris), Michael, John, Rachel, Sarah, Julia, and James. Finally and most of all, I give thanks for the gift of my wife Elaine, without whose support and encouragement for the last thirty years I would be utterly lost.

David H. Campbell

Abbreviations

1QH	Qumran Hymn Scroll
ASV	American Standard Version
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979.
BECNT	Baker's Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CD	Qumran Damascus Document
ESV	English Standard Version
HR	E. Hatch and H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament* I-III. Graz: Akademische, 1954.
JB	Jerusalem Bible
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV	King James (Authorized) Version
LXX	Septuagint
mg.	marginal reading
MM	J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930.
MNTC	The Moffatt New Testament Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NETB	New English Translation Bible
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary

NIV	New International Version
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NT	New Testament
NTA	*New Testament Apocrypha* I-II, ed. W. Schneemelcher. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1991, 1992.
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OG	Old Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures
OT	Old Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
Theod.	Theodotion's Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures

Introduction

1. General Introduction

One of the great tragedies in the church in our day is how Revelation has been so narrowly and incorrectly interpreted with an obsessive focus on the future end time, with the result that we have missed the fact that it contains many profound truths and encouragements concerning Christian life and discipleship. The prophetic visions of Revelation can easily disguise the point that it was written as a letter to the churches, and a letter which is pastoral in nature. The goal of Revelation is to bring encouragement to believers of all ages that God is working out His purposes even in the midst of tragedy, suffering, and apparent Satanic domination. It is the Bible's battle cry of victory, for in it, more than anywhere else in the NT, is revealed the final victory of God over all the forces of evil. As such, it is an encouragement to God's people to persevere in the assurance that their final reward is certain and to worship and glorify God despite trials and despite temptations to march to the world's drumbeat.

It is difficult to understand Revelation without understanding the OT. John identifies himself as a prophet (1:3) in the line of the OT prophets, speaking the word of the Lord in both judgment and promise. Scholars estimate that as many as 278 out of 404 verses in Revelation contain references to the OT and that over five hundred allusions to OT texts are made in total (compared with less than two hundred in all of Paul's letters). These are allusions (though quite recognizable) rather than direct quotations. For instance, what John sees in 1:12-18 is the same as what Daniel saw in his vision of the Son of man and what Isaiah spoke of in his prophecy concerning the Servant of the Lord whose mouth is like a sharpened sword

(for references see below). These allusions show the unity of the OT and NT and in particular demonstrate that the promise of the Messiah and His suffering, salvation, and victory are the same from the beginning to the end of the Bible and of human history. A quick look at just some of the OT allusions in the first chapter will illustrate our point. In 1:5 John alludes to Ps. 89:27; in 1:6 to Exod. 19:6; in 1:7 to Zech. 12:10; in 1:13-15 to Dan. 7:13-14 and 10:5-6; in 1:15 to Ezek. 1:24; and in 1:16 to Isa. 49:2.

OT prophecy called the people to a renewal of commitment to God and His law and to turn away from the pagan practices tempting them to compromise. When Revelation is thus understood as both prophetic and pastoral in nature, it becomes immediately relevant to each of us as we walk through its pages in our daily pilgrimage through the desert place of the world, where God is protecting us until He delivers us into the Promised Land of the final new creation. Much of the book becomes a commentary on Paul's teaching on spiritual warfare in Eph. 6:10-17. Every day we are to put on the armor of God and stand against the schemes of the evil one until the day when, having done all, we will stand forever in the Lord's presence. Most of all, we can be encouraged by the promise John's great vision holds out that this story will end in the triumph of God and the Lamb and that we will find our place reigning with them and worshiping them for all eternity.

2. Authorship

Revelation is the record of a prophetic vision given to a man called John in exile on the island of Patmos. The author identifies himself as John, a servant of God who bears witness to Jesus Christ and who is exiled for his faith (1:1, 9). He was either the apostle John or another man of the same name. He was well known to all the churches of Asia and carried sufficient authority that he could write a letter of this nature to these churches and expect it to be heeded. He was a leader of enough prominence that he had been exiled by the authorities, who must have considered him a threat. The way in which he uses the OT and its Hebrew text demonstrates that he was originally a Jew from Palestine rather than a native Greek-speaker. Nevertheless, John also knew his Greek OT quite well and used it adeptly. It is highly unlikely that another John, originally a Jew from Palestine but otherwise unknown to us, lived and worked among the churches of Asia and carried such a level of authority. Thus, the apostle John was likely the author of this book. Added to this is the fact that many of the themes we

particularly associate with John's Gospel and letters — Jesus as the Word, the Lamb and the Shepherd, manna, living water, life and light, conquering, keeping the word and the commands of God, and others — also appear in Revelation. Revelation was preserved and circulated in the early church, was considered authoritative, and was believed from the earliest times to have been written by the apostle John. Particularly significant is the testimony of Irenaeus. Though he wrote about 180, Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who was martyred in 156, having been a Christian for eighty-six years, and who personally knew John. We can presume with confidence that this letter is indeed a record of a vision given to the beloved disciple, now an old man, at the very close of the New Testament period.

3. Date of Writing

John wrote to churches that had experienced an occasional localized persecution (2:3, 13; 3:8-9), which does not fit with the severe persecution under Nero in A.D. 64-65. The church at Ephesus, founded around 52, had been around long enough to have lost its first love (2:4). The Laodicean church is called rich (3:17), but Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake in 60-61 and would have taken many years to recover. Early Christian writers, including Irenaeus, held that John received his vision during the reign of Domitian (81-96), and it was during that reign that a cult of emperor worship was established at Ephesus and some form of persecution broke out against the church. Our study will show that the Christians to whom John was writing were being forced to participate in this imperial cult (see on 2:9, 13-14; 13:15). From about 100, the usual basis for charges against Christians was their refusal to worship the emperor. Judaism enjoyed certain freedoms under Roman law, including the right to worship in synagogues and some degree of exemption from the imperial cult. However, as Christians became identified as a separate group from Jews, such privileges would not have been extended to them. It seems from Revelation that some Jewish Christians were tempted to flee persecution by returning to the synagogue and that Gentile Christians were tempted to avoid persecution by giving in to the demands of emperor worship. In Asia Minor, where the churches addressed in Revelation were located, the demands of emperor worship were particularly strong from about 90 onward. People were even required to participate in sacrifices as ritual processions passed their homes. The impetus for this cult seems to have come more from local

and provincial officials seeking to ingratiate themselves with Rome than from the emperor himself. Their attempts to make themselves look good depended on their ability to force the local population to support the cult enthusiastically, and detractors had to be punished. In Revelation Rome, along with other kingdoms, is identified with Babylon, yet Jews never referred to Rome as Babylon until after the destruction of the temple in 70, comparing that destruction with the similar destruction carried out by the Babylonians many centuries before. The evidence, therefore, seems to indicate that Revelation was written sometime shortly after 90, when John the apostle would have been an old man.

4. The Nature of the Book

Revelation combines aspects of three different kinds of writing — apocalyptic, prophecy, and epistle. The word "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek word for "revelation" and can refer to literature concerned with detailing events of the end times. Many apocalyptic books were written before, during, and after the time of the NT, most coming from Jewish circles rather than from Christians. Some scholars dismiss Revelation as just another of these wild and fanciful portrayals of the last days.

Though there are many definitions of apocalyptic, it is best to understand apocalyptic as an intensification of prophecy. Too much distinction has typically been drawn between apocalyptic and prophetic kinds of works. Indeed, some OT books combined the two to one degree or another. "Apocalyptic" should not be seen as greatly different from "prophecy," but the former contains a heightening and more intense clustering of literary and thematic traits found in the latter. What is sometimes heightened in apocalyptic literature is the origin of the revelation (that is, visions of God's throne, descriptions of His glorious appearance, angels around the throne, descriptions of the heavenly temple in which the throne is located, etc.). That this is above all the case in Revelation is borne out by the further description of this book as a "prophecy" in 1:3, as well as in 22:6-7, 10, where verbatim parallels with 1:1, 3 are found (which is indicated further by observing reference to "prophets" in 22:6; see further on 1:1). In addition, "apocalypse" in 1:1 is a direct allusion to Daniel 2, where the word refers to the prophetic revelation communicated from God to the prophet Daniel (see on 1:1). In this sense, Revelation is best seen as fitting into the genre of OT prophetic-apocalyptic works, especially those of Eze-

kiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. Accordingly, throughout the book there are repeated visions of God's heavenly throne room and His appearance there.

John thus sees himself in the line of the OT prophets, albeit those prophets who, like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, have a specific interest in the end times. The interests of these prophets was both in *forth-telling* exhortations to apply to people in the present and in *foretelling* the future. As noted above, Revelation as an apocalyptic-prophetic work focuses more on the source of revelation than does prophetic literature. The origin of revelation is the throne room of God in the heavenly temple. This is a feature that forms a part of prophetic genre (e.g., Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1–2), but in Revelation it becomes the dominating focus in order to underscore the divine, heavenly source of the revelation sent to the seven churches. There is also emphasis on this heavenly perspective so that the churches will be reminded that real spiritual struggles are going on behind the scenes of what appear to be insignificant earthly appearances or events. Indeed, the reason for addressing churches through their representative angels is to remind them that they have already begun to participate in a heavenly dimension and that their real and eternal home is in that dimension of the new heavens and earth (see on 4:4; 21:1–22:5), inaugurated through Christ's death and resurrection (see on 3:14). Such a reminder should motivate them not to place their ultimate security in the old world, as do unbelieving, idolatrous "earth-dwellers" (see on 6:17 for discussion). The focus on the heavenly perspective also makes the churches aware that their victory over the threat of idolatrous compromise comes ultimately from the heavenly sphere, where the Lamb and God sitting on the throne are centrifugal forces exerting their power on earth through the Spirit. The "lamps" of the Spirit give power to the ecclesiastical "lampstands" to shine their light of witness throughout the earth (see on 1:4, 12-13; 4:5; 5:6). One of the ways the church is to remember this heavenly perspective is by modeling its worship on the heavenly liturgy communicated in the apocalyptic vision (see on 4:4).

The apocalyptic-prophetic nature of Revelation can be defined as God's revelatory interpretation (through visions and auditions) of His mysterious counsel about past, present, and future redemptive-eschatological history, and how the nature and operation of heaven relates to this. This revelation irrupts from the hidden, outer heavenly dimension into the earthly and is given to a prophet (John), who is to write it down in order that it be communicated to the churches. The heavenly revelation usually runs counter to the assessment of history and values from the human, earthly perspective and therefore demands that people change and realign

their views with the heavenly view. In this respect, people in the churches are exhorted to submit to the demands of the book's message, or else face judgment. John's readers live in a worldly culture which makes sin seem normal and righteousness appear strange (with acknowledgment to David Wells for this definition of "worldliness"). In particular, John writes because he perceives there is a real danger that the churches will conform to what are considered the "normal" values of the world-system rather than to God's transcendent truth. In the light of the overall above discussion, the pressure of imminent persecution, which already had commenced on a small scale, was the probable specific occasion which caused the readers/hearers to entertain thoughts of compromise.

The focus of the revelation John received from God is how the church is to conduct itself in the midst of an ungodly world. The heavenly revelation gives an entirely different perspective from that offered by the world. Believers are faced with the choice of lining their lives and conduct up with one perspective or the other, and their eternal destiny depends on that choice. As our study progresses, we will see that the events of the book deal with the real-life situation of the church in every age, not just that of the end-time future. Believers are always facing the threat of compromise in one form or another. They must submit to the message as John has brought it, or face God's judgment. How sad it is when the study of Revelation in today's church regards it merely as futurology rather than setting in place a redemptive-historical mindset or worldview for the church! In fact, from the very beginning (1:3), Revelation describes itself as a prophecy. And, as in the OT and as noted earlier, prophecy in Revelation involves both *forthtelling* exhortations for the present and *foretelling* of the future.

Not only this, but Revelation is also written as an epistle, a letter to the seven churches, in which instruction on godly living is given to the believers who received it. It begins and ends as a typical letter would. Like the other NT letters, Revelation addresses the situation and problems of the believers who receive it. John appeals to them, on the basis of all they have in Christ and all they will yet inherit not to forsake the faith by compromising with the world. Not only the specific addresses of chs. 1–3 but also the visions of chs. 4–21 convey truth and direction from God as to the nature of the battle raging in the heavenlies and how believers are to respond to this battle, not at some undetermined date in the future but in their lives here and now, and to do so not simply by an intellectual belief that events will unfold in a particular way but by concrete moral choices on the basis of the issues God faces them with in the present.

5. The Four Ways of Interpreting Revelation

Over the course of church history, there have been four main schools of thought on how to interpret Revelation:

The Preterist View. The word "preterist" refers to the past. This view holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and that everything in the book has already been fulfilled — and hence is "past." But we have seen, it is unlikely that Revelation was even written until some years later than the fall of Jerusalem. On the preterist view, "Babylon" represents rebellious Israel, which persecutes the church. "Babylon," however, is never used in ancient Jewish or Christian literature to refer to unbelieving or disobedient Israel, but rather to Rome. The prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7, alluded to throughout Revelation, speak of an end-time judgment of the pagan nations (as does Rev. 1:7), not of Israel. Daniel also says that the end-time judgment is to be universal, not just involving one nation. Finally, the book becomes irrelevant for anyone who lives after those first days of the church. Why would God include it in the Bible at all? A variation of this view is that "Babylon" refers to the Roman Empire and that the prophecies in the book were completely fulfilled when that empire was destroyed in the fifth century. This deals with some of the objections yet leaves the question as to how the universal end-times judgment of all nations pictured in Revelation could possibly fit with the gradual decay and eventual collapse of destruction of the Roman Empire. Further, the book would have become less relevant to believers following that event.

The Historicist View. The historicist view suggests that the seals, trumpets, and bowls paint a picture of the successive ages of the church. It sees the symbolism of Revelation as referring to a series of specific historical events (always in the history of the western or European church), such as the collapse of the Roman Empire, the corruption of the papacy, the Reformation, and various events since. Christ's return is always seen as imminent by the person interpreting the book. The problem is that each historicist interpreter views the book differently, so as to make it fit the realities of his or her own age, which is always seen as the final one before the Lord's return. This view illustrates the danger of trying to make the symbols of Revelation refer to specific historical events, without any justification from the book itself for such an interpretation. Nowhere does

Revelation indicate, for example, that the order of seals, trumpets, and bowls represent the chronological order of western church history. Finally, this view appears to have no relevance for Christians outside the western church, nor would it have had much relevance for those to whom it was originally written. As we proceed, we will see that the seals, trumpets, and bowls portray not a chronological sequence of events but the same set of events unfolded from different perspectives.

The Futurist View. The futurist view holds that the entire book, apart from the letters to the churches in chs. 1–3, prophesies events surrounding the return of Christ at the end of history. This view takes two forms. Dispensational futurism (or classic dispensationalism) interprets the visions very literally and chronologically as referring to events of history. Generally the order of the visions in chs. 4–21 is seen as representing the actual historical order of events to happen in the yet-future latter days. Israel is restored to its own land immediately prior to 4:1. Then events unfold in the following order: the church is raptured into heaven, there is a seven-year tribulation, the reign of the antichrist begins, the nations gather together to make war against Jerusalem, Christ returns and defeats the nations, Christ rules during the millennium, Satan gathers together unbelievers at the end of the millennium to fight against Christ, and Christ defeats the devil and begins His eternal reign in heaven. But there is no mention in Revelation of the geographical restoration of Israel to its land, nor of any rapture of the church. Interpreters holding this view are constantly changing their interpretation of historical events to make what is happening currently fit into the pattern. In the twentieth century alone, for instance, numerous individuals, from Hitler to Saddam Hussein, with various popes and other politicians (as has been the case from the medieval period up to the present), have been identified as the antichrist, and then quietly discarded when they pass from the scene. The same is true with specific historical events or institutions (the Second World War, the European Common Market, the Gulf War, Y2K, Saddam Hussein's supposed rebuilding of Babylon). In short, the Bible is interpreted by modern events first, instead of by itself. This view makes Revelation of relevance or value only to Christians living in the last days. As it also generally promotes the view that the church will be raptured out of the world before any of these events happen, it is irrelevant even to these believers, in which case there seems little reason why God would have given John the vision in the first place. Remember, this book was written

to the "seven churches," which represents the church universal throughout the ages (see on 1:4). Progressive dispensationalism holds similarly to the above unfolding of events but maintains a looser approach (e.g., the "latter days" began during the church age, and many of the visions are interpreted symbolically and not literally). Modified futurism takes various forms, some affirming that the church is true Israel and that there will be no "pretribulation rapture." Rather, Christians will pass through the final period of trial. Most if not all events recorded in chs. 4–22 refer to a final period of tribulation and to succeeding events (though some hold that 4:1–8:1 covers the period from Christ's resurrection up to the end of history). This still leaves other difficulties of interpretation, including the fact that the book would have had less relevance for Christians of most ages than for those believers living later in the purported future fulfillment of Revelation's visions.

The Redemptive-Historical Idealist View. The idealist view sees the entire book as a symbolic presentation of the battle between good and evil. The seals, bowls, and trumpets speak over and over again to the events of human history in every age and give believers of all ages an exhortation to remain faithful in the face of suffering (hence "redemptive-historical"). We believe this view is substantially correct but must be modified in light of the fact that parts of Revelation do definitely refer to future end-time events concerning the return of Christ, His final defeat of the enemy, and the establishment of His heavenly kingdom. Many of the events prophesied speak equally to the life of the church in all generations, excluding those particular events dealing with the very end of history and the return of Christ. Preterists and historicists are to some extent correct in understanding that various parts of John's vision find a measure of fulfillment in actual historical events. The fact is, however, that their meaning is not linked exclusively to those particular events, for Revelation finds fulfillment in countless events throughout the church age.

As such, the message of the letter is of relevance and value to all believers of all ages, which is why the vision was given to John. We might call this an *eclectic* redemptive-historical idealist view, since, while the focus is on a symbolic presentation of the battle between good and evil and on specific repeated historical events during the church age, aspects of the preterist, historicist, and futurist views are incorporated (hence "eclectic"). As we unfold the outline of the book, the reasons we adopt this view will hopefully become apparent.

6. Revelation — Symbolic or Literal?

One of the great arguments over the interpretation of Revelation is whether it is to be taken symbolically or literally. Those taking a futurist view too often tend to a literal interpretation, in which the various people or events portrayed are so different and even shocking they could not possibly refer to anything known thus far in human history. But is such an interpretation justified? One of the keys to a correct interpretation of Revelation lies in its very first verse, which introduces and sets the tone for the entire book.

The Greek verb *sēmainō* is used in Rev. 1:1 to indicate the manner of God's revelation to John: "the Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and *communicated it (sēmainō)* by His angel to His bond-servant John." Various English translations render this Greek word as "communicated" (NASB), "made known" (RSV, NIV, JB, ESV, NEB), "signified" (KJV, ASV, Douay, NASB mg. reading), and "made clear" (NETB).

The word *sēmainō* elsewhere in the NT and in Hellenistic Greek can have any of these meanings. "Made clear" is unusual, but the notion of "symbolize, signify, communicate by symbols," is not untypical. For instance, in classical Greek the word could have the idea of giving signals, as in "giving the signal" for a military attack to begin. In this respect, it is significant to recall that the related noun is *sēmeion,* which means "sign" and which the NT uses for Jesus' miracles as "signs" or "symbols" of His divine power (e.g., healing the lame man in Mark 2 was symbolic of Jesus' ability to forgive sin; feeding the multitudes in John 6 was symbolic of His ability to give and nourish spiritual life).

The word in Rev. 1:1 could mean merely "make known" or "communicate," and thus refer to a general idea of communication, not a symbolic mode of communication, as it often does in the ancient world. The fact, however, that Rev. 1:1 is an allusion to Dan. 2:28-29, 45 confirms that here the word does mean "symbolize."

John speaks here of four critical elements:

(i) a revelation
(ii) God showed
(iii) concerning what will come to pass
(iv) and He signified it (Greek *sēmainō*)

The source of John's statement is to be found in Dan. 2:28-30, 45 (the account of Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream concerning the statue), the only other place in the Bible where these same four elements occur, the first three in vv. 28 and 29 and the fourth in v. 45 at the conclusion of the dream's interpretation:

(i) God reveals mysteries
(ii) which He has shown
(iii) concerning what will take place
(iv) and these He has signified (Greek *sēmainō* in the Septuagint [LXX = OG], the main Greek translation of the Hebrew OT)

We need to summarize the context of Daniel 2, since John likely had in mind that wider context. In Dan. 2:45 in the LXX (= OG), *sēmainō* is used to describe the symbolic vision which King Nebuchadnezzar had: "the Great God has *symbolized* to the king what will come to pass in the latter days" ("symbolized" is a rendering of an Aramaic verb which has the default meaning "know" and in the causative form "make known"). This refers to a dream-vision that the king had. He saw a huge statue composed of four sections of different metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. The statue is smashed by a rock which grows and fills the earth. Daniel tells the king that this vision was symbolic. The statue was to be divided into four metallic sections symbolizing four kingdoms (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome). The stone that smashed the statue represented God's kingdom, which would defeat the evil kingdoms of the world and dominate the world. The interpretation of the dream shows that the dream is not to be taken literally in terms of a statue and its various parts, but rather that the statue signifies or symbolizes something else (i.e., the four sections of the statue symbolize four world kingdoms). In Rev. 1:1, John deliberately uses the language of "signify" from Dan. 2:45 in part to portray that what God has been showing him is likewise symbolic. Most of the things that are about to unfold are not to be taken literally (lions, lambs, beasts, women, etc.), but each refers symbolically to another reality or set of realities.

The symbolic use of *sēmainō* in Daniel 2 defines the use in Rev. 1:1 as referring to symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information. Therefore, John's choice of *sēmainō* ("signify") over *gnōrizō* ("make known") is not haphazard but intentional. This conclusion is based on the supposition that John uses OT references with significant degrees of awareness of OT context.

The nuance of "signify" or "symbolize" in Rev. 1:1b is also confirmed by its parallelism with "show" *(deiknymi)* in the first part of Rev. 1:1, since "show" throughout the book always introduces a divine communication by symbolic vision (4:1; 17:1; 21:9; 22:1, 6, 8). In fact, whatever generally synonymous word John could have chosen here instead of *sēmainō* (whether *gnōrizō* or other like terms) would still have the sense of "communicate by symbols," because that is the mode of communication in Daniel 2 and the mode of revelation conveyed by *deiknymi* elsewhere in the book.

In this light, the dictum of the popular approach to Revelation — "interpret literally unless you are forced to interpret symbolically" — should be turned on its head. Instead, the programmatic statement about the book's precise mode of communication in 1:1 is that the warp and woof of it is symbolic, so that the preceding dictum should be reversed to say "interpret symbolically unless you are forced to interpret literally." Better put, the reader is to expect that the main means of divine revelation in this book is symbolic.

Therefore, most of the things that are about to unfold are not to be taken literally (lions, lambs, beasts, women, etc.), but each refers symbolically to another reality or set of realities. In the very first verse of the book, therefore, John sets out the principle that the visions to be unfolded in the book have a predominantly symbolic meaning, which may have various historical references, rather than referring in a literal manner to a particular person, thing, or event. Many of the visions are impossible to take literally, as we note below and elsewhere in the commentary (see, for instance, on 9:19). We understand Revelation, therefore (at least, outside the letters to the seven churches in chs. 2 and 3), as a series of revelatory visions which are to be interpreted symbolically. Unless there is strong evidence in the text to the contrary, the visions (whether, for instance, those of the beast, the false prophet, the seven kings, the ten horns, the army of two hundred million, the twenty-four elders, or the millennium) are for the most part to be taken non-literally. This does not mean that they have no meaning or historical reference, but that the meaning is to be found symbolically — and almost always within the context of OT references which run through the visions God gave to John (on which see further the next section). There is always a literal meaning underlying the symbolic meaning, though this literal meaning is often about spiritual realities and sometimes about physical realities, both of which have to do with some kind of historical reality.

This means that we must distinguish between the vision given to John, what that vision symbolizes, and to what or whom the vision may

refer. For instance, the woman on the beast in ch. 17 symbolizes the ungodly world system (that is, its economic, cultural, and religious aspects combined together). This worldly system's values are opposed to God's values for His people. The mistake is to bypass the visionary and symbolic and go straight to a literal interpretation, according to which a literal woman on a beast, or something very much like that, is referred to. In that case, the text portrays something so strange and different from anything which has happened hitherto (as with the beast of ch. 13) that it must represent something yet to come. This kind of interpretation could turn Revelation into some kind of science fiction fantasy along the lines of an alien invasion film, which is bizarre, but unfortunately often set forth in popular portrayals. However, admittedly, few literal interpreters try to understand the woman on the beast in some crassly literal fashion. Nevertheless, some commentators take the falling of one-hundred-pound hail (Rev. 16:21) as literal, as well as attempting to interpret literally the fire coming from the mouth of the two faithful witnesses and devouring their enemies, so that their mouths become supernatural flame-throwers. The fact that John bases the plagues of chs. 8, 9, and 16 on the plagues of Exodus does not mean that these plagues are to be taken literally as equivalent to the Exodus plagues (in which case they are yet to come), but rather that they symbolize the judgment of God in various ways, the exact historical reference or references of which must be drawn out by examination of the context and the way in which they are alluded to. When this is seen, we no longer have to conclude that none of the events referred to have yet occurred and must refer to some future cataclysm. This opens up a far broader sphere of interpretation.

John does, however, occasionally explicitly identify something he has seen in a vision, such as when he says that the lampstands are to be identified with the churches (1:20). In that case, we are fairly confident that wherever lampstands occur, they must refer to the churches. But otherwise, we must search the context and the OT (see again below) for the symbolic meaning referred to, and then proceed cautiously to identify any historical reference or references. The impossibility of interpreting literally most of the things seen in the various visions is shown by the fact they are often expressed in a way impossible to understand in a literal manner. For instance, John speaks not only of the lampstands being the churches (see 1:20), but identifies the two lampstands and two olive trees with the two witnesses (11:3-4, on which see for how this correlates with the original identification of the lampstands with the churches). His visions speak of

horses with the heads of lions, out of whose mouths come fire, smoke, and brimstone, and whose tails are like serpents with heads (9:17-18). He speaks of locusts which look like horses, have crowns on their heads yet have the faces of men, the hair of women, the teeth of lions, and breastplates of iron (9:7-9). He speaks of the lamb, standing though slain, with seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), and of the mysterious living creatures full of eyes, with six wings, and having the appearance of a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle (4:6-8). None of these can be interpreted literally, outside of (as noted above) an understanding of Revelation as a strange work of science fiction.

Finally, there is the symbolic significance of numbers in Revelation. Three numbers — four, seven, and twelve, along with their multiples — feature repeatedly in the visions, and each is best interpreted in light of its OT significance. In view of the repeated and systematic use of these numbers, the Scriptural significance attached to them, and the overwhelmingly symbolic nature of the pictorial images in the book (as noted above), it is clear that the numbers in Revelation are also to be interpreted symbolically. The first number in the book is clearly symbolic, and it sets the pattern for the others to be likewise interpreted symbolically. In Rev. 1:4 reference is made to "the seven Spirits who are before His [God's] throne." Some commentators try to take this literally and say that there were seven angels or spirit beings around God's throne. However, it is clear that the reference is to the Holy Spirit, since God has just been mentioned in the preceding wording ("Him who is and who was and who is to come"), and then Jesus is mentioned in the following verse (v. 5). Thus, the book is "from" God the Father, the Spirit, and Jesus. Why refer to the Spirit by the phrase "the seven Spirits"? It is to highlight the fact that the fullness of the Spirit is being emphasized, since "seven" in the OT and elsewhere in Revelation figuratively refers to completeness or fullness. The reason for this is that it is rooted in the seven days of creation. The OT uses seven often in this connection (for instance, Gen. 4:15, 24 and Ps. 79:12 refer to the sevenfold anger of God, expressing His full or complete anger which satisfies His justice). The tabernacle had seven lamps because Israel's earthly temple and its furniture were the microcosmic copy of the archetypal heavenly temple of God, and the number symbolized the fact that God's dwelling was intended to be extended throughout the earth.

The number four was also used in the OT and other Jewish literature to express completeness. The four rivers of Gen. 2:10-14 referred to the totality of creation. The tribes of Israel were divided into four groups in

the wilderness, and each group was located at one of the four points of the compass. In Revelation, four is used with reference to the worldwide or universal scope of something, as in the earth's four corners (see Rev. 7:1; 20:8) or the four winds (7:1). The allusion to Exod. 19:16ff. ("lightnings, sounds and thunders"), appears at four critical points in Revelation (4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18) to express the universality of the final judgment.

The number twelve also represents completion, most notably in the fact the one nation Israel was composed of twelve tribes. Finally, ten can represent completeness, as in the ten commandments.

Revelation features seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, which are so numbered in order to underscore the completeness of God's worldwide judgment. The four corners of the earth are the particular targets of the first four trumpets and the first four bowls, expressing God's judgment over His creation. Names used of God and Christ ("the One who lives for ever and ever," "the Lord God Almighty," "the One who sits on the throne," "the Alpha and the Omega") are repeated in Revelation in patterns of four and seven, expressing God's complete rulership over the whole earth. The name "Christ" appears seven times, "Jesus" and "Spirit" fourteen times, and "Lamb" twenty-eight times. The "seven spirits" are mentioned four times, thus linking complete sovereignty and worldwide dominion. The number twelve is the number not only of Israel, as represented in the twelve tribes, but of the new Israel, as represented in the twelve apostles. Significantly, the number twelve occurs twelve times in the description of the new Jerusalem (21:9–22:5). Interestingly, "Babylon" appears six times, possibly to associate it with the number of the beast (666).

The symbolic use of numbers serves to express the sovereignty of God over all history. The repeated series of sevens (whether of letters, seals, trumpets, or bowls) form the structure of the book. Each sevenfold segment (even the letters) deals with the struggle of the forces of good and evil and concludes with the triumph of good and the victory of God. This underlines the sovereignty of God and His purposeful hand on all the events of human history. The overall figurative effect of this repeated complex patterning is that the reader is left with the impression of God's all-encompassing will being like an elaborate spiderweb in which Satan and his forces are caught. Though they attempt to free themselves from divine sovereignty, they cannot escape ultimate defeat. The repetition of the numbers highlights the idea that nothing is haphazard or accidental. The analogy of a chess game is also appropriate. The sacrificial move of Christ at the cross puts the devil in checkmate (deals him a mortal wound);

the devil continues to play the game of rebellion, but his defeat is assured. This is an important theme of John's vision, which seeks to assure believers going through difficult circumstances that God is with them and will faithfully bring them through to final victory.

7. The Significance of the Use of Symbols in Revelation

Given that Revelation is full of symbolism, why did God use such a possibly confusing way to speak His message? The answer is that John's use of symbols is very similar to Jesus' use of parables, which itself is rooted in the language and signs of the OT prophets. When asked by His disciples why He spoke in parables, Jesus turned to Isa. 6:9-10 and answered, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall more be given . . . but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand . . .' " (Matt. 13:11-14). The parables of Jesus served the same purpose as the language and signs of the OT prophets: He used them to get the attention of His believing listeners who had grown spiritually sleepy and might not have paid attention otherwise. But for unbelievers (including pseudo-believers), parables made no sense, and rejection of the parabolic message was simply a further evidence of the hardening of the heart which refuses to listen to God. In fact, one can say that when the prophets used parables in Israel, they were indicating that judgment was coming on the anesthetized majority, though a remnant would be shocked out of their spiritual malaise. How much more was this true of Jesus' use of parables?

The symbols of John serve the same point as the words of the prophets and the parables of Jesus. In fact, the sevenfold admonition to the churches, "He who has an ear, let him hear" (2:7, etc.), is based on Isa. 6:9-10 and its use in Matt. 13:11ff., and especially Matt. 13:9, "He who has an ear, let him hear," as well as a similar saying in Ezek. 3:27 ("He who hears, let him hear"). The repeated use of this phrase in the seven letters, along with its repetition in Rev. 13:9, shows that the symbolism of the visions functions in the same way as Jesus' parables. By their powerful and often shocking imagery, they open the eyes of true believers while leaving

hardened unbelievers in deeper darkness, though it is also true that some unbelievers are shocked into the faith for the first time through hearing the parabolic visions read. Many of the symbols reveal the Satanic power behind earthly institutions and practices with which they have become tempted to compromise. The symbols in Revelation immediately attract the attention of those who desire to follow Christ. We could almost say they have a kind of "shock value" because of their vividness and presentation of unusual and even extraordinary images. Unbelievers, however, will turn away in lack of comprehension in the same way they turned away from Jesus and His parables. It is interesting to note that the plagues in Exodus were signs understood by the Israelites as the judgment of God, yet only served to harden the Egyptians, who did not perceive their significance. It is no coincidence that these plagues form the heart of the trumpet and bowl visions. They harden the unbelievers while calling the believers to renewed faith. Jesus' comment about those who heard but did not understand His words is thus behind the seemingly strange saying of Jesus to John at the conclusion of his vision: John is the one who, like those listening to the parables, "heard and saw these things" (Rev. 22:8). Jesus tells him that the words of this prophecy are to remain open to all who will hear in times to come, but the same two responses will be made: "Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong . . . and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness" (v. 11). Jesus is not endorsing continuing in sin but merely prophesying the nature of the response to God's word.

If all this is true, it suggests further that the message of Revelation does not merely concern the unfolding of future events but uses present events, understood in a symbolic manner, to speak both a warning and an encouragement to believers to persevere in their commitment to Christ and to divorce themselves from any allegiance to the world system, which expresses the rule of the kingdom of darkness. The visions of chs. 4–21 are about the present, not just the future. We will illustrate this truth further in the commentary below.

8. Revelation and the Old Testament

Revelation has more allusions to the OT than all other books of the NT put together. It should be noted that these are allusions rather than direct quotations. Most, however, are either clear allusions, where the wording

is almost identical to an OT text, or probable allusions, where the wording is not quite as close but the idea is still directly and uniquely traceable to a text in the OT.

Some larger OT passages seem to serve as a pattern for similarly substantial portions of Revelation. For instance, patterns from Daniel 2 and 7 are found repeatedly in Revelation 1, 4, and 5. Sections of Ezekiel influence Revelation 4 and 5, as well as other passages, including most of ch. 6 and part of ch. 18. The earlier trumpet and bowl plagues (Rev. 8:6-12; 16:1-14) follow the pattern of the Exodus plagues (Exodus 7–14). Revelation also develops certain OT themes in a general way, examples being end-time judgment and salvation, Daniel's concept of the abomination of desolation, and the OT concept of earthquake as a sign of the end.

By far the greater number of allusions are uses in Revelation of an idea or phrase referring to a person, place, or event from an OT text. These simple allusions may be condensed or expanded and are obviously applied to different historical situations, but almost always an essential focus of the OT text is carried over such that there is a clear continuity between the OT and Revelation. The following are some examples, grouped by the point common to both:

Common Point Is Judgment

books of judgment (Ezekiel 2, Daniel 7 and 12/Rev. 5:1-5; Ezekiel 2/Revelation 10)

the lion of Judah exercising judgment (Gen. 49:9/Rev. 5:5)

horsemen as agents of judgment (Zechariah 1 and 6/Rev. 6:1-8)

locusts as agents of judgment (Joel 1–2/Rev. 9:7-10)

Exodus plagues inflicting judgment (Exod. 7:14–12:33/Rev. 8:6-12; 16:1-14)

Common Point Is Tribulation

ten days of tribulation (Dan. 1:12/Rev. 2:10)

three and a half years of tribulation (Dan. 7:25; 12:7/Rev. 11:2; 12:14; 13:5)

Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem as OT places where God's people are persecuted (Rev. 11:8)

rulers who persecute pictured as beasts (Daniel 7/Revelation 11–13 and 17)

Babylon the Great, who deceives and persecutes (Dan. 4:30/Rev. 14:8; 16:19; 17:5-6; 18:2, 24; 19:2)

Common Point Is Idolatrous Teaching
Balaam (Numbers 25; 31:16/Rev. 2:14)
Jezebel (1 Kgs. 16:31; 2 Kgs. 9:22/Rev. 2:20-23)

Common Point Is Divine Protection
the tree of life (Gen. 2:9/Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19)
the "sealing" of the Israelites (Ezekiel 9/Rev. 7:2-8)
the wings of eagles protecting in the wilderness (Exod. 19:4; Deut. 32:11/Rev. 12:14)

Common Point Is the Victorious End-Time Battle
Armageddon (Zech. 12:11/Rev. 16:16)

Common Point Is Falling Away (Apostasy)
the harlot (Ezek. 16:15/Revelation 17)

Common Point Is the Spirit as the Empowering for God's People
Zech. 4:1-6/Rev. 1:12-20; 11:4

One final point to be made concerns the way in which John takes OT references and universalizes them. What in the OT is applied to Israel is given a much wider sense by John. For instance, God gave Israel the title "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6), but John applies this to the church (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). Where Zech. 12:10 states that the tribes will mourn over the Messiah, the reference is to Israel, but John widens it to all the tribes of the earth (Rev. 1:7). The concept of the Exodus plagues is extended by John from the land of Egypt to the whole earth (Rev. 8:6-12; 16:1-14). The three-and-a-half years of Israel's tribulation (Dan. 7:25; 12:7) are extended to the tribulation of the church as the true Israel throughout the world. This tribulation is instigated not by Daniel's literal Babylon (Dan. 4:30), but by the end-time Babylon or world system (Rev. 17:1-6), which persecutes not just Daniel's Israelite fellow believers but the church throughout the world (Rev. 17:5-8; 18:24). When Babylon falls, the "cities of the nations" (Rev. 16:19) also fall. The benefits of the end-time temple of Ezekiel are no longer reserved for Jews only, but are for all believing peoples. The leaves which are for the healing of Israel (Ezek. 47:12) are now for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). The lampstands of the ark now represent the churches (1:12-13, 20), and the physical manna given to Israel becomes spiritual manna for all believers (2:17). Tyre as harlot (Ezek. 26:17–28:19)

becomes the world system as represented by Babylon (Rev. 17:1–18:24). Physical Jerusalem becomes the "new Jerusalem," which is equated with the entire new creation (21:2-27). The reason for such universalization is rooted in the NT understanding of the work of Christ and of how through Christ the promise given to Abraham has been extended to the nations. When these nations trust in Jesus, who is the true Israel, they identify with him and thus become part of true Israel, riding on the Israelite coattails of Jesus. John's use of the OT should not, therefore, be seen as abuse of its true meaning. John simply understands the OT as prophetically pointing forward to the events of the NT and to Christ, and he does so in the same way that Jesus Himself and all the other NT writers did. The true people of God are now seen to be those who trust in the Savior promised in the OT, and believers from every nation, Jew and Gentile alike, constitute God's new covenant people, the continuation of true Israel. It was likewise prophesied in the OT that such people would be those upon whom God would in the latter days pour out His Spirit and upon whose hearts He would write His law. History is united by the plan of a sovereign God. In this history, the latter part (the work of Christ) interprets what has gone before, yet cannot be understood properly without it.

The simple yet amazing fact is that God chose to convey these visions to John in the best way he could have understood them — by using the language of the Bible. Far from being a rejection of the OT, this is the strongest possible affirmation of its authority. Everything God has given in Christ can and must be understood against the backdrop of the OT revelation, which not only points to Christ but alone makes it possible for us to understand who He truly is. Jesus told His listeners that if they only listened to what Moses wrote, they would understand who He was. Their problem was not that Moses contradicted Christ but that they refused to believe what Moses said about Him (John 5:45-47). The same truth applies to interpreting Revelation. By far the most important key to understanding John's vision is understanding the OT. As we study the book, we will find this conclusion verified over and over again. Most people take Revelation as a springboard for looking forward. However, without first looking back to the OT and seeing what it meant in John's time, and then moving forward from there to the present, we will not properly understand what it has to say about the past, the present, or the future.

9. The Outline and Plan of Revelation

Outline

1:1-20	Prologue
2:1–3:22	The letters: the church imperfect in the world
4:1–5:14	God and Christ glorified through Christ's resurrection
6:1–8:5	The seven seals
8:6–11:19	The seven trumpets
12:1–15:4	Seven visions or "signs"/deeper conflict
15:5–16:21	The seven bowls
17:1–19:21	Final judgment of Babylon and the beast
20:1-15	The millennium
21:1–22:5	The new creation: the church perfect in glory
22:6-21	Epilogue

Plan

The Two Positions on How the Visions Relate to One Another

Before we come to a closer study of the book, it may be helpful to lay out some kind of broad understanding of how these sections relate to one another and how this may point us toward a sense of the overall meaning of John's vision. There are two main schools of thought as to how the various sections relate to each other, the futurist position and the recapitulation position.

Chronologically Linear Futurist Position. The futurist position generally holds that the order of the visions, from 4:1 to 22:5 (i.e., excluding the letters of chs. 2–3), represents the chronological order in which the events described in the visions are to unfold. The seals are preparatory events preceding the trumpets and the bowls. The trumpets, visions (the "signs" in 12:1–14:20), and bowls are seen as the contents of the seventh seal, in that the seventh seal is said to have no content of its own. Some also argue that because the seventh trumpet appears to have no content of its own, the signs and bowls represent the content of the seventh trumpet. There are variations of this view (the most radical of which holds that the seals, trumpets, and bowls are all future though they recapitulate one another

and all refer to the same time). Nevertheless, generally the futurist view sees the events of history unfolding in a chronological order corresponding closely, or at least roughly, to the visions as listed.

The following arguments are among those used to support the futurist position:

1:19 divides the book into three parts, the *past* ("the things which you have seen," that is, John's initial vision of Christ in 1:9-18), the *present* ("the things which are," that is, the situation described in the letters to the churches in 2:1–3:22), and the *future* ("the things which shall take place after these things," that is, the events yet to come, in 4:1–22:5).

4:1 ("I will show you what must take place after these things") reaffirms this order.

The progression of numbered series of visions seems to suggest that a chronological order is involved. Further, 9:12 and 11:14 announce the completion of the first and second woes before the third woe begins.

The judgments seem to intensify as the book progresses.

It is natural to assume that the order of the visions represents the chronological order of future history.

A "literal" interpretation of Revelation supports the futurist view. That is, the bizarre visions, if taken in a physically literal way, have never happened before in history (for example, according to 16:21, the last bowl says that at the end of time there will be hail that weighs one hundred pounds). Therefore, if literally understood, these things must take place at a future time.

Recapitulation Position. This position holds that the various series of judgments are parallel descriptions of the same events. The pattern is identical within each series. Toward the end of each series, there is a description of judgment followed by a depiction of salvation (6:12-17 and 7:9-17; 11:18a and 11:18b; 14:14-20 and 15:2-4; 16:17–18:24 and 19:1-10; 20:7-15 and 21:1–22:5). The following arguments are advanced in support of this position:

The first scene of judgment occurs in 6:12-17 after the breaking of the sixth seal. This speaks of the destruction of the earth and heavens and of the great day of the wrath of the Lamb. It is hard to imagine how this could refer to anything other than the final judgment, or

how any other judgment could possibly come after it. This means that the events of tribulation portrayed in the trumpets (beginning at 8:2) must go back before the time of the very final judgment depicted in 6:12-17.

As clear a statement as possible of final judgment comes in 11:14-18 after the sounding of the seventh trumpet, where the kingdom of this world is said to have become the kingdom of God and of Christ, where the dead have been judged and the saints have received their reward. Note also that 20:12, a further clearly parallel final judgment scene, repeats the same words as 11:18 regarding the judgment of small and great. Again, as in the preceding point, this means that the depiction of the events of tribulation in chs. 12–13 must go back before the time of the last judgment pictured in 11:14-18.

These same verses (11:14-18) describe the content of the seventh trumpet as expressing the last judgment, which contradicts the claim of some futurists that the seventh trumpet has no content in itself and must therefore have everything recorded in the subsequent chapters as its content. Once we understand the content of the seventh trumpet to be the final judgment, the entire scheme of futurism collapses.

The description of the final punishment of the lost is just as clear and final in 14:14-20 (the final harvest) and in 16:17-21 (the seventh bowl) as in what many futurists typically seem to take to be the only mention of the final judgment, the one in 20:11-15.

The earthquake spoken of in 6:12-17 (the sixth seal) seems identical to that of 16:17-21 (the seventh bowl): both speak of a great earthquake after which the mountains and islands cannot be found. In 6:14, 16, the splitting apart of the sky and disappearance of the islands and mountains are traced to the presence of the One who sits on the throne of heaven, whereas in 20:11, which follows the judgment scene of 20:7-10, earth and heaven flee away and are no longer found again because of the presence of the One who sits on the throne. This demonstrates again that 6:12-17 portrays the last, definitive judgment, so that the trials that follow in the trumpet and bowl plagues must go back in time before that final judgment.

The same language of God's judgment through thunders and sounds and flashes of lightning as recorded in Exod. 19:16 is used in 8:5 (the conclusion of the seven seals); 11:19 (the conclusion of the seven trumpets); and 16:18 (the conclusion of the seven bowls).

Each of these texts in Revelation also mentions in context the heavenly temple or altar. Each text thus narrates the last judgment, so that the latter two recapitulate the first.

The situation of believers and unbelievers during the time immediately preceding the final judgment is described in very similar terms in 6:12-17 (the sixth seal); 9:13–11:13 (the sixth trumpet); and 16:12-16 (the sixth bowl).

The phrase "It is done" in 16:17 and 21:6 appears in both instances to refer to the completion of the same final judgment. On both occasions the words come from the throne of heaven.

The repetition of the phrase "gather together for war" in 16:14; 19:19; and 20:8 indicates that the same (final consummative) battle is being described three times.

The declarations concerning the fall of Babylon occurring in 14:8 and 16:19 and in various places in chs. 17-19 must also be describing the same thing, thus revealing again recapitulated description of judgment.

The trumpets and bowls are both modeled on the Exodus plagues, alluding to the same plagues and presenting them in roughly the same order.

Given the fact that each series of judgments does express at its conclusion the same reality of final punishment and reward, and given the great similarities between the series of judgments, the observation that each series of judgments seems to intensify in effect is more easily understood as expressing the heart of God to express the same realities in ever more forceful terms as the book reaches its climax.

Our conclusion, therefore, is that the recapitulation position best explains the structure of Revelation. The book consists of a series of parallel visions in which God expresses the same truths in different ways. How, then, are we to account for the fact that the contents of each series of seven are not absolutely identical, or that some are identical but expressed in a different order? The seals speak of four horses, while the trumpets and bowls speak of the Exodus plagues, but in different order.

We begin with the understanding that John is relating what he saw in a series of visions, and he is doing so in the order in which he saw them. *The order in which he saw things is not necessarily the historical chronological order in which those things will happen.* This is clear from the fact the text

shows he is speaking of the same events in different visions, but sometimes either not relating them in exactly the same order, or telling of different visions (e.g., horses instead of plagues) to express the same reality. Part of the reason for this is that, in general, the plagues recur throughout history, rather than being one-time historical events, hence there is not an exact correspondence in every detail.

John's phrase "after these things" or "after this" is used to introduce a number of visions throughout Revelation. Some futurists think that the phrase indicates that what is about to be narrated, following the "after this," will chronologically follow what is portrayed in the preceding vision. But strictly speaking "after this" only narrates the chronological order of the visions themselves, that is, that one vision comes after another in the visionary sequence. The phrase does not indicate that the history within the visions comes after the history recorded in the previous vision. For a further explanation, see also under 10. below. This means that the scope of John's sets of parallel visions deals with the course of history from the birth of the church at Pentecost until the return of the Lord. Understanding this gives us an absolutely critical key to understanding the meaning of Revelation as a whole.

The Relation of the Letters to the Visions

Readers of Revelation often fail to see much connection between the letters to the churches and the series of visions which follow. It is clear, however, that various themes in the seven letters reappear in the visions:

True and false Israel. False Israel is spoken of in 2:9 and 3:9, whereas the church, as the true Israel, is described in 7:4-8.

Suffering and persecution. The Christians at Smyrna will endure persecution (2:10), as have those in the vision slain for their faith (6:11). The Christians at Philadelphia will receive spiritual protection in trial (3:10) and will have written upon them the name of God and Christ (3:12), while believers in the vision are likewise spiritually sealed (7:3) so that they will not be harmed by the troubles to come, and also have the names of God and Christ written upon them (14:1). The Christians at Philadelphia will become pillars in God's temple (3:12), and the sealed believers will serve God in His temple (7:15). Antipas in Pergamum is described as God's witness (2:13), as are the believers in 6:9 and the two witnesses in 11:3-13.

Demonic figures. In Pergamum, Satan is said to have his throne (2:13), and there appears to be a false prophet there called Balaam (2:14). Satan later appears as the dragon (12:9) who is thrown out of heaven and attempts to establish his rule (throne) on earth. He is accompanied by a second beast described later as a false prophet (13:13-17; 16:13; 19:20). A Jezebel appears at Thyatira in 2:20-23, and Jezebel is used as a model for the harlot of ch. 17.

Other promises to believers. Believers at Laodicea are offered clean garments and invited to eat with the Lord (3:18, 20), and likewise believers at the return of Christ will be given clean garments and invited to the supper of the Lamb (19:8-9). Behind the door of the Laodicean believers stands Christ, the "faithful and true Witness" (3:14), and inside the open door to heaven is found the One who is "called Faithful and True" (19:11).

Other themes. Other common themes are that of overcoming (2:7, 11 and 12:11; 15:2; 17:14), idolatry (2:14, 20 and 9:20; 13:4, 12-15), and the picture of Jesus bringing judgment by the sword coming out of His mouth (2:16 and 19:15).

The letters, describing the present state of the church, and the concluding section, describing the glorified church in heaven, are closely and deliberately linked by the theme of promise and fulfillment. Notice the parallels between the imperfect church of the present and the perfect church of the future:

false apostles (2:2)	true apostles (21:14)
false Jews (2:9; 3:9)	tribes of the true Israel (21:12)
Christians dwell where Satan's throne is (2:13)	Christians dwell where God's throne is (22:1)
some in the church are dead (3:1)	all in the perfected church are alive (21:27)
the church is an earthly lampstand (1:20; 2:5)	God and the Lamb are the lamps (21:23-24; 22:5)
the church contains idolaters (2:14-15, 20-23)	the perfected church has no idolatry or lying (21:8)
Christians are persecuted (2:8-10, 13)	Christians reign as conquerors (21:6-7)

Notice also how the promises made to those who overcome are completely fulfilled in the new creation:

They will eat of the tree of life (2:7).	The tree of life bears fruit in heaven for the believer (22:2).
They will be a pillar in the temple (3:12).	God and the Lamb are the temple in heaven where the believer dwells (21:22).
They will be part of the heavenly Jerusalem (3:12).	They are part of the heavenly Jerusalem (21:23-27).
They will have the name of their God (3:12).	The name of God is on their foreheads (22:4).
Their names will be written in the book of life (3:5).	Their names are written in the book of life (21:27).
They will be clothed in white (3:5).	They are the bride adorned for her husband (21:2).
They will have a white stone and receive the morning star (2:17, 28).	They are part of the city whose foundations are precious stones (21:11, 18-21), whose light is God and the Lamb (21:23; 22:5), and that lives with Jesus, the bright morning star (22:16).
They will rule the nations (2:26-27) and sit with Christ on His throne (3:21).	They reign forever and ever (22:5).
They will be saved from the second death (2:11).	They are saved from the second death (21:7-8).

This close relationship between the letters and the rest of the visions is significant, because it shows that Revelation, like the other letters of the NT, is a pastoral letter written to believers. As in the other letters, grace is spoken over believers at the beginning and the end of the letter (1:4; 22:21). Like the other letters, Revelation deals with pastoral issues facing the churches and carries an appeal to believers to live for Christ. Like the other letters, it offers the hope to believers that, if they persevere in faithfulness to Christ, they will receive an eternal reward. This means that the content of the visions must have real and present relevance to all believers who read the book, no matter what age they live in. We understand that the letters of Revelation, though they deal (like all the other NT letters)

with the situation of churches of long ago, still speak to us in each of the topics they deal with — perseverance, idolatry, courage to witness, moral purity, doctrinal orthodoxy, and so on. Why then do we suppose that the visions should deal only with events of the future, and so hold little or no present relevance for us? Far more likely is the proposition that, at least in large part, the visions also deal with the events which have affected believers since the very foundation of the church. As our study proceeds, we will support this conclusion by examination of the text, understanding, of course, that there are parts of Revelation which do deal specifically with the future and events surrounding the return of Christ.

10. The Significance of 1:19 as a Key for the Interpretation of the Book

As stated in an earlier section, 1:19 is a significant interpretative key in Revelation for a proper understanding of the futurist understanding of the book: "Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things." The approach we will take in the commentary below is that a different understanding of 1:19 comes from wrestling with a variety of issues in the immediate context and throughout the book.

Those understanding Revelation from a futurist perspective (i.e., all the events spoken of in the visions are yet to come and will unfold in chronological order) view 1:19 in the following way: the "things which you have seen" refer, on this view, to the initial vision of the *past* described in the immediately preceding verses. The "things which are" concern the *present* situation in the seven churches dealt with in the letters, and the "things which shall take place after these things" concern the events of the *future,* specifically the events immediately prior to the return of Christ and that return.

This view has deficiencies which need to be addressed. To begin with, the command to write "the things which you have seen" does not seem to be merely a reference to past time, or to what John has seen in the preceding verses. It seems rather to pick up on 1:11, where the angelic voice tells John to write "what you see." There is no reason to limit the scope of this to the first vision John has; it seems more naturally to refer to the contents of the entire book. But what of "the things which are" and the things which are yet to come? It could very well be that "the things

which are" alludes entirely to events occurring during the present time of the seven churches. Since these seven represent the church universal, this phrase would thus refer to the "present" of the entire church age. In other words, these are as relevant for us today as are Paul's instructions to any of the churches he wrote to.

Furthermore, the correct understanding of the last phrase in v. 19, "the things which shall take place after these things" is crucial. We will attempt to show that this last clause is not to be limited to events of the far-off future, but rather encompasses all the events of the period between the resurrection and the return of Christ. Critical to a proper understanding of this verse is the fact that God is communicating with John in the words He inspired Daniel to speak six centuries earlier. If God speaks prophetically in the OT, the fact that He fulfills these prophetic words in the NT should be no surprise to us. More surprising would be the thought that God communicated such significant visions to John without any reference to how He had spoken in earlier days to His servants the prophets. This verse, along with three others (1:1; 4:1; 22:6), is heavily influenced by the words spoken through Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar in the interpretation of his first dream (Dan. 2:28, 29, 45). In section 6. above, we noted how John's statement in 1:1 ("The Revelation . . . which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place") is taken from Dan. 2:28, 29, 45, where God shows Daniel what must take place *"in the latter days"* or *"after these things":*

"He has made known . . . what will take place in the latter days" (Dan. 2:28) ". . . what would take place after this" (Dan. 2:29) ". . . what will take place after this" (Dan. 2:45)	"to show . . . the things which must shortly [or quickly] take place" (Rev. 1:1)

If we compare Rev. 1:1 with the passages in Daniel, the thought is almost identical. The significant difference in what God speaks to John involves the replacement of "the latter days" or "after this" (years yet far off to Daniel) with "shortly" or "quickly," thus implying that Daniel's "latter days" (= "after this") are on the brink of unfolding, in fact beginning to unfold. What was far off to Daniel is staring John in the face. In 1:3, John says that the time is "near," using a word similar to that spoken by Jesus

in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God *at hand.*" It is likely that "the kingdom of God is at hand" is parallel with and a further explanation of "the time is fulfilled." If so, the idea of "near" is a close synonym of "fulfilled." The Greek verb for "nearness" has the sense of "about to arrive" or "beginning to arrive." It will not be happening far off in the future: it is beginning to happen now, and much more is around the corner.

In Luke 20:18 Jesus equates the "stone" of His ministry with the end-time rock of Daniel's last-days kingdom. To Jesus, the prophetic words of Daniel are on the verge of fulfillment. And John is no different from Jesus in his understanding. Note the other parallels in Revelation 1 to Daniel. There are references to the kingdom (vv. 6 and 9), as in Dan. 7:14, which John sees being inaugurated in fulfillment. This kingdom belongs to a "Son of man" (1:13), just as in Dan. 7:13, and this Son of man is described in a heavenly vision (1:13-16), just as in Dan. 7:13-14. Jesus has begun in John's own time to begin to fulfill Daniel 7's Son of man prophecy. Out of this we draw the conclusion that Daniel 2 and Revelation 1 are describing the same reality, and that what is prophesied in Daniel is beginning to be fulfilled in Revelation. The events prophesied are actually occurring or beginning to occur. The death and resurrection of Christ have brought about the inauguration or beginning of the kingdom of God prophesied in Daniel. Such an understanding will have profound importance for our interpretation of Revelation as a whole.

Now we look at 1:19, in the light of both 1:1 and the passages in Daniel:

"What will take place in the latter days/after this" (Dan. 2:28, 29, 45)	"The things which must shortly [or quickly] take place" (Rev. 1:1)	"The things which shall take place after these things" (Rev. 1:19)

It is clear that Daniel's phrases *"in the latter days"* (Dan. 2:28) and *"after this"* (in Theodotion's translation, "after these things," exactly as in Rev. 1:19) are identical in meaning. The phrase "after this" (in the Hebrew text) or "after these things" (Theodotion) refers in Dan. 2:29 to something lying far off in the future, to which the phrase "in the latter days" also refers. However, in Revelation they allude to something which is already beginning to happen: as we have already seen, Rev. 1:1 replaces "in the latter days" with "shortly," and v. 3 adds the nuance "near," meaning "at hand." The phrase "after these things" in 1:19, therefore, is not a reference to events only of the future but to events that are already unfolding in these last days, since "after these things" is to be identified with the "latter days" in Dan. 2:28-29, which have

been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, each of the three phrases in Rev. 1:19 may very well refer to the same reality of the entire church age. The interpretation of Rev. 1:19 is complex, and there are a variety of interpretations; for that reason no *overall view* of Revelation should be based primarily on it, whether futurist or any other.

The other place where the phrase "after these things" appears is at 4:1 which, significantly, is the introduction to the vision section of the book. The angelic voice tells John, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." Again, this is an allusion to Dan. 2:29. If "these things" is synonymous with "the latter days," as it is in Dan. 2:28-29, it refers to the events of the last days understood as being inaugurated by the cross and resurrection of Christ. This is clear from John's understanding throughout Revelation 1 that the Daniel 2 and 7 prophecies have begun fulfillment in Christ's first coming. Consequently, the visions unfolding in the rest of the book will tell us what is going to unfold throughout the time period of these last days — that is, throughout the entire history of the church between Christ's resurrection and His return. We should expect, therefore, that the visions will speak to the life and history of the church in every age, including that in which the recipients of the book lived, even though there may be aspects which speak specifically to the time period immediately before Christ's return. It is important to remind ourselves that such an understanding runs completely contrary to much popular literature on Revelation, which takes the entire visionary portion of the book to refer only to the future events immediately surrounding the return of Christ. The understanding we have adopted, we are persuaded, provides a more satisfactory view of Revelation in another way, for otherwise the vast majority of the book would not have as much relevance either for those to whom it was written (the churches under John's apostolic authority) or to any believer who has ever lived since. This majority portion of the book would then refer primarily or only to one group of people living through the last tribulation and then later during the millennium. Though futurists protest that the book is still relevant in various ways for readers throughout the church age, we think our point still stands. As we proceed with our study, we will see our view supported by the text in a variety of other ways.

The final reference to Daniel occurs at 22:6, where the heavenly voice says to John, "The Lord . . . sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place." Thus the concluding verses of the book repeat the same words as occurred at the very beginning (1:1). The things which have been unfolded to John are the things that are about

to unfold before his eyes and that have been unfolding ever since. It is interesting to note that the four main sections of the book, the introduction (1:1-18), the letters (1:19–3:22), the visions (4:1–22:5), and the conclusion (22:6-21) are all introduced by allusions to Daniel 2:28-29, 45, which themselves form the introduction and conclusion of Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream. This is hardly an accident. Thus the content of the dream in Daniel 2 provides a framework by which to interpret Revelation as a portrayal of the end-time battle between good and evil and of the establishment of God's kingdom, all of which has begun with the death and resurrection of Christ and will be consummated at His final coming.

11. The Main Theological Messages of Revelation

In the commentary below, we will attempt to outline from the text some of the major themes of Revelation. We would suggest that the following themes in Revelation express the heart of God in giving this series of visions to John:

Willingness to Suffer for Christ Is the Path to Ultimate Victory. Even as the cross turned out to seal Christ's victory over Satan, so the present suffering of Christians seals their victory over the powers of darkness. Even while, like Christ, Christians suffering tribulation and hardship (1:9) also share in Christ's kingly reign (1:6). In this present age, believers may suffer physical hardship, but their spirits will be kept safe (11:1-12). The church's persecutors, on the other hand, will find themselves in the same position as Satan. Even as Satan's apparent victory triggered his ultimate defeat, so the present evil actions of unbelievers (11:10) are only laying the basis for their final judgment (11:13, 18). One of the main goals of the book, therefore, is to exhort believers to remain faithful to Christ in spite of present sufferings and in spite of the temptation to engage in idolatry represented by compromise with the world-system, because this faithfulness will eventually be rewarded in the heavenly kingdom. Notice that after the portrayal of the heavenly kingdom in 21:1–22:5, the final words of the book revert to the command to remain faithful. The heavenly visions serve as motivators for Christians now suffering in adversity to hold to the glorious promises of God and not to fall away. And so in the same way, Christians today should still read Revelation and allow its portrayal of the divine majesty to motivate us to continued faithfulness. Christians are to live according

to the values of this new world, not those of the world in which they live. Churches should be reminded that the scenes of heavenly worship are to be the model for our earthly worship every Lord's Day — for remember, it was as John readied himself for worship on the Lord's Day that he was given this vision.

The Sovereignty of God in Human History. In chs. 4 and 5 John is given a vision of the throne room of God. The word "throne" appears seventeen times in these two chapters (out of thirty-four times in the book as a whole), and signifies the sovereignty of God. In the vision, the Lamb is given a place of equal honor to God Himself, and so the chapters as a whole portray the victory of God and the Lamb. Because this vision serves as the introduction to all the subsequent visions in the book, its significance is to demonstrate the authority of God and of Christ over all that is about to unfold in the remainder of the book. The trials of the believers, the apparent triumph of the forces of the enemy, the eventual destruction of the latter, and the victory of the church are all under the sovereign control of God. It is therefore true to say that, according to Revelation, the hand of God is directly behind the tribulations of believers as well as those of unbelievers. Such trials are sent by God to refine His people. Not only that, but the OT passages which influence the visions of the seals, trumpets, and bowls also picture God as the cause of the woes which befall believers and unbelievers alike (see Zech. 6:1-8; Ezek. 14:21; Lev. 26:14-33 and their use in the seals in Rev. 6:2-8, or the sending of the Exodus plagues as formative for the trumpet and bowl plagues). The mystery as to how God would allow believers also to suffer is answered throughout the book: God's strategy is to use the woes to refine their faith, while reserving unbelievers for ultimate punishment. As the heavenly vision leads into the picture in ch. 6 of the horsemen and the initial unleashing of the divine judgments, it is clear that the resurrected Lamb (6:1) is in control of what is happening. The cross has been transformed from tragedy into triumph, and so also will God transform the earthly woes of believers into heavenly and eternal victory. The people of God have no other destiny during the church age than that of the Lamb during His earthly ministry. This is why Rev. 14:4 says that they "follow the Lamb wherever He goes."

The New Creation as Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy. The main prophetic themes of both OT and NT culminate in the new covenant, the new temple, the new Israel, and the new Jerusalem, all of which are summed up in

the concept of the new creation. These themes appear in 21:1–22:5 at the climax of the book. In both Revelation and other parts of the NT, these realities are seen to have already *begun* to be fulfilled in Christ — believers as the new creation, the church as the new Israel, and so on. These prophetic realities are then *consummately* fulfilled, especially as envisioned in 21:1–22:5.

Commentary on the Text

Prologue: The revelation was given so that John would bear witness to what God has done in Christ and so that believers would be blessed by understanding God's perspective on history and obeying His commands (1:1-20)

The revelation is given for the purpose of witness, resulting in blessing (1:1-3)

[1] The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, [2] who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. [3] Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ could mean "the revelation by (or from) Jesus Christ" or "the revelation about Jesus Christ," or both may be included. The word **revelation** (or "apocalypse," Greek *apokalypsis*) expresses the subject and nature of the book. The book is a heightened form of prophecy, which can be referred to as "apocalyptic," as apparent from the use of "revelation" and "prophecy" in vv. 1-3 and in 22:7. John begins by describing his vision as a revelation which God gave him to show His servants **things which must soon take place**. The roots of this verse are in Dan. 2:28-30, 45-47, where in the Greek translations of the OT the verb "revealed" appears five times, the verb "show" ("signify," "communicate," Greek *sēmainō* [only in OG]) twice and the phrase "what must come to

pass" three times. The key to the significance of these allusions to Daniel is that Daniel is speaking there of the kingdom of God which will come to pass in the latter days. But what Daniel explicitly states will come to pass "in the latter days" John rewords: these events will take place quickly or **soon**. These words do not connote the speedy manner in which the Daniel prophecy is to be fulfilled, nor the mere possibility that it could be fulfilled at any time, but the definite, imminent time of fulfillment, which likely has already begun in the present. What Daniel expected to occur in the last days, John is announcing as imminent, or beginning to occur now. The change of phraseology implies that the final tribulation, defeat of evil, and establishment of the kingdom, which Daniel expected to occur distantly in "the latter days," John expects to begin in his own generation — and, indeed, it has already started to happen (for the idea of tribulation preceding the divine kingdom see Daniel 7, which is a parallel prophecy to Daniel 2). The focus of "quickness" and "nearness" in vv. 1-3 is primarily on the inauguration of prophetic fulfillment and its ongoing aspect rather than nearness of consummate fulfillment (the return of the Lord), though the latter thought is secondarily present.

The following context shows that the beginning of fulfillment and not final future fulfillment is the focus. The references to the imminent eschatological period (v. 3b), the fact of Christ's present kingship over the world's kings (v. 5), the beginning form of the saints' kingdom (vv. 6, 9) and the following "Son of man" reference (v. 13) and vision (vv. 13-15), also indicating initial fulfillment of Daniel 7, point strongly to this focus and to the presence of a Danielic frame of reference (cf. discussion of these texts below). Similarly, the allusion to seven lampstands from Zechariah 4 in vv. 12, 20 and the reference to Isa. 49:2 and 11:4 (the sword in the Messiah's mouth) in v. 16 also indicate that the OT prophecies in those texts have begun to be fulfilled. In fact, only one verse in all of Revelation 1 clearly includes reference to Christ's last advent. And even that verse, 1:7, refers to the progressive nature of the fulfillment of Dan. 7:13 throughout the age, which will culminate in Christ's final coming. There is no doubt that John saw the resurrection of Christ as fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel regarding the inaugurating of the kingdom of God. This indicates that what is about to be written concerns not just the distant future, but what is before us here and now.

The chain of communication in v. 1 is from **God** to **Christ** to **His angel** to **John** and on to God's **bond-servants**. The latter phrase refers to the community of faith as a whole, which has a general prophetic calling,

rather than to a limited group of prophets. Where later in the book it is sometimes difficult to determine whether God, Christ, or an angel is speaking, the reality is that the message comes from all three. Therefore, John's book is a prophetic work which concerns the imminent and inaugurated fulfillment of OT prophecies about the kingdom in Jesus Christ.

2 The subject of the revelation is now made more explicit. John's seeing of all the visions is none other than his witness of the revelation about God and Jesus Christ, and the revelation given by them. The wording **the witness of Jesus Christ** is parallel with the preceding phrase, **the word of God**, clarifying its precise content. The revelatory **word of God** concerns what He has carried out through Jesus Christ.

3 In v. 3, John declares that the one who takes to heart **the words of the prophecy** will be **blessed**. The message of Revelation, as it unfolds, is not designed to provide fodder for intellectual speculation about the end times but is rather a series of commands addressed to the present-day lives of all who read it. Prophecy in the OT generally had two time references: it was a forth-telling of God's word for His people in the present, and a foretelling of events to happen in the future. Revelation maintains these two features of prophecy. Those **who read** and those who **hear** and **obey** its message will be **blessed**. That the book has an ultimate ethical aim is borne out by the conclusion in 22:6-21, which is an intentional expansion of the prologue in 1:1-3, and especially of the ethical emphasis of 1:3. The prophecy of v. 3 is not a set of predictions but, in the biblical tradition, a word from God calling for obedient response in the lives of believers.

The reason those who hear the prophetic words must heed them is now given: **for the time is near**. Here John echoes the words of Jesus in Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God at hand," where "at hand" has the meaning of "about to arrive" or "is now arriving." The two clauses are parallel: the time Jesus spoke of is now fulfilled and the kingdom has arrived. The connection between **for the time is near** and **quickly** in v. 1 indicates that in v. 3b John is developing further the "inaugurated" latter-day perspective on the OT (especially Daniel 2) which v. 1a conveys. The connection between the two clauses is highlighted by the conclusion of the book, where 1:3a is reiterated in 22:7b ("blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book") and introduced by a repetition of 1:1a in 22:6 ("to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place"). John views the death and resurrection of Christ as inaugurating the long-awaited kingdom of the end times that the OT books (such as Daniel) predicted and that will continue to exist throughout

the church age. He sees the end-time kingdom of Daniel as having arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. His prophetic words will speak into the heart of the present, not simply the distant future. To claim to have benefited from Christ's past redemptive work entails an acknowledgement to submit to Him as Lord in the present.

Suggestions for Reflection on 1:1-3

On understanding the book of Revelation. The fact that God spoke to John in the way that is unfolded throughout Revelation is remarkable. It would seem that God puts a premium on His people being prepared to understand how the OT is referred to in Revelation. Have we viewed Revelation in this way or have we tended to shy away from it because we feel unable to understand it properly? One of the main keys for understanding Revelation is to understand how the OT is used in the book.

On understanding prophecy. There is a great deal of emphasis on "prophecy" today. How do we relate the prophetic word that God spoke to John, which has begun fulfillment, with the "prophetic" messages or interpretations so commonly offered today, which view John's Revelation only as pertaining to yet future latter-day events?

On understanding prophecy: further reflections. Much teaching on prophecy today suggests that God gives prophetic words simply to show His servants what is about to happen in the future latter days. But is there more to it? What does it mean to "heed" the prophetic word (v. 3)? Is there a response to prophecy which is more than the accumulation of knowledge about the future?

John greets the churches on behalf of the Father, Spirit, and Son, whose redemptive work results in the Christians' new status, all to the glory of God (1:4-6)

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 be-
fore His throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the
dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us
from our sins by His blood — 6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His
God and Father — to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

4 John now addresses **the seven churches**. His choice of the number "seven" is no accident. "Seven" is the favorite number of Revelation. Biblically, it signifies completion or fullness and is originally derived from the seven days of creation. In Lev. 4:6, 17, the sevenfold sprinkling of the blood signified a completed action, as did the seven-day duration of the festivals, services of ordination, the march around Jericho, and the length of periods of cleansing from uncleanness. The significance of the number here is that the seven churches represent the fullness of the church. The universal nature of the seven churches will become clearer from the following context (e.g., 1:6; 5:9-10), especially the significance of the seven lampstands of the temple as representing the entire people of God during the inter-advent age (on which see 1:12; 11:3-4ff.). Likewise, Zech. 4:2, 10 and Rev. 5:6 also understand the "seven lamps" (= **the seven spirits** = the "Holy Spirit") of the temple as carrying out God's effective, universal work (5:6: in "all the earth") as they are mounted on the lampstand(s). Therefore, the lampstands also must be included in that universal work and have a universal identity. That the seven churches represent the whole church, at least in Asia Minor if not the world, is suggested further by noticing that each letter addressed to a particular church in chs. 2–3 is also said at its conclusion to be addressed to all the churches. It is no accident that after chs. 2 and 3 only the universal church is alluded to, and these seven churches disappear from sight. John's prophetic message is actually addressed to the entire body of Christ, the church in every age.

The typical elements of the epistolary greeting (**grace to you and peace**) are, as in other NT epistles, conditioned by the following contents of the letter and the historical situation of the readership. The Christian readers need grace to persevere in their faith in the midst of tribulation, especially pressures to compromise (cf. chs. 2–3). And in the midst of such external turmoil, they need the inner "peace" which only the eternal God who is sovereign over and above the vicissitudes of space-time history can give. The purpose of this revelation is to give the eternal, trans-historical perspective of **Him who is and who was and who is to come**, which can enable the readers to understand His commandments and so motivate them to obedience (cf. v. 3). The complete threefold clause is a reflection of Exod. 3:14 together with twofold and threefold temporal descriptions of God in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12), which themselves may be developed reflections on the divine name in Exod. 3:14. All these phrases are used in their respective OT contexts to describe God not merely as present at the beginning, middle, and end of history, but as the incompa-

rable, sovereign Lord over history, who is therefore able to bring prophecy to fulfillment and deliver His people despite overwhelming odds, whether from Egypt, Babylon, or other nations. Similarly, the expression is used here to inspire confidence in God's sovereign guidance of all earthly affairs and to instill courage to stand strong in the face of difficulties which test faith.

The prophetic message is not only from God and Christ, but also from the **seven spirits** before the throne. The reference here is to the Holy Spirit, the number "seven" again representing fullness. The Holy Spirit is needed to bring to believers the grace and peace John greets them with here, and His work will be needed if believers are to respond obediently to the prophetic words shortly to come. The Christian readers need grace to persevere in their faith in the midst of tribulation, especially the pressure to compromise (cf. chs. 2–3). And in the midst of such external turmoil they need the inner peace which only the eternal God, who is sovereign over and above the trials and struggles of the day-to-day realities believers face, can give. John is alluding here to Zech. 4:2-9, where seven lamps represent one Spirit which brings grace for the building of the temple. Note again how Rev. 4:5-6 identifies the seven lamps before the throne with the seven spirits. The Holy Spirit empowers us to become the temple in which God dwells.

5 John's greeting comes from **Jesus Christ**, who is described as **the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth**. John is quoting Ps. 89:27, 37, where all three phrases are used. The Psalm speaks of the king who will rule over his enemies and whose seed will sit on his throne forever (vv. 19-29). "Firstborn" from the Psalm is defined clearly as **firstborn from the dead**. Christ has gained a sovereign position over the cosmos. This is not to be understood in the sense that He is recognized as the first created being of all creation nor even as the origin of creation, but rather that He is the inaugurator of the new creation by means of His resurrection, as 3:14 explains. John thinks of Jesus as the seed of David, whose resurrection has resulted in the establishment of His eternal kingdom. The kings of the earth, as generally elsewhere in Revelation (6:15; 17:2; 18:3, etc., though see on 21:24 for an exception), are not the loyal subjects of the kingdom but those earthly kings who oppose Christ's rule. This includes not only the kingdoms and peoples represented by them but also the satanic forces behind these kingdoms. That Christ now rules over these kings shows again that the events unfolded in the visions refer to present realities throughout the church age, not just to events of the

future immediately preceding the Lord's return. As a result of reflecting on Christ's fulfillment of Psalm 89, at the end of the verse John breaks out into an exclamatory Christological doxology **To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood** that continues through to the end of v. 6, concluding with a doxology to God.

6 The Christological praise continues from v. 5: what Christ has done has **made** believers **a kingdom and priests** to serve **His God**. Their identification with His kingship (v. 5a) means that they too are considered to be resurrected and exercising rule with Him as a result of His exaltation. They have been constituted kings together with Christ and share His priestly office by virtue of their identification with His death and resurrection. The reference here is to Exod. 19:6: "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Notice how significant is the change of tense. What was prophesied as Israel's role as in Exodus, and never fulfilled by Israel, is now stated as accomplished by John, for the verb (**has made**) is in the past tense. **Kingdom** here refers not just to a place but, in parallel with **priests**, to an action. "Kingdom" can also mean "kingship" or "royal power." Believers do not merely live within a kingdom; they exercise its kingly power (albeit under Christ). Believers have already entered into this role as priests and as kings, even though the manner of their performance is still incomplete. Christ exercised His role as priest through His sacrificial death ("released us from our sins by His blood") and "faithful witness" (v. 5), and exercised His role as king by spiritually defeating sin and death on the cross and subsequently being raised from the dead ("firstborn" and "ruler," v. 5). The church is identified also with Christ as a priest and now exercises its role as priests by maintaining a faithful witness to the world and willingness to suffer for Christ. It defeats the strategies of the enemy even while suffering apparent defeat, yet still ruling in a kingdom (as Christ did on the cross). We will find these themes often revisited as Revelation unfolds, though it first occurs only three verses later (v. 9).

The expression from Exodus is a summary of God's purpose for Israel. This primarily meant that they were to be a kingly and priestly nation mediating Yahweh's light of saving revelation by witnessing to the Gentiles (e.g., Isa. 43:10-13), a purpose which, the OT prophets repeatedly observed, Israel never fulfilled (e.g., Isaiah 40–55). Like OT priests, the entire people of God now have free, unmediated access to God's presence, because Christ has removed the obstacle of sin by His substitutionary blood. It is the light of God's presence that they are to reflect to the world. That John sees Exod. 19:6 as fulfilled in the church indicates that the church

now continues the true Israel as the inheritor of God's promises and as His covenant people, while unbelieving Jews are described not as true Jews but as a synagogue of Satan (2:9). This accomplishment of God's redemptive plan will bring eternal **glory** and culminate in His eternal **dominion**.

The Son's kingship and the Father's sovereignty over history are the basis of the church's grace and peace and the Father's glory (1:7-8)

7 Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

7 The conclusion of John's greetings comes in this and the next verse. This verse is made up of two OT quotations. The first is from Dan. 7:13, referring to the enthronement of the Son of man over the nations. John sees this verse as fulfilled in the enthronement of Christ at the right hand of the Father. The second is from Zech. 12:10, which refers to the end-time victory of Israel over the nations and the repentance of Israel before the Lord, whom the people of Israel have pierced. Zechariah also speaks of mourning for a firstborn son, which echoes the quotation from Psalm 89 in v. 5. But the Zechariah text has been universalized, for in the original it speaks only of the house of David mourning over Him as a result of the Spirit of grace poured out upon them, whereas John speaks of **all the peoples of the earth** doing so, and also adds the phrase **every eye will see Him**. What is applied in Zechariah 12 to Israel is now transferred in Revelation to all the peoples of the earth, specifically those peoples who, having received the Holy Spirit and His grace (see v. 4), that is, all true believers in Jesus, **mourn over** what they have done to Him. This continues the same trend of application seen with the use of Exod. 19:6 in v. 6.

Therefore, repentant Gentiles are viewed as part of true Israel in fulfilling the Zechariah prophecy at the second coming of Christ. However, the Daniel 7 reference may include the whole course of the church age during which Christ guides the events of history in judgment and blessing, since the Son of man allusion in 1:13 has present application. Daniel's reference is to the "coming" of the Son of man to receive an end-time kingdom and authority. John understands this kingdom to have been received at the resurrection, and in this sense Jesus' final coming is the end of a pro-

cess whereby He continually "comes" to the churches as their Savior and even Judge throughout the course of the church age. In 2:5, 16 and 3:3, the coming of Jesus referred to is definitely not His final return but rather His coming in present judgment to the churches. It could thus be argued that the phrase "I am coming soon" in 3:11 also alludes to a soon coming in judgment. Therefore, Christ's **coming** in v. 7 and elsewhere in Revelation is understood better as a process occurring throughout history, so that His so-called "second coming" is actually a final coming concluding the whole process of comings. Consequently His "comings" in blessing and judgment throughout the course of time are but manifestations of His exercise of latter-day authority. The Zechariah quotation perhaps connotes the climax of the historical process expressed in the Daniel 7 allusion (that is, Christ's return). However, in John 19:37, the Zech. 12:10 quotation refers to the Gentile soldier near the cross who "pierced" Jesus and then apparently repented (cf. John 19:34-37 and Mark 15:39). A strikingly similar application of Zech. 12:10 is found here. Consequently, the Zechariah 12 reference could also include application to a period preceding the final coming (the church age) when Gentiles believe in the Messiah. **Amen** concludes the verse to show the trustworthiness and dependability of what has just been said in the preceding part of the verse.

8 The greetings section is concluded by the Lord's description of Himself using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, **the Alpha and the Omega**. This is a figure of speech that involves the stating of polar opposites to highlight everything between the opposites. Hence the statement that God is the beginning and end of history stresses His presence throughout and His rule over all events in between. God's sovereign rule is highlighted by referring to Him as the One **who is and who was and who is to come**, which means that God is **the Almighty**. With this threefold formula not only is the totality of polarity expressed (**who was and who is to come**) but a middle element is added (**who is**) to show that God is, indeed, ruling over events between the beginning and end of history. This middle element is actually put first, out of order, to highlight for the readers that God is present with them, ruling over all the circumstances in which they find themselves. This emphasis serves as a basis for v. 7, since it is only with the presupposition of an omnipotent God that such a confident assertion about the consummation of history can be made.

Suggestions for Reflection on 1:4-8

On the number seven. Given John's use of the number "seven" and its significance here as representing the church as a whole or the universal church, how should we think of the church today? Is our understanding often limited to our local congregation, or perhaps to other congregations with which we are familiar? How can we adjust our vision to see the church more broadly as God sees it?

On the Holy Spirit as the builder of the temple. Zech. 4:2-7 refers to the seven lamps representing one Spirit bringing grace for the building of Israel's second temple. John represents this same Spirit as building the temple of the church. How do we learn to appreciate more profoundly what it means that the Holy Spirit is building the church into a temple? Is He often an ignored figure in the process? How could 1 Cor. 3:16-17 and 6:19 shed light on this?

On Christ's resurrection. That Christ is the firstborn from the dead means that He has inaugurated the new creation through His resurrection. Do we appreciate the significance of the resurrection as the greatest dividing line in history, or do we think of other events, past or future, as constituting greater dividing lines? How does this understanding of Christ's resurrection as the beginning of the new creation affect the view of many that the end times are still yet future?

On believers as a kingdom and priests. Christ has made us a kingdom and priests to serve God. In what practical ways do we as believers exercise our kingly and priestly roles today? How could Rev. 1:6 help us reflect on this question?

On Jesus' coming. How do we understand the concept of Jesus' "coming" to His church throughout the course of history (as opposed to His final coming)? How might the idea of Jesus continually coming affect the way in which we live as Christians and conduct our church life today?

John is commissioned as a prophet to write to the churches, because their confidence is based on Christ's position as heavenly judge, priest, and ruler of the church as a result of His victory over death (1:9-20)

9 I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance *which are* in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the

word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like *the sound* of a trumpet, 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see, 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." 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a Son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. 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."

9 In vv. 9-11 John is commissioned to write a prophetic revelation. He identifies himself as one with his readers in the **tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance** that are ours **in Jesus**. He thus introduces himself in a manner which continues the theme of the kingdom from vv. 5-7, especially v. 6. Only one Greek article precedes these three words, which conveys the idea that all three are part of the same reality. One cannot exercise kingdom rule except through tribulation and endurance. But this is a kingdom unanticipated by the majority of Judaism. The exercise of rule in this kingdom begins and continues only as one faithfully endures tribulation. This is the formula for kingship: faithful endurance through tribulation is the means by which one reigns in the present with Jesus. Believers are not mere subjects in Christ's kingdom. That John uses the word **fellow-partaker** underscores the active involvement of saints, not only in enduring tribulation, but also in reigning in the midst of it. Their being identified with Christ is the basis for the trials which confront them, as well as for their ability to endure such trials and to participate in the **kingdom** as kings. This paradoxical form of rule mirrors the manner in which Jesus exercised His authority in His earthly ministry and even from

the cross, and Christians are to follow in His path. This becomes a major theme as Revelation develops. Believers will conquer by refusing to compromise in the face of trials (2:9-11; 3:8-10), by suffering as John himself did (v. 9), and in general by pursuing Christlike character (chs. 2–3). Like Jesus' beginning kingship, Revelation reveals that the saints' reign consists in "overcoming" by not compromising their faithful witness in the face of trials (e.g., 2:9-11, 13; 3:8; 12:11), ruling over the powers of evil (e.g., see 6:8 in relation to 6:9-11), defeating sin in their lives (see chs. 2–3), as well as having begun to rule over death and Satan through their identification with Jesus (cf. 1:5-6, 18). Their endurance is part of the process of "overcoming" (see the concluding promise in each of the letters).

The **tribulation** is a present reality (so also 2:9) and will continue among the churches in the imminent future (2:10). John himself was enduring this tribulation on **Patmos**, where he had been exiled due to his witness to Christ: **because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**. To "testify" could connote to witness in a court of law, which was its primary setting in the Greek world and is the way it is used in John's Gospel. This would mean that rejection of the "testimony" of Jesus and of Christians by the world and its courts becomes the basis for their judgment in the heavenly court (see on 11:3 and 22:20).

10 John introduces his commissioning (**I was in the Spirit**) by using language similar to Ezekiel's (Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24), thus placing himself on a level with the OT prophets. This is reinforced by his hearing a **loud voice like a trumpet** similar to that heard by Moses in Exod. 19:16-20. John has been entrusted with testifying to the revelation of the heavenly Jesus because he has been faithful in witnessing to the revelation of the earthly Jesus (this is the significance of the phrases "the word of God" and the "testimony of Jesus" in vv. 2a and 9b).

11 John's prophetic commissioning is further enforced by the command to **write what** he has **seen in a book** (or scroll), just as Moses was told in Exod. 17:14, Isaiah in Isa. 30:8 (LXX), or Jeremiah in Jer. 36:2. The reader steeped in the OT would perhaps discern that all such commissions in the prophets were commands to write testaments of judgment against Israel (so also Jer. 37:2; cf. also Exod. 34:27; Isa. 8:1; Jer. 36:2; Hab. 2:2). Therefore, at this early point in the book there is already a hint that one of its major concerns is judgment (as we shall see, judgment against both the world and those in the church who compromise with the world; see on chs. 2–3). Why John was commissioned to send his prophecy to these seven churches we do not know, other than that they may have been the

leading churches of the region, but it is apparent that the biblical significance of the number seven indicates these churches stand for all churches both then and now.

12-20 The vision related in vv. 12-20 follows the typical pattern of Old Testament visions (Isa. 6:1-7; Jer. 1:11-12, 13-14; Ezek. 2:9–3:11; Dan. 8:3-27; 10:2–12:3; 12:5-13; Zech. 4:1-3; 5:1-11; 6:1-8). First, the vision is related (vv. 12-16); next, the response of the one receiving the vision is given (v. 17a); then the interpretation of the vision follows (vv. 17b-20). The vision develops the themes of suffering, kingdom, and priesthood already found in vv. 1-9 and introduces the new theme of Christ as judge. In vv. 12-16, Christ is portrayed as the eschatological heavenly priest and the end-time ruler and judge. The interpretative section reveals that it was His overcoming of death which placed Him into these offices (cf. vv. 17b-18) and that His kingship primarily concerns His rule over the church. This vision in vv. 12-20 discloses that the overall function of vv. 9-20 is to serve as a commission to John from the risen Christ to write the totality of the vision which he witnessed, as evidenced by the restatement of the commission in v. 19. How does Christ's function as judge relate to His kingly and priestly roles? If the churches do not maintain their role as priestly kings by faithfully witnessing to "the testimony of Jesus" in the face of suffering, then they will be judged by Christ. If they are faithful and are unjustly persecuted, they need not fear (v. 17), because they can be assured that ultimately they will overcome their defeat in the same way Christ did. The OT allusions in this vision are essential (as generally throughout Revelation) for an understanding of its meaning.

12 The first things John **sees** are the **seven golden lampstands**, which represent the church (cf. 1:20). In Zech. 4:2-6, the lampstand with its seven lamps is a figurative expression by which part of the temple furniture stands for the whole temple, which by extension also represents faithful Israel (cf. Zech. 4:6-9). In the tabernacle and temple the lampstand, with its seven lamps, stood in the Holy Place before the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies, along with the bread of the presence, and the Jews understood the light that came from its lamps to represent the presence of the Lord (Num. 8:1-4). In Zechariah's vision the seven lamps (4:2) seem to represent the power of the Spirit (4:6) which will give the people of Israel (the lampstand on which the lamps sit) the power by which to rebuild the temple. John sees seven lampstands, each representing one of the seven churches and all together representing the universal church. The church, as the continuation of true Israel, is likewise to draw its power

from the seven lamps, which represent the Holy Spirit (Rev. 1:4; 4:5), as it seeks to build the new temple of God. Thus for John, the latter-day temple has already been inaugurated in the church, as has been suggested by the earlier reference to Zechariah (see v. 4 above) and implied by the use of Exod. 19:6 in v. 6 (the church as *priests* and kings). This is confirmed by Rev. 11:1-13, where the lampstands represent the church as the true temple during the time between the first and second comings of the Lord. In the light of vv. 5-6, Christ's death and resurrection have laid the foundation for the new temple, which He will build through the Spirit (the lamps on the lampstand). The shift from one lampstand in Zechariah to seven in Revelation stresses not only that this letter is intended for the church universal of the escalated end times, but also the idea that true Israel is no longer limited to a nation but encompasses all peoples.

13-16 John now relates his vision of the **Son of man**. The vision is drawn from Dan. 7:13-14 and 10:5-6. Even as the OT priests tended the lamps and **lampstands**, so Christ is pictured here as a heavenly priest who tends the lampstands by correcting and exhorting them, as chs. 2 and 3 will unfold. That Christ's eyes are like **a flame of fire** (v. 14) speaks of His role of judgment, as is clear from 19:12, where the same phrase is used to describe Christ in His role as judge. Jesus' constant presence with the churches means that He always knows their spiritual condition, which results either in blessing or judgment. This role of judgment is enforced by Daniel 10, since there the primary purpose of the heavenly man is to reveal the divine decree that Israel's persecutors would assuredly be judged (see 10:21–12:13). Dan. 10:6 even depicts the man as having "eyes . . . like flaming torches," and Dan. 10:16 (Theod.) identifies this person as one having the "likeness of a son of man."

That Christ's **feet** are like **burnished bronze**, **fired in a furnace** (v. 15) speaks of a foundation of moral purity in Christ which He wants also to build in the church (note how the similar phrase in 3:18 refers to moral purity). The description of the Son of man's **head and hair** is taken from the picture of the Ancient of Days in Dan. 7:9, showing how Christ and God can be thought of in the same terms. The description of His **voice like the sound of many waters** is also taken from a vision of the Almighty, though this time from Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:24; 43:2). That Christ (v. 16) holds in His hand the **seven stars** (identified in v. 20 as the angels of the churches) shows that His authority extends also to the heavenly realms. This may suggest that the stars, even if angelic, represent the church's heavenly existence and the lampstands its earthly existence. The **sharp two-edged**

sword coming out of Christ's mouth (see also 2:16 and 19:15) is based on the prophecies in Isa. 11:4 and 49:2, both speaking of Christ in His role as judge ("He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth," Isa. 11:4). With this sword, Christ will judge both disobedience in the church (2:16) and the world (19:15). Christ's **face** being **like the sun shining in its strength** is an allusion to Judg. 5:31, where the same is said of the victorious Israelite warrior. Here the portrayal in Judges is viewed as pointing to Christ as the ideal end-time messianic warrior.

17-18 In v. 17a is found John's response to this vision. It follows the same pattern as that of Daniel's (see Dan. 8:16-19 and 10:7-12): the prophet receives a vision, falls on his face in fear, is strengthened by a heavenly being, and then receives further revelation. The vision is interpreted in vv. 17b-20. The Son of man describes Himself as the **first and the last**, using the same words God attributes to Himself in Isa. 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12 and also in Rev. 1:8. This phrase refers to the complete sovereignty of God over human history from beginning to end, and its use by the exalted Christ here shows that He too is Lord over history, thus removing any doubt that He too is divine. This transferral is enlarged on in 22:13 in such a way that Christ there (and here) must be understood as such. Christ is the force behind history, causing it to fulfill His purposes. John's audience, like Isaiah's, is meant to take confidence in God's sovereignty by allowing it to strengthen their prophetic witness.

It is in this respect that John and his readership should **not fear**. In v. 18, Jesus refers to Himself as the **Living One**, thus alluding to His triumph over the power of death. The threefold formula describing the resurrection in v. 18a (**living . . . dead . . . alive**) cannot be accidental, but is designed as a further support of the divine attribute ascribed to Christ in v. 17b. It does this by being modeled on the threefold temporal formula of 1:4 and 1:8 (referring to God), to which v. 17b itself is closely related. From this similarity of the threefold clauses, the careful reader should discern that Jesus' death and resurrection was an integral working out of the divine purposes in history and established that He Himself was guiding this history. He also is the One who **lives forever and ever**, the same phrase used of God the Father in the OT (Deut. 32:40; Dan. 12:7).

That Christ has the **keys of death and Hades** shows that He now rules even over death. The background is probably Isa. 22:22, where Eliakim, who was given the key to the house of David, was seen by Jews as a type of the kingly and priestly messianic "servant" who would reign (see further on 3:7). Whereas once Christ Himself was held by death's grip, now not

only has He been set free from it but He also has the power to determine who else will be thus liberated. This verse assures believers that, regardless of what sufferings or trials they may now endure, if they persevere they will indeed reign forever with Christ.

19 The **therefore** of v. 19 is significant. John is commissioned anew to prophesy on the basis of who Christ is and His triumph over the powers of death, as set forth in the vision of vv. 12-18. As to the meaning of the threefold clause in this verse, on the basis of our discussion in the Introduction above (part 10.), we conclude the meaning to be as follows. The angel commands John to write down **the things which you have seen**. This is a simple reference to the series of visions John is about to receive from the Lord, all of which he is to record, thus giving us Revelation as we have it in our Bible. This series of visions deals with **the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things**. The latter phrase alludes to Daniel's revelation of the end times, which even now, according to Rev. 1:1, are beginning to be fulfilled in Christ. Hence, as John stands at the beginning of the end times, he is to record both what is already happening around him and the things which will continue to unfold as the end times proceed. Thus the scope of Revelation deals with all the events of world history commencing with the death and resurrection of Christ and concluding with His final return. The events recorded in it will recur throughout human history and thus remain relevant to readers of all times, though they also point to a final climax at the time of the Lord's return.

20 Now John begins to unfold the **mystery**, another clear reference to Daniel (2:29). The **lampstands** are now clearly identified as the churches. The **angels** are heavenly beings (the word is used with this reference approximately sixty times in Revelation) closely identified with the churches they represent and help. (Thus the "angels" are not human leaders or representatives of the churches or personifications of the churches or human letter carriers, though this last option is the most viable among these alternatives.) The churches are addressed through their representative angels, apparently in order to remind the believers that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly and that their real home is not with the unbelieving "earth-dwellers" (3:10 and elsewhere in Revelation). And one of the purposes of the church meeting on earth in its weekly gatherings (e.g., as "he who reads and those who hear" in 1:3) is to be reminded of its heavenly existence and identity by modeling its worship on that of the angels' and heavenly church's worship of the exalted Lamb.

This is why scenes of heavenly worship are woven throughout Revelation. This initial vision has shown Christ standing in complete authority over human history, yet He does so standing amidst the churches (v. 13), which are undergoing all sorts of trials and even apparent defeats (as chs. 2 and 3 will unfold). Rev. 1:13-16, 20 shows the "Son of man" in a present position of sovereignty among the weak and suffering churches of His kingdom, bringing into sharper focus the unexpected form in which the expected Danielic kingdom has reached its initial fulfillment.

And the **mystery** has been utilized also from Daniel precisely at this point to emphasize the ironic nature of the fulfillment and its reversal of expectations. In Daniel 2, "mystery" has to do with the hidden meaning of a symbol whose interpretation has eschatological significance. **Mystery**, on the surface, refers to the hidden meaning of the stars and lampstands, which are about to be interpreted. But **mystery** also carries the connotation of unexpected, end-time fulfillment included in the meaning of the stars and lampstands in the present context. The **mystery** that Christ reveals here to John is the reality that His rule coexists with the suffering of the churches. This is in fact the mystery of the cross, the same mystery by which Christ Himself, though the Creator of the universe, had to submit to the power of death. This same mystery is referred to in Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 2:7; and Eph. 3:3-6. Jesus spoke of the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt. 13:11), by which He meant the beginning fulfillment of biblical prophecy, in a way surprising and contrary to what was commonly predicted, and, above all, the form which the kingdom of heaven took in His life and death, unlike the way in which the Jewish people expected it to come. This **mystery** is applied here to the church, in both its present and future situations.

Suggestions for Reflection on 1:9-20

On the idea of tribulation. If the kingdom as marked by tribulation and endurance was unexpected by Judaism, in what ways could we say it is also unanticipated by contemporary Christians? What happens when we wrongly understand Christianity by focusing on "conquering" or health and wealth in our lives without reference to Jesus' cross and our imitation of his suffering?

Further thoughts on tribulation. How does understanding end-time tribulation as a present reality rather than referring to a defined future period affect how we understand challenges we may expect to face as Christians?

On Christ's presence with the church. It seems that John is commissioned, like the OT prophets, to bring a message both of comfort and of judgment. How could these two themes coexist? The reality of Christ's presence in the church by His Spirit reminds us of His awareness of all that goes on within it. Are we as aware of His presence as He is aware of the state of our hearts? We know that Christ comes to judge the world, but how could it be said that He also comes to judge the church? Reflect on this in the light of Rev. 2:23 (and see the comments there).

On God's sovereign presence. God is the Alpha and Omega, and Christ is the first and the last, the force behind human history. How do the sovereignty of God and Christ and their continued presence with their people help believers to view the challenges and suffering that come into their lives?

On the significance of the end times. If Revelation teaches that the end times began with the cross and the resurrection, what then does this mean for us? Do we see this truth consistently witnessed to in other parts of the NT? Given the frequent understanding of the end times as only a future reality, how is it that we have misunderstood such a critical biblical truth?