

Towards an Understanding of the Book of Revelation

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The book of Revelation is very difficult. Scholars interpret it in many different ways.¹ Many Christians do not read it, except select passages (e.g. 7:9–17, 21:1–4).

In this article, I seek to arrive at an understanding of it. The result is a new reading of the book.

Preliminaries

Background

The author of Revelation names himself as John (1:9), and those to whom he is writing as seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:10–11).² He wrote at a time when Christians were being persecuted. He himself was on the island of Patmos because of his faith and wrote of sharing ‘the tribulation’ with his readers (1:9). He refers repeatedly to martyrs, including one at one of the churches (2:13, 6:9–11, 11:7–10, 20:4).

Because of this background, most scholars date Revelation either in the reign of Nero (AD 54–68) or of Domitian (AD 81–96) who persecuted Christians particularly severely. On my reading of 11:1–14, however, John refers to the earthly temple and ‘holy city’ (11:1–2) as if they are still standing. This dates

¹ See, e.g., Leon Morris, ‘Revelation, Book of’, in *The New Bible Dictionary (NBD)* (eds. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, R.V.G. Tasker, and D.J. Wiseman; London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962), 1093–5.

² In western Asia Minor / modern Turkey.

Revelation before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and hence to the time of Nero.³

Composition

The book comprises a series of visions John had. The visions are distinct but are linked together to form a single narrative. That the visions are distinct is shown by Jesus appearing in one in his glory (1:12–18), in another as a sacrificial lamb (5:6), in another as a baby (12:1–5), and another as a warrior (19:11–16). This means that each vision has to be interpreted in its own terms, as well as in relation to the whole.

Symbolism

The visions are highly symbolic. In a small number of cases, the symbols are explained, as shown in the table below:

Symbol	Meaning	Ref.	Symbol	Meaning	Ref.
Stars	angels	1:20	horns	kings	17:12
Lampstands	churches	1:20	waters	peoples	17:15
Lamps	spirits	4:5	woman	city	17:18
Eyes	spirits	5:6	clothing	deeds	19:8
Dragon	Devil, Satan	12:9, 20:2	bride	city	21:9– 10
Heads	mountains, kings	17:9– 10			

Table-1. Symbols in the Revelation of John.

The meanings of the symbols in this table are far from obvious, and this is true of other symbols in the book. When interpreting

³ Many commentators prefer a later date, citing Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3 [2nd century], read as: ‘... the apocalyptic vision ... was seen ... towards the end of the reign of Domitian (Gk. *Domitianou*)’. According to Robert Young (author of *The Analytical Concordance of the Holy Bible*), however, the correct rendering of *Domitianou* is ‘of Domitius’, Domitius being the family name of Nero [*Concise Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, dated 1907), 179].

Revelation, therefore, we have to be prepared to meet words that do not have their ordinary meaning but are symbolic with another meaning.

Scholars point out that much of the symbolism is based on the Old Testament (OT), especially the book of Daniel. This is helpful as we shall see. Links to the OT do not always, however, solve the problem of interpretation. For example, the phrase 'a time and times and half a time' (12:14) apparently comes from Daniel 7:25 and 12:7, where it is equally enigmatic.

Numbers

Many of the numbers in Revelation are almost certainly symbolic. This is particularly true of the number seven, which appears no fewer than fifty-two times. Scholars suggest that this number signifies completion. This is based on the fact that the seventh day completed God's days of creation (Gen. 1:1–2:3).

Periods

John speaks of periods of 42 months (11:2), 1,260 days (11:3, 12:6), and (as noted above) 'a time and times and half a time' (12:14). These are equivalent if 'time' = 1 year, 'a time and times and half a time' = $1 + 2 + \frac{1}{2} = 3\frac{1}{2}$ years, and 1 year = 12 months = 360 days. That these periods are all the same suggests that they are more symbolic than literal, and the precise way in which they are stated, that God is in control of them. The same may apply to 'three and a half days' (11:9).

Beasts

There are 'beasts' in Revelation (11:7 etc.). These are explained by Daniel's vision of beasts (Dan. 7:1–14) which he is later told represent 'kings' (7:17) or 'kingdoms' (7:23). Scholars take the

former to be equivalent to the latter.⁴ I take the latter to be the meaning in Revelation.

Horns

In Revelation several of the creatures have horns. The general significance of these seems to be power or strength (cf. Deut. 33:17). In Daniel's vision of beasts, they represent kings (Dan. 7:24).

Babylon

In Revelation there are several references to the 'great city' of 'Babylon' as if it still existed (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). In reality,⁵ Babylon was captured by the Persians in 539 BC, and largely destroyed when they put down a rebellion in 478 BC. The Greeks under Alexander the Great then captured the city and started to rebuild it (331 BC), but following his death, one of his generals (Seleucus) took charge of it (312 BC), built another one further north, and left Babylon largely in ruins and deserted. 'Babylon' in Revelation must therefore be symbolic of a city with power and evil influence like that of ancient Babylon. An obvious candidate for this is Rome.

Why?

Why the symbolism? The answer may be to obscure the message of the book from the Romans who would have persecuted Christians even more if they had thought the message was about them. Thus if 'Babylon' stands for Rome, it serves to disguise it. A second reason may be, like that for Daniel's visions and Jesus' parables, to obscure the message

⁴ Septuagint (LXX, the ancient Greek translation of the OT); William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (tr. Edward Robinson; eds. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1100.

⁵ See D.J. Wiseman, 'Babylon', *NBD*, 117–9; 'Babylonia', *ibid.*, 120–8.

from casual readers, 'that seeing they may not see, and seeing they may not understand' (Dan. 10:12, Luke 8:9–10).

The use of symbolism is characteristic of apocalyptic (revelatory) literature.⁶

Poetic language

Closely related to the use of symbolism is the use of poetic language. Many of the OT prophets wrote in poetry and used poetic language. Isaiah, for example, in connection with his prophecy that ancient Babylon would fall, wrote of the sun, moon, and stars failing to give their light (Isa. 13:10). He used similar imagery again in connection with the judgment of the nations (Isa. 34:4). Ezekiel also used it in connection with Babylon's capture of Egypt (Ezk. 32:7–8), and Joel in his prophecy that was fulfilled at Pentecost (Joel 2:28–32, Acts 2:16–21). In using this imagery, the prophets evidently did not intend it to be taken literally, but as expressing the *enormity* of the events they were prophesying, just as we say something is 'earth-shattering' if it is exceptionally remarkable.

Revelation is not poetry, but it contains poetic language, including images involving the sun, moon, and stars (6:12–14, 8:12, 12:4). That these are poetic is shown by their incoherence if taken literally (the stars fall to the earth in 6:13 but are still in the sky in 8:12 and 12:4). We have to allow, therefore, for the use of poetic language when reading Revelation. For example, being thrown into a 'lake of fire' (19:20; 20:10, 14–15; 21:8) may not be literal, but a way of expressing severe punishment (cf. 20:10b).

Scope

The book covers contemporary issues in the early chapters (the letters to the churches, chs. 2–3) and the last days in later chapters ('a new heaven and a new earth', chs. 21–22). This

⁶ G.E. Ladd, 'Apocalyptic', *NBD*, 43–4.

embraces the whole of world history. In between, however, the book only describes two ‘witnesses’ (ch. 11), two ‘beasts’ (ch. 13), and one city, named ‘Babylon’ (chs. 17–18). This leads to four main ways of interpreting the book:⁷

Preterists take it to describe events taking place in the first century, ‘Babylon’ being identified with Rome.

Historists take it to describe events taking place over the course of world history.

Futurists take it to describe events taking place in the end times.

Idealists take it to describe imaginary events that show that God will triumph in the world.

Each of these interpretations has its problems.⁸ Preterists have difficulty with the later chapters (19–22), futurists with the early chapters (1–3), and historists with the limited scope of the middle chapters. Idealists get round these problems, but at the expense of not describing actual happenings.

A fifth alternative is to take the middle of the book as presenting prophecies that have *multiple* fulfilments, like Isaiah’s of the fall of Babylon (Isa. 13:1–14:23, 21:1–10, 46:1–2, 47:1–5).⁹ These prophecies are fulfilled in the first century with ‘Babylon’ standing for Rome, and then again in succeeding centuries, with ‘Babylon’ standing for other powerful and evil cities. This scheme embraces the other interpretations. I have called it the ‘pluralist’ view. I adopt it here.

⁷ See, e.g., Morris, ‘Revelation’.

⁸ Cf. Morris, ‘Revelation’.

⁹ See history above, and my article, ‘Multiple fulfilment of prophecy,’ *AJBT* 21 (47) (2020), 1–4.

Presentation

With the above introduction in the background, I now present a short exposition of Revelation, designed to bring the main lessons out of it. I do not go into all the details, many of which are difficult. For a discussion of these, please see the many commentaries.¹⁰ The details show how much the OT lies behind, and is fulfilled by, the Book of Revelation.

I need to stress that my exposition is very tentative. I have studied other books of the Bible and achieved a relatively high degree of certainty as to their meaning, but Revelation is different. All I have been able to do is to use the same methods as I have used for other books and arrive at the best understanding I can. Other scholars arrive at very different interpretations, including more spiritualized ones, with reference to ‘the Antichrist’.¹¹ I hope, nevertheless, that my exposition will help readers who find the book difficult.

Translation

In the exposition, I have translated texts, as far as possible, literally.

I have rendered *hagios* as ‘saint’ in the general sense of someone who is trusting and following Jesus (cf. 14:12),

¹⁰ E.g. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); David E. Aune, *Revelation*, WBC (3 vols.; Nashville: Nelson, 1997–8); G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); John W. (Jack) Carter, *The Revelation of John* (AJBT, 2018); Ian Paul, *Revelation*: (London: Inter-Varsity Press / Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

¹¹ John refers to antichrists in his letters (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), but not explicitly in Revelation, though he does describe anti-Christian rule.

and translated *doulos* in relation to God (1:1 etc.) as ‘servant’.

I have translated *en tachei*, ‘with speed’, and *tachu*, ‘speedily’. These may mean ‘soon’ or ‘suddenly’ (‘like a thief’, 3:3). The first suits the context at 1:1, 11:14, and 22:6, but at 2:16, 3:11, 22:7, 12, and 20, *tachu* could have either meaning, or both. I discuss this further under 22:6–21.

I have rendered *hadēs*, ‘Hades’. This corresponds to ‘Sheol’ in the OT (Heb. *še’ôl*) and is the place where the souls of the righteous dead waited for Christ’s coming before he came (Heb. 11:39–40), and where the souls of the unrighteous dead wait for the Last Judgment. The souls of the righteous dead now go to heaven (Luke 23:43, Heb. 12:22–24).

I have taken *biblion* to mean ‘scroll’ or ‘book’ according to the context.¹² When it has the latter sense, it is equivalent to *biblos*. Both words are used in the phrase ‘the [Lamb’s] book of life’ (3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15, 21:27).

At a number of points, the conjunction *kai* introduces a clarification, and can be rendered ‘that is’, ‘namely’, etc. Vine calls this the ‘epexegetic’ or ‘explanatory’ use.¹³

¹² See W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphants, 1940), Vol. I, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, 251–3, use (h).

Exposition

Opening statement (1:1–3)

The book begins by setting out what it is about: ‘A revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to show his servants what must with speed take place’ (v. 1a). God made this known through his servant, John (vv. 1b–2). Blessed are those who read this prophecy (v. 3).

Greeting and doxology (1:4–8)

John greets ‘the seven churches in [the Roman province of] Asia’ with the greeting, ‘Grace to you and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is coming, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ ...’ (vv. 4–5a).

Verse 8 (below) identifies ‘him who is, and who was, and who is coming’ as ‘[the] Lord God’. It is striking that he is described as ‘coming’. This is fulfilled in the new Jerusalem as we shall see. The ‘seven spirits’ are, I suggest, *parts* of the Holy Spirit like fingers of the hand.

John then moves into a doxology in praise of ‘him who loved us and has freed us from our sins by his blood’ (vv. 5b–6) and is coming again (v. 7).

He adds: “I am the Alpha and the Omega [the A to Z, the entirety],” says [the] Lord God, “who is and who was and who is coming, the Almighty” (v. 8).

John’s encounter with the glorified Jesus (1:9–20)

John says that he was on the island of Patmos on the Lord’s day when he heard a loud voice behind him telling him to write what he sees on a scroll and send it to the seven churches (vv. 9–11). When he turned round he saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands ‘[one] like a son of man’ in awesome attire holding seven stars in his hand (vv. 12–16). John falls at

his feet, but the figure tells him to get up, and explains that he was dead but is now alive, and holds the keys of death and Hades (vv. 17–18). The figure thereby identifies himself as the risen, ascended, and glorified Jesus.

Jesus then repeats his instruction, and explains that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches and the seven stars their angels, as if churches have angels looking after them (vv. 19–20).

Letters to the churches (chs. 2–3)

Jesus in heaven tells John to write a letter to each of the seven churches. The letters indicate that the spiritual health and circumstances of the churches varied widely. In brief they are as follows:

Ephesus. Jesus commends the church for its perseverance, but calls on it to repent for ‘leaving [its] first love’ (2:1–7).

Smyrna. Jesus tells the church that, despite tribulation and poverty, it is ‘rich’, and calls on it to be faithful in the face of forthcoming persecution (2:8–11).

Pergamum. Jesus commends the church for having been faithful in the face of persecution, but calls on it to repent for having members who eat what is sacrificed to idols and commit fornication (2:12–17).

Thyatira. Jesus tells members of the church who are following the teaching of a woman promoting fornication and eating what is sacrificed to idols, that, if they do not repent, he will punish them. On the rest of the church he imposes no other burden but to ‘hold fast what you have’ (2:18–29).

Sardis. Jesus tells the church that, apart from a few members, it is ‘dead’, and calls on it to repent (3:1–6).

Philadelphia. He commends the church for keeping his word and not denying his name despite being weak and having to cope with persecution from unbelieving Jews. He promises to look after it in the future (3:7–13).

Laodicea. Jesus condemns the church for being ‘neither cold nor hot’ and warns it that he is about to ‘spew [it] out of [his] mouth’. But he explains his love, and invites members to come back to him (3:14–22).

The letters draw on the imagery of chapter 1 and later chapters (e.g. 2:1 on 1:20).

Note that, while the letters are to specific churches at a specific time, they contain lessons, like Paul’s letters to specific churches, for other churches, according to their spiritual state and circumstances. This includes churches today.

Vision of heaven (ch. 4)

John is now given a vision of heaven (vv. 1–2). He sees first a throne with someone sitting on it, radiating light so brightly that his features could not be discerned (vv. 2–3). Surrounding the throne, John sees twenty-four other thrones, with ‘elders’ sitting on them, and seven lamps, representing ‘the seven spirits of God’ (vv. 4–6a). The twenty-four elders perhaps represent the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles.

Around the throne John also sees four living creatures, one like a lion, one like a calf, one like a human being, and one like an eagle (vv. 6b–8a). They worship the one on the throne, and prompt the elders to do the same (vv. 8b–11).

The living creatures are similar to the ones Ezekiel saw in his vision (Ezk. 1:4–14). They are also like the idols pagans worship, but, being subservient to the one on the throne, they serve to show the powerlessness of such idols, and the futility of worshipping them.

Vision of heaven continued: the Lamb (ch. 5)

John then saw in the right hand of the one on the throne, a scroll with seven seals (v. 1). The scroll contained a list of future happenings in the world, but at first no-one could be found who was worthy to open it (vv. 2–4). John was then told that there is someone who can open it, and was shown a lamb, ‘looking as if it had been slain’, who took the scroll (vv. 5–7). The living creatures and the elders then start singing his praise (vv. 8–10). John hears many angels joining in, ‘numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand’, along with the rest of creation (vv. 11–14).

Opening the seals (ch. 6)

John watched the Lamb opening the seals (v. 1). Most of these led to judgments¹⁴ being poured out on the earth.

The first led to the overcoming of evils (v. 2), the second to people turning against each other (vv. 3–4), the third to food shortages (vv. 5–6), the fourth to deaths (vv. 7–8) and the sixth to terror (vv. 12–17).

I take these judgments poetically, as indicating the kind of actions God will take in response to human wickedness. Today there are floods, droughts, earthquakes, epidemics, and conflicts. That God takes such actions against human wickedness will be reassuring to Christians who are suffering persecution.

The fifth seal revealed, ‘underneath the altar, the souls of those who had been slain on account of the word of God and on account of the witness that they bore’ (v. 9). They called out to be avenged, but were told to wait a little longer (vv. 10–11). That they are mentioned will surely help those who are facing the

¹⁴ I use ‘judgment’ in the broad sense of deciding guilt and punishing it (compare *krima* in 17:1).

prospect of martyrdom, as many were at the time, and many are in some countries today.

The seventh seal is opened later (8:1–4).

Marking out Christians for protection (7:1–8)

After this, John saw an angel telling other angels not to execute judgments on the earth ‘until we seal the servants of our God on their foreheads’ (vv. 1–3). The sealing was to mark the servants out for protection from the judgments (cf. 9:4).

The servants number 144,000 (vv. 4–8). They are all Jews. This could be because most of the Christians at this time were Jews or Jewish proselytes, who needed particular reassurance as they were persecuted both by the Romans and by Jews who rejected Jesus (cf. 2:9, 3:9). Alternatively, the reference could be to all Christians, they being ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16).¹⁵

The protection of Christians from the judgments on earth leads on to the next vision, of Christians safe in heaven, and to a later vision, of the 144,000 safe in heaven (14:1–5).

Christians safe in heaven (7:9–17)

After this John sees in heaven ‘a great multitude that no-one could number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues’ (v. 9a). They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands (v. 9b), and were worshipping God and the Lamb (v. 10). The angels joined them (vv. 11–12).

Then one of the elders told John who they were: ‘These are those who are coming out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (vv. 13–14). Therefore, he says, they are now in heaven, free from

¹⁵ Taking the last *kai* to be epexegetic (‘that is’, ‘yes’).

the troubles of earth, with the Lamb looking after them (vv. 15–17).

I take ‘the great tribulation’ to be the tribulation Christians were going through at the time (1:9), and which Christians have been going through since, especially in some parts of the world today.

Note that ‘are coming out’ is in the continuous present tense. The elder is referring to an ongoing process – people dying and their souls going up to heaven.

The seventh seal (8:1–5)

John now sees the seventh seal opened. This led to a period of silence in heaven (v. 1), while an angel offered the prayers of God’s people on the altar before the throne (vv. 3–5). At the same time, seven angels are each given a trumpet (v. 2).

Blowing of the trumpets (8:6–13)

The seven angels proceed to blow their trumpets (v. 6). These result in further judgments of the earth, the first by hail and fire (v. 7), the second by a volcano erupting into the sea (v. 8), the third by a large meteorite (vv. 10–11), and the fourth by the dimming of the light from the sun, moon, and stars (v. 12). Worse was to follow (v. 13).

Blowing of the trumpets continued (ch. 9)

When the fifth angel blew his trumpet, another huge meteorite struck the earth and created a volcano. Out of the smoke came locusts with stings, which tormented people for many months (vv. 1–12), Only those with the seal of God on their forehead escaped (v. 4).

The sixth trumpet released huge armies of cavalry from the east, beyond the river Euphrates, with ‘fire and smoke and sulphur’ coming out of the mouths of the horses, killing many people (vv. 13–19).

Survivors of these judgments did not repent of their idolatry and immorality (vv. 20–21).

The seventh trumpet is very different, and is blown later (11:15–19).

John recommissioned (ch. 10)

At this point, John is recommissioned, as he has more prophesying to do. He sees a mighty angel coming down from heaven with a little scroll in his hand (vv. 1–4), and solemnly declaring that there would be no more delay (vv. 5–7). John was then told to take the scroll and eat it (vv. 8–9, cf. Ezk. 2:8–3:3). When he ate it, it was sweet in his mouth but sour in his stomach (v. 10). He was then recommissioned: ‘You must prophesy again over many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings (v. 11).

The sweetness presumably corresponds to what he is prophesying, and the sourness to how it is received.

Spiritual warfare: the two witnesses (11:1–14)

John is then told in a vision to measure the inner sanctuary of the temple and those worshipping in it (v. 1). He is not to measure the court outside it, which was for the Gentiles, who will trample on ‘the holy city’ for a period (v. 2). God says that he will help two ‘witnesses’ to prophesy for this period (vv. 3–6).¹⁶ Then a ‘beast coming up out of the abyss [bottomless pit] shall make war with them, overcome them, and kill them’ (v. 7). Their corpses shall be ‘left on the street of the great city’ (v. 8). People shall not allow them to be buried, but rather rejoice over them (vv. 9–10). Some days after this happened, however, God

¹⁶ Verse 4 alludes to Zechariah’s vision of a lampstand and two olive trees (Zech. 4:1–14). The two witnesses correspond to the two olive branches in verses 11–14.

put life back into them, took them up to heaven, and brought down an earthquake on the city (vv. 11–14).

This vision is difficult to interpret. The two witnesses could be Peter and Paul, the ‘beast coming up out of the abyss’ the Roman Empire, and ‘the great city’ Rome. According to early Christian writers, Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome.¹⁷ However, while elsewhere (chs. 16–18) John calls ‘the great city’ Babylon, which could be Rome, here he says that it is ‘called spiritually Sodom and Egypt, where indeed [the] Lord was crucified’ (v. 8). This suggests rather Jerusalem, though earlier John calls this ‘the holy city’ (v. 2). To resolve this difficulty, it is necessary to make Rome through Pontius Pilate ultimately responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

The general terms of the vision allow it to be repeated at other times in the history of the Church. The general message is that there will be times when the ungodly war against the godly, and that, at such times, God will help godly leaders, and if they are killed, take them up to heaven.

The seventh trumpet (11:15–19)

Blowing the seventh trumpet led to loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become [that] of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever’ (v. 15). This prompts the twenty-four elders to worship God and to say that the time for judgment has come (vv. 16–18).

At this point, John sees ‘the ark of the covenant’ in the inner sanctuary of the temple in heaven (v. 19). Under the old covenant, the ark contained the Ten Commandments, and was where God met with his people (Exod. 25:10–22 etc.). The same

¹⁷ Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 5:1–6:1 [late 1st century]; Dionysius of Corinth, *Fragments from a Letter to the Roman Church* 3 [2nd century]; Tertullian, *Prescription against Heresies* 36 [late 2nd century].

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elements continue under the new covenant (Mat. 5:17–20, 19:20, 28:18–20).

Spiritual warfare continued: the woman and the dragon (ch. 12)

John now has another vision involving spiritual warfare. He sees two signs in heaven. The first is a woman who is about to give birth (vv. 1–2). The second is a great red dragon, later identified as the Devil or Satan, who stands before the woman so that he may devour the child when it is born (vv. 3–4). The woman gives birth to a boy, who was ‘snatched up to God’ (v. 5). She then fled into the desert where she might be looked after for a period of time (v. 6).

The birth of the boy led to war in heaven between archangel Michael¹⁸ and his angels and the dragon and his angels (v. 7). Michael wins, as a result of which the dragon is thrown down to the earth (vv. 8–9). John then hears a loud voice rejoicing over the fact that the dragon is no longer in heaven but warning the earth that he has gone down to it, and is full of fury (vv. 10–12).

When the dragon saw that he was on earth, he pursued the woman, but she was taken care of in the desert and when the serpent attacked her (vv. 13–16). This led the dragon to ‘make war with the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and hold the testimony of Jesus’ (v. 17).

In this vision, John sees what went on in heaven when Jesus was born, and the consequences of this for life on earth.¹⁹ The woman is Mary, the baby boy is Jesus, and ‘the rest of her offspring’ are the followers of Jesus. Jesus was ‘snatched up to

¹⁸ Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9.

¹⁹ Many commentators understand this more broadly, with the woman representing the people of God (Gal. 4:26). The allusions to Mary and Jesus are, however, strong.

God' in his resurrection and ascension. It is with the followers of Jesus the Devil makes war.

Spiritual warfare continued: the two beasts (ch. 13)

John now sees two beasts. The first has seven heads and ten horns, and was given power and authority by the dragon (vv. 1–2). It had a fatal wound which had been healed, the wonder of which led people to worship it and the dragon (vv. 3–4). The beast blasphemed against God and was allowed to 'make war with the saints and overcome them' (vv. 5–7a). Its authority extended to all people except those whose names are recorded in the Lamb's book of life, who are called to endure (vv. 7b–10).

The second beast had two horns, and was given authority by the first beast, which it used to make people worship the first beast (vv. 11–12). It set up an image of the first beast and performed great signs to make people worship it (vv. 13–15). It also forced everyone to carry a mark of the first beast if they wanted to buy or sell (vv. 16–17).

John identifies the first beast in a riddle: 'the number of the beast' is the 'number of a person' and is '666' (v. 18).²⁰

If we go by Daniel 7, the beasts here are kingdoms. The first being all-powerful and persecuting Christians is almost certainly the Roman Empire under a persecuting emperor. The emperor is presumably the person the number 666 refers to. A puzzle is the 'fatal wound', but this may be the assassination of Julius Caesar and the civil war that followed.

The second beast is completely subservient to the first beast, and does all it can to please it. This was the case for Judea under king Herod the Great, and doubtless applied to other subject kingdoms in the Empire. John later calls the second

²⁰ Some manuscripts have 616.

beast ‘the false prophet’ (16:13, 19:20, 20:10) because it deceived people into worshipping the first beast (19:20).

Again, the prophecy is general enough to be capable of being fulfilled at other points in Church history. The first beast represents states opposed to authentic Christianity, and the second, supporters of these states.

Note that some commentators take 666 to be Nero Caesar. This is based on the use of letters in Hebrew to represent numbers.²¹ They take Nero’s name and title in Greek (*Neron Kaisar*), transpose this into Hebrew (*nrown qsr*), and sum the values of the letters. The result is 666.²² This procedure is somewhat contrived, but the result ties in with our discussion of the date of Revelation in the introduction.

Sign of victory: the 144,000 (14:1–5)

Having seen the beasts, John now has more reassuring visions.

The first is of the 144,000 he saw earlier. When he saw them then, they were on the earth. Now he sees them with the Lamb in heaven (v. 1), where a new song is sung (vv. 2–3). They are described as being chaste, honest, and ‘unblemished’, as ‘following the Lamb wherever he goes’, and as being ‘purchased from humankind, [the] firstfruit to God and to the Lamb’ (vv. 4–5). A fine example to us would-be later-fruits.

Signs of victory: the three angels (14:6–13)

John now sees three angels. The first had ‘[the] eternal gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth’, made urgent because ‘the hour of [God’s] judgment has come’ (vv. 6–7).

²¹ See table in A.B. Davidson, *An Introductory Hebrew Grammar*, 23rd edn. (rev. John Edgar McFadyen; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1939), 4.

²² The same procedure starting from the Latin *Nero Caesar* gives 616 as in some manuscripts.

The second announced the fall of 'Babylon' (v. 8). This is described more fully later. Here 'Babylon' is capable of multiple interpretations, but is almost certainly, in the first instance, Rome.

The third angel declares that anyone who worships the beast or his image will be severely punished (vv. 9–11). John says that this calls for 'the endurance of the saints, those who keep God's commandments and faith in Jesus' (v. 12).

He then hears a voice from heaven say, 'Write: blessed [are] the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'that they shall rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them' (v. 13).

Further sign of victory: the harvest of the earth (14:14–20)

John now sees one 'like a son of man' on a cloud with a sharp sickle in his hand. Then an angel came and told the figure to harvest the earth, which he did (vv. 14–16). Another angel then appeared with a sharp sickle and was told to harvest the grapes, which he did (vv. 17–20). He threw the grapes into the 'great winepress of the wrath of God', showing that the grapes are symbolic of the wicked. Presumably, the one 'like a son of man' harvested good seed, representing the righteous.

John has other visions of judgment later.

The seven last plagues (chs. 15–16)

John now sees seven angels having 'the seven last plagues', last because 'with them God's wrath is completed' (15:1). He also sees 'those overcoming the beast' singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb (15:2–4).

He then sees the seven angels come out of the inner sanctuary in heaven with the seven plagues and being given seven bowls 'filled with the wrath of God' (15:5–8). They are told to pour out

the bowls on the earth (16:1). The plagues are like those God inflicted on Egypt before the exodus.

The first bowl produced painful sores on those who worshipped the beast (16:2).

The second bowl turned the sea into blood so that everything in it died (16:3).

The third bowl turned the rivers and springs into blood, the angel saying that God is righteous in doing these things because those who worshipped the beast ‘shed [the] blood of saints and prophets’ – a sentiment with which those at the altar agreed (16:4–7).

The fourth bowl increased the power of the sun so that people burned in its heat; but they still did not repent (16:8–9).

The fifth bowl plunged the kingdom of the beast into darkness, but this still did not move the people (16:10–11).

The sixth bowl dried up the river Euphrates, making a way for enemy kings to come from the east. John also sees three evil spirits performing signs and gathering the kings of the whole world for a battle ‘on the great day of God Almighty’ (16:12–16). In the midst of this, Jesus says, ‘I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who watches ...’ (v. 15).

The seventh bowl leads to a voice from heaven saying, ‘It is done’ (16:17). There follows a huge earthquake on the earth causing a great deal of damage, including to ‘the great city’ and other cities – God having remembered to give to Babylon ‘the cup of the wine of the fury of his anger’ (16:17–20).²³ There followed a plague of huge hail stones (16:21).

²³ Taking the last *kai* in verse 19 to be epexegetic (‘that is’, ‘yes’).

More on the judgment of Babylon (chs. 17–18)

John goes on to say that one of the angels said to him that he would show him the judgment of Babylon, pictured as a prostitute corrupting kings and people (17:1–2).

The angel carried him away in the Spirit into a desert, where he saw a woman riding on the first beast he had seen earlier, with seven heads and ten horns. On the forehead of the woman was written, ‘Babylon the Great, the mother of the prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth’; she was ‘drunk from the blood of the saints’ (17:3–6a).

John asks the angel to explain the vision to him. The angel tells him that the beast ‘was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction’ (17:6b–8). The time when it ‘is not’ presumably corresponds to the fatal wound in 13:3.

The angel then identifies the seven heads as ‘seven mountains on which the woman sits’ and as ‘seven kings’ (17:9–11).

If ‘Babylon’ is Rome, the ‘seven mountains’ could refer to the seven hills on which the city stands, and the ‘seven kings’ to emperors. The angel gives further details about the kings, but not enough to identify them with any certainty.²⁴

The angel further identifies the ten horns as ‘ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom but receive authority as kings [for] one hour with the beast’ (17:12). These may be kings of subject states. Their aim, he says, is to ‘give their power and authority to the beast’ and to ‘make war with the Lamb’ – a war they will lose (17:13–14).

The angel finally notes that the prostitute [the city] is surrounded by many peoples (17:15) and declares that the ten

²⁴ The ‘seven kings’ (17:9–10) must be a selection of Rome’s many emperors. The ‘eighth’ is the beast [empire] itself (17:11), presumably as a result of the civil war foreseen in 17:16–17.

horns and the beast [the subject kings and the many-peopled empire] shall turn against her in a civil war, and 'eat her flesh and consume her with fire' (17:16). This 'God put into their hearts' to do (17:17). The identity of the woman, which we have hitherto inferred, is now made explicit ('the woman that you saw is the great city', 17:18).

After this, John sees another angel coming down from heaven, shouting, 'Fallen, fallen [is] Babylon the Great, and has become a dwelling place of demons and a haunt of every unclean spirit ...' (18:1-3).

Then John hears another voice from heaven calling God's people to come out of her because 'her sins are piled up to heaven' and 'she shall be consumed with fire' (18:4-8).

The angel goes on to say that, when the kings of the earth who cavorted with her see the smoke of her burning, they shall weep and mourn over her (18:9-10).

Likewise, the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her because no-one buys their goods anymore (18:11-17a).

Those who work on the sea shall also weep and mourn, but recognize the justice in her demise because of the way she treated God's people (18:17b-20).

Then a mighty angel picked up a huge boulder, and threw it into the sea, saying, 'With such violence, the great city of Babylon shall be thrown down, never to be found again ...' (18:21-24).

This concludes the judgment of Babylon. It leaves us with a problem. We have hitherto identified Babylon with, in the first instance, Rome. But Rome has not suffered the fate that Revelation predicts. Indeed, in the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and made it the religion of the empire. Rome has since lost its empire, but still stands today.

The problem is resolved by Jesus' words about there being two ways through life: the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life (Mat. 7:13–14). Revelation's predictions about Rome are for the way its leaders and citizens were on in the 1st century, the way that leads to destruction.

Likewise for other evil cities to which the prophecy applies; it only applies as long as their leaders and citizens do not repent and continue on the path they are on.

Rejoicing in heaven (19:1–5)

After this, John hears a great multitude in heaven rejoicing over God's condemnation of 'the great prostitute' [Babylon] for corrupting the earth, and his avenging thereby 'the blood of his servants' (vv. 1–3). The twenty-four elders and four living creatures join in (v. 4), and God encourages his servants to join in too (v. 5).

If there is rejoicing in heaven over the condemnation of Babylon, we must remember that that there is also rejoicing in heaven over 'one sinner who repents' (Luke 15:7).

Rejoicing in heaven continued: the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:6–10)

John then hears a great multitude in heaven rejoicing because 'the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready'; yes, it was granted to her to wear 'fine linen, bright and clean' because this represents 'the righteous deeds of the saints' (vv. 6–8).²⁵

An angel then tells him, 'Write: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb"' (v. 9). This prompts John to worship the angel, who tells him not to do this (v. 10).

²⁵ Taking *kai* in verse 8 to be epexegetic ('that is', 'yes').

What is pictured here is a marriage between the Lamb and the company of saints, i.e. the Church (cf. Eph. 5:22–32). This may be a single event, in which case it is with the *total* company of saints, and takes place at the end of the age. Any saints still on the earth at the time will doubtless be caught up to join the supper in the way the apostle Paul describes (1 Thes. 4:13–18). Alternatively, the supper could be a repeated or ongoing event as saints on earth die and are taken up to heaven, reflecting the way the supper is foreshadowed on earth by repeated celebrations of the Last Supper (Luke 22:19–20, 1 Cor. 11:23–26).

Judgment of the nations (19:11–21)

John now sees heaven open and a rider on a white horse emerge to judge and make war against the nations. Armies in heaven follow him riding white horses and dressed in fine linen. He has a name only he knows, but his known names are ‘Faithful and True’, ‘The Word of God’, and ‘King of Kings and Lord of Lords’. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty (vv. 11–16).

John then sees an angel calling on all the birds to gather to eat the flesh of all people, both small and great (vv. 17–18). War then ensues between the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, and the rider and his army. The beast and the false prophet are captured, and thrown into a lake of fire. The rest are killed with the sword, and the birds gorge on their flesh (vv. 19–21).

This episode apparently duplicates the harvest of the earth in 14:14–20. One way of resolving this is to note that the harvest does not refer to the two beasts, which continue to appear in subsequent visions. This suggests that the harvest was *partial* (a kind of firstfruits), and that the judgment in this episode is

fuller. It still does not relate to all parts of the earth as we shall see in 20:7–10.²⁶

The picture of Jesus going to war disturbs many readers, but he has to do this if he is to rid the world of evil. Remember that he drove out the tradesmen from the temple when he was on earth (John 2:14–16, Mat. 21:12–13p). Remember too that Revelation employs poetic language.

Now we have taken ‘the beast’ to be, in the first instance, the Roman Empire, and ‘the false prophet’ a subject state. Like Rome, these were on the way to destruction, the destruction described in this episode. But, like Rome, the Roman Empire avoided this by becoming Christian. Come the 5th century, however, the morals of the empire declined and this prophecy was fulfilled. It has since been fulfilled for other empires that have risen and fallen, and will continue to be fulfilled until a final fulfilment when Jesus comes again (Acts 1:11). It is at this point that the Devil is punished, as described in the next vision.

Punishment of the Devil (20:1–3)

John now sees an angel come down from heaven, seize the dragon (the Devil or Satan), throw him into the abyss [bottomless pit], shut it, and seal it over him for ‘a thousand years’ (vv. 1–3). Here imprisonment for ‘a thousand years’ could be symbolic, signifying total loss of influence and power, something the Devil would hate.

²⁶ In this respect, the visions in Revelation are *progressive* (Dr. Arthur G. Fraser, personal communication).

Vindication of the martyrs (20:4–6)

John then sees thrones, with the souls of the martyrs sitting on them.²⁷ They came to life, and reigned with Christ for the period of the Devil's imprisonment (v. 4). Theirs is 'the first resurrection'; the rest of the dead do not come to life until after this period (v. 5). Blessed are those having part in the first resurrection (v. 6).

So the martyrs, who are waiting to be vindicated (6:9–11), will be specially blessed.

The Devil's end (20:7–10)

John is told that, when the Devil is released from prison, he shall go out to deceive the nations at the edge of the known world ('Gog and Magog')²⁸ to assemble them for war (vv. 7–8). When they had so assembled, they encircled the camp of the saints and 'the beloved city' [Jerusalem], but fire came down from heaven and devoured them (v. 9). And the Devil was cast into the lake of fire, where he, along with the beast and false prophet, 'shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever' (v. 10).

Verses 7–9 take up the prophecies of Ezekiel 38–39 and Zechariah 12–14.

Note that the lake of fire is not consuming, suggesting a poetic description (cf. Luke 16:24).

Judgment of the dead (20:11–15)

Then John saw 'a great white throne' and the one sitting on it (v. 11). And he saw the dead, both great and small, standing

²⁷ I take *kai* in *kai tas psuchas* to be epexegetic ('namely'). See my article, 'Why the millennium?' *AJBT* 21(1) (2020).

²⁸ Somewhere 'far north' of Israel (Ezk. 38:14–16, lit. 'the extremities of the north').

before the throne, being judged by what was written in the books about them, according to what they had done (v. 12). This included those who had died at sea (v. 13). Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire, and all whose names were not found written in ‘the book of life’; for them this is ‘the second death’ (vv. 14–15).

‘Hades’ is the place where the souls of the unrighteous dead wait for this judgment. For these it is already a place of discomfort (Luke 16:22–24). The ‘lake of fire’ is ‘hell’ itself, referred to elsewhere in the NT as *geenna*, ‘Gehenna’.

The key book is ‘the book of life’ or ‘Lamb’s book of life’ (13:8, 21:27). This contains (compare 21:27 with 22:14) a list of all those who have ‘washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (7:14).

A new heaven and a new earth (21:1–8)

John then saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (v. 1), fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 65:17–25). This prophecy was referred to by Jesus (Mat. 19:28) and Peter (Acts 3:21, 2 Pet. 3:1–13).

John then saw ‘the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (v. 2). And he heard a voice from the throne saying that now the dwelling of God is with human beings, and he will remove from them all their suffering (vv. 3–4).

The one on the throne further said, ‘I am making all things new’ (v. 5). He then explained to John that he would give freely to anyone who is thirsty ‘from the spring of the water of life’, and that he shall be the God of those who overcome, but not of the cowardly, unbelieving, or evildoers, whose place is in the lake of fire (vv. 6–8).

The new Jerusalem (21:9–27)

One of the angels then said to John that he would show him ‘the bride, the wife of the Lamb’ (v. 9). The angel took John away in the Spirit to a high mountain, where he showed him the new Jerusalem in its glory (vv. 10–11).

The city had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and an angel at each gate (vv. 12–14). This is a picture of security and safety.

The city was very big: about 1,400 miles square (vv. 15–16). It was also 1,400 miles high, making it a cube, the same shape as the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle (Exod. 26:31–34)²⁹ and temple (1 Kgs. 6:20). This was where God made himself to be present with his people, and must be the significance of the city being a cube (cf. v. 3).

The wall was substantial: about 200 feet high or thick (v. 17). The city was made of gold, the wall of jasper, and its foundations adorned with every kind of jewel (vv. 18–20). The gates were made of pearl and the street of gold (v. 21). The city therefore had the splendour God had promised (Isa. 54:11–12).

There was no temple or night, God and the Lamb being the temple and giving the light – light that will draw the nations to it (vv. 22–26).

The ungodly shall not enter it (they have been judged and thrown into the lake of fire), only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life (v. 27).

The river of life (22:1–5)

The angel then showed John ‘a river of water of life’, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river was a tree of life (cf.

²⁹ Scholars believe that the curtain described in these verses made the Most Holy Place a cube.

Gen. 2:9)³⁰ bearing fruit every month and with leaves for the healing of the nations (vv. 1–2). Here eternal life, lost by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:19, 22–24), is assured.

‘No longer shall there be any curse’ (v. 3a). The curse that followed Adam’s fall in the Garden (Gen. 3:17–19) shall be removed. Rather, God and the Lamb shall be in the city, and his servants shall see his face (vv. 3b–4). They shall live in the light of God’s light, and reign with him for ever (v. 5).

Concluding comments (22:6–21)

Revelation concludes with a series of comments by different speakers.

First the angel says to John, ‘These words [are] trustworthy and true; and the Lord ... sent his angel to show his servants the things that must with speed take place’ (v. 6). Jesus picks up the last thought by saying, ‘Yes, behold I am coming speedily! Blessed [is] the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book’ (v. 7).³¹

John responds by trying to worship the angel, which the angel resists (vv. 8–9). The angel then told him not to seal up the book, but to let people respond to it as they will (vv. 10–11).

Jesus then says again that he is coming speedily, and shall give to everyone according to what they have done (vv. 12–14). Blessed, he says, are those who wash their robes [in his blood, 7:14] that they might have the right to the tree of life, and may go through the gates into the city (vv. 14–15). He says that he has sent his angel to tell us this (v. 16).

³⁰ The word translated ‘tree’ (*xulon*, ‘wood’) is not the usual word for tree (*dendron*), but it is the word used in the LXX of Genesis 1–3.

³¹ I have taken *kai* to be epexegetic (‘Yes’).

There follow calls to Jesus to ‘come’, an invitation to the thirsty to ‘come’, a warning not to add to or take from the book, and a closing grace (vv. 17–21).

I have tried to heed the warning here as well as I can, though it is difficult when writing a short exposition.

It remains to discuss the difficult question of Jesus coming ‘speedily’. This certainly means ‘suddenly’ as Jesus emphasized to his disciples (Mat. 24:36–25:13). But it could also mean ‘soon’, in which case we need Peter’s helpful comment that ‘one day with [the] Lord [is] like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day’ (2 Pet. 3:1–10). The point is that Jesus wants us to live *as if* his coming is imminent, like soldiers on ‘red alert’, ready for battle (cf. Luke 12:35–40).

Final comment

The blessing Jesus promises readers of the book of Revelation (22:7) lies, as we have seen, in the assurance it gives to them that, whatever tribulation they may be going through, he is in control of events, and has their future in his hands.³² It amplifies the assurance he gave to his disciples after the Last Supper when he said, ‘In the world you shall have tribulation, but take courage, *I have overcome the world*’ (John 16:33).

³² Cf. Carter, John W. (Jack). *The Revelation of John: A Message of Encouragement for a Persecuted Church*. Hayesville, NC: The American Journal of Biblical Theology. ISBN 9781976959622