

REVELATION

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INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Overview

G. K. Chesterton humorously quipped regarding Revelation, “Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.”¹ We are reminded at the outset that the book of Revelation has brilliance and beauty outshining any attempt to explain it.² John wrote Revelation to churches facing persecution and being tempted to compromise with Roman imperial power and cave in to the social pressures of pagan society. He calls upon these churches to stay faithful until the end, reminding them that God and Christ are sovereign over the evil they face. Believers should rejoice, despite persecution and discrimination from opponents, for they can be assured a place in the heavenly city since they are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. If they endure until the end, they will enjoy God and the Lamb forever. Ultimately, God will vindicate those who are his. Furthermore, God reigns over history, and his reign is expressed in his judgments unleashed on the earth. Those judgments will culminate in the final judgment, where the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire and the righteous will enter the new Jerusalem. God’s name will be honored and praised forever for vindicating the righteous and punishing the wicked.

Title

The title of the book comes from the first word in the Greek text: Revelation (*Apokalypsis*). The book is a revelation *of* Jesus Christ and *from* Jesus Christ (cf. comment on Rev. 1:1). Jesus Christ is the subject matter of the book; the book is thoroughly and strikingly Christological. At the same time, Jesus transmitted what was given to him to an angel, the angel passed it on to John, and John passed it on to the churches.

¹ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 29.

² This commentary is written at a semipopular level and hence doesn’t interact with other scholars who have written on Revelation. I was originally taught Revelation from a dispensational standpoint. I learned much from that viewpoint (even if I finally disagree rather significantly), and one can find that perspective in the commentaries of John Walvoord, Robert Thomas, and Paige Patterson. I also stand in debt to a number of other commentators. See especially the commentaries by Leon Morris, Dennis Johnson, G. B. Caird, Bruce Metzger, Robert Mounce, George Eldon Ladd, Vern Poythress, James M. Hamilton Jr., David Aune, Greg Beale, Grant Osborne, and George Beasley-Murray. Two books on the theology of Revelation by Richard Bauckham also influenced me. See his *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993).

Author

The author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) but doesn't identify himself as an apostle. He informs us he wrote the letter from Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea opposite Miletus off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Various theories have been offered about authorship, but the most probable is that the book was written by either the apostle John or a certain "John the Elder." Identifying the author as the apostle John is the most convincing, for several reasons. First, an author who didn't mention his authority was probably a person of prestige and thus felt no need to refer to his office. The apostle John fits this description best. Second, the earliest and most common view among the church fathers (including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria) was that the apostle John wrote the book. Third, Eusebius of Caesarea identified the author as John the Elder based on Papias's testimony (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.2–4), and this view has been endorsed by some prominent scholars today. Eusebius, however, probably misinterpreted Papias's words, for Papias wasn't speaking of two Johns. If we read Papias carefully, we see that John the Elder and John the Apostle were the same person, for Papias calls the apostles "elders." Furthermore, Eusebius had personal reasons for wanting to distance the apostle John from Revelation, for he was biased against the book.

The most significant objection to apostolic authorship is the style of Revelation, which departs significantly from the style of the Gospel of John.³ The objection isn't compelling, for the different style is explained by the apocalyptic genre of the work. Remarkable differences between the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation are surely present, but the simple Greek style of Revelation fits with what we find in the Gospel of John.⁴ Others have objected that the theology of Revelation contradicts John's Gospel, for the former declares judgment on God's enemies while the latter proclaims God's love. The dichotomy erected is a false one, for judgment is threatened in the Gospel as well (John 3:36; 5:22, 29; 12:48), and Revelation promises salvation to those who repent and wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 3:19–21; 7:13–14; 9:20–21; 22:14). We also see some rather striking and unusual points of contact: Jesus in both books is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14; Rev. 19:13), the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:6; 19:7, 9; 21:9), and the Son of Man (John 1:51; 3:13, 14; Rev. 1:12–16). The simplest and most persuasive solution is that John the Apostle wrote the book of Revelation.

Date and Occasion

Scholars dispute whether Revelation was written in the 60s AD, when Nero reigned as emperor (AD 54–68), or in the 90s, when Domitian reigned (AD 81–96). Certainty is impossible, but a date in the 90s seems preferable for at least three

3 On the syntax and vocabulary of the book, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1997), clx–ccxi. I believe the apostle John also wrote the Gospel of John, but the scope of this present work prohibits a full defense of that view.

4 Often I designate the book of Revelation simply as "Revelation." Context will make it clear when the book of Revelation is intended.

reasons. First, Irenaeus is most plausibly interpreted as saying Revelation was written under Domitian, for he says, around the year AD 180, that the Apocalypse was seen near the end of Domitian's reign (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.18.3; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3). Irenaeus's close proximity to John gives his testimony credibility, for Irenaeus was a hearer of Polycarp (c. AD 70–160), and Polycarp was, according to tradition, disciplined by John the Apostle. Second, though the matter is disputed, it is likely that pressure to worship the emperor increased under Domitian, and the contents of Revelation fit with such a reality. The scattered and sporadic persecution in Revelation accords with the evidence of Domitian's reign. The persecution wasn't state sponsored or official, but it was always threatened and sometimes broke out with ferocity, as table 9.1 shows.

TABLE 9.1: Indications of Persecution in Revelation

1:9	John banished to Patmos
2:13	Antipas put to death
3:10	Trial on whole earth
6:9–11	Martyrs under the altar
16:6	Babylon poured out blood of God's people
17:6	Babylon drunk from blood of saints
18:24	Babylon drunk from blood of saints
19:2	God avenged blood of his servants
20:4	Martyrs beheaded

Third, Laodicea is described as a rich city (Rev. 3:14–21), but it suffered from an earthquake in AD 60–61, and a date in the 60s would have been too early for the city to have recovered its riches.

Revelation, then, was probably written in the 90s, to churches facing sporadic persecution from Rome, with a particular threat from the imperial cult. It is probable that Jews in their communities also discriminated against Christians and perhaps even reported them to the authorities (2:9; 3:9). Christians also faced local social pressures from trade guilds, which celebrated festivals for various gods and engaged in cultic practices; the failure of Christians to participate in such activities would have suggested that they were not good citizens. John wrote Revelation to encourage believers to endure until the final day, promising them they would enter the new Jerusalem if they continued to persevere in faith.

Genre and Literary Structure

The book of Revelation has a mixed genre, including epistolary and prophetic elements, though the apocalyptic character of the book especially stands out. The book is specifically identified by the author as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19; cf. 10:8–11), and it includes seven letters to churches (2:1–3:22). The epistolary

character of the book indicates it was to be read orally in the churches in its entirety (1:3). Still, what characterizes the book most notably is its apocalyptic genre. But it is apocalypse merged with prophecy, so that the book is prophetic/apocalyptic, written to call the church to faith and action in perilous times. The apocalyptic genre wasn't an innovation of John, for parts of Isaiah (24:1–27:13), Ezekiel (37:1–39:29), Daniel (7:1–12:14), and Zechariah (esp. 9:1–14:21) are apocalyptic. Jewish books written during the Second Temple period were also apocalyptic, including 1–2 *Enoch*, 2–3 *Baruch*, 4 *Ezra*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The apocalypse seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature studied the apocalyptic genre for a number of years and produced the following definition. Every word of the definition was doubtless debated and discussed carefully, since it is the product of a committee of experts on apocalyptic literature. This doesn't mean the definition is flawless, yet we should pay close attention to a definition composed by experts in apocalyptic literature. They write,

Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Apocalypse was intended to interpret present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.⁵

A more popular and less technical way of putting it is as follows: Apocalypse is a supernatural unveiling of what is about to take place. A divine disclosure is given, usually by angels to some prominent person, in which God promises to intervene in human history, destroy evil, and bring his kingdom. We should add that apocalypses are given to encourage and strengthen those who are suffering to persevere and continue in the faith. Readers are encouraged to “hang on,” for they will triumph ultimately.

Certain features characterize apocalyptic literature, the most important being its symbolic language. Some interpreters approach the book with what I call “newspaper eschatology,” interpreting Revelation through contemporary events. Such an approach, however, is arbitrary and inconsistent. It is arbitrary inasmuch as the interpretation changes as history marches on, as anyone knows who has followed this approach over the years. It is inconsistent inasmuch as the claim to take the book “literally” is contradicted by their own symbolic interpretations. No one actually follows a literalistic hermeneutic in reading the book. For instance, no one believes Jesus really has a double-edged sword in his mouth (Rev. 1:16). The symbolism of the book should produce humility in us as interpreters, for we must confess we don't always know how to interpret the symbols. In any case, the

⁵ See John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1979), 9.

most important background for interpreting the book is not the newspaper but the OT, for Revelation is infused with OT allusions. Virtually every line of the book echoes the OT witness. Hence, the fundamental reason some interpreters go astray is that they don't anchor their reading of Revelation in the OT.

The symbolic nature of Revelation should be especially observed relative to numbers. Revelation uses the numbers four, seven, ten, twelve, and multiples of the same symbolically. Some dispensational interpreters have argued the book should be interpreted literally if possible, but such a stance is flawed, for saying we must interpret literally begs the question. We must recognize instead that authors may intend symbolism in their writings. The art of interpreting Revelation can't be solved with a prefabricated rule about literal interpretation. Instead, we should interpret Revelation in accord with the genre used; if the language used is symbolic, we must interpret it in light of such symbolic conventions.

Other features of apocalypse include visions, angels, and otherworldly creatures. Often apocalypses are pseudonymous, but Revelation clearly stands apart, for the author identifies himself as John and doesn't appeal to some famous person from the past. The following list summarizes some features of apocalyptic literature:

- Historical dualism
- Visions
- Pseudonymity (Revelation excepted)
- Symbolism
- Numerology
- Angelology
- Demonology
- Predicted woes

It is helpful in interpreting Revelation to distinguish four levels of communication.⁶ First is the linguistic level: the text itself, the words John wrote. Second are the visions John saw, recorded in the text. Third is the referential level, the historical referent of the visions. Fourth is the symbolic level, explicating via images the larger significance of the historical referent. One example should suffice. First, at the textual level John wrote about the beast (Rev. 13:1–8). Second, at the visionary level he presumably saw an actual beast that was quite horrible. Third, the referent to the beast is most likely the Roman emperor. Fourth, the Roman emperor may stand symbolically for any and all empires opposed to the one true God. I am not claiming that all four elements are present in every instance in Revelation, nor is it always easy to apply these four principles to what we find in the book. Still, the four levels have a heuristic value in assisting us as we attempt to interpret the book.

⁶ For these distinctions, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Revelation 20:1–6," *JETS* 36 (1993): 41–54.

Theology of Revelation

THE REALITY OF EVIL

The message of Revelation won't resonate with readers unless the evil opposing God is recognized. The prime mover of evil in the world is the Devil, or Satan. The nature of the Devil is communicated through the names he is given. He is identified as the "devil" (*diabolos*), meaning he accuses the people of God (2:10; 12:9, 12; 20:2, 10). The Devil is also called the "serpent" (*ophis*), which reaches back to Genesis 3 and recognizes the Devil as the one who tempted Eve (Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2)—which explains why he is called the "ancient serpent." The Devil is also called a "dragon" (*drakōn*), representing a mythological monster and formidable enemy who hates and oppresses the people of God (12:3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4; 16:13; 20:2).⁷ Finally, the Devil is identified as "Satan" (*satanas*), the great adversary of God, Christ, and his people (2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 7). "Satan" transliterates the Hebrew term for accuser/adversary, translated into Greek as *diabolos* in Zechariah 3:1–2. Hence it too may have the notion of accuser. Satan persecutes the people of God incessantly (Rev. 12:13–17). He even uses religion, if it accords with his purposes, and thus even a Jewish synagogue, insofar as it oppresses the church, is satanic (2:9–10; 3:9). Satan calls forth the beast (the Roman Empire), granting it authority to prosecute his war against the saints (13:1–18). Satan deceives the world, hindering it from seeing the love of God in Jesus Christ (12:9; 20:8, 10).

Satan doesn't act alone. Indeed, the beast and the false prophet are part of the "unholy trinity" (16:13). One of the primary ways Satan works is counterfeiting and parodying the things of God. The dragon and the beast long above all else to be worshiped and praised, arrogating to themselves the glory belonging to God and the Lamb (13:4; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 20:4). In the case of the first beast, we have a parody of the resurrection, since it "dies" and returns to life (13:3), and hence the beast seems to be invincible, even speaking against God with impunity (13:4–5). This first beast, which is the Roman Empire and represents all human government opposed to God, is summoned by Satan from the sea (12:17–13:2) and comes from the abyss (11:7). The beast persecutes, kills, and discriminates against the people of God (11:7; 13:7, 16–17), exercising political power in the world (13:7). The second beast, the false prophet (13:11–18; 19:20), tries to impersonate the Lamb (13:11) and the Holy Spirit. The second beast is a parody of the Spirit in that he bestows glory on the first beast (13:14–15) and allegedly speaks divine words. The second beast stands for false religion, which, as Paul says, has the "appearance of godliness" but lacks its "power" (2 Tim. 3:5). The beast and the false prophet make war against God and Christ, resisting divine authority at every turn (Rev. 19:19–21).

The evil permeating the world is also represented by Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 17:1–19:5). Babylon is the city of Rome (17:18), but it also represents what Augustine called the "city of man," opposed to the "city of God." Babylon is a harlot, a wicked and brazen witch. The people of the earth join her harlotry by

⁷ I am not suggesting that Satan himself is mythical!

forsaking the one true God (17:2). Her detestable idolatry manifests itself in her fierce opposition to the people of God, the spilling of the blood of God's saints (17:6; 18:24; 19:2), and her lust for economic security. Babylon is drunk with the blood of those who belong to God. And it is not as if only a few participate in her prostitution—nations, merchants, and kings join to enjoy the riches of the godless system (18:3). The city of man lives for luxury and comfort, but its day of comfort and joy will be short-lived (18:9–24).

Evil rules over all who don't belong to Jesus Christ. Instead of worshiping and praising God and the Lamb, they have yielded their devotion to the dragon, the beast, and Babylon (13:8, 12). They are often called "the earth dwellers" (*hoi katoikountes epi tēs gēs*; cf. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8), which functions as a technical term for unbelievers who live on the earth. These "earth dwellers" live for this world instead of the coming new creation, and their names are not inscribed in the book of life (17:8). The earth dwellers are deceived by the false prophet and so give themselves to the beast (13:14). They get in bed with Babylon (17:2) and hence put to death God's people and rejoice when saints are slain (6:10; 11:10). Hence they will be judged (8:13).

THE SUFFERING OF THE SAINTS

The evil dominating the world leads to the suffering of the saints—the people of God. Texts mentioning such suffering are found in a table under Date and Occasion, above. It should be underscored that Revelation was written to suffering churches, to Christians who faced implacable opposition from the government and society. It wasn't written to believers who merely had an academic interest in prophecy. Jesus Christ called them to be ready to die for his sake (2:10); amid great suffering they were summoned to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ (11:3–14). Christians were being slain because of their testimony about Jesus Christ and faithfulness to the Word of God (20:4), and Revelation makes it plain that believers will be put to death until Jesus returns. The unholy trinity hates the people of God and tries to destroy them through discrimination and persecution. The church in Revelation is described as a martyr church. It doesn't follow that every believer will actually be slain by those who oppose God, but every genuine believer will be persecuted and hated by the world (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12).

CALL TO PERSEVERANCE

Linked to the suffering of believers is the call to persevere until the end. In the face of great evil they must not buckle under pressure to compromise with Rome. After recounting the rise of the beast and his resistance to God, John declares, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10). John reminds his readers of the judgment to be meted out on those who worship the beast; they will experience God's unending wrath and torment (14:9–11). The impending judgment summons believers to perseverance: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus" (14:12). In

every one of the letters to the seven churches, believers are called to “conquer,” or overcome (2:7, 11, 17, 25–26; 3:5, 12, 21). Overcoming isn’t optional for believers. John isn’t saying that those who overcome will get a special reward above and beyond eternal life. Instead, *only* those who overcome will eat from the tree of life (2:7). Only those who overcome will conquer the second death—the lake of fire (2:11; 20:14). Only those who overcome will have their names inscribed in the book of life and wear white garments (3:5). Overcomers will inherit the promises, but those who don’t overcome will experience the second death (21:8). Hence, the call to overcome is a matter of utmost seriousness; life and death are at stake!

Those who stay morally awake and alert until the end will receive the garments of salvation (16:15). Those who belong to the Lamb are “called and chosen and faithful” (17:14). Those whose names are written in the book of life are judged according to works (20:11–15), works indicating that they belong to God. Revelation 12:17 describes believers as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

The call to persevere should not, however, be interpreted as works-righteousness. The water of life is given freely to those who thirst (21:6; 22:17). But those who drink freely at the fountain of grace demonstrate that they have slaked their thirst by continuing to follow Christ to the end. As 12:11 says, “They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

In a world where evil resists God and his Christ so that God’s people are harassed, reviled, imprisoned, and slain, the question of God’s sovereignty isn’t merely an academic matter. God declares at the outset and conclusion of Revelation that he rules over history, for he is the “Alpha and the Omega” and the “beginning and the end” (1:8; 21:6). Nothing that happens to God’s people comes as a surprise, nor is it outside his sovereign control. God reigns over all history as the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4, 8). John clearly draws on Exodus 3:14 and declares that God rules over the present, past, and future.

The sovereignty of God is expressed powerfully in chapter 4, which functions as an introduction to the remainder of the book after the letters to the churches in chapters 2–3. John allows us to peek into heaven itself, where God as the ever-holy one sits on his throne, ruling over all. The word “throne” plays a major role in Revelation, forty times referring to God’s or Christ’s throne. John wants his readers to know that God reigns and rules in heaven, for he is the creator of all (4:11), and the Creator is clearly sovereign. Here John reflects the theology of the OT, where God’s sovereignty as Creator is part of the warp and woof of its testimony.

Revelation’s portrayal of God’s sovereignty is no mere abstraction. What is striking and astonishing is God’s rule over the evil inflicted by the beast and the false prophet. John repeatedly tells readers the authority wielded by the beast and the false prophet “was given” (*edothē*) them by God (13:5, 7, 14, 15), including

activities like blaspheming God and murdering believers. God's goodness and holiness are not besmirched, as if he were evil (4:8), even though he rules over the evil unleashed in the world. The passive verb indicates God permitted evil to be done. It must be noted that God didn't *do* these evil deeds; they were the actions of the beast and false prophet. Yet they would have no authority to do such evil unless granted it from above (cf. John 19:11). Nevertheless, evil finally implodes and destroys itself from within. The beast and ten kings will finally turn against the harlot, Babylon, and utterly destroy her (Rev. 17:16). The hatred and destruction inflicted on Babylon stem from the beast and his cronies, yet God fulfills his purposes in these events (17:17). He even "put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose" (17:17).

God's sovereignty reminds believers they can take comfort in their sufferings. Even if they don't understand fully why they are suffering, they are assured that God is working out his purposes and plans in the evil intrigues of those opposed to him. Even though the evil they face is painful and agonizing, believers can trust their wise Father who watches over them. Satan and the beast aren't running out of control in their evil machinations; God always remains the sovereign one who rules over all things.

GOD PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE

In saying that God protects his people, I am not saying God prevents them from suffering. We have seen their intense suffering—believers are not spared even from death. Still, the Devil and the beast cannot do anything to the saints apart from the will of God. Even amid the storm, God superintends history. Indeed, the most frightening thing isn't martyrdom but the wrath of God. When his judgments are unleashed on the world, when the wrath of God and the Lamb are unveiled, no wicked person will be able to stand (6:16–17). Indeed, no one is "worthy" (*axios*; 5:2, 4) to be saved in and of himself (cf. "The Cross of Christ," below). Here we observe how God protects believers from his wrath. Immediately after asking who can withstand God's wrath (6:17), the author records the sealing of the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel (7:1–8). I argue in my comments on that passage that the 144,000 stand for all believers throughout history, both Jews and Gentiles. The main point of the passage is that it is the 144,000 who are sealed and protected by God from the day of wrath. Yes, believers will suffer, but their suffering is temporary, and they will be spared from God's eschatological wrath on the final day. The interpretation of 11:1 is also quite difficult, but the measuring of God's temple, altar, and those who worship there refers likely to the protection of God's people. Even though they suffer persecution (11:2), they are in God's hands and are shielded by him.

This same truth is expressed with a variety of symbols in Revelation. The 144,000 have the name of the Lamb and the Father on their foreheads (14:1). The name inscribed on the forehead means they belong to God and are under his protection (cf. 3:12). Similarly, the woman in chapter 12 (cf. comments) is another

way of describing the people of God. She is “nourished” by God in the wilderness for 1,260 days (12:6; cf. 11:3). The 1,260 days are equivalent to forty-two months (11:2; 13:5) or “time, and times, and half a time” (12:14), equal to three and one-half years, a span we read about elsewhere in Revelation. I suggest in the commentary that this period refers to the entire period between the resurrection and second coming. During this time period believers will be trampled and persecuted (11:2; 12:15–16), for the beast will be exercising his authority and blaspheming God (13:5). Still, even though the church is in the wilderness, God will protect and nourish his own (12:6), just as he protected Israel in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. The woman (the church of Jesus Christ) will be sustained on the wings of an eagle (12:14; cf. Ex. 19:4), and will be helped (Rev. 12:6) and not be overwhelmed (12:16). God thus exercises his sovereignty and love in shepherding his people during their sojourn in the wilderness. The church will be persecuted but will be delivered and preserved. She will be kept from the hour of testing striking the earth (3:10), not by being removed from the earth but by the grace of God sustaining her (cf. John 17:15; 1 Pet. 1:5).

GOD’S JUSTICE IN JUDGMENT

Revelation speaks much about the judgment of God, and the reader of the previous sections understands better why this is the case. Satan and his cohorts have rejected God, turned against truth, justice, and love, and pursued the saints with murderous intent. The earth dwellers have cast their lot with the prostitute Babylon instead of with the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Judgment will be meted out on those who have prostituted themselves, allying themselves with the city of man rather than the city of God.

Nor are believers exempt from the threat of judgment. The letters in chapters 2–3 warn of judgment if the churches don’t repent. God is impartial in judgment, pouring out his wrath on all who reject him. Judgment is featured especially in Revelation in the seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5), trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and bowls (16:1–21). It is not my purpose to rehearse these judgments in detail here. I would suggest (cf. comments on these passages) that God’s judgments stretch from the resurrection to the last day, culminating in the final judgment. The earth will finally be harvested like grapes trod in the winepress (14:17–20). The images of judgment are apocalyptic and all-encompassing. The judgment will leave no stone unturned—the entire world of earth, sky, and sea will be affected. The judgment is an expression of the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:16–17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15).

The final judgment is often introduced with a massive earthquake (6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18). Thunder and lightning are unleashed on the world (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Battering hail descends from heaven (11:19; 16:21), and God’s temple is opened (11:19; 15:5). The entire cosmos falls apart (6:12–14), and the sky splits apart like a scroll (6:14). The islands and mountains of the world lose their moorings (6:14; 16:20). Even earth and heaven flee when God comes to judge (20:11).

These are all pictures of the end—of the dissolution of the old creation. John doesn't write literally but tries to convey the indescribable horror of the final judgment and God's wrath with vivid pictures of the world descending into chaos. The sixth seal (6:12–17), the seventh trumpet (11:15–19), and the seventh bowl all designate the end (16:17–21). After the judgment, the “kingdom of the world” will become the “kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (11:15). Then God's judgment will be “done” (16:17). It seems that the seals, trumpets, and bowls overlap one another in increasing intensity so that the bowls represent both the time near final judgment and final judgment itself.

God's judgments, as noted earlier, represent his sovereignty and indeed his goodness. Evil won't finally triumph over God and his holiness. The world has been besmirched and devastated by evil ever since Adam and Eve, but evil won't last forever. Its day is coming. Some wonder if God's judgments are righteous, but John pauses to emphasize that they are indeed righteous. God is just, giving the wicked what they deserve, for they shed the blood of God's saints (16:5–7). John realizes readers might wonder if fierce judgments are truly warranted, so he declares several times the righteousness of God's judgments. Before the final bowl judgments are poured out, John says, “Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!” (15:3). The punishment fits the crime—the slaying of God's people (18:20–24). Or, as 19:2 says, “His judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” The justice for which martyrs plead will finally be meted out (6:10). People are judged according to their works (20:11–15), and hence the judgment is fair and equitable. People are receiving recompense for what they have done (22:12). No one unclean can enter the city (21:27); those outside the gates are those who have given themselves to evil (22:15).

Hence, the saints don't question God's judgments but praise him for them. Those in heaven and on earth exclaim, “Hallelujah!” (19:1, 3). The saints cry out “Hallelujah” as the smoke of Babylon “goes up forever and ever” (19:3), for evil has been destroyed and they have been vindicated. The final judgment lasts forever, for those who worship the beast (14:9) are “tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (14:10). The judgment cannot be restricted to annihilation, for it isn't just the *smoke* ascending forever. Instead, those punished are tormented forever—“They have no rest, day or night” (14:11). They will experience conscious punishment in the lake of fire, the second death, where the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet find their eternal home (19:20; 20:10), for the second death is the lake of fire (20:14).

THE DEITY OF CHRIST

One of the striking features in Revelation is its extraordinarily high Christology. It rivals the Gospel of John—perhaps another indication that John is the author. One parallel with the Gospel of John leaps out, for Jesus is called the “Word of God” (19:13), echoing the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is the “Word”

(John 1:1, 14). Jesus is also identified at the outset as the “ruler of kings on earth” (Rev. 1:5), showing he shares the same rule and sovereignty as God. Three times Jesus identifies himself as the “first and the last” (1:17; 2:8; 22:13), and in the latter verse he also says “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Only Yahweh is the first and last (cf. Isa. 44:6; 48:12), and elsewhere in Revelation God declares that he himself is the “Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8)—thus Jesus shares the stature of God as the sovereign one over all. The Roman Empire does not ultimately rule over the saints. Instead, Jesus rules over the kings of the earth, thus they cannot do anything apart from his will. Believers can put their entire trust in him, for he is “Faithful and True” (19:11).

The sovereignty of Jesus and therefore his divinity pervade the book. Jesus comforts the suffering church by affirming that he holds the “keys of Death and Hades” (1:18). He also holds the seven stars in his hands (2:1), ruling over the angels of the seven churches. When Jesus opens a door, no one can shut it; when he shuts the door, no one can open it (3:7). Chapter 5 emphasizes that no one is “worthy” to open the seven-sealed book except Jesus Christ. In other words, the key to history and to the history of redemption is Jesus Christ.

We find astonishing parallels between God and the Lamb, indicating that the Lamb is equal to God. Sinners beg to be hidden from the presence of God on the throne, but they also plead to be spared from the “wrath of the Lamb” (6:16). Salvation is attributed both to God and to the Lamb (7:10). The divine stature of Jesus is apparent when John says, “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water” (7:17). Psalm 23 says Yahweh is the shepherd, leading his own to quiet waters (Ps. 23:1–2), and John assigns the same role to the Lamb, demonstrating that he is Lord of all. We are also told that the Lamb is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14; cf. 19:16), again showing Jesus enjoying the same sovereignty as God. The apostles belong to the Lamb (21:14), and both God and the Lamb are the new temple (21:22). Similarly, the new creation is illumined by both God and the Lamb (21:23; 22:5). The river of life comes from both God and the Lamb (22:1), and God and the Lamb both sit on the throne (22:3). The equivalent status of God and the Lamb is strikingly apparent. The kingdom of the world is given to the Lord and to the Christ (11:15; cf. 20:6). Just as God as Creator is worshiped in chapter 4 (4:9–11), so Christ as Redeemer is worshiped in chapter 5 (5:9–14). Just as God is worthy (4:11), so the Lamb is worthy (5:9, 12).

Jesus is the beginning and head of the new creation (3:14), the living one, the resurrected Lord (1:18; 2:8). Jesus’ rule is due not only to his divinity but also to his humanity. Jesus fulfills the promise of the Davidic covenant (cf. 2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalms 89; 132) as the root of David (Rev. 5:5; cf. Isa. 11:1, 10). As the Davidic king, he will rule the world with an iron rod (Rev. 12:5; cf. Ps. 2:9), and when he comes again he will destroy God’s enemies (Rev. 19:11–21).

Jesus is also the glorious Son of Man, as we see from the stunning vision in chapter 1 (Rev. 1:12–18). As the Son of Man, he is a human being, for he has died

and risen (1:18). But he is also divine, for his hair is white (1:14), just as Yahweh's is (Dan. 7:9). His glory is so great that John faints in his presence (Rev. 1:17).

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Revelation doesn't depart from the witness of the remainder of the NT: the glory of the person of Jesus Christ is revealed also in his sacrifice on the cross. John emphasizes in arresting ways the centrality of the cross. In chapter 4 we see God as Creator worshiped in the heavenly throne room. We find in chapter 5 God holding a sealed book that no one is worthy to open. John weeps, for if no one can open the book, no one can be saved and God's purposes for human beings will be unrealized. But then John is told that the Lion from the tribe of Judah "has conquered" and can open the seals (5:5). When John looks, however, he sees not a Lion but a slain and risen Lamb (5:6), indicating that Jesus conquered through his suffering, through his death on the cross. Peace and justice were accomplished not by overwhelming force but through suffering love.

God intended human beings to become kings and priests—kings to rule the world for God and priests to mediate his blessing to the world. Christ through his blood redeemed human beings and made them such kings and priests, so that the goal for which he made human beings would be realized (5:9–10). People will enter the heavenly city only if their robes are white (3:4–5, 18; 7:9, 13; 19:14), but the robes become white in a surprising way—through the red blood of the Lamb shed for them (7:14). Robes don't normally become white by being reddened, but these robes do!

Chapter 12 depicts war in heaven between Satan and his angels and Michael the archangel and his angels. Satan was evicted from heaven, losing his platform for accusing human beings. But how do we explain Satan's defeat, and why can he no longer lodge accusations against humans? The answer is found again in the blood of the Lamb (12:11). Satan is conquered (cf. 5:5!) and defeated because of the death of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' death, believers have no fear of condemnation, having been cleansed of their guilt through the cross. No accusation can stand against them, for the Lamb has redeemed them from their sins.

We have seen in chapters 5 and 12 (pivotal chapters in Revelation) that victory and triumph come only through the cross. And the book *begins* this way as well. John declares that Jesus "freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5). We see here again that human beings are liberated to serve as priests and kings (1:6). The fundamental need for human beings is forgiveness, by which they are cleansed and restored to their proper function. All praise is given to the Lamb for such restoration, as we hear in the resounding words of the angels, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:12).

THE CENTRALITY OF WORSHIP

One of the striking themes of Revelation is worship. It isn't my purpose here to examine this theme in any detail. We simply want to observe its prominence, for

we have seen most of these themes elsewhere. The majesty and holiness of God as Creator are featured in chapter 4, the angels responding with worship and praise. The worship of God here echoes the worship of the seraphim in Isaiah 6, giving praise to God as thrice holy (Isa. 6:1–3). Similarly, in Revelation 5 all of creation worships and praises Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb, the one who has redeemed his people and opened the book with seven seals. In 7:10–12 angelic powers give praise to God and to Lamb for the salvation of the great multitude. The twenty-four elders fall face down and worship God for commencing his reign, rewarding his saints, and judging those who are evil (Rev. 11:16–18). Those who triumph over the beast also sing the song of Moses (15:2–4), showing the salvation in Jesus Christ fulfilling old covenant promises. They praise God for his awesome works, rule over all, righteous and true ways, and holiness. God alone is acknowledged as the holy one, the one before whom all will bow because of his righteousness. God is also praised for his righteous judgment on those who practice evil. The saints and angels voice their praise to God for judging the harlot, Babylon (18:20; 19:1, 3, 4). God is praised for his justice, salvation, glory, and power. The saints are full of praise because God’s kingdom has come and the marriage of the bride has occurred (19:5–8).

Finally, on two occasions Revelation insists that only God is to be worshiped (19:10; 22:8–9). John was tempted to worship a glorious angel, but such worship is reserved for the one true God alone. Restricting worship to God constitutes further evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ, for John, as we saw above, clearly teaches that Jesus is to be worshiped, and hence it follows that Jesus Christ shares in the divine identity.

THE WONDER OF THE NEW CREATION

Believers in Jesus Christ are promised they will enjoy the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, the heavenly Jerusalem. The future glory promised to believers is described in a variety of ways, and it is important to recognize the symbolism of the language. For instance, those who enter the new creation will worship God in his temple day and night (7:15). Believers will be a “pillar in the temple” (3:12). Yet there isn’t a temple in the new creation, for the Lord and the Lamb are its temple (21:22). In 21:1–22:5, John often alludes to the temple described in Ezekiel 40–48, yet he says there is no temple. Thus we see the temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40–48 wasn’t intended to predict the future building of a literal temple. It represented the dwelling place of God, and at the consummation of history the entire universe—the entire heavenly city—is God’s dwelling place. The precious gems in the heavenly city also remind us of the tabernacle and temple (Rev. 21:10–11, 19–21). The city is a perfect cube (21:16), like the Most Holy Place in the temple (1 Kings 6:20), showing that the city is God’s residence, his dwelling place. The most important aspect of the new creation is fellowship with God. He dwells with his people so that they can see his face and revel in his presence forevermore (Rev. 21:3; 22:4).

The pain and sorrow of the present world will be erased forever, for God will make everything wondrously new (7:17; 21:4–5). Thus it makes sense that those who die in the Lord from now on are blessed (14:13). The saints will slake their thirst in the new creation in the fountain of living waters (7:17; 21:6). The new creation is described as a wedding feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–10). The wedding will be consummated, and the saints' joy will be "inexpressible and filled with glory," for the city will radiate with the glory of God (1 Pet. 1:8; Rev. 21:10–11). The city is safe and impregnable, having a high wall (Rev. 21:12)—no one can attack those within. The language is clearly symbolic, however, for the gates of the city are also always open (21:25); there is no use for a wall if the gates are always open! But the high wall and open gates communicate the same truth: the residents of the city cannot be harmed by anything; the city is secure from any and every marauder.

The city consists of the one people of God throughout the ages, having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates and the twelve apostles on its foundation stones (21:12–14). The city is founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) and consists of all believers everywhere. The number twelve is clearly symbolic. The city is 12,000 stadia long (Rev. 21:16), and the wall is 144 (12 × 12) cubits high (21:17). Remarkably, John tells us that this is the measurement of an angel but that no one knows how angels measure! Thus we have another indication of John writing symbolically, not literally.

The beginning of God's creation in Genesis is reflected in the end: there is a tree of life in the city for healing (22:2), but this does not imply that people will need healing, for there are no diseases there. The tree of life symbolizes the perfect wholeness the saints enjoy in the city. The nations bring their glory into the city (21:24–25)—everything beautiful and lovely from the present creation will be in the new creation. Still, what makes the city so desirable is God himself and the Lamb, for they are the light of the city and the light of our lives (21:23).

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

Revelation concludes the story of the Bible. God created Adam and Eve to rule the world for him, in dependence upon him. In doing so they would reflect his glory and beauty. Adam and Eve, however, turned against God and arrogated to themselves glory and honor belonging to the Creator. They worshiped the creature (themselves) rather than the Creator, violating God's command. As a result the world was plunged into sin, and death followed as a consequence of sin.

Still, God promised salvation would come through the offspring of the woman (Gen. 3:15). This promise of salvation was then channeled through one man and one nation: Abraham and Israel. God promised offspring, land, and universal blessing to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). The promises took a long time to be fulfilled, both in Abraham's life and in the nation. By the time of the exodus Israel was exploding as a nation, thus the promise of offspring was being fulfilled. God liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery under Moses and entered into a covenant with them.

Israel regularly violated the covenant, but God graciously brought them into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership.

Israel was poised to experience universal blessing, but they started walking backward. In the days of the judges they began living like the Canaanites they had dispossessed. Still, God continued to forgive them when they repented, and Saul was crowned as their first king. Would he be the king through whom blessing would come? Instead, Saul's career mirrored Israel's. At first he seemed to be the answer to Israel's problems, but he turned away from following the Lord and pursued his own inclinations. The Lord had promised blessing would come through a king (e.g., Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10; Num. 24:17), but it was apparent Saul was not that king.

A king after God's own heart was anointed: David. David was dramatically different from Saul, for he followed the Lord, obeying him even when suffering unjustly at Saul's hand. God promised David's dynasty would last forever, and the universal blessing promised to the world would come through David's son. The blessing couldn't come through David, as great as he was, for he showed himself to be a sinner. Neither was Solomon the final promised king, for his heart was bewitched by idols in his later years. Indeed, the promised blessing for Israel wasn't secured under any of the kings of Judah or Israel. Instead, the north and the south both defected from the Lord and ended in exile—in 722 and 586 BC, respectively.

What happened to the promise? Israel was going backward. They weren't even in their own land! God promised through the prophets that a "day of the Lord" was coming when he would save his people and judge the wicked. The covenant with David would be fulfilled, and his salvation and righteousness would be revealed to all peoples. A new exodus, a new covenant, a new creation, and a new David would come.

The Gospels reveal that Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the promises made to Abraham and David. Most of Israel in Jesus' day didn't recognize him as the Messiah, but he was the son of David, the Son of Man of Daniel 7, and the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53. He was God's true Son. Still, the promises were fulfilled in an astonishing way. Jesus the Christ was slain for the sin of his people and raised for their justification (cf. Rom. 4:25). As the rest of the NT makes plain, salvation belongs to those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, who give their lives to him. The Epistles unpack theologically what Jesus Christ has done for his people and what it means to live to the glory of God after the great saving work accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The book of Revelation is a fitting consummation to the story. John teaches us that good will triumph and evil will be dethroned. Jesus conquered sin, death, and Satan through his cross and resurrection, but the church in this world still faces these foes, and often it seems that Satan and evil have triumphed. Revelation teaches that evil will not finally conquer. Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Lord, and he rules over all. His kingdom will come in its fullness, and his purposes will

be realized. Those who oppose him will regret it, for they will be dethroned and judged. The pleasures of Babylon and idolatry are short-lived. Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and those who give themselves to worshiping them and the things of this world will be judged. Victory is sure; Satan will soon be crushed under Jesus' feet (cf. Rom. 16:20). Hence the suffering church must take courage and endure to the end. They must keep trusting and relying on the Lord. They must remember that the Lamb who was slain also rules over all. Those who persevere will receive the final reward, for the new creation is most certainly coming, and the bliss and joy of those who know the Lord and the Lamb will never end. Jesus is coming again, and all his promises will come to fruition.

Preaching from Revelation

Too often those who preach from Revelation have used it as a prophecy chart, which is alien to the message of the book. They have fallen into the trap of newspaper eschatology instead of biblical eschatology. Unfortunately, those who don't follow such an approach have often gone to the other extreme and avoided preaching from Revelation altogether, but such an approach is equally mistaken, for God has given us the book for our instruction in edification and holiness.

Revelation is a recursive book, meaning the same themes are examined again and again. We don't have a linear story that begins in chapter 1 and ends in chapter 22. The story begins and ends a number of times, and hence preachers must be sensitive to the literary structure of the book when proclaiming it. Still, there is great benefit in preaching through the entire book. If one uses this approach, I would suggest taking large chunks of the text in each sermon. For instance, when I preached the book I preached twenty-seven messages.

Another way to preach the book is via the themes presented above. For instance, one could do a series on worship, the cross of Christ, God's judgments, the seven letters to the churches, the need to persevere, etc. We want to impress on our churches that the theology of Revelation fits the rest of the NT. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of what is prophesied in the OT, and the fulcrum of history is the cross. Those who give themselves to Jesus Christ and persevere to the end will be saved. Conversely, those who give themselves over to evil will be judged.

When we untangle the apocalyptic language in the book, we don't find anything radically new in the message of Revelation. All the themes in the book are present elsewhere in the NT. Still, this isn't to say the genre is dispensable. We want to communicate the genre in our preaching, for the apocalyptic genre arrests us and transports us from our present existence, reminding us of a world to come—a world beyond our senses. The apocalyptic genre reminds us that awesome issues are at stake, showing us that evil is lurid and dreadful while goodness is beautiful and beyond our imagination. Apocalypse seizes our imaginations and hearts, transporting us to another world—the world awaiting the faithful. In our preaching

we should try to capture the transcendent message of the book and underscore the life-and-death issues at stake.

It is also helpful to preach Revelation because it is the culmination of the story of the Bible. Hence, when we preach Revelation we should show our hearers that it is infused with OT themes and allusions. The book doesn't depart from the OT witness but fulfills it. Finally, in preaching Revelation we preach Jesus Christ: the book reveals him (1:1; cf. comment), and any faithful preaching of the book will feature Jesus as the crucified and risen one. In other words, we preach Revelation well only if we proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Interpretive Challenges

The symbolism of Revelation presents interpretive challenges, and probably no other book in the NT is more disputed interpretively than Revelation. Four different interpretive approaches have played a major role in the history of the church, as represented in table 9.2 in a simplified way.

TABLE 9.2: Interpretive Approaches to Revelation

Preterist	Fulfilled entirely or mainly in the first century
Historicist	Fulfilled in stages throughout church history
Idealist	Fundamentally symbolic
Futurist	Fulfilled mainly in future

The preterist view argues that Revelation was mainly or entirely fulfilled in the first century. The strength of this view is how it takes seriously the historical context in which Revelation was birthed. John wrote Revelation to readers in the first century, and the book addressed their concerns, hopes, and fears. The preterist view can be divided into liberal and evangelical camps. Those who are liberal theologically maintain that Revelation promised Jesus would come soon and destroy the Roman Empire, but these promises were not actually fulfilled, and hence John got it wrong. Most evangelical preterists, on the other hand, maintain Revelation was written before AD 70 and the events prophesied in Revelation are fulfilled mainly in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The liberal preterist view, though it rightly sees the historical context in which Revelation was written, fails to understand the nature of biblical prophecy, in which contemporary fulfillment anticipates a future and final fulfillment. It also wrongly asserts that biblical writers have erred, and such a theological judgment should be rejected for a variety of reasons that can't be detailed here.

The evangelical preterist view has several problems. First, it demands that the book was written before AD 70, yet most scholars and the preponderance of the evidence suggest a date in the 90s. The most common evangelical preterist view is precarious, for the book *must* be written before AD 70 for its interpreta-

tion to succeed. Second, the events recorded by Josephus concerning Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 are often forced upon Revelation by preterists, instead of their interpreting the text more naturally. Third, evangelical preterists identify Jerusalem as Babylon, but we have no other instance where Jerusalem is called Babylon, whereas elsewhere Babylon designates Rome (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Finally, the evangelical preterist view reads the book in terms of the destruction of Jerusalem but doesn't handle well the many texts that speak universally, in which judgment is not limited to Babylon but encompasses the entire world.

The historicist view reads the book of Revelation as if it were a prophecy of the entirety of church history. Such a reading was especially popular in classical dispensationalism and was applied especially to the letters in chapters 2 and 3. Almost all dispensational interpreters today, however, have abandoned this approach, and few scholars support it, for church history must be forced to fit into the seven letters, or the rest of Revelation for that matter. It seems that this view survives in only a few circles.

The idealist view understands Revelation in broad categories, seeing in Jesus Christ the triumph of God and the defeat of the Devil and God's enemies. Interpreters have been attracted to this approach, for it isn't guilty of the arbitrary readings littering the history of the church. The idealist approach rightly sees the main message of the book, but it has been criticized for being too general and vague. Almost all would agree with the general message it detects in the book, but some of the gritty details in the book are sacrificed.

The futurist view is probably the most popular in evangelical circles today. The last century has been dominated by dispensational futurist readings, where Israel is sharply distinguished from the church and Revelation 4–22 takes place after the rapture of the church. Much of Revelation, then, records (according to this view) what happens in the seven years of tribulation before the second coming of Christ, his millennial reign on earth, and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. Not all futurists, however, are dispensationalists. In recent years major commentaries have been written by scholars such as Robert Mounce, George Eldon Ladd, and Grant Osborne from a futurist stance, but none of these scholars is dispensational. It will become apparent in the course of the commentary why I reject a dispensational reading of the book, but space is lacking to interact with that view here. Only two problems with the dispensational view should be noted here. First, there is no evidence that the church is raptured before chapter 4. Such a reading must be imposed upon the text. Second, the sharp distinction between Israel and the church postulated by dispensationalists cannot be supported by a careful reading of Revelation.

Not all futurists, as noted above, are dispensationalists, for many today identify themselves as historic premillennialists, inasmuch as a number of early church fathers who were not dispensational believed in a future millennial reign of Christ on earth. The futurist view rightly sees the book relating to the end of history, but in some instances it falls prey to speculation and dangerous fantasies. In popular

circles (e.g., the writings of Hal Lindsey and the novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins)⁸ speculation runs rampant, and the meaning of Revelation is subverted by modern agendas. Still, the futurist approach reminds us that God reigns over history and will fulfill his promises in the future.

The approach taken in this commentary is a combination of the preterist, idealist, and futurist views. Revelation was written to churches in the first century, who understood and were edified and challenged by the book. The idealist view rightly sees the prophecies as consisting of patterns and correspondences, so that what was prophesied relates both to the first century and to all churches throughout history until God consummates his purposes and plans. I will argue that the patterned or correspondence character of the prophecy helps us see how the words of Revelation spoke to the first century, the church throughout history, our time, and the end of the ages. At the same time, an idealist view must also incorporate the future into its reading, for John forecasts also the denouement of God's purposes in history.

Outline

I will argue in the commentary that Revelation has a recursive structure. In other words, the book often comes to the end of history (e.g., 6:12–17; 7:15–17; 11:15–19; 14:1–5, 14–20; 16:17–21) and begins again. Hence, the book isn't like most epistles, with a logical structure that is unfolded. Nor is it a linear book like Genesis, which proceeds in chronological order. Interestingly, though the genre is entirely different, the book in some ways reminds us of 1 John, in which John articulates themes and then circles back to reflect on them again, continuing this method throughout the letter.

- I. Introduction (1:1–20)
 - A. Prologue: (1:1–8)
 - B. Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)
- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)
 - A. Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - B. Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - C. Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - D. Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - E. Sardis (3:1–6)
 - F. Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - G. Laodicea (3:14–22)
- III. Visions in the Throne Room (4:1–5:14)
 - A. God as the Holy Creator (4:1–11)
 - B. The Lamb as Redeemer (5:1–14)
- IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5)
 - A. The First Six Seals (6:1–17)

⁸ The indictment of LaHaye and Jenkins applies only if the eschatology underlying their novels is embraced as true to Scripture.

- B. Interlude (7:1–17)
 - 1. Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1–8)
 - 2. Salvation of an Uncountable Multitude (7:9–17)
- C. The Seventh Seal and the Seven Trumpets (8:1–5)
- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19)
 - A. The First Four Trumpets: Cosmic Destruction (8:6–13)
 - B. Fifth Trumpet: Demonic Locust Plague (9:1–12)
 - C. Sixth Trumpet: Demonic Cavalry (9:13–21)
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14)
 - 1. Renewed Call to Prophecy (10:1–11)
 - 2. Temple Protected (11:1–2)
 - 3. Two Witnesses Empowered, Killed, and Vindicated (11:3–14)
 - E. The Seventh Trumpet: Kingdom Come! (11:15–19)
- VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20)
 - A. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1–6)
 - B. War in Heaven: The Devil Expelled (12:7–12)
 - C. The Woman: Persecuted and Protected (12:13–17)
 - D. Two Beasts (13:1–18)
 - E. The 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1–5)
 - F. Three Angels (14:6–13)
 - G. Two Harvests (14:14–20)
- VII. The Seven Bowls from the Sanctuary (15:1–16:21)
 - A. The Sanctuary and the Song (15:1–8)
 - B. The Seven Bowls (16:1–21)
- VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride (17:1–19:10)
 - A. The Harlot Babylon Destroyed (17:1–18)
 - B. The Declarations of Two Angels (18:1–8)
 - C. Lamentation over Babylon's Fall (18:9–19)
 - D. Rejoicing over Babylon's Fall (18:20–19:5)
 - E. Rejoicing over the Marriage of the Lamb (19:6–10)
- IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15)
 - A. Defeat of the Beast, the False Prophet, and Their Adherents (19:11–21)
 - B. Reigning with Jesus for a Thousand Years (20:1–6)
 - C. The Last Battle (20:7–10)
 - D. The Last Judgment (20:11–15)
- X. The New Heavens and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
 - A. All Things New (21:1–8)
 - B. The Bride and the Holy City (21:9–22:5)
- XI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

A simplified structure of Revelation is presented in table 9.3.

TABLE 9.3: A Simplified Structure of Revelation

chs. 1–3	Letters to the seven churches
chs. 4–5	Throne room vision
chs. 6–7	Seven seals
chs. 8–11	Seven trumpets
chs. 12–14	Visions of heaven and earth
chs. 15–16	Seven bowls
17:1–19:10	The fall of Babylon
19:11–22:21	The consummation and the new heaven and new earth

REVELATION 1:1–8

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants¹ the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail² on account of him. Even so. 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.”

¹For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface; likewise for *servant* later in this verse ²Or *mourn*

Section Overview

The structure of the prologue is somewhat loose, with no linear progression of the argument as in many epistles. The book is introduced (Rev. 1:1–3), followed by a grace greeting (vv. 4–6), and then John closes with two solemn statements (vv. 7–8) emphasizing God’s sovereignty. The prologue has an earnest and impressive character from the first words to the last. The importance of reading and obeying the

book is underscored (v. 3), and John twice punctuates what he says with “Amen” (vv. 6, 7). The sovereignty, majesty, and greatness of God and Jesus Christ pulsate through the prologue, and readers are provoked to see that the message conveyed is of utmost importance.

Section Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–20)
 - A. Prologue: (1:1–8)

Comment

1:1 The book of Revelation is about Jesus Christ, for in it he is revealed. The phrase “revelation of Jesus Christ” could mean a revelation *about* Jesus Christ or a revelation *given by* Jesus Christ. It clearly means the latter, for John tells us that God “gave” the revelation to Jesus. For some that settles the issue, but given the contents of the remainder of the book, and given what is said about Jesus Christ even in the prologue, we should not opt for an either-or here. The revelation both is given by Jesus Christ *and* centers on Jesus. The word “revelation” indicates that God’s purpose in history is unveiled or disclosed to us in what John writes. We see from the outset that the book of Revelation is *about* Jesus Christ, and its contents are given *by* him.

The revelation was sent to show God’s “servants,” i.e., believers, what will take place “soon.” After two thousand years we wonder what these words mean, for John consistently affirms the nearness of the fulfillment (cf. 1:3; 22:6). Jesus promises to come “soon” (2:16; 22:7, 12, 20). Many scholars have argued that John got it wrong. They say the word “soon” means soon, but it didn’t happen, and that’s that. But as I will show below, the matter isn’t as simple as this, and there are good reasons for thinking the word “soon” isn’t contradicted by the two thousand years of history that have passed without the return of Jesus. Some preterists have said the wording relates to AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. But this latter view hardly works, for Revelation doesn’t focus on Israel and Jerusalem, and it strains belief to think Jesus’ coming can be identified with Jerusalem being destroyed.

The discussion at this point could become quite involved, but several things must be said. First, “soon” is a relative term, for what it means depends on one’s perspective. Peter tells us that one day with the Lord is like a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Two thousand years—i.e., two days, so to speak—have elapsed since Jesus was enthroned on high. Second, biblical prophecy is marked by the tension we find here. For instance, if one reads Isaiah 40–66 carefully, it is evident that God promises a new exodus—the return from Babylon. Isaiah gives every impression that, when the new exodus occurs, the new creation will dawn (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), the Spirit will be given (Isa. 44:3), and all of God’s promises will be fulfilled. But it didn’t happen that way. Israel returned from exile, but their place in the world was still rather pitiful. Did Isaiah get it wrong? Remarkably, Jesus and the apostles didn’t think so. They didn’t reject Isaiah’s testimony even though it seemed as if

he promised everything would be fulfilled when Israel returned from exile. They recognized the complexity of Isaiah's vision. The restoration was inaugurated but not consummated in the reign of Cyrus, and Jesus and his apostles believed the full and final fulfillment was still to come. The appropriation of Isaiah by Jesus and the apostles functions as a model to us today in interpreting prophecy and the coming of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Jeremiah prophesied Israel would return from exile in seventy years (Jer. 25:12; 29:10), and when one reads Jeremiah 30–33 it seems the new covenant would be inaugurated, the Davidic king would reign, right sacrifices would be offered, and Israel would prosper (Jer. 31:31–34; 33:17–26). It is quite obvious, however, that Jeremiah's prophecy wasn't realized in its fullness at the return from Babylon in the time of Ezra. Indeed, the Lord reveals to Daniel that the completion of God's plans won't be realized until seventy sevens take place (Dan. 9:24–27). We have a precedent, then, in OT prophecy. The imminence of the fulfillment must not be understood simplistically or narrowly. Jesus could return in any generation, yet there is no guarantee enabling us to pin down when he will come.

Third, we need to remember that the last days have arrived with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:16–17; Heb. 1:2). The last hour has now come (1 John 2:18), and thus the end is imminent, and has been for two thousand years. Every generation has rightly said Jesus is coming soon, because all the great redemptive events needed for him to return have been accomplished.

The revelation was mediated to John through an angel, and one of the features of apocalyptic literature is the conveyance of a transcendent message from an angel or another important person. John here is probably the apostle (cf. Introduction), and his designation as a servant indicates his humility but also his stature, for Moses (Num. 12:7–8; Josh. 1:1–2),⁹ Joshua (Judg. 2:8), and other godly men (Dan. 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6) were designated as servants in the OT. The words "made it known" (*sēmmainō*), of which Jesus is probably the subject (though the subject may be the Father), stem from a verb (cf. Dan. 2:45 LXX) pointing to the symbolic nature of the revelation given to John (cf. John 12:33; 18:32; 21:19; Acts 11:28), though the symbolism of the book is evident from its content, in any case.

1:2 The message John conveys in the book is the "word of God," which means it is God's message for the churches. John also witnesses to the "testimony of Jesus Christ," which is probably appositional to "word of God," signifying that God's word centers on Jesus Christ. The phrase "testimony of Jesus" is used with reference to the faithfulness of believers in 12:17 and 20:4, referring to those who persevere despite the opposition they face. The phrase is also used in 19:10 to designate the essence of prophecy. In each instance, the focus is on the testimony *about* Jesus, though in 1:2 we may have another example of a both-and, where the testimony is both *about* Jesus and *given by* Jesus. The message of Revelation consists of the word of God, and God's word centers especially on Christ. John also tells us he

⁹ Moses is called the servant of the Lord more than thirty times.

saw the message contained in the book, and hence we can deduce that the message of the book was transmitted through visions. John uses the verb “see” more than fifty times to indicate what was revealed to him.¹⁰ The reception of visions is characteristic of apocalyptic literature, and hence we have another indication of the imagistic character of the book.

1:3 There are seven statements of blessing in Revelation; both the one reading the book aloud and those hearing and obeying its message are promised a blessing (see table 9.4).

TABLE 9.4: The Seven Blessings in Revelation

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it . . .	1:3
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.	14:13
Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on . . .	16:15
Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.	19:9
Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection.	20:6
Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.	22:7
Blessed are those who wash their robes.	22:14

Given the significance of numbers in Revelation, and especially the import of the number seven (fifty-five occurrences), it seems significant that there are seven blessings. The sevenfold blessing probably signifies completeness and fullness in the blessing promised. The contents of the blessings all relate to future reward promised to believers, to bliss they will experience after a period of testing.

Here the blessing is promised to the one who reads the book aloud and to those who hear and keep it. We see here that the book was read out loud to the churches receiving it. The oral impact of the book is slighted in Western cultures, where the reading of Scripture in church is confined to brief passages, and most private reading is silent. We can imagine, however, the impact this stunning book had on those who first heard its message. Blessing comes from hearing the message of the book, but hearing alone doesn’t bring blessing, for hearing must be accompanied by obeying. The book of Revelation isn’t merely information; it shouldn’t be confused with a prophecy chart. The book calls upon its readers to act, to heed the message conveyed, and we shall see the focus is on the call to persevere to the end. The message must be attended to, since the “time is near” (1:3).¹¹ Readers must not compromise with the world and grow lackadaisical, as if they had plenty of time to respond. The call to obedience is urgent and must be heeded immediately. We should also note that the message of the book is also designated as “prophecy.”

¹⁰ Cf. Revelation 1:12, 17, 19, 20; 4:1; 5:1, 2, 6, 11; 6:1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 9; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 17; 10:1, 5; 13:1, 2, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2, 5; 16:13; 17:3, 6, 8, 12, 15, 16, 18; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22.

¹¹ For the significance of the nearness of the time, cf. comment on 1:1.

The book isn't limited to apocalypse but is also prophetic in nature. We could say that the book is prophetic-apocalyptic.

1:4 The epistolary character of the book now surfaces as John writes to seven churches. The seven churches are named in 1:11, and thus are not merely symbolic but rather real churches in particular locations in the Greco-Roman world. The historical character of John's writing is apparent from the reference to Asia, a Roman province in the western part of what is today Turkey. Emperor worship was quite common during the first century in the province of Asia, and hence, as we shall see, John's message was directed to concrete circumstances in the life of the churches. Still, the number seven seems to have symbolic import as well, for the message ultimately isn't limited to the seven churches but applies to all churches throughout history.

As is typical in Christian letters, we find a grace wish (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3) extended to the readers. In this instance the grace wish concludes in verse 6 with a doxology. What is particularly striking is the Trinitarian nature of the grace wish, for the Father, Spirit, and Son are all mentioned. No other grace wish in the NT includes the Spirit, making this one distinctive.

The prayer for grace also includes peace. Grace refers to God's gracious favor granted freely from the abundance of his love, while peace centers on the right relationship with God belonging to believers as a result of God's grace. Here the focus is on the subjective experience of that peace, since Christians are already in a right relationship with God. Believers continue to need God's grace and peace daily, especially when they face persecution and discrimination from the world. Hence John prays that they will know God's grace and peace from the Father, Spirit, and Son.

Grace and peace come first from the Father, who is designated as the one "who is and who was and who is to come." John alludes to Exodus 3:14, where the Lord reveals his name to Moses by declaring, "I AM WHO I AM." In Exodus Yahweh discloses himself as the everlasting God who reigns over heaven and earth, and as the covenant God faithful to his people and his promises to them (cf. Ex. 6:3–8). Isaiah particularly picks up on the "I am" formula from Exodus (e.g., Isa. 41:4, 10; 42:8; 43:3, 5, 10, 11, 25).¹² Isaiah emphasizes Yahweh as Israel's Creator, Lord, and Savior in a situation where Israel fears it will never be liberated from exile but instead will be swallowed up by Babylon forever. So too John in Revelation calls attention to the greatness of God. He "is"—i.e., he reigns over the world and the church, even though the Roman Empire contests his lordship. He "was"—he has always been the sovereign Lord of history. There has never been a time he was not mighty God of the entire creation. He is the "coming one"—he is coming to establish his rule over the world in a new and decisive way. Yes, God has always been King and Lord, but the fullness and completeness of his reign has not yet

¹² Isaiah does not always use the exact wording of the formula, but he still alludes to Exodus 3:14, as is evident in the content of his prophecies.

been realized or acknowledged. He is coming to judge the wicked, vindicate the righteous, and bring about the new creation. We may think it odd to speak of the Father as coming, for isn't Jesus Christ the "coming one" rather than the Father? We should note that this very same phrase is used of the Father in Revelation 1:8 and again in 4:8. Since Jesus Christ appears at the end of the grace wish in 1:5, the Father is obviously in view here in 1:4. In one sense, we should not be surprised that the Father is declared the "coming one," for even though the Son comes physically, what is true of the Son is true also of the Father. In Trinitarian terms, we call this *coinherence*. The members of the Trinity inhere in one another; the action of one member can be predicated also of another. Hence the judgment of the Son is the judgment of the Father as well (John 8:16), and the love of the Son represents the love of the Father also.

Grace and peace aren't only from the Father but are also from the "seven spirits who are before his throne." The phrase "seven spirits" occurs three other times in Revelation (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). Some doubt this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, since Jesus possesses the seven spirits (3:1) and the burning torches are also called the seven spirits (4:5). Some think the reference is to the seven angels of God or to seven archangels, for the word "spirit" often refers to angels. I will argue that each instance is actually a reference to the Holy Spirit.¹³ In this verse, a reference to the Holy Spirit is particularly persuasive. It is difficult to see how grace and peace can come from anyone but God himself. It is also quite striking in reading the NT that grace and peace are never said to come from a human being; we never read of grace and peace coming from the apostle John or Paul or anyone else. Nor do we ever find grace and peace coming from an angel or an exalted person from the past, such as Moses or Elijah. Grace and peace always come from God himself, and thus it makes most sense to see the "seven spirits" here in 1:4 as referring to the Holy Spirit. The "seven spirits of God" (3:1; 4:5; 5:6) may seem strange on first reading, for there aren't seven Holy Spirits. We need to recall that Revelation is apocalyptic, regularly using numbers with symbolic import. Thus the number seven here designates perfection and the fullness of the Holy Spirit. We almost certainly have an allusion to Isaiah 11:2, where seven things are said about the Spirit: "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." Here we have compelling evidence that the Spirit is divine, for, as noted above, grace and peace come only from God, and here grace and peace come from the Holy Spirit, who himself contains all divine perfections.

1:5 The grace wish, as noted in verse 4, comes from the Father and the Holy Spirit. Now we see it coming also from Jesus Christ. The focus is certainly on Jesus, as more is said about him (cf. vv. 5–6) than about the Father or Spirit. We note first that grace and peace come from "Jesus Christ," but we know that grace and peace come from God, and hence we have clear evidence that Jesus Christ is fully divine.

¹³ See the commentary on the respective texts where the phrase is used.

Here we have the raw materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity was derived. The Trinity wasn't invented by the church in later ages but was formulated through a careful and intense exegesis of the relevant NT texts. The church's deliberations and conclusions, as expressed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds, represent theological exegesis at its best. We don't have a capitulation to Greek philosophy—quite the contrary. The doctrine of the Trinity goes against the philosophical notions reigning at the time, stemming instead from what is revealed in the NT.

Jesus Christ is fully God, but he is also fully human. His human name is Jesus—the man from Nazareth, the son of Mary who suffered and died for the salvation of his people. Jesus is also the “Christ.” John doesn't use the title *Christ* as Jesus' last name but, as a Jew nurtured in the messianic hope, he gives the title its full significance (cf. 1:1, 2; 11:15; 12:10; 20:4, 6). Jesus is the son of David (5:5; 22:16), the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant promising an everlasting Davidic dynasty (2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalms 89; 132).

Jesus Christ is the “faithful witness” (cf. Rev. 3:14; Ps. 89:37; Isa. 55:4). The word “witness” (*martyrs*) in the course of church history developed to mean one who testified to Jesus Christ by giving his or her life in death. At this juncture, however, even though Jesus sacrificed his own life, the term doesn't have that technical sense. Jesus was a faithful witness not only in death but during his entire life as well. Jesus here functions as an example for the readers, called to be faithful witnesses like their Lord. The course the readers are called to run was traversed first by Christ.

Jesus is also the “firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Paul also claims that Jesus was the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). “Firstborn” in Hebrew culture designated privilege and rule, as formalized in the practice of primogeniture. In most instances where Jesus is identified as “firstborn,” his sovereignty and rule are featured (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6), just as the king in the Davidic line is identified as “firstborn” (Ps. 89:27). Possibly there is also the notion of time in Revelation, with John intending us to understand Jesus as the first person resurrected in history. Others were resuscitated (like Lazarus), but they all died again. Jesus, on the other hand, has conquered death forever. At the same time, he is sovereign over death, having triumphed over it. Death no longer rules—Christ rules. Indeed, he rules over the “kings on earth.” Those addressed in Revelation were suffering. Some were being put to death, a threat present for all believers. No one knew what might come next. It would be easy to think they were at the mercy of Rome and its emperor. Without denying the moral responsibility of rulers, the readers are reminded that Jesus rules over rulers. Hence the Christians in the churches must not fear the imperial power of Rome or any governing authorities. Even if they give their lives in death like Jesus, death will not triumph over them. They will share in Jesus' victory over death and are to trust in his sovereignty over all opponents.

The remainder of verses 5–6 consists of a doxology to Jesus Christ for his redeeming and saving work. John begins by reflecting on the love of Jesus Christ manifested in his giving himself for the redemption of human beings. The read-

ers can rest secure despite the storms swirling around them, for the one sovereign over death and kings loves them with a costly love. They may be hated by Roman authority and the culture they inhabit, but Jesus Christ loves them with a love that delivers them from their greatest enemy. Christ's love expresses itself in the giving of his life for their sake, by which believers are released from their sins. Some manuscripts say believers were "washed" (*lousanti*) instead of "freed" (*lysanti*) from their sins. The former idea is quite attractive and fits with Revelation 7:14 and 22:14, where a different verb for washing is used. Still, we can be almost certain that John wrote "freed" instead of "washed." The reading "washed" is supported by the Textus Receptus, while "freed" is supported by early and superior manuscripts (p¹⁸, א, A, C). Furthermore, there is likely an allusion to Isaiah 40:2, which speaks of Israel's sin being "pardoned" (*lelytai*)—the verb translated "pardoned" in the Greek OT is the same one (*lyō*) in Revelation 1:5. The price of release is also specified in the preposition "by" (*en*), a preposition designating price in Greek. The price, of course, was Jesus' blood. The reference to his blood picks up on sacrificial language from the OT, where blood was offered to procure atonement (cf. Lev. 17:11). Jesus' blood, then, was the means by which believers were ransomed and purchased and liberated from the sin enchaining them (cf. Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7). The sacrificial character of the language used indicates believers need to be forgiven to be set free from the bondage of sin (cf. Ps. 130:8).

1:6 Jesus freed his people from sin for a purpose. His people constitute a kingdom and are priests of God the Father. When God created Adam and Eve, he placed them in the garden to rule the world for him (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). They were to be his vice-regents in the world, mediating his blessing as priests to the entire world. They were to mediate such blessing, however, in entire dependence upon God, so that he would receive glory and honor and praise as they carried out their mandate. They failed in their commission, of course, and brought into the world death and devastation and ruin (Rom. 5:12–19). Israel was also summoned to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), but like Adam they transgressed the Lord's commands and did not bring the universal blessing promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18). Instead, Israel was exiled from the land of promise because of sin. Not only did Israel fail to bring salvation to the world; they couldn't even find blessing in their own land because of their sin. Israel's history demonstrated they were still in Adam.

The promise of salvation given to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15) and to Israel has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God's Spirit anointed him to proclaim good news, liberate those who are captive, and announce the year of the Lord's favor (Isa. 61:1–2; cf. Luke 4:18–19). The exile will end and Israel will be restored and rebuilt (Isa. 61:3–4). God's people will be his "priests" (Isa. 61:6), conveying his blessing to the world. According to John, this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus' redemption, by which he has freed his people (both Jews and Gentiles) from sin so they can fulfill the mandate given originally to Adam and Eve. The church of Jesus Christ is where God now rules. His rule over the entire world is not yet evident, but he does reign

over his people. They are his realm, his kingdom, his dominion, and hence the rule of the saints is inaugurated but not consummated. And they are even now his priests (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5), enjoying access to God and proclaiming the good news of the king's reign and his offer of amnesty to all who repent and trust in him.

We see the same theme elsewhere in Revelation. Jesus redeemed people from every tribe, tongue, and people group to make them a “kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9–10). The rule first promised to Adam and Eve will become a reality in all its fullness. Even now believers represent the place where God rules, but the day is coming when they will reign over the entire world for his sake.

The redeeming work of Christ and the centrality of Christ in God's purposes do not diminish the glory of God the Father. Quite the contrary. These realities maximize God's glory. God is magnified, God is glorified, in his Son, Jesus Christ, especially in his saving work by which he redeems his people. Nor do the rule and priesthood of human beings, of the redeemed, somehow eclipse God. No, his glory shines even brighter through those he has reclaimed. His kingly power and sovereignty are displayed for all to see through the church, and thus God is to be praised forever; his kingdom will not fail. John adds the word “Amen,” meaning “May it be so”—the desire of everyone who is a member of the kingdom.

1:7 What is the relationship between this verse and the preceding ones? Verses 5–6 conclude with a promise of the coming kingdom, and now John tells us the kingdom will come in its fullness when the king comes, and he is coming with the clouds, as Daniel predicted. Everyone on earth will see him, and those who didn't repent will mourn, for they will recognize the Lord they spurned.

John begins with the word “Behold,” summoning the readers to attention. History as it is now won't last forever. A new day is coming, a new world is coming, and all must be prepared for that day. Jesus is coming again to the earth, on the clouds. John draws on Daniel 7 here, and in the context of Daniel 7:13–14 the “one like a son of man” comes not to the earth but to the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom. God grants the kingdom to the Son of Man so that all will worship him and that his kingdom purposes for the world will be fulfilled.

The Gospels also identify the Son of Man as Jesus Christ, and obviously John shares the same view in Revelation, for in the subsequent passage John has a vision of Jesus Christ as the glorious Son of Man (Rev. 1:12–20). In Revelation John often applies OT prophecies in a new way, and he clearly does so here, for Jesus comes not to God in the clouds but to the earth. We know that coming to earth is in view, since “every eye will see him” and “all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” at his coming. John has put together Daniel 7:13 with Zechariah 12:10, and the latter text clarifies that the coming here is to earth. Such a combination of Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10, however, did not originate in the book of Revelation. We see this phenomenon already in the teaching of Jesus: “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the

tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). Allusions to both Zechariah 12:10 and Daniel 7:13 are quite clear in the Matthean text. Whatever we make of the literary or oral relationship between this saying and Revelation, it seems clear that the tradition of Jesus coming with the clouds and people of earth mourning was being disseminated in the early church. In particular, the notion that Jesus would return to earth on the clouds was quite pervasive (Matt. 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9–11; 1 Thess. 4:17). The coming of Jesus, as we saw in 1:3, is one of the central themes of the book, and John again forecasts its importance. It hardly makes sense to limit this coming to Jesus’ “coming” to destroy Jerusalem in AD 70, for John refers not to the tribes of Israel (cf. Rev. 7:4–8) but to “all tribes of the earth,” and thus isn’t focusing on Israel’s judgment. Indeed, it is scarcely the case that every eye saw him in AD 70, nor did all the tribes of the earth mourn when Jerusalem was judged. Many in the Greco-Roman world might have rejoiced upon hearing of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. John writes, then, about a coming of Jesus that will be universal and evident to everyone on earth.

The notion that every person will see Jesus coming reflects the synoptic tradition (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 21:27). At the same time, John picks up the words of Zechariah in saying David’s house and residents of Jerusalem will gaze on the one they pierced and mourn over him (Zech. 12:10). Zechariah focuses on cleansing and forgiveness granted to those in Israel as they weep over the one they have slain (Zech. 12:10; 13:1). John applies and interprets the OT text for his situation in a twofold way. First, “all the tribes of the earth” probably alludes to Genesis 12:3 (cf. Gen. 28:14; Ps. 72:17) and the promise to Abraham that many will become part of his family. In line with the original context of Zechariah, some who see Jesus will mourn and repent, which fits with Romans 11:26, where Paul says “all Israel will be saved” when the deliverer (Jesus) comes from Zion. Second, others seeing the pierced one will experience God’s judgment. John’s Gospel recounts the piercing of Jesus, constituting the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy in history (John 19:34, 37). The Israelites who put Jesus to death looked on the one they pierced. In Revelation, however, the eschatological fulfillment of Zechariah’s words is contemplated, indicating that fulfillment of prophecy may occur at more than one level. Another way to put this is to say that Zechariah’s prophecy relates not only to those who were historically responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion and piercing. John declares that “all the tribes of the earth”—all who have rejected Jesus Christ as Lord—have pierced Jesus. Or we could say that every human being has crucified and pierced Jesus, but those who have repented of doing so are freed from their sins (Rev. 1:5–6). Those who refuse to repent will be filled with grief and sorrow (cf. Matt. 24:30; Rev. 18:9), for they will realize the hour of judgment has come. They will lament never turning to Jesus for salvation.

John responds to what he has written in verse 7 with an affirmation: “Even so” and “Amen.” The salvation of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked

are both a matter of joy in Revelation, the latter not because of vindictiveness but as a matter of justice. The coming of Jesus means the coming of the kingdom, the removal of everything defiling and evil upon the earth, and the inauguration of a new creation, perfect and beautiful. The natural response, the only healthy response, to such a new creation is yes and amen. This is John's way of affirming the petitions of the Lord's prayer. Yes and amen to the kingdom coming, yes and amen to God's will being done on the entire earth.

1:8 The prologue concludes with an emphatic statement of God's sovereignty. God declares himself to be "the Alpha and the Omega," referring to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. At the outset and conclusion of the book, God claims this title (cf. 21:6). He reigns over all history from beginning to end, and if he rules over the beginning and the end, he rules over everything in between as well. The church, suffering under the thumb of the Roman Empire, could not say that God had abandoned them or that his rule had been compromised. He rules over every particle and speck of history, and has and always will be eternally God.

John then reiterates the words said of God in 1:4: the one who is, who was, and who is to come.¹⁴ He is mighty God in every moment faced by those who belong to him. There was never a time he was not supreme Lord over all, and there is no chance that history will spin out of his control. He is coming through his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring in the kingdom.

Believers can be guaranteed such vindication because God is "the Almighty." "Almighty" (*pantokratōr*) in the LXX is most often a translation of the Hebrew for "LORD of hosts," referring to Yahweh as the Lord of the armies of heaven. Yahweh rules, according to the OT witness, in heaven and on earth. The book of Job often uses the term "Almighty" as a translation of *shadday* (Job 11:7; 22:17, 25; 23:16; 27:2; 34:12; 35:13). Typically, *shadday* is understood by OT scholars to refer to God's power and might, and hence the LXX translation is fitting. The background in Job is significant, as God is designated the Almighty One in the midst of Job's intense suffering. John explains here why God rules over history. He is Almighty God who always fulfills his purposes and plans, and thus nothing or no one can thwart his designs.

Response

Three themes should be highlighted here. First, the sovereignty of God; second, the centrality of Jesus Christ; and third, the grace and peace intended for believers. God's sovereignty breathes through these verses so that the readers are assured, amid their suffering, that they are in his loving hands. He never abandons his people but will accomplish his purposes despite the horrendous evil characterizing their present existence. The sovereignty of God assures believers that his kingdom will come and his will be done. The tears and sighing of this present evil age won't last forever, nor will the wicked endure. What confidence and trust

¹⁴ Cf. comment on 1:4 for a fuller discussion.

believers should have when they rest in the goodness and strength of the one who reigns over history, the one who is Almighty God, Alpha and the Omega, who is and was and is to come!

Second, we see the centrality of Jesus Christ. The book is a revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the example par excellence for Christians of one who suffered as a faithful witness. God's sovereignty over the world is expressed in Jesus, for he has conquered death and rules over every king, emperor, prime minister, and president. He will come soon and establish his kingdom. Is his coming good news? It is for believers, as Jesus Christ is also their Redeemer. Believers can be confident they will enjoy the new creation and won't be expelled from the city to come. John reminds Christians they are loved by Jesus Christ, as was manifested in the shedding of his blood. Jesus gave his life to free us from our sins. Because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the evil we have done no longer stains or defiles us. And John doesn't stop there. We have been freed for a purpose. The role intended for Adam and Eve belongs to us through Jesus Christ. We are kings and priests through Jesus Christ, and thus God's kingdom, even if invisible to the world, is present now in the church of Jesus Christ.

Third, by virtue of the sovereignty of God and the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we may now enjoy grace and peace. We experience the grace of God when we know the love he has for us in Jesus Christ. Since he has freed us from our sins, he won't withhold any gift from us. He is in control of our lives and all of history. He knows what we can handle and gives us strength to face all that comes our way. As a result we enjoy his peace, knowing that all things will end well and that God is always for us in Jesus Christ.

REVELATION 1:9–20

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

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came

a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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.”

Section Overview

John introduced the book in the prologue, and in verses 9–20 he informs his readers of the circumstances leading him to write. The text can be structured into four sections. First, in verses 9–11 John tells readers he is writing from Patmos, where he has been banished because of his commitment to the gospel. He received a commission through a loud voice to write a book and send it to seven churches in the province of Asia. Second, John turns to see the voice of the one speaking to him and receives an astounding and glorious vision of the Son of Man (vv. 12–16). Third, in response to seeing such glory, John faints. But then Jesus, who has conquered Death and Hades, tells John not to fear (vv. 17–18). Fourth, John is summoned to write what God showed him in the visions and is given an explanation of the seven stars and seven lampstands (vv. 19–20).

Parallels between Daniel 10 (and Daniel 7) and Revelation 1 are quite striking, as table 9.5, compiled by James Hamilton, shows.¹⁵ Daniel 10 describes an angel, while in Revelation 1 Jesus is envisioned as the Son of Man.

TABLE 9.5: The Descriptions of the Ones Revealed in Daniel 10 and Revelation 1

Daniel 10	Revelation 1
10:5, “clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold”	1:13, “clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest”
7:9, “the hair of his head like pure wool”	1:14a, “the hairs of his head were white, like white wool”
10:6c, “his eyes like flaming torches”	1:14b, “His eyes were like a flame of fire” (description found also in 2:18)
10:6d, “his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze”	1:15a, “his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace” (description found also in 2:18)
10:6e, “and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude”	1:15b, “and his voice was like the roar of many waters”
10:6b, “his face like the appearance of lightning”	1:16c, “and his face was like the sun shining in full strength”

¹⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 49 (table 3.3).

What is the significance of these parallels? Since Daniel 10 describes an angel and Revelation 1 the Son of Man, it is evident that the descriptions here in and of themselves don't indicate these figures are divine, since angels aren't divine beings. However, we must also attend to differences between the two accounts, for Jesus is described, in contrast to the angel, in priestly terms (cf. comment on Rev. 1:13). Furthermore, as seen in the chart, John also draws on Daniel 7, and his use of Daniel 7 hints at Jesus' deity. Hence, both the angel of Daniel 10 and the Son of Man of Revelation 1 are glorious, but Jesus' glory surpasses the glory of the angel, for he is divine.

Section Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–20) . . .
- B. Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)

Comment

1:9 John now explains the circumstances leading to his writing to the churches. In introducing himself, John doesn't focus on his apostolic authority. Instead, he emphasizes his solidarity with his readers. He is their "brother," i.e., a fellow believer. He is a part of the family of God, just as they are. He also emphasizes his partnership with them. He shares with them the "tribulation" and suffering believers face: slander, poverty, imprisonment, discrimination, social ostracism, physical abuse, and—in some cases—death. In John's case, he was banished to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Presumably, the Romans exiled John to Patmos because of his proclamation of the gospel, described as the "word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (cf. 1:3). John's experience presages other texts in Revelation referring to the suffering of believers. For instance, the Philadelphian church is commended for holding fast to God's word in a culture opposed to its message (3:8, 10). The martyrs under the altar were put to death on account of God's word (6:9), and those who were beheaded were deprived of their lives "for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God" (20:4). Believers are said to conquer Satan by the "word of their testimony" (12:11). The word of God centers on the testimony about Jesus Christ (cf. comment on 1:2). Both John and his readers suffered because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ, their unflinching allegiance to the word of God.

John doesn't participate only in suffering; he and all believers share also in the kingdom. Even now he and they are members of the kingdom (1:6; 5:10; 12:10) and will reign with Jesus when he establishes his kingdom in all its fullness (5:10; 11:15). Hence, John's participation with them in endurance isn't pointless. Believers are members of the kingdom now, but they are called to endure so they will enjoy the kingdom in its fullness later. John forecasts the central admonition of the book in this verse. Believers are called to endure until the end to receive the coming kingdom (13:10; 14:12). John isn't engaging in theoretical reflection far from the suffering of his readers. He knows firsthand what it is like to suffer for

the sake of the gospel. The affliction, kingdom, and endurance are all theirs “in Jesus,” because they are united with Jesus as those who have been freed from their sins and made kings and priests (1:5–6).

1:10 John informs the readers that he was “in the Spirit.” We should not interpret this phrase in Pauline categories, as if John were telling us he was living by the power of the Spirit on that occasion (though doubtlessly he was relying on the Spirit) rather than in the flesh. The phrase “in the Spirit” is used at key points in the book to designate the spirit of prophecy (4:2; 17:3; 21:10). When John says he was “in the Spirit,” he indicates that the Spirit that animated OT prophets was on him as well (cf. Simeon in Luke 2:27). So, being in the Spirit means John was to receive revelation from God. This is further evidence (cf. Rev. 1:3), then, that the content of the book is authoritative, for John was inspired by the Spirit in what he wrote.

The day John received revelation was the “Lord’s day.” This is the only occurrence of this phrase in the NT. It refers almost certainly to Sunday, the day Jesus was raised from the dead. The Gospel writers all note that Jesus rose on the “first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19), and the notation suggests this particular day was significant for Christians. The observance of the Lord’s day makes sense, as Jesus’ resurrection was the inauguration of the new creation. We also learn from Acts that the church broke bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), most likely a reference to the Lord’s Supper. And Paul exhorts the Corinthians to set aside money “on the first day of every week” (1 Cor. 16:2). This evidence suggests Christians were starting to meet together on Sunday. John, exiled to Patmos, was deprived of assembling together with other Christians, and yet on this day the Lord spoke to him. The voice summoning John on that day was as loud as a trumpet blast, calling him to write down what God revealed to him. This trumpet echoes the trumpet sound when the Lord revealed himself to Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:17–20), here indicating the Lord was revealing himself to John. Just as God revealed his words to Moses on Sinai, so now he gives John his words on Patmos.

1:11 John is given his commission: he is to write on a scroll the message for the seven churches. Writing it down shows the authoritative nature of his message (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 17:18; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 36:2). The cities are listed in the order in which they are addressed in chapters 2–3: Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7); Smyrna (2:8–11); Pergamum (2:12–17); Thyatira (2:18–29); Sardis (3:1–6); Philadelphia (3:7–13); Laodicea (3:14–22). The order reflects the route a courier would take in delivering the contents of the book: Ephesus was on the coast, and the cities are in a circle, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. We are reminded afresh that the book was written to specific churches in the first century.

1:12 John is riveted by the voice and turns to see who is speaking. The text says he “turned to see the voice”; voices, of course, cannot be observed by sight, but John refers to the person speaking with the voice (cf. LXX Ex. 20:18; Dan. 7:11). In

Judaism “the voice” often refers to God’s voice, though it could also be the voice of an angel here. On turning, John sees seven golden lampstands. We are told in Rev. 1:20 that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The lampstand was in the Holy Place, just outside the Most Holy Place, in the temple (1 Kings 7:49; 2 Chron. 4:7, 20). The churches as lampstands are to reflect the light of the glory of God to the world (Matt. 5:14–16), and John calls them to be faithful witnesses.

1:13 When John looks, he sees a glorious vision of the Son of Man. The vision obviously isn’t literal but is stocked with imagery characteristic of apocalyptic literature. We could become preoccupied with each feature of the vision and miss the impact of the whole: the stunningly glorious appearance of the Son of Man. The many uses of the word “like” demonstrate that what is represented here shouldn’t be taken literally. This is confirmed by verse 16, for no one puts a two-edged sword in his mouth, unless he wants to be cut up rather badly!

The Son of Man is walking in the midst of the golden lampstands, indicating his dwelling with the churches. He is vitally present with the churches and knows their state, and has not abandoned them in their trials.

When John says he sees one “like a son of man,” he clearly alludes to Daniel 7:13, where the same phrase is used.¹⁶ In Daniel 7 the son of man is a glorious figure of a human being—the phrase “son of man” in Hebrew refers to humans (cf. Num. 23:19; Ps. 8:4; Ezek. 2:1, 3).¹⁷ At the same time, the son of man in Daniel has divine characteristics, for he comes with the clouds like Yahweh and all people serve him (cf. Ps. 104:3; Dan. 3:14, 17, 18). The “son of man,” then, is a human being, but he is more than a human being. Such a reading of Daniel 7 fits with Revelation, where the Son of Man is both human and divine. A reference to Jesus as the Son of Man isn’t common in Revelation (cf. Rev. 14:14), but it is pervasive in the Gospels. The Gospel of John particularly emphasizes that the Son of Man was lifted up and glorified through his death, so that his death becomes the pathway, the route, to Jesus’ exaltation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31). Even though the details differ, such a portrait fits with what we find in Revelation.

The “long robe” (*podērē*) represents the robe worn by priests (Ex. 25:7; 28:4, 31; 29:5; 35:9; Zech. 3:4; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 18:24; *Sir.* 45:8). Similarly, the “golden sash” is almost certainly priestly as well (cf. Ex. 28:4, 39, 40; 29:9; 39:29; Lev. 8:7, 13; 16:4). In Daniel the son of man receives a kingdom along with the saints (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27), for he is their corporate head. The Son of Man, however, is not only a king but also a priest, suggesting, given Revelation 1:5–6, that he is the one who atoned for the sins of his people. The kingdom becomes a reality through the cross, and thus if there is no cross, if there is no priestly work of atonement, there is no kingdom for the saints.

1:14 If verse 13 teaches that the Son of Man is priestly, verse 14 shows he is all-knowing. The hair of the Son of Man is “white, like white wool, like snow.” In

¹⁶ The Greek is slightly different, but the meaning is the same.

¹⁷ Daniel 7:13 is written in Aramaic, but that doesn’t change the point made here.

other words, his hair is not just white but stunningly and brilliantly white. John once again alludes to the OT and tweaks it to make a point. In Daniel 7 the son of man approaches the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom. The Ancient of Days who sits on the throne has “clothing . . . white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool” (Dan. 7:9). John hasn’t inadvertently attributed to the Son of Man what was true of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. He hasn’t forgotten what Daniel says. Instead, John often applies OT texts in new ways, and the adjustment in this case is especially noteworthy, for John attributes to the Son of Man white hair, even though in Daniel 7 the white hair belongs to the Ancient of Days. The white hair, of course, isn’t literal but indicates the wisdom and omniscience of the Son of Man; thus there is no doubt the Son of Man is divine.

The eyes of the Son of Man are “like a flame of fire.” We should note the three uses of “like” (*hōs*) in this verse. We see the same word twice in verse 15 and once in verse 16, and we find a synonym also translated “like” (*homoion*) in verse 13. The apocalyptic and symbolic character is underscored by the use of “like.” John isn’t telling us that Jesus’ eyes *were* a flame of fire but that they were *like* a flame of fire. In Daniel 7:9 the throne of the Ancient of Days is like flaming fire, and flaming fire devours and destroys God’s enemies (Isa. 29:6). We see in Daniel 10:6 that a glorious angel also has eyes “like flaming torches.” Here it is the Son of Man’s eyes that are like a flaming fire, and the expression is used two other times in Revelation (2:18; 19:12). The parallel in 2:18 (cf. comment) helps us see that the expression denotes the penetrating discernment of the Son of Man. Nothing is hidden from his gaze. He knows exactly what is going on in the churches, in the empire, and in the hearts of all people. He knows those who are faithful to him, those who are straying from him, and those who have rejected him.

1:15 The feet of the Son of Man are “like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace.” This uncommon image is obviously not literal, as John again picks up the description of the angel in Daniel 10:6—“his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze.” In the ancient world, shoes or boots worn by soldiers were immensely important. If soldiers had ill-fitting shoes, their feet would be bloody and blistered in battle and hinder their ability to fight. Jesus’ bronze feet, on the other hand, are able to crush his enemies since they are made of bronze, and this perhaps also designates his moral perfection (cf. Rev. 2:18). No one is able to stand against him or conquer him.

The glory of the Son of Man continues to be developed in John’s vision. His feet are able to stomp on his enemies, and his voice resonates with power and resounds like “many waters” (cf. 14:2; 19:6; Ezek. 43:2; Dan. 10:6). We read in Psalm 29:3, “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters.” God’s thundering voice communicates his power, majesty, and sovereignty. We see the same theme in Psalm 93:4: “Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty!” The thundering roar of the sea proclaims the power of God. However, roaring waters

are not limited to divine persons. In Ezekiel 1:24 the wings of the cherubim have a sound “like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty.” Still, even this verse assists us in understanding the meaning of the expression in Revelation. What is striking about the cherubim is the incredible loudness of their moving wings, like the sound of cascading water. But Ezekiel goes further, saying it is “like the sound of the Almighty.” This last statement is very significant, for we see the deafening waters reminding us of Almighty God. Hence, the voice of Jesus is like the voice of God—majestic, powerful, and effective.

1:16 Three things are said of the Son of Man in verse 16. First, he holds the seven stars in his right hand. Second, a two-edged sword is in his mouth, and third, his face shines like the sun. Holding the seven stars in his right hand is quite mysterious, for we don’t know what the seven stars are at this point in the narrative, but in verse 20 we are told that the “seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.” Unfortunately, this doesn’t help us a great deal, for the identity of the angels is itself contested. As will be explained in the comment on 1:20, the best guess is that the angels are literal angels who either superintend the churches or represent the spirits of the churches, perhaps representing their heavenly existence. In either case, Jesus holds them in his hand, controlling and protecting them (cf. Pss. 73:23; 139:10).

Jesus also has a sharp double-edged sword in his mouth. The sword refers to his words, for Revelation 2:12 speaks of the “words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.” Revelation 19:15 confirms the same notion, for when Jesus returns he judges and defeats the nations with a “sharp sword” coming from his mouth. In Isaiah 49:2 the servant of the Lord, who may be Isaiah, in the historical context of that book, has a “mouth like a sharp sword.” This reference is to the prophetic word of Isaiah, but the servant of the Lord is ultimately Jesus himself, and as the servant of the Lord he speaks the Lord’s word (cf. Heb. 4:12). The Son of Man must not be trifled with, for his word penetrates and judges those who oppose him. We read in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 that the man of lawlessness will be destroyed by the breath of Jesus’ mouth.

Finally, Jesus’ face shines “like the sun.” This is another way of describing the glory of the Son of Man. For instance, at Jesus’ transfiguration also we read that his face shone with glory (Matt. 17:2). This doesn’t necessarily indicate divinity, for an angel’s face may also shine with a brilliance like the sun’s (Dan. 10:6; Rev. 10:1). The point is that Jesus is glorious. Indeed, there is a danger in trying to distinguish too sharply the various descriptions of the Son of Man in these verses, for the overall impression is the main point. John wants us to see and feel the glory and splendor and majesty of the Son of Man.

1:17 We see here John’s response to the vision of the Son of Man. It is quite clear the main point of the vision is his transcendent glory and majesty, for John, upon seeing the vision, faints at his feet like a man who dies of a sudden heart attack (cf. Dan. 8:18). Falling before God or angels has its antecedents in OT depictions of

people in the presence of awesome beings (cf. Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17–18; 10:7–9). The glory of God in the Son of Man was more than John could take as a mere human being. Still, John is strengthened by this glorious Son of Man. He lays his strong right hand on John and comforts him by telling him not to fear. Clearly, John was deathly afraid, keenly aware of his sin and finiteness. He knew he was unworthy to stand in the presence of the one he beheld. In the remainder of verse 17 and in verse 18 the reasons John should not fear are explained. Jesus, as the Son of Man, declares, “I am the first and the last.” These words are picked up again in Revelation (cf. 2:8; 22:13). What is remarkable is that these words allude to what is said of Yahweh in Isaiah (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), and Isaiah emphasizes that Yahweh’s being the first and last distinguishes him from idols. Yahweh is set apart from false gods because he is the everlasting one. John should not fear, for the same is true of the Son of Man. He shares the identity of the one true God. He reigns over all of history, for he always has been and always will be.

1:18 As the Son of Man, Jesus is the “living one.” In both the OT (e.g., Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Kings 19:4; Pss. 42:2; 84:2; Dan. 6:20, 26) and the NT (Matt. 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16; 1 Tim. 4:10; Rev. 7:2), the Lord is often identified as the “living God.” The divine identity of Jesus again stands out, and yet there is a complexity to the picture, for Jesus is also a human being. Indeed, as a human being he died. But even though he died, death was not the final word, for Jesus triumphed over death at his resurrection. Now he is deathless and will live forever as the Son of Man and Son of God, the God-man, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Since the Son of Man reigns over history as the first and the last, and since he is the ever-living one who has conquered death forever, he holds the “keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). “Keys” indicates his authority over both Death and Hades (cf. Isa. 22:22; Matt. 16:19; Rev. 3:7). Death and Hades are regularly brought together in Revelation (6:8; 20:13, 14). Hades is similar to the Hebrew Sheol and in the NT regularly refers to the realm of the dead (Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31). Death and Hades together refer to the same entity: the realm of death. They are personified in Revelation, perhaps also denoting demonic powers. Probably both ideas are present here, for there is a close connection between Satan and death (cf. John 8:44; Heb. 2:14–15). Those who belong to Jesus don’t need to fear, for Death and Hades and all demonic powers are under the authority of Jesus. Death will not defeat them, for Jesus as the living one has defeated death.

1:19 The instruction to John circles back to the mandate of verse 11. He must write what he has seen in the vision from God. The vision includes the glorious Son of Man described in verses 12–16 but also includes the contents of the entire book.

Some have derived an outline of the book from 1:19, saying that the things “seen” refer to chapter 1, the things that “are” to chapters 2–3, and the things that will take place “after this” to chapters 4–22. Actually, it is not that simple. For instance, the vision of God ruling on his throne in chapter 4 certainly includes the past and present and cannot be relegated to the future. Nor is it convincing

to say that all the events in chapters 5–22 relate only to the future. As I will argue in due course, the seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5) and trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19) relate to both the past and the future. The eviction of Satan from heaven recounted in chapter 12 occurred at the cross, and the two beasts of chapter 13 represent the Roman Empire and false religion, and such realities cannot be limited to the future. Hence, what John says here does not delineate the structure of the book. Instead, the entire vision relates to both the present and the future: John saw both what is now and what is to come. His vision comprehends all of history, including the present and the future, which are integrally related to the past.

1:20 Through John, the Lord now explains some of the symbolism. The seven stars signify the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The disclosure here unravels a “mystery” (*mystērion*). In English, and especially in theological discourse, we often use mystery to denote something beyond our understanding, and such usage is perfectly acceptable. Words have a range of meanings and can be used in a variety of ways. A mystery may refer to something that is puzzling or hard to figure out. In the Scriptures, the word usually refers to something once hidden but now revealed—often with redemptive-historical significance. In this instance, however, the significance does not seem to be redemptive-historical.

Even though John tells us the seven stars Jesus holds represent the angels of the seven churches, it is unclear who these “angels” are. Some have argued they are the pastors of each church—that in each letter (“To the angel of the church in Ephesus” [2:1], etc.) the leader of the church is particularly addressed. This solution is attractive, for why would John write letters to the heavenly angels of each church? Still, the interpretation doesn’t convince, for “angel” is never used in the NT to designate leaders of churches, and Revelation uses the word “angel” (*angelos*) or angels seventy-five times but never unambiguously of humans. Another solution posits that “angels” designates the spirit or spiritual state of each church. This reading is possible, but it is hard to see where *angel* has this meaning elsewhere, and in Revelation “angel” or “angels” always refers to heavenly beings. It is best, then, to see a reference to heavenly angels. The most important argument for this is the usage of the word. John refers to “angels” or an “angel” seventy-five times in the book, and every other use refers to heavenly angels. It is thus most natural to see a reference to them here as well. This argument is further strengthened when we observe that “angel” or “angels” typically refers to heavenly angels in the OT. Indeed, in the apocalyptic book Zechariah, the singular “angel” is used twenty times, always referring to a heavenly being. We also see in Job 38:7 (LXX) that angels can be identified as stars. It is much more difficult to know why angels are addressed in each of the seven letters here in Revelation. Perhaps the best answer is that the angels represent the churches in heaven or play some role in guarding and watching the churches. We see something quite similar in 1 Corinthians 11:10 concerning the role of angels in guarding or observing the worship of believers.

The heavenly angels are the stars of the churches, and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The tabernacle and temple each had a lampstand to illumine the Holy Place. In Zechariah, the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua are represented by two lampstands (Zech. 4:2, 11). The notion here is that the church is to be light, illumining the world with the good news about Jesus Christ.

Response

Our response to encountering Jesus as the Son of Man should be the same as John's. When we see the Son of Man in all his glory, we are filled with awe and fall down in worship before him. When suffering comes, we must remember above all the glory of Jesus as the Son of Man. He is our Priest who atones for our sin, our Prophet who speaks the word of God, our King who reigns over all. When we see Jesus, we behold him in all his beauty and glory. And if we truly see Jesus, we won't fear anything else, not even death, for we will realize that Jesus holds the keys of Death and Hades. Death won't triumph over us, because it didn't conquer Jesus. We can be full of confidence whatever the opposition, whatever the situation, for Jesus reigns over all and will protect his own.

REVELATION 2:1–7

2 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”

Section Overview

Chapters 2–3 consist of seven letters to the seven churches. The state of the churches is mixed, though on the whole their spiritual vitality is declining. The letters share the elements detailed in table 9.6, and observing the elements and their variations assists us in interpreting each letter.

TABLE 9.6: Elements of the Seven Letters

Church addressed	Ephesus 2:1–7	Smyrna 2:8–11	Pergamum 2:12–17	Thyatira 2:18–29	Sardis 3:1–6	Philadelphia 3:7–13	Laodicea 3:14–22
Addressed to the angel of the church	2:1	2:8	2:12	2:18	3:1	3:7	3:14
Some aspect of vision of Christ in chapter 1 related to the church	2:1	2:8	2:12	2:18	3:1	3:7	3:14
Commendation/encouragement of the church	2:2–3, 6	2:9	2:13	2:19, 24–25		3:8–10	
Correction of the church	2:4		2:14–15	2:20–23	3:2		3:14–18
Call to repent and threat of judgment	2:5		2:16	2:21	3:3		3:19
Call to listen to the message of the Spirit	2:7	2:11	2:17	2:29	3:6	3:13	3:22
Promise to “conqueror” (i.e., overcomer)	2:7	2:11	2:17	2:26–28	3:5	3:11–12	3:21

We see from table 9.6 that each of the elements is found in the letter to the church in Ephesus. The church is commended for its perseverance and orthodoxy but is rebuked for losing its first love. Their failure to love isn’t trivial, for their lampstand will be removed unless they repent and are restored. On the other hand, the one who overcomes and triumphs will be rewarded with the tree of life and a place in paradise forever.

Section Outline

II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)

A. Ephesus (2:1–7)

Comment

2:1 The letter is addressed to “the angel of the church in Ephesus.” Ephesus played an important role as a port city on the west coast of the province of Asia. The city was famous for its temple to Artemis (cf. Acts 19:29–40) and was also enthusiastic about the imperial cult, hosting a temple for Julius Caesar. A temple for the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) may have been built before John wrote Revelation. Two dimensions of the vision of Christ are related to his self-identification in Revelation 2:1. First, Jesus “holds the seven stars in his right hand,” and we were told in 1:20 that the seven stars were the angels of the seven churches. The angels, which perhaps guard and protect the churches or represent them in heaven, are in the hand of the Son of Man. Ultimately, the protection of each church is in

the hands of the glorious Son of Man. Second, Jesus as the Son of Man “walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The seven lampstands are identified as the seven churches (cf. comments on 1:12; 1:13; 1:20). The Ephesian church, like every church, is to reflect the light of God’s holiness and love to the world (Matt. 5:15–16). Jesus walks in their midst. He is not distant from the churches but walks among believers and hence knows what is happening in each church; he cares for the church and threatens judgment if it goes astray.

2:2 The church is commended for its perseverance and discernment (vv. 2–3). The Ephesian church stands out for its works, its toil, and endurance. These Ephesian Christians did not only agree verbally with the Christian faith; they applied it practically to their everyday lives. Their works demonstrated the reality and concreteness of their commitment. Indeed, their work was marked by “toil” (*kopon*), meaning that they toiled and slogged even when weary. They were characterized by perseverance and endurance, continuing to labor and work even in adverse circumstances.

The church is commended not only for its labor but also for its spiritual discernment. They didn’t suffer from naivete but refused to tolerate so-called Christians who participated in evil. They didn’t blithely accept those who called themselves apostles. “Apostles” is probably not used here in the technical sense of the twelve appointed by Jesus but refers instead to those who were sent out as missionaries, as emissaries, as ambassadors of the churches (cf. Rom. 16:7; Phil. 2:25). The Ephesian church carefully assessed those who claimed to be messengers of Christ, exposing those who were not truly his disciples (cf. Matt. 7:15–20; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1–6). It is sometimes said that the Ephesian church is commended for doctrinal orthodoxy, which is certainly true. They would not accept teaching contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it would be a mistake to limit their discernment to doctrinal orthodoxy. They were also perceptive enough to identify behavioral deficiencies of false apostles. In other words, it is likely these false apostles recommended living in a way contrary to the way of Christ. Neither their teaching nor their works was pleasing to God. This makes perfect sense, for doctrine and life, teaching and behavior, cannot ultimately be separated.

2:3 John underscores further the endurance and perseverance of the saints in Ephesus. Their endurance is truly remarkable, for, humanly speaking, they had every reason to grow tired and weary. Nor can it be said that their endurance is merely an example of human strength and fortitude. On the contrary, they have endured for the sake of Jesus’ name. The reference to Jesus’ name signifies his deity, focusing on his character and being. God is identified and recognized by his name, and thus invoking any other god is to profane and take God’s name in vain (cf. Ex. 20:7; Lev. 20:3; Deut. 6:13). If believers endure for Jesus’ name, they esteem him as divine and assign him the same stature as God himself.