

Notes and Quotes About Revelation

Introduction

Millions of people use the Bible in which they devoutly believe to condemn people they do not approve of; millions more read the word of God daily and within ten minutes are speaking words to spouses, neighbors, children, and colleagues that are contemptuous, irritable, manipulative, and misleading. How does this happen? How is it possible for people who give so much attention to the word of God, to remain so unaffected by it? Not, surely, through unbelief, but through lack of imagination: the Enemy subverted the spoken word into an ink word. The moment that happens, the imagination atrophies and living words flatten into book words. No matter that the words are believed to be true, they are not voiced words – Spirit-voiced and faith-heard – and so are not answered. They go through the minds of the readers like water through a pipe.¹

Revelation requires imagination! It is not a code to be cracked or a timeline to be charted, but a vision to be experience. Its vivid symbols, disturbing images, and cosmic drama are not meant to satisfy curiosity but to awaken wonder, stir courage, and ignite faith.

We must learn to experience Revelation as a Living Word–Spirit-breathed and soul-disrupting—that draws us into an invisible reality all around us. Only with holy imagination can we begin to perceive the Lamb on the throne, the worship of heaven, victory through death, and the promise of a new creation breaking in.

What follows are some details about Revelation, along with powerful quotes from various authors.

—Allen Burris

Authorship

Read 1:1 — The author calls himself “John,” and he professes to be a servant of Jesus Christ. He identifies himself as a “brother and companion in the suffering” of his readers (see verse 9).

Early external tradition identifies this writer as John the son of Zebedee, the Apostle and writer of a Gospel and epistles. Justin Martyr (150 A.D.) stated that Revelation was written by “a certain man with us, whose name is John, one of the Apostles of Christ.”

Readers

The readers are identified as “the seven churches in the province of Asia.” These churches were likely the leading congregations in this area.

¹Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder – The Revelation of John & The Praying Imagination*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 14.

Place of Origin

John received the revelation while on the island of Patmos. See verse nine. Patmos is a small rocky island in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Asia Minor. Political prisoners were sent there for exile.

Purpose & Occasion

The Christians of Asia Minor were being persecuted for their faith during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD). There is much debate about the severity of the persecution and how extensive it was. While we do not know conclusively about the persecution, we do know the Christians were encouraged to remain “faithful, even to the point of death” (2:10).

Date

Two dates have been put forth as possibilities for this book. One possibility places its writing during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD). The other possibility, and the one most generally accepted, is during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD). Most scholars believe that Revelation was written around 95 AD. Internal evidence and external references support this view.

Apocalyptic Literature

Revelation belongs to a special class of writings known as apocalyptic. The Greek word behind apocalypse is a compound word meaning an “unveiling.” The purpose of the apocalyptic writer was not primarily to “cover up” his message but to make it more vivid by “unveiling” it through signs and symbols.

Revelation is not unique, and this type of literature is mostly associated with religious writing, especially Judaism. Apocalyptic literature grew out of troublesome times and is linked with specific historical situations. The book of Revelation is saturated with imagery, language, and themes drawn from the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel and Daniel.

The message is presented through visions. The visions vary from scenes in heaven to scenes on earth. The visions are usually associated with angels or heavenly messengers of some kind.

There is a predictive element. The literature grew out of troublesome times, and it predicts that the future will be bright. There will be vindication and victory in the days to come. The predictions are general in nature and deal with the character of events rather than details.

Apocalyptic literature relies heavily upon symbols. The writer faced the task of seeing the invisible and expressing the inexpressible. The writing, therefore, is full of imagery and symbolism which are hard to understand. This makes the task of the modern interpreter, who is far removed from the situation and unfamiliar with the symbols, difficult.

Numbers are very important in apocalyptic literature.

- 1 expresses the idea of unity or independent existence.
- 2 stands for strength, energy, and courage.
- 3 is the symbol of the divine.
- 4 symbolizes the world in which humanity lives
- 5 represents a limited period of time
- 6 has a very sinister meaning. (Seven was considered sacred, and six falls just short.)
- 7 is the most sacred number for the Jews. It appears often in Revelation.
- 8 does not appear in Revelation.
- 9 does not appear in Revelation
- 10 represents human completeness
- 11 does not appear in Revelation
- 12 represents organized religion.

Methods of Interpretation

Futurist Method — This method teaches that the events of chapters 4-19 are in the future and will take place immediately before the Second Coming.

Continuous-Historical Method — understands Revelation as a forecast in symbols of the history of the church. It begins with the early church and tells of its history through our time.

Preterist (or past) Method — this view is the opposite of the futurist view. It believes that everything occurred in the days of the Roman Empire.

Philosophy of History Method — believes that the historical setting is not important. The book is just a poetic apocalyptic view of good versus evil.

Historical-Background Method — views the book in the its first-century setting but applies the principles to present day situations. The primary purpose of the book is for the comfort and encouragement of the original readers, but there are also timeless truths that will be helpful for us. This view holds that the visions should be grasped as a whole and should not be pressed for minute details and fulfillment.

Chapter Summaries

- 1 Prologue, presenting an awesome picture of Christ walking among His churches. He controls the present and future. Christians are secure in His hand, but they are beginning to waver. Christ calls them to spiritual renewal.
- 2 & 3 The letters to the seven churches. Each church is exposed for what it is in the sight of Christ. There is good and bad, and the problem of compromise is present.
- 4 The awesome throne room of God. As He is worshiped in Heaven so He should be worshiped on earth.

- 5 Who can open the scroll? Only the Lamb who was slain! The Cross is the victory for the church, as for Christ. Even death cannot destroy Christ or His church.

- 6 & 7 The beginning of the prophetic material concerning the world situation. The four horsemen are introduced. The breaking of the seals leads to the seventh which seems unbearable. It is then the chapter gives us the victorious visions of the saints both in Heaven and on earth. The ones on earth are sealed for victory.

- 8-11 The seven trumpets, monsters and locusts attack, but the real pain is escaped by the faithful. They are harmed, but not as those who bear the mark of the beast. They are bound for destruction, and through their terrible suffering God is calling them to repentance, but they do not respond.

- 12 A retelling of the history of God's people. The coming of the Child who is protected and ascends to Heaven victoriously. Satan is defeated and cast from God's presence. Thus he turns his hatred toward the church.

- 13 The beasts of Satan are introduced, one is of the political power of Rome, the other the religious aspect – the Emperor Cult. The mark of the beast is failure cubed.

- 14 The contrast of the followers of the beast and those of God is clear. The saints are victorious though seemingly defeated. The lament of the fallen city of Rome begins.

- 15,16 Another cycle of seven, the bowls represent the final acts of God as He definitively defeats Satan and his cohorts. The dragon and the beast are seen in their terrible reality as they are destroyed.

- 17,18 This is the final portrayal of the great prostitute. Those who have made their living off of the wickedness of Rome lament her fall.

- 19,20 The Lord reigns! The evil are judged! Satan is bound for those who are faithful, but still loosed until the end of time. He is then thrown into eternal punishment.

- 21,22 The New Jerusalem is described, and the Lord promises to come quickly.

The Setting 1:1-20

Verses 1-3

John establishes the time frame: soon!

Chain of revelation: God-Jesus-Angel-John-Reader.

Verse 3 contains the first of 7 “blessings” or “beatitudes” found in Revelation (see also: 14:13, 16:15, 19:9; 20:6, 22:7, and 22:14).

Jesus is both the content and the agent of Revelation.

Verses 4-8

The seven churches are specific churches but also representative. There were other churches in the area, e.g., Colossae, Troas, and Hierapolis.

In the salutation there is an interesting Trinitarian structure. The “seven spirits” could be an ancient way of referring to the fullness of the Spirit.

The word for “witness” is *martyrs* from which we get martyr.

Verse 7 combines words from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10.

Verse 8 is only one of two places where God speaks.

Verses 9-11

The “Lord’s Day” is Sunday.

John was “in the Spirit” (cf. Peter in Acts 10 and Paul in 2 Corinthians 12).

Verses 12-20

Jesus is described.

Jesus is in control of the churches.

There is no need for fear!

Revelation 2 & 3—Letters to the Seven Churches

The nature of the seven churches:

The churches of Revelation show us that churches are not Victorian parlors where everything is always picked up and ready for guests. They are messy family rooms. Entering a person’s house unexpectedly, we are sometimes met with a barrage of apologies. St. John does not apologize. Things are out of order, to be sure, but that is what happens to churches that are lived in. They are not show rooms. They are living rooms, and if the persons living in them are sinners, there are going to be clothes scattered about, handprints on the woodwork, and mud on the carpet. For as long as Jesus insists on calling sinners and not the righteous to repentance – and there are no indications as yet that he has changed his policy in that regard – churches are going to be an embarrassment to the fastidious and an affront to the upright. St. John sees them simply as *lampstands*: they are places, locations, where the light of Christ is shown. They are not themselves the light. There is nothing particularly glamorous about churches, nor, on the other hand, is there anything particularly shameful about them. They simply are.²

The structure of the seven letters is generally the same:

²Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder – The Revelation of John & The Praying Imagination*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988), 54.

1. Address from Christ
2. Words of rebuke and/or encouragement
3. Summons to listen – “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”
4. Promises to the conquerors

Helpful interpretive key:

“Nicolaitans” (literally: “conquerors of the laity, the people”) may, like “Balaam” and “Jezebel,” be John’s own symbolic name for his opponents, since “conquer” is a key word in John’s theology and since “Nicolas” is the rough equivalent of “Balaam” in Hebrew (“ruler of the people”).

The “Nicolaitans,” “Balaam,” and “Jezebel” promoted the “progressive” doctrine of accommodation to the culture around them.³

Problems addressed in the Letters:⁴

The problem of Assimilation: Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira.

The problem of Persecution: Smyrna and Philadelphia.

The problem of Complacency: Sardis and Laodicea.

Exercise:

| Church | Strengths | Weaknesses |
|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Ephesus</i> | | |
| <i>Smyrna</i> | | |
| <i>Pergamum</i> | | |
| <i>Thyatira</i> | | |

³M. Eugene Boring, *Interpretation (A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Revelation*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 93.

⁴These classifications come from Craig Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 57-66.

| | | |
|--------------------|--|--|
| <i>Sardis</i> | | |
| <i>Philadephia</i> | | |
| <i>Laodicea</i> | | |

Worship in Heaven

Some general thoughts about worship:

In worship God gathers his people to himself as center: “The Lord reigns” (Ps. 93:1). Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose.

People who do not worship live in a vast shopping mall where they go from shop to shop, expending enormous sums of energy and making endless trips to meet first this need and then that appetite, this whim and that fancy. Life lurches from one partial satisfaction to another, interrupted by ditches of disappointment. Motion is fueled by the successive illusions that purchasing this wardrobe, driving that car, eating this meal, drinking that beverage will center life and give it coherence.⁵

In Chapter 4 John shows his readers/hearers a picture of the true, holy, revered God. He is sovereign, eternal, and the creator of everything. He is on the throne! He is in control! (Not Domitian.) The churches need not fear. Instead they should stand in amazement and awe as they see the majesty of God through the eyes of John.

Chapter 4 closes with John witnessing a great scene of worship of the Father. Chapter changes the focus to the Son and then to the Father and the Son. Both are worthy of worship.

Worthy is the Lamb!

This is an important point in Revelation: The Lamb is worthy of praise and

⁵Peterson, 60.

honor, and the Lamb holds all power over history — the book with seven seals. It is important because John expects his beloved churches in Asia to face increased pressure and persecution. They will live under the sign and even the reality of the cross. They will need to be reminded that the Lamb who was slain is the One who ultimately holds all power, not only over the churches but also over society and even the seemingly powerful empire. To worship the Lamb is to be attuned with the worship that takes place in heaven and with the ultimate goal of all creation, “in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and in the sea.” The ultimate power does not belong to those who now look like lions but to the Lamb who was slaughtered and those sealed with its blood, who “will reign on earth” (5:10).⁶

The First Six Seals (6:1 - 7:17)

Chapter 6

Revelation 6 marks the beginning of the main section of Revelation. Chapters 4 and 5 set the stage for the opening of the scroll with its sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls (chapters 6 - 16). Just as the vision in chapter 1 lead to the writing to the churches, so the great vision of the throne room of God leads to the opening of the scroll, revealing God’s judgment and justice. It was important for the churches to know that God was on His throne and in control. It should be noted that the scroll is not opened until all the seals are broken. The contents of the scroll are not revealed until we get to chapter 8.

The principle purpose of the visions in Revelation 6 is to awaken a sense of uneasiness in readers by vividly identifying threats to their well-being. The four horsemen are designed to shatter illusions that people can find true security in the borders of a nation or empire, in a flourishing economy, or in their own health. Subsequent visions promise that God will not allow injustice to continue forever – which is assuring to the victims, but disturbing to the perpetrators – and warn that no place on earth and no position of power or wealth will protect people from the judgment of God and the Lamb. Those who grasp the way that these visions relentlessly undercut human pretensions will find themselves asking the final question in the chapter: “Who can stand?” (6:17). Those who have been moved to ask this question are rightly prepared for the visions that follow in chapter 7.⁷

Chapter 7

If the threats of Revelation 6 take away the readers’ confidence in the security provided by nation, community, economic prosperity, and health; and if they warn that positions of wealth and influence ultimately fail to shield people from the wrath of God; the

⁶Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 44,45.

⁷Koester, 82.

visions in Revelation 7 call readers to be confident that God will be true. Instead of identifying with the multitudes who call upon the mountains and hills to shelter them from God and the Lamb (6:16-17), listeners are invited to seek shelter that God and the Lamb provide (7:15-17). If God brought Christ, the Lamb, through death to a place on the heavenly throne, readers can persevere in faith, confident that God will bring all of his people through tribulation to a place in his court.⁸

The Seventh Seal and the Seven Trumpets (8:1 - 11:19)

Chapter 8 ff.

At the opening of the seventh seal (8:1) the echoes of celestial praise fade into reverent silence. The quiet, which lasts for half an hour, offers a respite from disaster and celebration, allowing readers to “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Rather than serving as an anticlimax to this cycle of visions, the silence adds suspense to the drama. The earth has been shaken by the mere opening of the seals that bound the scroll of God. Therefore, one might expect even more terrible and wonderful things to occur now that the scroll is opened so that it can be read. The cycle of visions will show whether this is the case.⁹

Seven trumpets are blown in succession, creating the third cycle of visions in Revelation. At the conclusion of the previous cycle, a graceful silence lingered in heaven’s chambers after the voices in the celestial chorus had sounded the “Amen” in their praises of God and the Lamb (7:12; 8:1). Rather than allowing readers to bask in quietude, however, John directs attention to the seven angels, who are given seven trumpets, whose sound will break the stillness and signal an onslaught of new visions even more terrible than those that have gone before (8:2). With each successive scene, disaster strikes earth, sea, and sky, until demonic hordes of locusts and cavalry torment humanity amid clouds of fire, smoke, and sulfur (8:7 - 9:21). The cycle is all the more ominous because the destruction unfolds in a relentlessly measured way. The effect is something like an orchestral performance in which the strings scrape dissonant chords while woodwinds shriek, trumpets blare, and cymbals crash in what seems to be wild discord — except that all the players move to the steady beat that is set by the conductor’s hand: one, two, three, four. . . .

As the terrors crescendo to unbearable levels after the fifth and sixth trumpets, the wicked persist in their refusal to repent (9:20,21), so that the audience might well expect the seventh trumpet to signal the arrival of God’s catastrophic judgment with earsplitting finality. But the last trumpet does not sound and the end does not come. Instead there is an interlude, just as there was an interlude before the end of the previous cycle of visions. Following the same stylized pattern, the accounts of the seven seals

⁸Koester, 91

⁹Koester, 91,92.

and the seven trumpets begin with six threatening visions, shift to an interlude, then conclude with the seventh item in the series. In the series of the seven seals, the interlude interrupted to the specter of judgment to show the faithful in heaven, giving glory to God and the Lamb (7:1-17). Now, in the series of the seven trumpets, the interlude interrupts the specter of judgment to show how the testimony of the faithful who suffer on earth helps move others to give glory to God (10:1 - 11:13).¹⁰

More overview material:

In Revelation there are 3 seven-fold visions: the seals (chapter 6), the trumpets (chapters 8 & 9), and the bowls (chapter 16). Between the 6th and 7th seal there is a parenthetical pause that consists of two visions designed to give encouragement to the church: the sealing of the saints and the heavenly multitude. After this pause we have the beginning of the 7 trumpets.

At the close of the 9th chapter, 6 of the 7 trumpets have sounded, and once again there is a pause before the final trumpet is blown. This interlude will include a vision of an angel with a little scroll and a vision of 2 witnesses.

At the pouring out of the bowls in chapter 16, there will be no pause between the 6th and 7th bowl because at that time all warnings will be over. It will be too late to repent.

The Two Witnesses & The Woman and the Dragon (11:1 - 12:18)

Concerning 11:1-14:

“There are few passages in the entire book of Revelation that have proven to be as difficult to interpret as this one. The words are fairly simple, but it is difficult to see to what they may refer. In particular, who are the two witnesses of whom John speaks?”¹¹

As figures that stand for the faithful generally, the two witnesses encompass the traits of individuals from many periods in the history of God’s people. Calling them olive trees and lampstands recalls how Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor – who led Israel during the time of Persian domination – were depicted as olive trees whose oil supplied a golden lampstand (11:4; Zech. 3:1 - 4:14). The faithful of John’s time embody these traits during a time of Roman domination, when they constitute a “kingdom” that recognizes the sovereignty of God, and serve as faithful “priests” to the Creator of heaven and earth (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). The speech of the two witnesses can be compared to the fire pouring out of their mouths, which was a trait of the prophet Jeremiah, who bore witness during the time that the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem and its temple (Jer. 5:14; Rev. 11:5).

¹⁰Koester, 93,94.

¹¹Gonzalez & Gonzalez, 71.

Other elements reinforce the impression that the witnesses encompass traits from the people of God in many periods of time. They are like the prophet Elijah, who called fire from heaven and shut up the heavens so that rain would not fall during a period in which rulers promoted the worship of false gods among the people (Rev. 11:5,6; 1 Kings 17:1; 18:38; 2 Kings 1:10). They are also like Moses, who had power to turn water into blood and to send plagues upon the earth while Israel was in bondage in Egypt (Rev. 11:6; Exod. 7:17-21). Although there were traditions that Moses and Elijah were to return before the Day of the Lord, both witnesses encompass all the traits mentioned above.¹²

Concerning chapter 12 and following:

The drama that spans the last half of the book traces the defeat of Satan, who is cast down from heaven to earth, and from earth to the abyss. In the course of the action, Satan seeks to operate through other agents, including two beasts and a harlot, but God and the Lamb eventually thwart the efforts of these “destroyers of the earth.” The progression of the plot continues to follow shorter cycles of visions that convey warnings and promises of blessing, but the overall sequence of events is highly stylized and can be outlined as follows:

Satan thrown from heaven to earth (Rev. 12)
 beast and false prophet conquer (Rev. 13)
 harlot rides on the beast (Rev. 17)
 harlot destroyed by the beast (Rev. 17)
 beast and false prophet conquered (Rev. 19)
 Satan thrown from earth into the abyss (Rev. 20)

The outline shows how John systematically introduces Satan, the beast and false prophet, and finally the harlot into the drama, and how in reverse order he describes the defeats of the harlot, the beast and false prophet, and finally Satan himself. The last piece in the sequence occurs almost as an anticlimax when the Devil is momentarily released, only to be cast into the lake of fire (20:7-10).¹³

Modern readers may find the cosmic drama played out in Revelation 12-22 to be something like a movie that thrills audiences with special effects, as heroes and villains traverse the galaxies in battles for control of the universe. Such a comparison to modern popular culture does not trivialize Revelation, but actually offers a way to understand what the book is doing. John’s audience lived within a wider culture that had its own heroes and image makers, its rumors and stereotypes, its rituals and graffiti. Christians faced the continual challenge of discerning how far they could go in embracing non-Christian practices, and at what point they needed to resist. The description of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 shows that Christian nonconformists were sometimes treated violently by non-Christians; but a more insidious threat was the power of popular culture to seduce Christians into compromising their convictions and relaxing into

¹²Koester, 108, 109.

¹³Koester, 116.

complacency. John grapples with the icons of the popular culture of his day in order to unmask them, so that when readers see the realities that lie behind the facades, they might better resist compromise and persevere in faith.¹⁴

The Conflict on Earth Begins (13:1-14:20)

Additional comments on 666.

The number of the beast is 666. Whatever this means, it would have been clear to the original audience but is lost to us. There are various ways of creating numbers out of letters, and the author might have been using either a Hebrew or Greek alphabet. The number seems to mean a particular person — perhaps a public official whose duty was concerned with spreading the imperial cult in Asia Minor by public proclamations or by building programs or by both. The name is in code, either because of the danger of mentioning the name or because the code number indicates it is an incomplete, imperfect number — unlike the perfect 777 or the more-than-perfect 888, which is the number to which the name of Jesus corresponds. We cannot determine the significance of the number 666 at this late date. But that is a minor point in contrast to what we do know about the danger of the earth beast and about the parallels that can occur in our own time.¹⁵

Before John offers readers an alternative to submitting to the beast, he piques their curiosity by linking the name of the beast to the number 666 (13:18). In one sense it may be sufficient to note that triple six connotes imperfection. Previously in Revelation, completeness and blessing have been associated with the number seven. . . . The number six, however, has more to do with imperfection and judgment. . . . Following this pattern, the number 666 implies that the beast signifies unfulfillment and destruction. Yet John goes further by inviting readers to “calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person” (13:18). The text apparently assumes that the readers are familiar with *gematria*, which is the practice of adding up the numerical values of the letters in a word. In antiquity, the letters of the alphabet had numerical values ascribed to them, so that a = 1, b = 2, etc. By explaining that 666 is “the number of a person,” John implies that 666 is the sum of the values of the letters in a person’s name. . . . The problem is that it may be easy to calculate the number if one already knows the name, since all one has to do is add up the values of the letters; but it is extremely difficult to determine the name of the basis of a number, since many different letter combinations can yield the same total. With a little ingenuity, people in every generation seem capable of finding an adversary who can in some way be linked to the number. Candidates for 666 stretch from medieval popes to modern tyrants like Hitler.¹⁶

. . . It is likely that John intended his readers to think of a particular individual, one already

¹⁴Koester, 117.

¹⁵Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 90.

¹⁶Koester, 132.

known to them, by this number which is designated as “a man’s name” (13:18 NEB, TEV). Nero is by far the most likely candidate supported by the majority of historical scholars, since the letters “Neron Caesar” in the Hebrew spelling add up to precisely 666: Nun (50) + Resh (200) + Waw (6) and Nun (50) + Qof (100) + Samach (60) + Resh (200) = 666.¹⁷

That John expected his reader-hearers to think of Nero is supported by the fact that he uses the myth of the returning Nero elsewhere in Revelation (13:3; 17:9-11).¹⁸

Nero had once persecuted the church, the first Roman emperor to do so. The view that he was not really dead but would return from the East to wreak havoc on the empire was in the air. John sees a new persecution looming on the horizon, and pictures the advent of the new Roman oppressor as the “return of Nero.” He did not intend this in any literal sense; he wanted to make a statement to those who saw commitment to Roman ideology as harmless and quite compatible with Christ commitment. His picture-language warns, “Beware, it is Nero all over again,” just as one might say of a new dictatorial anti-Semitism that many might see innocuous, “Beware, it’s Hitler all over again.” The whole passage calls responsible interpreters of the Bible not to “decoding” a “puzzle” but to alertness in discerning the nature and consequences on one’s commitments.¹⁹

The Wrath of God (15:1-16:21)

Additional Thoughts about the Wrath of God.

We are not used to hearing much about the wrath of God. It does not seem in keeping for a loving God to be wrathful. But John understands quite well that the holiness of God ultimately requires the destruction of evil. Redemption involves the end of the power of evil. Grace is central, for all human beings are sinful and need forgiveness. But forgiveness alone does not destroy evil. The destruction of evil is the goal of God’s wrath. This wrath is for the sake of redemption, for the sake of holiness, not the result of an irrational anger. In the book of Revelation, God’s wrath seeks to destroy particularly those sources of evil that are Satan or the instruments of Satan. Human beings must choose to whom their loyalty is given, but the major focus is on the superhuman objects of faithless human worship.²⁰

. . . The understanding of the cross of Christ includes the fact that Jesus suffered the wrath of God for us, taking on himself God’s righteous desire to destroy evil. Therefore, the recipients of grace are to become holy. Grace is not a way for us to indulge in evil without any consequences. Rather, grace is the means by which God frees sinful people from the power of

¹⁷Boring, 163.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 100, 101.

evil so that they may become holy. To eliminate wrath from God is to cheapen and make meaningless the work of grace. This portion of Revelation not only speaks of the wrath of God as a reality but, as we have seen, also points to the end of such wrath, when all of the forces of evil have been destroyed.²¹

Additional Thoughts about the Battle of Armageddon:

Probing of John's meaning of the "battle of Armageddon" thus reveals that we should not be concerned to locate it on a map or give it a date. It is not a prediction of some historical battle to be located on the map and calendar but one of his pictures of the penultimate eschatological events, the climax of the eschatological woes that John saw himself and his churches as already experiencing. The meaning of the "battle" and its outcome is John's concern, not its location in time or space. In this context the meaning seems to be that at the climax of God's eschatological judgments he will allow the "evil trinity" to gather the kings of the East, including the feared Parthians from beyond the Euphrates, for a final onslaught against rebellious Rome, something that John pictures as happening in his immediate future. In the concluding visions of this section, John pulls back from actually describing their destruction of Rome. No battle is described, no Parthians ever reach Rome. This is because he considers the final destruction of this symbol of worldly evil to be God's own work, in principle already accomplished in the Christ event, and because he has a detailed account of the "fall of Babylon" to present as the climax of the eschatological woes in the next section, 17:1–18:24.²²

In the midst of these graphic scenes of the eschatological future already breaking in, a voice is heard, the direct voice of Christ speaking through his prophet: "Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!" (16:15). This is not, as has sometimes been supposed, a misplaced verse more at home among the messages of 2:1–3:21 (cf. 3:3). It is John's way of reminding his hearer-readers that the visions are not to provide speculative information about the future but are a challenge from the living Christ for them to orient their lives in the present toward the coming eschatological reality.²³

The Fall of Babylon (17:1-18:24)

Random Thoughts about Chapters 18 & 19

John is writing a *pastoral letter* to address the immediate problem of his reader-hearers, not a *puzzle* for later readers. John was not concerned that his original hearer-readers learn from this passage who the reigning emperor was – they knew that already – but rather *what* he was, what he represented. He was afraid that his fellow Christians might not recognize that imperial

²¹Ibid.

²²Boring, 177, 178.

²³Ibid.

power was ultimately demonic, that the current lull in persecution was only the calm before the approaching storm. When the “eighth” emperor appeared he would be both another parody of Jesus Christ (the true “eighth”) and another incarnation of the beastly power that had appeared in Nero. The present distress under Domitian was only the leading edge of the great persecution to come; when the beast appeared again, though appearing to be powerful, it would last only a little while, since it was already destined to go the perdition. All this John wanted to disclose in his evocative revelation of how things ultimately are to Christians who had to decide how to evaluate rival claims to ultimate allegiance made by the god represented in Rome and the God represented in Jesus Christ. He may have chosen a deliberately imprecise means of expression in order to allow his hearer-readers to become participants in the disclosure of the true nature of the Roman threat. John’s mode of communication calls for a discerning response, not a simplistic identification of Rome or any other government with the Satanic beast.²⁴

John’s lampoon of the great harlot was designed to move first-century readers to resist being seduced by the power and wealth of Rome into compromising their loyalties to God, Christ, and the Christian community. The implications of the satire, however, are not confined to the first century. The harlot’s traits are not simply those of Rome, but include those of Babylon, Tyre, and Nineveh. By encompassing characteristics from all of these cities, the harlot represents a power that is not limited to one place or to one time. When the harlot’s arrogance, violence, and obsession with luxury are described more fully in Revelation 18, modern readers will find themselves confronting forces that belong not to a forgotten age, but to the world that they know.²⁵

A more helpful way to read the text is to recognize that John uses evocative imagery that resists decoding. Elsewhere in Revelation, the number seven indicates completeness, so that when John writes to seven churches in Asia, he presents a message to the whole church. When he says that the seventh seal is broken (8:1), the seventh trumpet is sounded (11:15), or the seventh bowl is emptied (16:17), he indicates that a vision cycle is complete. Accordingly, identifying the seven heads with seven kings seems to point to the totality of the beast’s power. Picturing an eighth king as a return of one of the seven seems to play on legends that Nero would return, so that one could say of a future persecution of the people of God: “It is Nero all over again.” Despite the ambiguity in its details, the end of the story is clear. Evil self-destructs. The beast and its allies begin by waging war against the Lamb (17:13–14), but they end up by destroying the harlot (17:16). After carrying the great harlot for a time, the beast overthrows her. The purple and scarlet gown, and the gold and jewels that gave her pride are stripped away in disgrace. She who consumed the blood of the saints is now consumed by the jaws of the beast, and her remains are burned with fire (17:16). In an ironic twist, destruction by fire means that for the harlot herself it is “Nero all over again,” because under Nero the city set on seven hills was devastated by fire once before (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.38). In an earlier vision, Babylon was shattered by one of God’s angels (Rev. 16:19), but here God’s will is carried out when God

²⁴Boring, 183.

²⁵Koester, 159.

directs the forces of evil to pursue their own destructive course. The beast comes from the bottomless pit, where destruction reigns (17:8; cf. 9:11), and destruction is what it brings, even to its allies. The sobering message of this vision is that God's judgment is carried out when he allows those who wreak destruction to become victims of their own practices.²⁶

John considers the phases of the "career" of the beast important enough to repeat them twice in 17:8: it "was," "is not," and "is to come." On the one hand, this cryptic description shows that the beast is a parody of the true God who "is, was, and is to come" (1:4, 8; 4:8). On the other hand, this description also serves to "locate" the reader with reference to the activity of the beast. It once "was": it is a reality that has already appeared in the past. Imperial persecution was first manifest in Nero, 64 C.E. At the moment it "is not": there is no full-scale persecution of Christians by Rome under way as John writes. John believes this has lulled many Christians into a false sense of security and an accommodation to Rome and what she stands for. But the beast is to ascend from the abyss – John sees the return of the beast as imminent and is trying to prepare his congregations for the great persecution to come. But it goes to perdition. When it appears, it is already on the way out. John is afraid his fellow Christians will surrender to an enemy already defeated. His revelation is to remove the cover (the literal meaning of apocalypse) and let them see the reality of things.²⁷

The End of the Old (19:1 - 20:15)

Supplemental thoughts of chapters 19 & 20

We should note that the second coming does not in fact play a large role in John's eschatology. It is only one of several pictures, described much more briefly than the new Jerusalem. And yet it is an important symbolic way of picturing the goal of history. John's first response to the implied question "What will the End be like?" is to give us a picture of the return of Christ. As God's definitive revelation was not in an abstract principle, a law, a book, or a thing, but a *person*, so at the End we meet not something but Someone. As the Bible's pictures of ultimate beginnings are personal (not a Big Bang but "In the beginning God . . ."), so also its pictures of the End are neither bang nor whimper but the God revealed in Christ. Though pictured in transcendent apocalyptic imagery, John intends to say that at the End of all things we meet not a stranger or newcomer but One we know. It is return and reunion, wedding celebration after a long engagement, not the arrival of an alien. At the End of history we confront no utterly unknown mystery, no abyss of nothingness, no figure of apocalyptic fantasy. We are awaited by the One who has already made himself known in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and has made everything different by his appearing. The theological symbol of the second coming means that the ultimate future makes effective and manifest to all the reality that has already appeared in history in the person of Jesus, at present visible only through eyes of faith.²⁸

²⁶Koester, 161.

²⁷Boring, 181.

²⁸Boring, 197, 198.

John speaks of the saints' whereabouts in relational rather than in geographical terms. Each time we might expect him to say that they "reigned on earth," he says that they "reigned with Christ" (20:4,6). The point bears repeating. If we ask, "Where are the saints?" we receive the answer, "They are with Christ." The relational answer "with Christ" points us to the heart of life in the millennial kingdom. John is more concerned with "who" than with "where." Having assured readers that the saints will be "with Christ," John leaves most other questions unanswered, as if to say, "What more do you need to know?"²⁹

Although the millennium has attracted much attention from interpreters, it is not a quantitatively large item in John's eschatological repertoire, occurring only in this brief passage in his entire composition (and found nowhere else in the New Testament).³⁰

It is an abuse of John's own structure to make "the millennium" the interpretive key to his whole revelation. Like the picture of the second coming, which also receives relatively little space, the picture of the millennium is only one of John's ways of thinking about the End.³¹

If we can free our own imaginations from the chains of literalism, what a dramatic picture we see in this chaining of the dragon! An angel with lasso and key swoops down from heaven and without a struggle Satan, whose time has come (12:12; cf. Matt. 8:29), is bound and cast into the abyss. The threefold verbs of 20:3, "threw," "shut," and "sealed," have the same ring of finality as our "signed, sealed, and delivered."

In the preceding visions we have seen Satan's agents disposed of, as the beast and false prophet disappear into the lake of fire (19:20). The symbols of rebellious, self-deifying human empire and those who promote its worship are gone forever. But the dragon, Satan, the personification of the ultimate power of evil, is still at large. Will he again find a way to deceive humanity and begin the cycle all over again? Some sour voice is present at the celebration of every victory: "Yes, but what about. . . ?" So long as the power of evil is free at all, these cynical voices always have a point and an audience. John addresses the question of the ultimate destruction of evil with a dual visionary response. In one picture, evil is overpowered and imprisoned while the world still endures (20:1-3); in the other, evil is finally destroyed and the threat is removed forever (20:10).³²

The Glorious Future (21:1 - 22:21)

John has already given remarkable expression to the Christian conviction that at the End

²⁹Koester, 185.

³⁰Boring, 202.

³¹Boring, 203.

³²Boring, 200, 201.

we meet not an event but a Person. All Revelation's statements about the "End" are really statements about God; eschatology is an aspect of the doctrine of God. Shining through the varied pictures of "what it will be like" is the conviction which John shares with Paul that at the end of the historical road God will be "all in all" (*panta en pasin*, RSV "everything to everyone," I Cor.15:28). For John, God is not finally one "item" in the new Jerusalem; God is himself the eschatological reality who embraces all dwelling with humanity," and declares that "God himself will be with them" (cf. the closing lines of Ezekiel's description of the restored Jerusalem, "The name of the city henceforth shall be 'the Lord is there'" [48:35]). In the only two instances in which the voice of God directly addresses the hearer-readers (21:6, cf. 1:8), God declares "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." God does not merely bring the End, God is the End. As a perfect cube (21:15-16), the golden city as a whole is a holy of holies in which divine presence is directly, intimately available (I Kings 6:20; II Chron. 3:8-9). Thus in contrast to all pious expectation and the pattern of Ezekiel 40-48 which John is following, there is no temple in this city—because God-as-defined-by-the-Lamb is himself the temple, the "place" of the divine-human encounter (21:22).³³

All of the destruction that has occurred, the final judgment, the end of the old earth and heaven—all have taken place for the purpose of making way for the new. John had received a tantalizing hint of what was to come when he was told of the marriage feast of the Lamb (19:6-9). Now he sees this new heaven and new earth (21:1). There is no sea in this new earth, for the sea was understood to be a place of danger. For someone exiled on an island, as was John, the sea was also the cause of separation from loved ones. Christians often assume that the biblical view of the end of history includes the end of the earth, and then the redeemed enter an unchanged heaven. That, however, is based on a nonbiblical view that discounts the value of the earth. The biblical picture presented here is quite different in two ways. First, heaven itself is new. Second, there is a new earth, which is the habitation of the redeemed. In 2 Peter 3:13 there is a similar expectation. A new earth is part of the eschatological hope of Israel, that is, the hope for the final end of history. It can be seen in Isaiah 11:1-9 and 65:17-25 and in Ezekiel 40-48 in the vision of the new temple. In all of these, there was an earthly quality to the future hope. Paul included a similar expectation of a renewed earth in Romans 8:19-23.³⁴

John has finished his task. He has faithfully recorded what he has seen and heard in his vision. His words have been authenticated both by the angel and by Jesus himself. Now it is up to those who receive the book to follow its guidance. Will the words be so difficult that some readers will be tempted to tone them down and change them, enabling those readers to compromise with the powers that be? Difficult as they are, the words are to remain. Those who would change them would be revealing that they are among the unfaithful, thereby suffering the consequences described in the book. Is

³³Boring, 215.

³⁴Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 137-138.

John's message positive or negative? For the faithful, it is a message of hope and encouragement. It presents a vision of the Holy City that will be their reward and therefore gives them strength to continue along the difficult path. For the wavering, John's message presents a clear choice: remain faithful or be condemned. There is no middle way, no compromise with the evil structures that control so much of earthly life. For them, it may be a frightening message, for it shows that life is about to be more difficult for the faithful, rather than easier.³⁵

Revelation confronts readers with an astonishing range of visions that both threaten and encourage them. Those who recognize the integrity of the book must come to terms with both. Christians in the so-called mainline churches have often had difficulty with the threatening side of the book. Repulsed by those who intimidate people with Revelation's warnings of fiery judgment or who turn its visions of conflict into a script for World War III, many Christians relegate Revelation to the margins of their lives. They might occasionally read a passage about heavenly glory during one of their worship services, but otherwise find it best to keep Revelation out of public view (see pp. 31-32 above). For such readers, the challenge is to hear Revelation's summons to see and resist the forces of sin and evil that are afoot in the world, especially as these manifest themselves in preoccupations with wealth, callousness toward violence, and the notion that it does not really matter what one calls "god." Revelation's visions are designed to disturb readers in order to bring them to renewed lives of faith and faithfulness. Other readers have difficulty coming to terms with the expansive hope that Revelation offers. Preoccupied with the secrets of the seven seals, the ghoulish armies massing for battle, and the prospect of cosmic destruction, they pass quickly by the scenes of heavenly glory and cosmic praise that culminate in the eternal city of God. By reading Revelation as a script for a future drama that will be played out in lockstep fashion, they follow a course in which faith becomes fatalism. For them, the challenge is to take the ominous visions not as simple predictions, but as warnings that are designed to move readers to repentance and endurance. Moreover, the book's repeated spirals may move downward into visions of threat, but they return each time to scenes of glory in the presence of God. To hear the book in its integrity means hearing the promises that God and the Lamb extend to those of every tribe and language and people and nation. Therefore,

"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'
And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'
And let everyone who is thirsty, come.
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift."

In light of such invitations and promises, the book calls each of its readers to respond "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20), and to embrace the benediction that occurs in its

³⁵Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 147-148.

final verse. “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen” (22:21).³⁶

³⁶Koester, 204-205.