

Part 5: The Seals Are Opened

3.3 The first six Seals are opened (6:1-17)

(14) How Shall We Interpret The Visionary in 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.”
(G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*)

“The Revelation has 404 verses. In those 404 verses there are 518 references to earlier scripture. If we are not familiar with the preceding writings, quite obviously we are not going to understand the Revelation. ...

The statistic posts a warning: no one has any business reading the last book who has not read the previous sixty-five.” (Peterson, 23)

“SOME READERS BELIEVE that current events unlock the meaning of the biblical prophecies.

Yet this approach seems to me wrongheaded—I believe that it runs up against the evidence of Revelation itself. John writes to seven literal churches in literal Asia Minor, following the same sequence in which a messenger traveling Roman roads would deliver the book If we take seriously what the book itself claims, then it was a book that must have made good sense to its first hearers, who in fact were “blessed” for obeying it (1:3). That John wrote the book in Greek probably suggests that he also used figures of speech and symbols that were part of his culture more than ours. That the book was to remain “unsealed” even in his generation also indicates that it was meant to be understood from that time forward (22:10; contrast Dan. 12:9–10).

Perhaps an even more compelling reason exists to argue for focusing on ancient rather than modern background for

understanding the book of Revelation. If today's newspapers are a necessary key to interpreting the book, then no generation until our own could have understood and obeyed the book (contrary to the assumption in 1:3)." (Keener, 21)

(14.1) The Preterist or Contemporary Historical method

This view reads the Revelation as an historical document addressing the issues that arose in the 1st Century AD. It sees the prophetic elements of the book (completely? mostly?) fulfilled in the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70) or the fall of Rome (AD 476).

(14.2) The Historicist Method

This method reads the book as a forecast of the history of the west leading up to the interpreters present time. Therefore, the book had little relevance for the immediate circumstances of its first audience.

(14.3) The Idealist Method

This view holds that Revelation does not point to any specific historical events at all but simply reveals the timeless principles by which God governs creation. In this scheme, the book reveals the ageless battle between good and evil, light and darkness.

(14.4) The Futurist Method

This view sees Revelation as a revealing of the final victory of God in Christ over the forces of evil in a decisive way at the end of the present age. This method has been popularly championed by the dispensationalists in present times.

(14.5) The Literary Method

This study takes an integrated approach to the book, realizing that *none of the methods listed above is alone sufficient to deal with the varied nature of the diverse literature contained by Revelation*. Basically, we will view the book as being relevant to its first century audience in that it reveals both what God is doing and what God will do to finally bring an end to the present age. Thus God's universal principles of salvation are revealed, but they are moving all things toward a future, predetermined conclusion in Christ. Yes, the events of Revelation are witnessed by similar events in history, but these are moving toward a final, escalated fulfillment at the end of the Age.

(15) The Structure of Revelation

(15.1) The Prophetic-Literary Approach

This view treats the book as a series of visions like the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament. Each of the visions (oracles) is self-contained and to some degree independent of the other visions but fit together in a narrative framework. In other words, each of the visions are smaller stories, or chapters, within the larger framework of Revelation as a whole.

The structural key to dividing the book according to these visions is given in the phrase “Now after these things I looked...” or as in the final instance, “Now After these things I heard...”

1	The Things which have been...
2-3	The Things which are...
4-22	The Things which must soon take place...
	<i>After these things...</i> The Lamb and the Scroll of Destiny (4:1-6:17)
	<i>After these things...</i> The Sealing of the 144,000 of Israel (7:1-8)
	<i>After these things...</i> The Signs and Events of the End (7:9-15:5)
	<i>After these things...</i> The Wrath of God Arrives (15:5-17:18)
	<i>After these things...</i> The Final Fall of Babylon the Great (18:1-24)
	<i>After these things...</i> Christ Appears and New Creation (19:1-22:21)

(15.2) The Recapitulation or Progressive Parallelism Approach

This view divides Revelation into seven sections which run parallel to one another, each time telling the story of the church and the world from the time of Christ’s first coming to the time of his Return. *In other words, Revelation is telling the same story over and over, each time from a different angle and with minimal narrative development.*

1-3	The Seven Churches of the “timeless Church”
4-7	The Suffering Church Victorious in Christ
8-11	The Church Avenged and Victorious in Christ
12-14	Jesus Versus the Devil and His Beasts
15-16	The Final Visitation of God’s Wrath
17-19	The World Versus the Kingdom of Christ
20-22	The Final Triumph of Christ and the Church

Revelation 6:1 I looked on when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a thunderous voice, “Come!” 6:2 So I looked, and here came a white horse! The one who rode it had a bow, and he was given a crown, and as a conqueror he rode out to conquer.

“... the throne room vision of chapters 4 and 5 sets the stage for the opening of the scroll with its sequence of seals, trumpets, and bowls (chaps. 6-16) ... As each seal is removed we are introduced to a series of preliminary judgments representing forces operative throughout history by means of which the redemptive and judicial purposes of God are being carried out prior to the end.”
(Mounce, 151)

- 6:2 The White Horse / Conqueror

IN THE BACKGROUND 22: *The Chariots of Zechariah 6:1-8*

In these passages in Zechariah, the Chariots and Horses represent the “four spirits/winds of Heaven” (6:5) sent out into the earth to report to the LORD.

Revelation 6:3 Then when the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come!” 6:4 And another horse, fiery red, came out, and the one who rode it was granted permission to take peace from the earth, so that people would butcher one another, and he was given a huge sword.

- 6:4 The Red Horse

- 6:4 “granted permission”

Revelation 6:5 Then when the Lamb opened the third seal I heard the third living creature saying, “Come!” So I looked, and here came a black horse! The one who rode it had a balance scale in his hand.
 6:6 Then I heard something like a voice from among the four living creatures saying, “A quart of wheat will cost a day’s pay and three quarts of barley will cost a day’s pay. But do not damage the olive oil and the wine!”

- 6:5 The Black Horse
- 6:6 “don’t damage the oil and wine”

“During the siege of Jerusalem, Titus gave explicit orders not to destroy the oil and wine because he wanted those luxuries to be enjoyed by the rich, who can afford them even in times of want. The black horse states the hard facts of the matter, that the harsh inequalities in distribution of the necessities of life are exacerbated in situations of dire need. God’s judgment on this injustice follows in subsequent chapters.” (A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, 64)

Revelation 6:7 Then when the Lamb opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, “Come!” 6:8 So I looked and here came a pale green horse! The name of the one who rode it was Death, and Hades followed right behind. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill its population with the sword, famine, and disease, and by the wild animals of the earth.

- 6:8 The Pale Green Horse / Death and Hades

(*chloros*) – the color of death

- 6:8 Sword, famine, disease, and wild animals:
Ezekiel 14:21 “For this is what the sovereign LORD says: How much worse will it be when I send my four terrible judgments - sword, famine, wild animals, and plague - to Jerusalem to kill both people and animals!

Revelation 6:9 Now when the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been violently killed because of the word of God and because of the testimony they had given. 6:10 They cried out with a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Master, holy and true, before you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?” 6:11 Each of them was given a long white robe and they were told to rest for a little longer, until the full number was reached of both their fellow servants and their brothers who were going to be killed just as they had been.

- 6:9 The souls of the slain martyrs...

“ In the OT ritual sacrifice the blood of the bullock was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering (Leviticus 4:7; Exodus 29:12). This blood contained the life, or soul, of the flesh (Leviticus 17:11). That the souls of the martyrs were underneath the altar is a way of saying that their untimely deaths on earth are from God’s perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven.” (Mounce, 157)

- 6:10 How long, O Lord ...

“Through centuries of oppression the cry, How long? has constantly risen to Heaven. “How long shall the wicked exult?” asks the Psalmist (94:3). “How long shall I cry for help,” asks the prophet, “and thou wilt not hear?” (Hab. 1:2). Vindication, not bitter revenge, is the theme.” (Mounce, 159)

- 6:11 a long white robe
- 6:11 rest a little longer...
- 6:11 Until the full number is reached...

Revelation 6:12 Then I looked when the Lamb opened the sixth seal, and a huge earthquake took place; the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the full moon became blood red; 6:13 and the stars in the sky fell to the earth like a fig tree dropping its unripe figs when shaken by a fierce wind. 6:14 The sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. 6:15 Then the kings of the earth, the very important people, the generals, the rich, the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 6:16 They said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, 6:17 because the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to withstand it?”

6:12-13 The Signs of the END

The events of this passage occur together in Jesus’ teaching in the Olivet Discourse as *immediately preceding* His Return (Matthew 24:15-31; Mark 13:24ff).

I think it is important to notice the sequence of events Jesus outlines in the Olivet Discourse as this same pattern is represented throughout Revelation:

The Abomination > Great Tribulation > Heavenly Signs >

Christ Appearing

“In all of these various texts, the transformation of the Sun, Moon and Stars all precede and herald the Lord’s appearing

See Joel 2:10, 30-31; Isaiah 2:10ff., 13:9ff., 34:4, Ezekiel 32:7-8, Hosea 10:8 for texts that contain similar imagery about the days preceding the appearance of the Lord in the end times.

IN THE BACKGROUND 23: *Parallels in the Texts About the End*

There are significant parallels between Revelation 6 and Jesus’ teaching about the “signs of the end” in the Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 (*Also in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke*).

MARK 13:7ff., 24f.	REVELATION 6 SEALS
1. Wars	1. Wars
2. International strife	2. International Strife
3. Earthquakes	3. Famine
4. Famines	4. Pestilence (= Death and Hades)
5. Persecutions	5. Those who are persecuted
6. Eclipses of the sun and moon, falling of the stars, shaking of the powers of heaven	6. Earthquakes, eclipse of the sun, moon turns to blood, falling of the stars, men calling on the rocks to fall on them, shaking of the powers of the heaven

- 6:14 - The “Shaking” of Creation

The earthquake mentioned here may be the same one mentioned in the Seventh Trumpet in 11:19 and the Seventh Bowl in 16:18.

See also Isaiah 34:4; Ezekiel 38:19; Joel 2:10; Amos 8:8; Haggai 2:6.

- 6:15-16 Hide US!

- 6:16-17 - The Day of Wrath has come!!!!

IN THE BACKGROUND 24: *The Day of the Lord*

The “Day of the LORD/YHWH” is a major theme in the Hebrew Prophets. Ultimately, this “day” will be the time in which the Lord-God appears to bring final judgment upon *the whole earth*.

Isaiah 13:9–13

Look, the day of the LORD is coming—
 cruel, with rage and burning anger—
 to make the earth a desolation
 and to destroy the sinners on it. 1
 3:10 Indeed, the stars of the sky and its constellations
 will not give their light.
 The sun will be dark when it rises,
 and the moon will not shine. 1
 3:11 I will bring disaster on the world,
 and their own iniquity, on the wicked.
 I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant
 and humiliate the insolence of tyrants.
 13:12 I will make man scarcer than gold,
 and mankind more rare than the gold of Ophir.
 13:13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
 and the earth will shake from its foundations
 at the wrath of the LORD of Hosts,
 on the day of His burning anger.

Malachi 3:1–2 “I am about to send my messenger, who will clear the way before me. Indeed, the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant, whom you long for, is certainly coming,” says the LORD who rules over all. 3:2 **Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can keep standing when he appears?** For he will be like a refiner’s fire, like a launderer’s soap.

IN THE BACKGROUND 25: *The Wrath of God*

God's wrath is a fundamental theme in Bible. It is both a **present** (Romans 1:18) and a **future** (Revelation 19:15) reality. God is not throwing a tantrum in His wrath, nor is He being vindictive. God's wrath is simply the righteous response required by His holiness and His love of all that is true, good and glorious.

When humanity, in its desire for sin and corruption, rejects all that God loves, *He gives them exactly what they want*. The present wrath of God—turning people over to their sin—and even His future wrath seen in Revelation is used first to call sinners to repentance, to give them a little taste of what eternity will be like without Him.

In some sense, God's Wrath is the removal of His gracious and providential care. Each of the judgments in Revelation displays what happens when Christ "lets go" of creation. Since "those who dwell on the earth" reject Christ's truth and grace, in the end, He gives them a reality in which He no longer holding all things together. This is a just response to humanity who has rejected Him.

4 The 144,000 from the 12 Tribes of Israel are sealed (7:1-8)

Revelation 7:1 **AFTER THIS I SAW** four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so no wind could blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. 7:2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, who had the seal of the living God. He shouted out with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given permission to damage the earth and the sea: 7:3 "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees until we have put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 7:4

Now I heard the number of those who were marked with a seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand, sealed from all the tribes of the people of Israel: 7:5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand, 7:6 from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh, twelve thousand, 7:7 from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar, twelve thousand, 7:8 from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed.

- What about the 7th Seal?

Tune in next week...

As in all great narratives, the “plot” of Revelation is given suspense and tension through the use of “cliffhangers.” Just when we expect to see the opening of the Seventh Seal and the final events of history, we get the vision of the sealing of the 144,000. This builds tension and keeps the “story” moving forward.

This material is clearly associated with the 6th seal as it reveals the answer to the question of the unredeemed who fearfully cry out, “Who is able to stand the Day of His judgment?” The 144,000 and the innumerable multitude in this chapter show us where true security is found and they serve as foil - a contrast to the wicked at the end of chapter 6.

- 7:1 The Four Angels and the Four Winds

In Apocalyptic literature, the “four winds” often represent the power of destruction. In Daniel 7:2 the four winds blow on the sea and the terrible beasts arise to destroy and conquer. In Jeremiah 49:36 the four winds bear the fierce wrath of the LORD to Elam. Here, the angels that control these winds hold them back so that the 144,000 can be spared.

- 7:2 The Angel from the East
- 7:3 No Damage until The Sealing ...
- 144,000
- The Seal

This recalls the Passover and perhaps Ezekiel 9:3-6. In the Ezekiel passage it is interesting to note that the instruction is given to place the Hebrew letter *tau* on the forehead which was written as an X or a + which foreshadows Christ (*Xristos*) and/or the Cross.

In the Bible, sealing expresses 1) **ownership** (2 Timothy 2:19) and 2) **security** (Ephesians 4:30). Just as the Holy Spirit now “seals” Christ’s people to ensure that they all will be kept secure to receive their inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14) so in the context of Revelation it seems that this 144,000 are sealed to ensure that they will arrive at the destiny which the Lord-God has determined for them.

- 7:4 Who are the 144,000?

Option 1: The Full Number of the Redeemed
(Jew and Gentile)

Most modern commentators take the view that this is the symbolic representation of all of God’s redeemed people, Jew and Gentile united in the Body of Christ. But even Beasley-Murray makes an incredible statement about the arbitrary nature of this judgment:

“It is freely to be admitted that the contrast between the representations of the Church in verses 1-8 and 9-14 is unexpected, not to say violent. For it is hardly a natural procedure to list with such precision the members of a defined company of people, consisting of the component tribes of a single nation, and then go on to identify them with an innumerable host drawn from every nation under heaven. And even when we grant the

obvious symbolism in the number 144,000 — made up of twelve tribes, each characterized by twelve multiplied by 1,000 — **it remains that verses 4-8 provide an unusual description of the Church. Indeed, it is hard to resist the conclusion that in the first instance it was never meant to apply to the Church.**”
(Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 140-141)

Option 2: National Israel (not Gentiles) set apart for the Fulfillment of the Promises of Salvation

This view works on two basic (and somewhat unpopular) presuppositions: 1) Ethnic, National Israel is NOT to be identified with the Church, and 2) Israel as a nation still has a place in God’s future plans. The interpretation of Romans 9-11 is critical for this issue:

Romans 11:25-29 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery--so that you will not be wise in your own estimation--that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,

“THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION,
HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.”

27 “THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM,
WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”

28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

* Paul seems to believe that Israel, as a nation, will be redeemed in the future. This redemption of Israel will bring about the consummation of all things. Now, in our present age, Israel is in rebellion against God and rejects the Gospel of Christ. In the time of the End, God will turn again to Israel to complete His promises to her and thus bring history to a close:

Romans 11:15 *For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*

- 7:5-8 The Names of the Tribes:

There is no standard way of naming the tribes even in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here we might take note of a couple of peculiarities:

- 1) Judah is mentioned first before Reuben the first born, probably because Jesus is from the tribe of Judah,
- 2) Manasseh, one of Joseph's sons is included, and
- 3) Dan is excluded probably due to its close association with idolatry. Even amongst the chosen tribes, we see God's sovereign choice at work, ordering things for His purposes.