

Revelation

Author and Date

Iranaeus said the Revelation was written in the mid 90s in the reign of the Emperor Domitian ¹, and this is now widely accepted ^{2 p.5}. Ancient tradition ^{2 p.7} and some commentators identify the author with John the beloved disciple and author of John's Gospel ³; others disagree, because he does not describe himself as an apostle, the Greek is worse than that of the Gospel, and perhaps the book was written too late for its author to have met Jesus personally. Nevertheless the John's Gospel and Revelation have much in common: both are written in Greek with Hebrew influence;^{4 p.110} they are the only two New Testament books that contain a title within the text; they share ideas and phrases such as calling Jesus "Lamb of God" and "Word of God" ^{2 p.7}; and both present Jesus as a powerful figure, always in control.

Audience

The book is presented as a general pastoral letter to seven churches under persecution on the southern coast of what is now Turkey ^{2 p.10}. The number seven symbolises perfection ^{5 p.24} or completeness, implying that the message is actually to the entire church of all ages ^{2 p.32}.

Content

"Revelation is the Bible's 'conclusion' and should be interpreted as such...Genesis narrates the beginning of mankind's rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden, while Revelation narrates the concluding story of God's eventual triumph over the Evil One and all those the Evil One incites to rebellion". ^{2 p.29-30} The book begins and ends with assurance that Jesus will come again ³ and emphasizes his triumph over worldly power ^{2 p.18}, to encourage those whose faith is wavering ^{2 p.98}.

Revelation, like Ezekiel's, Daniel's and Zechariah's prophecies, uses both historical and contemporary symbols; the style is called Apocalyptic writing. "Apocalypses view reality from an entirely different frame of reference in order to transform our understanding of human existence."^{2 p.16} "they should be seen as predicting, or even calling for, great changes in the social order."^{5 p.13} Wilcock ^{6 p.67} likes Caird's ⁷ description of Revelation as a vision of God's control room, where maps are spread out and secret plans for victory are devised. Some features on the maps show the present situation, others what is planned.

Apocalyptic writing traditionally arose from the *Merkabah* process: a rabbi would fast and pray and seek inspiration. This method was applied to a number of fields, apocalyptic being regarded as the most difficult, so it was left to the most expert rabbis, and even they would base their thoughts on previous apocalyptic works. The results often prophesied the down-fall of the current powers-that-be, which was politically dangerous, so they used coded references to those powers and wrote under pseudonyms. It is hardly surprising that the identity of the author is in doubt. Revelation's message is that faithful witness attracts opposition, but only for a time, and God's eventual victory is assured ^{5 p.112}.

Much of the book is metaphorical, using symbols; some (such as the woman giving birth to a child in chapter 12) have at least six meanings, all apparently intentional, even though some refer to pagan goddesses! Perhaps John deliberately avoided explaining his metaphors to avoid excluding any potential meanings^{5 p.16}. Seven Seals are opened by the Lamb, and we read of three groups of seven woes (Seven Trumpets; Seven Plagues; Seven Bowls) associated with human behaviour and the response of nature and God to it. These sevens all lead to the last judgment, so they seem to tell the same story three times ^{5 p.16}. Within these "sevens" certain details repeat, for example, a period of 1,260 days (Revelation 11:2).

The fact that details recur suggests that the text describes the same sequence of events more than once in different words, perhaps from a different point of view, to confirm and clarify them, as did Pharaoh's two dreams with the same meaning (Genesis 41:32) ^{6 p.38-39}. Also the repetition and numbered items would make the text easier to follow for a congregation hearing it read aloud ^{5 p.17}.

¹ Iranaeus (Bishop of Lyons 177–202) *Against heresies* 5.30.3 cited in Wall (see below) p.10

² Wall, R. "Revelation" in Gasque, W. (ed) *New International Biblical Commentary* series (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1991)

³ Winter, D. (ed) *Matthew Henry's Commentary — The New Testament* (London: Hodder, 1995) Book 2 p.502–3

⁴ Hengel, Martin *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989)

⁵ Maxwell, Marcus *People's Bible Commentary — Revelation* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005 edition)

⁶ Wilcock, M. *The Message of Revelation* in Stott, J. (ed) *The Bible Speaks Today* series (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press 1975)

⁷ Caird, G. *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, A & C Black, 1966, p.60–61

Revelation

Wall ^{2 p.33f} identifies five ways Revelation chapters 4–22 have been interpreted:

1. Early writers and some modern commentators view chapters 6–19 as events that will occur seven years before Christ returns, and chapters 20–22 as a millennium following the Second Coming. This would make the bulk of the book irrelevant to its stated audience.
2. Those who believe they are living in the “end times” before the Second Coming apply the prophecies to the church of their day. Like (1), this would make the bulk of the book irrelevant to its stated audience. Similar things were said, wrongly, of Ezekiel’s prophecies in Ezekiel 12:25–26.
3. Some see it as a vision of God’s ideals, relevant in every age but never achieved outside heaven.
4. Most contemporary commentators see it as a message about the author’s day expressed in terms understood by readers of that time. We can extrapolate a comparable message to our own situation.
5. Wall proposes studying the impact of the book on its first readers in order to apply it to today. He considers it a mistake to seek meaning in every detail ^{2 p.91}; it is like an impressionist painting, aiming to convey theological truth expressed in poetic (that is, imaginative) terms.

Structure based on Wilcock ^{6 p.15f}

1:1–8	Prologue	
1:9–3:22	The Church in the World	Seven letters dictated
4:1–8:1	Suffering for the Church	Chapter 4: the scene in heaven Chapter 5: the Lamb is enthroned and given a scroll sealed with seven seals, representing hardships Chapter 6: the first six seals are opened† and horsemen appear causing people to afflict one another Chapter 8: the seventh seal is opened
8:2–11:18	Warning to the World	Seven trumpets sound† causing natural disasters
11:19–15:4	The Drama of History	Seven visions of cosmic conflict
15:5–16:21	Punishment for the World	Seven bowls poured out
17:1–19:10	Babylon the Whore	Seven words of justice
19:11–21:8	The Drama behind History	Seven visions of ultimate reality
21:9–22:19	Jerusalem the Bride	Seven final revelations
22:20–21	Epilogue	

† Maxwell ^{5 p.92} identifies the first 4 seals with Jesus’s prophecies in Mark 13:7–8 and the first 4 trumpets with Mark 13:19–25.

Scene changes based on Wilcock ^{6 p.114–5}

1:12	Scene 1	A voice says “come” and he turns to see who is speaking	
4:1	Scene 2	A door is opened and a voice says “come”	
8:2	Scene 3	Angels with trumpets appear	
11:19	Scene 4	In heaven a door is opened	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="font-size: 3em; margin-right: 5px;">}</div> <div style="margin-right: 5px;">Seven sights:</div> <div style="border-left: 1px solid black; padding-left: 5px;"> <p>13:1 I saw a beast</p> <p>13:11 I saw another beast</p> <p>14:1 I looked, and see! The Lamb</p> <p>14:6 I saw another angel</p> <p>14:14 I looked, and see! a white cloud</p> <p>15:1 I saw another portent</p> <p>15:2 I saw ... a sea of glass</p> </div> </div>
15:5	Scene 5	In heaven the temple of the tent of witness is opened	
17:1	Scene 6	An angel says “come” and John is taken to a wilderness	
19:11	Scene 7	Heaven itself is opened	
21:9	Scene 8	An angel says “come” and John is taken to a mountain top.	

Revelation

Commentary

Chapter 1: Introduction

- Revelation 1:1–3 The book claims as much authority as the Jewish Law, which was given to Moses via angels (Galatians 3:19). The author calls himself a servant, *cf.* Mathew 20:26. Like a comedian, the author seems to enjoy ambiguity, and introduces some in the first line: is this a revelation *by* Jesus or *about* Jesus? The answer is, both ^{5 p.16!}
- Revelation 1:4 *cf.* Revelation 1:9, 22:8. The author was able to instruct the churches because he embodied Christian tradition, and was well known, so his name needed no qualification ^{4 p.29}. The phrase “who is and who was and who is to come” alludes to the ambiguous tense of the name of God heard by Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) which Jews see in the three-fold “Holy” in Isaiah 6:3, quoted in Revelation 4:8.
- Revelation 1:7 *cf.* Daniel 7:13, Zechariah 12:10.
- Revelation 1:8 The opening balances the ending in Revelation 22:13.
- Revelation 1:9 See comment on Revelation 1:4. John was sent to Patmos, an island set apart for political prisoners ^{2 p.61}.
- Revelation 1:12 *cf.* the seven-branched lampstand near the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:31–37) in the Holy Place of the Temple (Hebrews 9:2), which was a shadow of things in heaven (Hebrews 8:5). The candlesticks represent churches showing the light of the Gospel (*cf.* Matthew 5:15). The white-haired ancient of days (*cf.* Daniel 7:9) is among them. His gaze is penetrating; his feet are ready to trample and purify ^{3 p.504}.
- Revelation 1:13 Son of man: *cf.* Daniel 7:13 and Matthew 16:13. The sash or girdle was a priestly vestment in Exodus 28:4.
- Revelation 1:14–15 *cf.* Exodus 19:16, Ezekiel 8:2, Ezekiel 43:2 and the appearance of Jesus at the Transfiguration in Mark 9:3 etc.
- Revelation 1:16 The Messiah has power over life and death (Isaiah 11:4) *cf.* Jesus in John 5:22–30. Dulles ^{8 p.110–111} says the two-edged sword is God’s word, either read from the Bible or preached, to which the hearers must respond, accepting or rejecting the Gospel. Isaiah 49:1–6 prophesies that God’s word will reach the gentiles; the churches to which letters were addressed in Revelation were all in gentile cities, now in Turkey. The idea of God’s words being like a sword also occurs in Isaiah 49:2 in a servant song that is often taken to represent Christ, though it may have had other fulfilments as well, such as the Israelite nation in exile. Comparing God’s words with a sword shows God’s word is mighty (“releasing captives”). In Revelation 19:21 Christ wields the sword to defeat his enemies, but in Hebrews 4:12 it is like a surgeon’s scalpel, able to peel back our defences so that our inner parts may be healed.
- Revelation 1:17 *cf.* Ezekiel 1:28–2:1. Jesus is now too wonderful to look at, so for our benefit his appearance is veiled as Moses’s was in Exodus 34:33–35.
- Revelation 1:20 The lamp-stands are golden because the churches are precious. Seven: see comment on Revelation 4:5. Jesus is amidst seven lights, implying that he has all light ^{5 p.13}, in other words, perfect knowledge (though Grün ^{9 p.115} says it symbolizes something earthly being made divine, and Wilcock ^{6 p.62} suggests it means a thing’s essence). The stars may signify each church’s fate, a Christian answer to astrology, which claims that one’s fate is determined by the stars ^{5 p.29}.

⁸ Dulles, Avery *Models of the Church* New York: Doubleday, 1974

⁹ Grün, Anselm OSB *The Seven Sacraments* London: Continuum, 2003

Revelation

Chapters 2–3: Letters to the Churches

- Revelation 2 and 3 Seven churches are addressed, with a salute to the church's angel; commendations; criticisms; and a challenge; using metaphors from the context of that church. The theology of this section is like that of John 12:24–26. The fact that seven Churches are addressed is symbolic. Seven stands for completeness, so the complete church is meant to heed these "letters". Most Christians can identify to some extent with all of the churches described here. We should guard against the faults described, and heed the encouragements.
- The sequence of churches follows a clockwise tour of what is now western Turkey. Many of the churches are urged to avoid sexual sin and food sacrificed to idols. The first and last of the seven are threatened with destruction.
- Revelation 2:3–5
Ephesus It is said that John was bishop of Ephesus for many years ^{6 p.43}. The church there had not grown weary, but had lost the enthusiasm of its first response to God's love. Verse 5 shows that what was flagging was not worship but works¹⁰; they were obeying the first Great Commandment "love God with all your heart..." but not the second "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39).
- Revelation 2:5 Barton ^{11 p.1291} says this verse refers to the Second Coming of Christ, but the words "I will come to you and remove..." (NRSV) imply a special visit. More reasonably, Brown ^{12 p.1001} says it refers to imminent judgment of a local church, *cf.* Ezekiel 12:25–26. The Ephesian church has indeed disappeared, along with the city ^{6 p.44}.
- Revelation 2:6 The Nicolaitans followed Nicholas of Antioch, about whom little is known ^{2 p.70}. Ephesians 5:3 urged the Christians in Ephesus to avoid sexual sin.
- Revelation 2:7 The lampstand represents the local church (Revelation 1:20), so its removal would be the end of that Christian community. The "tree of life" gives eternal life, as in Genesis 3:22.
- Revelation 2:8
Smyrna Smyrna was a port (now called Izmir) that "rose from the ashes" after a disastrous earthquake ^{6 p.45}. The letter implies that the Christians there faced death threats. Verse 8 reminds them that Christ has overcome death, *cf.* Hebrews 2:14–15.
- Revelation 2:11 The "second death" might mean death of our body, because the early church regarded baptism as the death of our old life, as shown by Colossians 2.
- Revelation 2:12–13
Pergamum Pergamum was named after papyrus due to its library, and the name has common roots with our word parchment. The Roman cult of emperor worship started with the construction of a temple in Pergamum to the emperor Augustus in 29 BCE ^{2 p.74}. Revelation was probably written in the reign of Domitian who liked to be addressed as "Lord and God" ^{5 p.35}.
- Revelation 2:14 Balaam was a pagan, tasked by the Moabites with cursing Israel, but forbidden to do so by God (Numbers 22:1–12). However, he led Israel into promiscuity (Numbers 31:16). His mention here may be a code-name. Paul in 1 Corinthians 8 allowed Christians who were secure in their faith to eat meat sacrificed to idols (as almost all meat was, before it appeared in the shops, in those days) knowing that idols are non-entities, but was apparently over-ruled in Acts 15:28–29. Presumably the rebuke here relates to Christians adopting pagan ideas, as in 1 Corinthians 6:15f.
- Revelation 2:15 Nicolaitans: see comment on 2:6.

¹⁰ Zundel, Veronica writing in *New Daylight* 17 November 2016 p.92

¹¹ Barton, J *et al* (editors) *The Oxford Bible Commentary* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001

¹² Brown, R *et al* (editors) *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* New Saddle River: Prentice-Hall 1990

Revelation

- Revelation 2:17 White stones were used as admission tokens to festivals and entertainments ^{6 p.48} and signs of acquittal in trials ^{5 p.39} cf. Revelation 19:12, Judges 3:18. *New name:* cf. 3:12, Isaiah 62:2. Our individual experiences give us each opportunities for praising God in Heaven which no-one else can fulfil. ^{13 p.119}
- Revelation 2:18 *Thyatira* Thyatira was a commercial centre in the middle of what is now Turkey. The letter emphasises Jesus's authority over pagan and commercial culture.
- Revelation 2:20 King Ahab married Jezebel of Sidon, who introduced paganism (1 Kings 16:21) and tried to destroy the true prophets who were criticized their immorality (e.g. 1 Kings 18:4). Jezebel here may be a code-name, perhaps for the wife of an official.
- Revelation 2:24 The mention of "deep secrets" suggests that Gnosticism threatened Christianity.
- Revelation 2:26–27 The word "authority" could mean effective prayer rather than direct rule, but verse 27 clearly implies rule with power. cf. Revelation 3:21, Ephesians 2:6.
- Revelation 2:27 The "iron sceptre" is mentioned and perhaps fulfilled in 19:15.
- Revelation 2:28 The "morning star" is actually a planet, Venus. It is bright enough to be visible after all other stars have been hidden by the morning light, so it symbolises victory ^{5 p.45}.
- Revelation 3:1 *Sardis* Sardis was known for complacency: twice carelessness had allowed it to be invaded, despite superb defences: once by Cyrus in the 6th Century BCE, and again by Antiochus in 218 BCE. Then it lost its influence due to an earthquake. ^{2 p.79} This letter has nothing to commend the church in Sardis for, but urges Christians there to keep awake and look lively; otherwise the next surprise visitor will be Jesus ^{5 p.47}.
- Revelation 3:5 It is possible for back-sliding Christians to have their names erased from the Book of Life, that is, to lose their place in heaven. White robes were worn for baptism, signifying the purity that should admit the wearer to heaven, as in Revelation 3:18 and 22:14.
- Revelation 3:7–8 *Philadelphia* In stark contrast to Sardis, the letter to the church in Philadelphia contains no criticism. The one who opens and no-one shuts quotes Isaiah 22:22. The scribes and Pharisees thought they could declare who could enter heaven, but Jesus disagreed (Matthew 23:13) and awarded that right to Peter (Matthew 16:19).
- Revelation 3:12 A pillar is an essential part of a building; it cannot be taken away without damaging the structure. *New name:* cf. Isaiah 62:2, Revelation 2:17.
- Revelation 3:16f *Laodicea* Like Sardis, the church in Laodicea received no praise. The Laodiceans' lukewarmness might mean laziness in obedience and worship of God. Guthrie ¹⁴ relates it to long aqueducts that brought water to Laodicea from distant springs, the water being lukewarm when it arrived. What had once been distinctive and special had become mediocre and unattractive. Jesus would spit them out, as one would the hot, allegedly medicinal, spring-water of nearby Hierapolis ^{2 p.86, 5 p.52–53}.
- God permits evil deeds, but wants his people to be increasingly different from the world. They should no longer be inseparable like young wheat and darnel, but like the mature plants that are easily separated in the harvest (Matthew 13:24f).
- Revelation 3:18 Laodicea was famous for trade and banking, textiles, and an eye hospital ^{2 p.85}. This letter encourages them to seek real gold, real clothes, and real sight. The white robes signify purity and enable the wearer to enter heaven, as in Revelation 22:14.

¹³ Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain* London: Harper Collins, 1977

¹⁴ Guthrie, D "John" in Carson *et al* (editors) *New Bible Commentary* Leicester: IVP, 4th edition 1994

Revelation

Revelation 3:20 Holman Hunt's famous paintings have made the phrase "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" sound familiar and safe, but actually it makes the shocking point that Jesus felt that he was not allowed to enter the church in Laodicea. (Maxwell ^{5 p.55} sees this verse as a challenge to the Laodiceans to wake from slumber, remembering the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1–13; the bridegroom arrived late to collect his bride, but half of the bridesmaids were asleep and had run out of lamp oil.)

Chapters 4–18: Visions of Heaven

Revelation 4:1 "Heaven" in Revelation can mean the heavenly realms, where angels oppose God's enemies, or the holy place where God dwells ^{5 p.56}, though the distinction disappears in Caird's idea of battle plans in a heavenly control room⁷. "Trumpet" resembles the voice of God in Exodus 19:16f. "Come up" *cf.* Exodus 19:20, Exodus 24:9.

Revelation 4:3–4 *cf.* Exodus 24:10f. The rainbow is a sign of God's mercy; after the Flood, he promised not to kill all living things again (Genesis 9:13). The old and new covenants have twenty-four elders, the heads of the twelve tribes plus the twelve apostles (Matthew 10:1–2). Here they represent all God's people.^{2 p.93, cf. 5 p.58, 6 p.61}

Revelation 4:5 Seven: see comment on Revelation 5:14. Jesus is in complete light, not in the dark about anything, *i.e.* all-knowing. The seven lamps, according to a similar vision in Kotchiu, China in the early part of the 20th Century ¹⁵ are all of different colours, the seven colours of the rainbow. All seven colours are present in white light, and all contribute to its scope and function without duplication, *cf.* Revelation 21:23.

Perhaps we should imagine the "seven spirits" similarly, not as seven beings, but as seven aspects of the work of the one Holy Spirit. Since Revelation 1:20 says the lampstands are the seven churches, it follows that churches do not have to be identical; the diverse spectrum of churches glorifies God, provided they act in harmony.

Thunder and lightning showed God's awesome power in Exodus 19:16 ^{5 p.59} *cf.* the earthquakes at Jesus's death (Matthew 27:51) and resurrection (Matthew 28:2) ^{2 p.93}.

Revelation 4:6 *cf.* Exodus 24:11. Once they were sprinkled with blood (Exodus 24:8) the Israelites could approach God's throne without coming under judgement. In Matthew 14:25 and Mark 4:1 Jesus was seen on a sea.

The "living creatures" are created by God (Genesis 1:20) and worship him (Revelation 5:14). Ezekiel 1:4f shows they are mobile, and travel directly and fast, and their function is go where the Spirit goes, as heralds of God acting in judgement.

Revelation 4:7 Lion, Ox, Man and Eagle: *cf.* Ezekiel 1:4. The Jews regarded them as the greatest of creatures, exhibiting different aspects of skill and power ^{5 p.62}.

- The lion is a great hunter, fearless (Proverbs 30:30) and destructive (Isaiah 38:13).
- The ox uses its great strength to help mankind (Exodus 23:12).
- Humans are thinkers and agents of change, made to rule (Genesis 1:26) with understanding (Ecclesiastes 8:1), obeying Christ (Revelation 2:26).
- The eagle has great vision and mobility; it swoops on tiny details (Jeremiah 48:40).

Revelation 4:8 Various other religions imagined gods covered with eyes, which could see everything and thus knew everything and could not be taken by surprise. Eyes also imply the ability to differentiate between good and evil (Genesis 3:5). The living creatures see everything, and know what God is doing, and praise him ceaselessly.

¹⁵ Baker, H.A. *Visions beyond the veil* Minneapolis: Osterhus Publishing House, 12th edition 1950 p.17
online: available from www.insightsofgod.com/downloads/veil.pdf accessed 11 January 2016

Revelation

The angels are quoting parts of Isaiah 6:3, Ezekiel 3:12 and Daniel 7:10.^{16 p.60} This verse reflects the Jewish idea that “Holy, holy, holy” means holy in the past, present and future, rather than God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Its three-fold repetition emphasizes holiness and the number 3, meaning God is utterly holy^{2 p.96}.

Revelation 4:10–11 *cf.* Psalm 145:3, Daniel 3:5. The elders’ thrones and crowns show authority to rule (Revelation 2:26–27, 5:10) yet they ascribe all rule and glory to God. Their. These images connect two aspects of Christian worship: praise and offering^{5 p.63}.

Revelation 5:1–3 In John’s day sealed scrolls were either government edicts or legal documents^{2 p.100}. The sealed scroll is *full* of writing on both sides; no more could be added. Its plentiful contents are partly in the public domain (the outside) and partly secret until the end (the inside) *cf.* Isaiah 29:10–11, Daniel 12:4. It might contain judgement (Isaiah 8:1), salvation (Isaiah 29:18), and truth (Isaiah 30:8).

Paul tells us in Ephesians 3:10 that the angels and other spiritual beings (demons?) learn of God’s secret plans from God’s people. We know before they do! What a privilege! But as a result we are not yet allowed to know details which, if the enemy knew them, might enable Satan to win.

Revelation 5:4 John wept not only because he did not know what the scroll said while it remained sealed, and its seals held back the implementation of God’s justice^{2 p.101}, and also because opening it would cause trouble, see comment on Revelation 6:1.

Revelation 5:5 Jesus, the only one who could reveal salvation, appeared amidst the Old Testament symbols. He is referred to using Old Testament titles from Hosea 5:14 and Isaiah 11:1.

Revelation 5:6 John looked for the lion but saw instead a slaughtered lamb^{2 p.102}. The seven horns show complete power and success, *cf.* Deuteronomy 33:17, 1 Samuel 2:1, Jeremiah 48:25, Daniel 7:8*f.*, Luke 1:69; the seven eyes indicate complete knowledge. The lamb has all wisdom and power (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Revelation 5:7 *cf.* Philippians 2:9.

Revelation 5:8 The elders were worshipping God in Revelation 4:8, but now worship the lamb, who has ascended to the throne. The earthly temple had bowls for sprinkling blood and censers for burning incense (2 Chronicles 4:22). In the presence of “the Lamb that was Slain” no further blood need be shed, so these two functions are rolled into one.

The prayers of the saints are now addressed to the Lamb rather than the Father. Fragrant incense (Exodus 25:6) burned continually in the Temple (Exodus 30:8). It made a holy (Exodus 30:35), special (Exodus 30:37) smell around the offerings that celebrated God’s goodness *e.g.* the Grain offering (Leviticus 2:16), but not those associated with sin, which have nasty connotations (Leviticus 5:11).

Revelation 5:9 The sacrificial nature of Jesus’s ministry has qualified him for heavenly authority.

Revelation 5:10 *cf.* Revelation 1:6, Exodus 19:6: this “nation of priests” is drawn not only from Israel but from every tribe and nation. These shall reign, fulfilling God’s objective in Genesis 1:26. Their elders sit on thrones and wear crowns (Revelation 4:10) but yield these up to God.

¹⁶ Sawyer, J. *The Fifth Gospel — Isaiah in the History of Christianity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996

Revelation

- Revelation 6 Chapters 6–8 resemble Jesus’s teaching in Mark 13, *cf.* Matthew 24 and Luke 21. Chapters 6 and 7 sound alarming but do not represent the contents of the sealed scroll, because it cannot be read until the last seal is broken in 8:1 ^{5 p.78}.
- Revelation 6:1
The first seal Seven usually represents completeness, so the vision is attempting to show the complete picture — though we are incapable of viewing the actual complete picture, so this is perhaps comparable with a cartoon. All we can understand of heaven is a few glimpses, shown in the visions of the prophets, the parables of Jesus and the “types”¹⁷ of the Old Testament; the reality is beyond us.
- The seven seals reveal God’s complete judgment. They are followed by seven trumpets (Revelation 8:2), one of which releases seven thunders (Revelation 10:4) and lastly seven bowls (Revelation 15:7).
- These sevens must all describe the same series of events, described in different terms, because each one ends with the final judgment. Each of these sevens starts with events that seem natural but end up with something supernatural. ^{5 p.70}
- Presumably the words in the scroll are God’s words. Therefore the opening of the scroll does not simply reveal the contents, as would be the case with our words. God’s words are powerful and effective (Isaiah 55:11, Hebrews 1:3). Indeed this particular scroll is so powerful that even the breaking of its seals brings cataclysms.
- Revelation 6:2–4
The second seal Horses and riders generally represented military strength (Jeremiah 51:21) sometimes in the spiritual realm (Isaiah 31:9). In Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:2–7 white and red horses were God’s spies going throughout the earth to see what was going on. This time however they have been authorised not just to look but to intervene on God’s behalf, like the red army in Nahum 2:3 that carried out God’s judgment. A white horse was the steed of a victorious leader ^{5 p.72}.
- Revelation 6:5
The third seal The black colour of the third horse may represent a gathering storm (1 Kings 18:45).
- Revelation 6:6 Basic food becomes exorbitantly expensive, but not oil nor wine. People may be starving yet have vehicles and fuel, or see others enjoy luxury without sharing. Profiteering today is said to make grain prices artificially high, but wheat is at also risk from fungal infection. Resistant infections are spreading,¹⁸ just like resistant bacteria in hospitals. The poor suffer most when times are hard; justice is called for.^{5 p.74}
- When grain is scarce it would be difficult to make the grain offering, but still possible to offer the drink offering and to burn incense mixed with oil. A little of the grain offering was burned to the Lord, but most was supplied to the priests as food (Leviticus 2). Does this indicate an impoverished church?
- Revelation 6:7–8
The fourth seal A pale colour signifies sickness and death (*e.g.* Jeremiah 30:6). The weapons described, including wild animals, were all used by the Romans against Christians ^{2 p.110}. But three-quarters of the earth was unaffected; this is a warning that should lead to repentance before the universal judgment^{5 p.74} (*cf.* 2 Peter 3:9).
- Revelation 6:9–10
The fifth seal In the earthly Temple, blood from Fellowship Offerings, offerings for unintentional sin on the part of an individual or the whole community, or for the uncleanness of the whole community, would have run down the altar and formed a pool at its base (Leviticus 3:2, Leviticus 4:18*f*, Leviticus 16:18).

¹⁷ “Type” is used by theologians to indicate an example that helps us understand a class of thing, *cf.* the word *prototype*.

¹⁸ “Killer fungus spells disaster for wheat”, *New Scientist* 15 March 2008 p.14

Revelation

Blood is sometimes depicted in the Old Testament as crying out for justice (e.g. Genesis 4:10); this passage shows that the blood of the saints¹⁹ also cries out to God for justice, and is heard. He will act when the time is right (Psalm 75:2). The question “how long” repeats Daniel 12:6, and is answered in Revelation 10:6^{2 p.138}.

Wilcock thinks that in Revelation the phrase “those who dwell upon earth” means those who feel at home there, unlike those whose ultimate home is heaven^{6 p.72}.

- Revelation 6:11 Ecclesiastes 9:8 implies that white robes are appropriate for happy times. Isaiah 1:18 connects white with purity from sin.
- Revelation 6:12–17 *The sixth seal* cf. Luke 21:25–27. Many people react to God by running away. Perhaps people fail to get into heaven not because they are refused entry, but because they flee from it.
- Revelation 7:1–3 *Interlude* This refers to a later stage in John’s vision, rather than a later stage in history; in Revelation 7:3 the earth must not be harmed yet, but we have already read of harm in Revelation 6:12^{6 p.78}. Chapter 7 is an “interlude” interrupting the opening of the seals^{2 p.114, 5 p.80}, responding to the questions “how long” (Revelation 6:10) and “who can stand” (Revelation 6:17)^{2 p.117}. The fours reflect common sayings such as “the four corners of the earth”^{6 p.64}.
- Revelation 7:2–8 The numbers here are mysterious, but seem to indicate all of God’s people^{6 p.60}. 144,000 is like an army comprising a dozen “thousands” (a military unit) from each tribe^{5 p.83}. The seal does not protect from earthly danger but from judgment^{5 p.81}. Verse 6 omits Dan, who turned to paganism (Judges 18:30), substituting Joseph’s son Manasseh, suggesting that those who turn away from God are not sealed^{2 p.118}.
- Revelation 7:9–12 In answer to the question in Revelation 6:17, a huge and diverse multitude is shown to be able to stand in God’s presence. Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem (John 12:13) seems to be a fore-taste of this verse. Those of us who serve God on earth will be able to praise him with a song in which the angels cannot participate.
- Revelation 7:10 The exclamation about “salvation” is apparently a translation of the traditional Jewish cry “Hosanna” into Greek.
- Revelation 7:14 Wall thinks that “*the* great ordeal” (not “great ordeals” or “a great ordeal”) indicates a specific event (e.g. Nero’s persecutions) rather than a class of ordeal (e.g. martyrdom)^{2 p.118} cf. Daniel 12:1^{5 p.86}. However, this is seen from a heavenly, not earthly, viewpoint; and Revelation 7:6 promises relief from a variety of kinds of suffering.
- Revelation 7:15 The question in Revelation 6:10 seems to be answered indirectly, by contrasting time-bound earthly troubles with eternity in heaven, as in Romans 8:18. It is an eternity not of idleness but of some sort of service^{5 p.88}.
- Revelation 7:16–17 cf. Isaiah 49:10, and see comment on verse 14.
- Revelation 7:17 Jesus the good shepherd leads his sheep to water. Water without price is offered in Revelation 21:6 which parallels the wine without price of Isaiah 55:1–2, cf. Jesus’s first miracle in John 2:1–11. Wine is for humans, but all creatures need water.
- Revelation 8:1 *The seventh seal* Seven: see comment on Revelation 6:1 The opening of the seventh and last seal allows the writing on the scroll to be read and acted upon, leading firstly to silence (verses 1–5), and then John heard seven trumpets. However, the events that the trumpets ushered in cannot follow the opening of the seals, because the sky vanished in Revelation 6:14, so the trumpets must describe the same events from a different viewpoint^{6 p.86f}.

¹⁹ The word *saint* comes from *sanctus*, Latin for holy. Jesus’s death and resurrection makes all his followers holy, that is, saints.

Revelation

- Revelation 8:2–5 Silence is a form of worship (Habakkuk 2:20). The silence in heaven, and worshipful atmosphere of incense, allows the prayers of the saints to be heard^{5 p.90}. The prayers of the saints¹⁹ reach God and are answered, but there may be a delay. *cf.* 1 Kings 18:38–38 where fire fell from heaven, vindicating God’s prophet^{2 p.122}.
- Revelation 8:7–13
The first four trumpets sound their ominous warnings The escalating disasters echo the escalation of the plagues in Exodus. They warn people without affecting them directly^{6 p.96}. The Egyptians repented and let the Hebrews go, so (as in Matthew 12:41–42) at the last judgement they will condemn the people of the last generations for failing to heed the warnings. An astronomical object or artificial satellite falling to earth could fulfil these prophecies; both can contain polluting elements. However, it is dangerous to interpret these chapters literally; the whole point of the plagues in Egypt was that people could *not* understand them as natural phenomena; they showed God’s hand at work^{6 p.92–94}.
- Revelation 9:1–11
The fifth trumpet: the lid of the underworld is lifted This vision is so extraordinary, it must be metaphorical^{6 p.96}. Egypt was plagued with locusts in Exodus 10:14. Nevertheless, events like this are actually occurring. Red Fire Ants (*Solenopsis invicta*) have spread from South to North America where hundreds of people have died from their stings.²⁰ This does not fulfil the prophecy, because the ants also damage plants, but it helps us to vividly imagine it. Verse 1 implies that the star is an angel, perhaps the fallen angel Satan^{6 p.97}; but 1 Enoch 19:1 & 20:2 identify the angel as Uriel^{2 p.127f}. Christians are immune to the plague, being marked like the Hebrew homes “passed over” in Exodus 12:13^{2 p.128}.
- The prophecies of Joel also mention locusts (Joel 1:4), lions’ teeth (Joel 1:6), fire (Joel 1:19, 2:3), a trumpet sounding a warning (Joel 2:1), blackness, clouds and an army (Joel 2:2) looking like horses (Joel 2:4); urging repentance (Joel 2:12–13).
- Revelation 9:13
The sixth trumpet “Trumpet 6 is the last warning for the inhabitants of the earth. When Trumpet 7 sounds it will be too late (Revelation 11:15–18).”^{6 p.98} Incense was burned in the space between the horns of the incense altar (Exodus 30:1). The altar for burnt offerings was similar but larger (Exodus 38:1). Previous references to altars and incense in the book have signified the prayers of the saints; so this is a response to prayer^{5 p.97}.
- Revelation 9:14–15 The four angels seem to have been bound in order to restrain their tendency to do evil, but now the restraint is lifted.
- Revelation 10:1–2
Interlude Chapter 10 is an interlude within the Trumpets, as chapter 7 was an interlude within the Seals. The mighty angel (= messenger) resembles that in 1 Chronicles 21:16, bringing a message from God, accompanied by reminders of God’s power and mercy.^{5 p.100} “Mighty angel” could mean Gabriel, which means “mighty man of God”.^{5 p.102} “The next two chapters mark a turning point in the book... The steady progression of judgments is suspended... the people of God now figure prominently. In fact... it is here that the main message of Revelation actually begins.”^{5 p.100}
- Wall suggests that the interlude is needed because the Christians of John’s day had allowed worldly propaganda to blind them to the vision of the Gospel’s potential; he calls this idolatry—believing the world rather than God.^{2 p.135} The book’s focus changes here from what is happening in the world to how Christians should respond.
- Revelation 10:3–4 Seven: see comments on Revelation 6:1. Thunders: *cf.* God’s voice in 2 Samuel 22:14, Psalm 29:3 and John 12:28–29. The author was privy to secret information (as Gnostics claimed to be) so the readers should heed what the book says.

²⁰ *New Scientist* 17 November 2001 p.22

Revelation

- Revelation 10:5–7 The angel addresses the frustration of God’s people living between the revelation of salvation and its conclusion when sin and pain end. The question “how long” in Daniel 12:6, repeated in Revelation 6:10, is now answered.^{2 p.138–9} A few translators put “there will be no more time”; time as we know it comes to an end.^{6 p.101}
- Revelation 10:8–9 *cf.* the claim in Revelation 1:1 that the message of the book was given by an angel. Take it and eat it: *cf.* Ezekiel 3:2 and the offer of bread at Holy Communion. The open little scroll is probably a *precis* of the one written on both sides (Revelation 5:1) limited to “open” things that were apparent in the author’s day^{2 p.135–9}.
- Revelation 10:10 *cf.* Job 20:12–14. God’s word is “sweet”: Psalm 19:10, Psalm 119:103, Proverbs 24:14. Sour: the word of prophets was often seen as a bitter pill (Jeremiah 9:15, Lamentations 3:14–15, Ezekiel 21:6–7); they often had to bring bad news to people who would not listen. In Ezekiel 3:3 it seems that the message was unpleasant but obeying God’s command to preach it was a pleasure.
- Revelation 10:11 The preceding chapters’ woes did not prompt repentance, so the emphasis changes to proclamation of the gospel^{5 p.105} perhaps in many ages as well as places^{2 p.140}.
- Revelation 11:1 Measuring: *cf.* Revelation 21:15, 2 Kings 21:13, 1 Chronicles 21:1, Ezekiel 40:3. Measuring was done by the person in charge, to take close control, such as a King counting his subjects (1 Chronicles 21:2*f*), an architect planning changes, or someone checking construction. Perhaps this verse implies John being given increased authority; or perhaps the time has come to be quite clear who is in the church and who is not. The temple in Jerusalem was demolished in 70 CE, decades before Revelation was written, so readers would interpret this as an allegory meaning the church^{6 p.103–6}. Both the temple structure and its population are under God’s control.
- Revelation 11:2 The Courts of Women and Men and the Holy of Holies (where God’s people go) are measured (a sign of God’s control) but not the Court of the Gentiles^{5 p.106}; people there might think they are safe, but actually they are in the world’s domain and so excluded.
- Worldly powers have the ascendancy for 42 months, which equals 3½ years (Revelation 12:14) and Daniel’s mysterious “time, times and half a time” (Daniel 7:25 and 12:7); it also appears in Revelation 13:5. 1260 days is a similar period, and also appears in Revelation 12:6. In Psalm 90:4, 3½ “years” (millennia) represents half of the life of the universe. Wilcock says “To say ‘the times of the nations are forty-two months’ will lead us into great and unnecessary difficulties. To say, on the other hand, ‘Forty-two months means the times of the nations’ puts quite a different complexion on the matter. The figure becomes a symbol like the red cross or the swastika...”^{6 p.106}
- Revelation’s readers might imagine the trampling of the church described here as like the trampling of Jerusalem by the Romans, foretold by Jesus in Luke 21:24.
- Revelation 11:3–6 To make sense of the allegory we have to assume that the witnesses represent the witness of the church, always facing extinction, but constantly renewed^{6 p.104–5}. Maxwell interprets them in the light of Zechariah 3–4 where lampstands and olive trees represent priests and kings, anointed and reflecting the light of the Holy Spirit; two witnesses are the bare minimum of testimony in Deuteronomy 19:15^{6 p.108}. Wall notes that their miraculous powers echo those of Moses (Exodus 7:20 etc.) and Elijah (1 Kings 17:1)^{2 p.145}; those miracles showed God’s power to unbelievers.

Revelation

- Revelation 11:7–11 When the witnessing is complete, God allows it to be extinguished briefly, but then resurrected like Jesus. It is not always God’s will that churches should thrive ^{6 p.106–7}. As in Jesus’s death and resurrection, God likes to let his enemies play their hands, think they have won, but then discover that they haven’t.
- Revelation 11:12 It easy for the nations to “look on” now that TV and the internet are available.
- Revelation 11:13 Giving glory to God can be short lived, and not flowing from voluntary submission.
- Revelation 11:14 The “second coming” of Jesus will bring woe to those who resent his rule ^{6 p.107}.
- Revelation 11:15-18 God’s reign is now seen. The “victory song” ^{5 p.114} must mean that the rebellious rule of sin on earth is finally ended. The future part of the phrase “who was, and is, and is to come” is omitted, being superfluous. The time has come for justice to be done.
The seventh trumpet
- Revelation 11:19 Now John can see into the heavenly equivalent of the Most Holy Place in the temple. Storms are raging there; God’s dynamism is disturbing even what the ancients regarded as the fundamental elements: earth, wind, fire and water.
- Revelation 12:1 Wall sees this section as a flashback showing how the present situation arose. It puts the church’s suffering and apparent defeat in the context of war in heaven. The twelve horns mean that the woman represents the people of God, originally the twelve tribes of Israel; the twelve stars in her crown represent the apostles and thus the whole church is included. ^{2 p.157–8} The child who will rule the nations is Jesus. The story of the war between good and evil is told using images taken from Greek and Babylonian creation myths; the world’s dreams are fulfilled in God ^{5 p.114}.
- Revelation 12:3 Horns: see notes on Revelation 5:6. A similar if not identical beast appears in Revelation 17:3 and Daniel 7:7.
The multiple heads and crowns represent great power and authority ^{6 p.117} mimicking or usurping the power of God. The story is told in dualistic (black and white) terms ^{2 p.160}. The church’s experience follows a pattern that has continued through all ages; God provides spiritual security and eternal life, but not physical security ^{5 p.120–3}.
- Revelation 12:4–6 This incident echoes Herod trying to kill the infant Jesus, but has much wider meaning. The exodus to the wilderness links the woman with Israel, of which Mary was a member ^{6 p.119}, though verse 17 makes it clear that her offspring, *i.e.* the church (“new Israel”) are included.
The iron sceptre (*cf.* Psalm 2:7–9, Revelation 19:15) sounds fierce but the word translated “rule” means “shepherd” ^{5 p.122}. 1260 days: see comment on Revelation 11:2–3. The “third of the stars” swept from heaven may mean that a third of the angels sided with Satan and so were ejected from heaven with him ^{5 p.121}.
- Revelation 12:9 *cf.* Isaiah 14:12, Luke 10:18.
- Revelation 12:14 Time, times and half a time: see comment on Revelation 11:2–3. Eagle’s wings: *cf.* Exodus 19:4.
- Revelation 13 The dragon and two beasts make a “blasphemous parody of the Holy Trinity” ^{5 p.128}
- Revelation 13:1–3 “John’s readers at this point would surely have recognized the Roman empire. Like the beast, imperial power came out of the sea, its ships bearing officials and soldiers, rising over the western horizon.” ^{5 p.128}
Contemporary interpretations are possible:

Revelation

“The beast represents what New testament scholar Walter Wink has called the Domination System, the way of a fallen world in which divisions of class and privilege are maintained, sometimes through violence. The kings of the nations and merchants who benefit from exploitation of the poor are the ones who weep when the beast is finally destroyed. However, the very violence and exploitation that the beast uses to maintain its power and demand its worship contain the seeds of the beast’s own destruction.

The idea of Roman economic exploitation is not something that became a problem only in the first century when John wrote down the Revelation. Indeed, in addition to calling the domination system a beast, he refers to that system as Babylon. For John, Babylon was a code word for Rome, which was the superpower in his day just as Babylon was the superpower in the sixth century BCE. Thus Babylon, like the beast, is really a code word for all systems of domination in our fallen world. All governments who rule by the sword and all economic systems that rule through exploitation are Babylon.

According to the Revelation, so comprehensive and powerful is this domination system that the temptation to worship the beast is nearly irresistible: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (Revelation 13:4). Yet John calls for “endurance and faith of the saints” (13:10). And he tells Christians to separate themselves from the abusive systems around them (18:4).

The conflict that the Revelation puts before us is, therefore, a conflict in worship: worship the dominating beast or worship the slain Lamb by becoming a witness to the power of the cross. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that John believes that God wants a total withdrawal from the world around us. The world is fallen, but God has great plans for restoration and redemption.

In Revelation 21 we have a picture of what God intends to be the culmination of history: a new heaven and earth in which there is no more violence, death, or sorrow. In this new heaven and earth, described as a new Jerusalem, God dwells so completely and manifestly that there is no need for a temple in which to worship; the entire city has become a temple to God. Contrary to what the world thinks, John tells us, the power of the sword is not the glory of the nations, nor is death the ultimate mark of honour. Rather, the glory and honour of the nations is a future of peace and abundance, with no more domination by death, poverty, or privilege.”²¹

Revelation 13:4–8 The first beast represents evil social (*e.g.* political or financial) systems that are very difficult to resist ^{6 p.123f} but those who hear this message should heed the warning.

Forty-two months: see comment on Revelation 11:2–3.

Revelation 13:9–10 The purpose of the book is becoming clear: Christians are urged to listen (Revelation 13:9), endure (Revelation 13:10), be wise (Revelation 13:18), and be encouraged (Revelation 14:1–5).

Revelation 13:11-15 The second beast is a parody of Jesus, the lamb who was slain ^{2 p.168}. It looks innocent but acts for the dragon, and represents false ideology ^{6 p.127}. Evil prophets with authoritative speech and ability to perform miracles (like the Apostles in Acts) might be operating within the church rather than outside it ^{2 p.173}.

²¹ Phillips L and S. *In Spirit & Truth: United Methodist Worship for the Emerging Church* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources 2000)

Revelation

Revelation 13:16-18 See comment on Revelation 13:9. Wall sees parallels with baptism (and hence the Holy Spirit) marking believers as belonging to Christ, and argues that this mark indicates that a person belongs within the corrupt systems of the world and may participate in them; those without the beast's mark are economically and socially disadvantaged.^{2 p.160} We see wheat and tares together (Matthew 13:24f), but heaven sees clearly who is on God's side and who is not; all are marked one way or the other.

The number has prompted much speculation. Some of early manuscripts (such as one from Oxyrhynchus in Egypt) show the number as 616, but Irenaeus in the 2nd Century CE decided that 666 was the correct version.²² First century people liked "gematria" codes with a number representing the sum of the letters in their name, where A=1, B=2 etc.; in this scheme *Nero Caesar* and *Beast* both work out at 666 in Hebrew but not the language of the book which is Greek^{5 p.134}. Wilcock thinks such ideas misguided, and suggests that these verses mean "Let him who has understanding work out a number for the beast... What shall we suggest?"^{6 p.131}

Revelation 14:1-5 See comment on Revelation 13:9. Verses 4-5 interpret the vision of verses 1-3. The reference to Mount Zion fulfils Isaiah 24:21-23 and Psalm 2:6. The 144,000 male "virgins" who abstained from women echo 1 Samuel 21:4-5; this mixed metaphor indicates men and women who choose purity rather than pleasure^{6 p.140}.

Revelation 14:6-11 Three angels make final appeals, warning humanity to repent before it is too late. The purity of the 144,000 contrasts with the impurity of "Babylon", used by early Christians as a code-word for Rome; it also appears in Revelation 18:2, 18:10 and 18:21. Revelation 17:9 is about a city built on seven hills. The demolition of the Temple by the Romans may have made comparison with Babylon, which did the same when the Jews were exiled, seem logical. But Wall says it means "any and every place where a congregation of believers struggles to live for God"^{2 p.157}.

The mention of wine in verses 8 and 10, one related to sin and the other to judgment, could show that God's judgment is not imposed, but the natural consequence of sin. The wine-press in verse 20 adds nothing, but extracts what is already there. The horrible fate of those who reject God is paralleled by warnings elsewhere in scripture, such as the fate of the rich man who ignored Lazarus in Luke 16:24.

Revelation 14:12-13 From heaven's perspective the godly people who remain are martyrs; this could be because heaven's perspective has peculiar features, or because all godly people will be killed, or because those who are godly under persecution are ready to pay the price and blessed accordingly whether it happens to them or not^{2 p.187}.

Revelation 14:14-15 The exalted Christ appears; an angel (= messenger) conveys to him a message from God the Father saying that the final judgement can now begin.

Revelation 14:16-18 *cf.* Joel 3:13. There are two harvests, one of grapes for the wine-press (verse 20) and a grain harvest of God's people^{5 p.144-5}. Wine-press: see comment on Revelation 14:6-11. The time of the final judgment has come, but before we see it in Revelation 19:11 the vision back-tracks^{5 p.184}.

Revelation 14:20 Wine-press: see comment on Revelation 14:6-11.

Revelation 15 From here on there is rejoicing in heaven, and "the two contrasting images of the harvests [Revelation 14:16-20] dominate the rest of Revelation"^{5 p.146}. There are many echoes of Exodus, emphasizing that this is about God saving his people from the world^{2 p.191}, which was celebrated annually at the Passover with the death of lambs^{8 p.138}.

²² *Church Times* 29 April 2005 p.2

Revelation

- Revelation 15:1 See comment on Revelation 6:1.
- Revelation 15:2 On (not *beside* as in NRSV ^{5 p.146}) a sea of crystal: *cf.* Exodus 24:9–10. The fire might be the purifying fire that consumes all evil, *cf.* Psalm 50:3, Malachi 3:2.
- Revelation 15:3–4 The “song of Moses” does not quote Exodus 15 (nor Deuteronomy 32*f*) but reworks it to suit a new situation, implying that the nations will finally repent ^{5 p.146–7}.
- Revelation 15:5–8 *Seven Bowls* The seven bowls of universal destruction echo the seven plagues on Egypt in Exodus 7:17*f*, and the connection is emphasized by their being carried by angels dressed as priests emerging from a tent ^{2 p.192*f*} *cf.* Exodus 33:7 ^{6 p.142}.
- Revelation 16:1–6 Seven: see comment on Revelation 6:1.
- Revelation 16:7 Everything in heaven seems to alive! *cf.* Luke 19:40.
- Revelation 16:8–11 Like the plagues on Egypt, the bowls meet not with repentance but with obstinacy.
- Revelation 16:12 A reference to people from the East traditionally meant the Arabs living in the eastern desert. ^{23 p.1025}
- Revelation 17:3 Horns: see notes on Revelation 5:6. A similar if not identical beast appears in Revelation 13:1. *cf.* Daniel 7:24, where the ten horns represented ten kings.
- Revelation 17:8 *cf.* Revelation 20:12.
- Revelation 17:9 Rome was built on seven hills, and contemporary readers armed with such facts were expected to interpret this vision, so it is not a prediction yet to be fulfilled. There was a myth that Nero would return with an army to sort out his empire. ^{5 p.162}. Similar fates will befall other empires that commit the same sins.
- Revelation 17:12 Ten kings each reign for an hour; their reigns seem short, from a heavenly perspective.
- Revelation 18:9–19 *Babylon’s funeral* Babylon: see comment on 14:6–11. Godly people must leave before the destruction, as Lot left Sodom (Genesis 19).
The descriptions of judgement in Revelation, and particularly this chapter, fascinate those who want to identify their times with it. It is tempting to compare the fall of Babylon with, say, the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. But when Jesus was asked about the fall of a tower in Siloam, he said we must not assume that the people killed in such events were being judged for sin (Luke 14:4–5).
- Revelation 18:1 Heaven’s splendour far surpasses even that of Rome at its height ^{5 p.166}.
- Revelation 18:12 “Babylon” grabbed the wealth of the world, including slaves, as cheaply as possible. It became dependent on others who had little interest in its success. ^{5 p.172} John’s readers should consider whether their own context and behaviour is sinful. ^{5 p.175} “Much of what we hold to be ‘Christian’ may turn out to be no more than an attempt to convince ourselves that the values of Babylon are acceptable.” ^{5 p.179}.
- Revelation 19:7–10 *cf.* Hosea 2:19. The saints do not rejoice in the destruction of Babylon but in the victory of good over evil, and justice being done. Linen: *cf.* Matthew 22:11–12.
- Revelation 19:11–21 *The Second Coming of Christ* The description of the Rider makes it clear that this is Jesus, on a victor’s white horse, leading the armies of heaven. He will defeat those who oppose his rule using the sword that comes out of his mouth, which is his powerful word ^{2 p.232} as in Revelation 1:16 and *cf.* Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:2–7. Linen: *cf.* Matthew 22:11–12.

²³ Hertz, Dr J. *The Soncino Edition of the Pentateuch and Haftorahs* London: Soncino, 2nd Edition 1970

Revelation

- Revelation 19:12 Jesus wears many crowns, indicating unlimited power and authority. He, like the saints, has a name known only to himself: *cf.* Revelation 2:17, Judges 3:18; the nature of things that are to come, and what we are to become, is beyond our understanding ^{5 p.184}.
- Revelation 19:13 The “Word of God” is Jesus (John 1:1), and here he is seen wearing a robe stained with his own redemptive blood ^{5 p.185} fulfilling Isaiah 63:1–6.
- Revelation 19:14 Linen: *cf.* Matthew 22:11–12.
- Revelation 19:15 fulfils Psalm 2:7–9
- Revelation 19:17-21 Jesus’s enemies gather to fight him, but have no answer to his power ^{5 p.185}. His army might be composed entirely of angels, or of godly people as well ^{6 p.186}.
- Revelation 20:1–3 Satan was thrown down from heaven to earth in Revelation 12:9; now the reign of Christ demands that he must be excluded from the earth as well.
- This vision does not follow chapter 19 chronologically, because the nations who will not be deceived for a thousand years were utterly destroyed in chapter 19. Satan may be bound and in a pit (hell), and unable to compel people to rebel against God, but his demons are still able to tempt people to do evil.
- The thousand year period is probably symbolic rather than literal (see 2 Peter 3:8); it may be a response to Jewish debates about the relationship between prophecies concerning the reign of the Messiah and the restoration of Israel. ^{2 p.234–5}
- Revelation 20:4–10 *cf.* Daniel 7:9–10. When commentators compare “the millennium” described in these verses with “the rapture” of saints gathered to heaven in Matthew 24:37–42 various theories emerge:
1. pre-millennialists read Revelation literally and in sequence, and conclude that the second coming of Jesus will be followed by a millennium of peace, followed by the final judgment of the dead and of Satan;
 2. post-millennialists interpret chapter 20 as another viewpoint on chapter 19 rather than a sequence of events, and expect the church to succeed in converting the world;
 3. amillennialists regard chapter 20 not as a future event but as the present state of affairs, in that Christ defeated death in his death and resurrection, though his rule is apparent only to Christians;
 4. others view chapters 19 and 20 as purely symbolic, assuring believers of vindication and the defeat of evil.
- (1) and (2) are traditional interpretations that read Revelation as a prediction of future events, but led to unhelpful or implausible conclusions; (3) and (4) seek a different kind of meaning in the prophecy. Many modern commentators favour a mixture of (3) and (4). ^{5 p. 188–9, 6 p.176–181}
- The passage does not say that all Christians will sit on thrones and judge, though 1 Corinthians 6:2 appears to say so, and Revelation 2:26–27 and 3:21 may confirm it. The disciples were told that they would judge the tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:30).
- Other examples of the dead being raised are the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37), the raising of Lazarus (John 11:43), and Jesus’s resurrection.
- “Gog and Magog” are a mythical ruler and his realm, as in Ezekiel 38:2. ^{5 p.194–5} The “second death” is the fate of those, living or dead, who do not receive eternal life in heaven ^{2 p.239}.

Revelation

It is not necessarily God who torments for ever and ever (*cf.* Luke 16:25), but Satan and his cohorts; and the eternal punishment may be symbolic rather than literal ^{5 p. 195}.

Revelation 20:12-15 *cf.* Luke 12:2, Revelation 21:27. There is now hope for sinners, unlike when books were opened in Daniel 7:10. Everyone is judged according to their deeds, which are recorded in books.

But the future of each individual does not depend on the judgment of their good or evil deeds. The Lamb's Book of Life, the list of those whom Jesus will honour before the Father (Malachi 3:16, Matthew 10:32), determines who receives eternal life as a free gift.

Revelation 21:1 We suddenly emerge from the death-throes of evil and rebellion (and arguments about interpretation) into the light of heaven, where no evil is found ^{6 p.176} *cf.* Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah 66:22, 1 Peter 3:13, Hebrews 1:12.

The sea is no more; to the desert nomads who became the Jews its surging and dangerous waters were the epitome of evil and chaos. Maxwell thinks the sea before God's throne in Revelation 4:6 became the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20, which is no longer needed ^{5 p.198}; instead there is a spring of the water of life in verse 6. There is an echo of the Exodus here: the sea was an obstacle to the Hebrews, but God opened a way through, and the Egyptians were then destroyed in it. The sea before God's throne was an obstacle to approaching him, but it was removed once his enemies had been destroyed in it.

Why is a new heaven needed, and a new earth? NIV translates verse 4 as speaking not of new things but a new order of things.

Maybe the division between heaven and earth becomes obsolete. The word "new" does not mean replaced but renewed; heaven and earth are purified from Satan's influence and renewed. ^{5 p.198, 2 p.247}.

Revelation 21:2 The book hops between two metaphors for the people of God: the Heavenly City and the Bride of Christ. The rural idyll of Genesis 2 is replaced by a heavenly city with millions of inhabitants; our destiny is to live in community ^{5 p.201}. Subsequent references to the heavenly city mean a city of people, not of masonry.

Revelation 21:3 This is the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah 7:14 where the concept of "Immanuel" (God with us) is introduced. It was fulfilled in a quiet, almost hidden, way when Jesus was born; but ultimately the tent enclosing the Ark of the Covenant in the exodus from Egypt is replaced by God dwelling openly among his people ^{2 p.246}.

Revelation 21:4-5 God likes making things; it is not a hardship nor a loss to him, but an expression of his nature. He makes a new city and equips its inhabitants with resurrection bodies and new natures, able to live in community with him and each other ^{2 p.245}.

Revelation 21:6 Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, implying that God made and sustains and rules everything. Isaiah 48:20 makes a similar statement about the exodus from Egypt and the return from Babylon. Perhaps this reference indicates a third exodus: leaving earth for heaven.

Jesus offered water leading to eternal life in John 4:10-14, *cf.* Revelation 7:17 where Jesus the good shepherd leads his sheep to life-giving water.

Revelation 21:7 God describes his people not as subjects but children, *cf.* Matthew 5:45 ^{5 p.208}.

Revelation

- Revelation 21:8 *cf.* Proverbs 6:16–19, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. Maxwell describes this verse as a “list of Christians who may be in danger of failure”. He adds that courage is a virtue given as needed by God, and “John has in mind those who are adamantly non-Christian, rather than those who occasionally lapse.”^{5 p.209} The inclusion of “cowardly” in this list is worrying; churches are full of people who are afraid to take the step of commitment to Christ and speaking up for God. Carr^{24 p.133} describes a process of reflection on Scripture that involves taking a risk; this verse may mean that such people will not get to heaven unless they take the plunge. The purpose of Revelation was to encourage Christians facing persecution^{5 p.209}. Heaven is for those who have tried to emulate the courage of Christ.
- Revelation 21:9 The purpose of God’s judgment is to prompt people to repent, so it is appropriate for an angel who carried a bowl of judgment to encourage John to look carefully at the Bride of Christ.^{5 p.210}
- Revelation 21:10-13 High wall: the city is absolutely secure^{2 p.252}, and it radiates the glory of God.
- Revelation 21:14 *cf.* Ephesians 2:20, 1 Corinthians 3:11–17. The city represents God’s people (Revelation 21:2), so the foundation stones are named after the twelve Apostles (see Matthew 19:28), and the gates are named after the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus the city represents the whole people of God.^{5 p.216}
- Revelation 21:15 Measuring line: see notes on 11:1, and *cf.* 2 Kings 21:13, Zechariah 2:1. The angel measures the city to show that all of it is under God’s control^{6 p.208}.
- Revelation 21:16-17 The city is huge, *cf.* John 14:2–3. It appears to be shaped like a ziggurat, because it is on a square base, and as high as it is wide, yet the outer wall is far shorter than the overall height. (Some commentators ignore the height of the wall, interpreting the city as a cube, like an enlarged version of the Holy of Holies in 1 Kings 6:20.)
- Revelation 21:18-20 The beauty of heaven, described in terms of precious stones, comes from a variety of sources acting together in a kaleidoscope of colour — see Revelation 21:14. *cf.* Exodus 28:17–20 & 39:13, 1 Kings 7:10, Isaiah 54:12, Ezekiel 28:13.
- The stones mentioned here are the ones in the High Priest’s breast-plate in Exodus 28:17–21. Chrysolite is an ore of Asbestos, unlike the gaudy precious stones; so these minerals have different strengths and weaknesses. Some are hard yet burn, others are soft yet impervious to fire.
- The city is a metaphor for God’s people (Revelation 21:2) so these stones represent people. They have different strengths and weaknesses, which when used together in the right way give the whole a great all-round strength (Revelation 21:19). Similarly the altar in the Jewish Temple was made of wood covered by gold — one hard but flammable, the other soft but able to withstand the fire for burning offerings (Exodus 27:1).
- Revelation 21:21 The use of a pearl for a gate is curious, because it is a thing of great beauty that comes into being because a living thing (an oyster) is in distress, having a grain of sand inside its shell. It is said that our greatest ministry arises from our greatest injury. These gates are not intended for shutting to keep people out (see verse 25) so they are about admission. Jesus said “I am the gate for the sheep” (John 10:1–10) and these gates fulfil a similar function.
- Revelation 21:22 Some commentators see conflict between the statement here that John saw no temple in the New Jerusalem, and the vision in Revelation 11:19 of the Ark of the Covenant in the heavenly Temple.

²⁴ Carr, W *Handbook of Pastoral Studies* London: SPCK, 1997

Revelation

The New Covenant made the images in the old Temple superfluous; we no longer sacrifice animals because one sufficient sacrifice has now been made; similarly the bread and wine at Holy Communion are unnecessary in heaven.

Once everything that opposed God's rule and refused to worship him is either renewed or destroyed, the distinction between God's temple and everywhere else becomes meaningless; God is known and worshipped everywhere.

- Revelation 21:23 *cf.* Isaiah 60:19, Revelation 22:5, and Jesus transfigured (see Mark 9:2).
- Revelation 21:24 *cf.* Isaiah 60:3, Isaiah 60:5. Membership of the People of God is open to all.
- Revelation 21:25-27 *cf.* Isaiah 60:11, Revelation 20:12. It was usual to shut the gates of a walled city at night, against unseen threats, but heaven is never closed, because it is never under threat, so people can accept God's invitation at any time.
- Revelation 22:1-2 *cf.* Psalm 36:9, Ezekiel 47:1. Although the heavenly city sounds quite different from the rural idyll of Genesis 1-3, there are rural features such as wholesome fruit and clear water, both of which sustain eternal life. Thus the last book of the Bible proclaims the same message as the first: God creates good things ^{6 p.212}. The Tree of Life gave eternal life in Genesis 3:22.
- Revelation 22:3-5 *cf.* Isaiah 60:19 and Revelation 21:23. In John's Gospel night is always associated with secrecy (*e.g.* John 3:2), and often with evil deeds (*e.g.* John 13:27-30); neither has any place in heaven. God's people will reign, restoring the position of responsibility and privilege that humanity had in Eden (Genesis 1:28), and they will do so for ever and ever, achieving the immortality that Adam and Eve were denied (Genesis 3:22-24). They will all see God's face, which previously only a privileged few had done (Genesis 32:30, Exodus 24:9-11, Exodus 33:11, Judges 6:21-23, and those who lived in Judah and Galilee in the first century).
- Revelation 22:6-12 Soon: see comment on Revelation 22:20-21. Verse 11 may seem puzzling, but needs to be read along with verse 12: God allows us free will, and with it the choice of our individual destiny.
- Revelation 22:13 The ending balances the opening in Revelation 1:8, and repeats the claim of angelic revelation in Revelation 1:1.
- Revelation 22:14-16 The white robes signify putting on cleanness over human imperfections, as in Revelation 3:18, and enable the wearer to enter God's presence. Root and offspring: as implied by the phrase Alpha and Omega, Jesus is the beginning and the end, *cf.* Matthew 22:42-45. Descendent of David: the Bible's promises are fulfilled. Bright morning star: bringing the world from darkness into light.
- Revelation 22:17-19 Adds to the words: we should not add rules to what God requires, *cf.* Mark 7:4. Water of life: *cf.* Ezekiel 47, John 7:37-39.
- Revelation 22:20-21 The word translated "quickly" or "soon" can also mean "suddenly" ^{5 p.226}. The right time to respond to God's invitation is always *now* ^{6 p.214}.

Abbreviations

- BCE before the Christian Era (the academic multi-faith version of BC meaning Before Christ)
- CE in the Christian Era (the academic multi-faith version of AD meaning Anno Domini)
- cf.* abbreviated Latin meaning "compare this with"
- ed(s) editor(s)
- f* and the *following* verses
- i.e.* abbreviated Latin meaning "that is"
- NIV the "New International Version" translation of the Bible
- OSB Order of St Benedict
- p. page(s)