

# **How to Understand Revelation**

**[Follow the Lamb Wherever He Goes]**

**Dr. Dave Mathewson**

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Background
2. Literary Genres of Revelation: Apocalyptic, Prophetic, and Epistle
3. Hermeneutics or Principles for Interpreting Revelation
4. Revelation 1
5. Revelation 2: Intro., Ephesus, Smyrna
6. Revelation 2: Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis
7. The seven churches of Revelation: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea
8. Revelation 4-5: An Introduction
9. Revelation 4-5 continued
10. Rev 5-6: The Lamb and the Seals on the Scroll
11. Rev 6: The Scroll Seals
12. Revelation 6 on the 6 seals
13. Revelation 7--the Multitude and Chapter 8--the Final Seal
14. Revelation 8 to 9: Seven Trumpets and Exodus Imagery
15. Trumpets and the Interlude (Rev 10-11)
16. Revelation 11: Temple and Two Witnesses
17. The Seventh Trumpet; The Woman, the Dragon, and the Son
18. Revelation 12-13: The Dragon and Two Beasts
19. Revelation 13: The Two Beasts
20. Revelation 14: Salvation of Saints/Judgment on Wicked
21. Revelation 14-16: Grain/Grapes and the Seven Bowl Judgments
22. Revelation 17-19:5: Introduction to Babylon
23. Revelation 17:7-18:8: Interpreting the Beast and Fall of Babylon
24. Lament and Joy over Babylon's Fall (Rev 18)
25. Revelation 19:11-21: The Warrior and the Battle
26. Revelation 20: Binding of Satan and Millennium
27. Revelation 20: The Millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment
28. Revelation 21: New Creation, Bride New Jerusalem
29. Revelation 21: The Bride New Jerusalem Continued
30. Revelation 22: New Jerusalem and How to Read Revelation

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 1

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Introduction and Background

What we're going to do for the next several sessions is work through the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Probably no book in the history of Christianity has been so misunderstood, ignored and neglected as the very last book of the Bible. It's interesting when you study the history of the book it even had a little bit of a problem getting into the New Testament canon because of some of the reasons that we'll discuss. When we approach a book of Revelation it's helpful to put it in its proper perspective and to realize that we stand in a long tradition of the church's attempt to try to read and make sense of the book of Revelation. So it's helpful to understand some of their mis-starts, their misunderstandings, and some of the mistakes to avoid, but also to understand how they read it and positively to understand how we can appropriate some of the church's insights.

## Two Mistaken Approaches: Obsession and Neglect

As you study the history of the church's reception and understanding of the book of Revelation, most people realize that the church has basically been characterized by two approaches to Revelation. Number one is what I simply label "obsession;" that is, some Christians, some churches, some periods of church history up until the modern day have treated Revelation with what I think is a rather unhealthy obsession. That is, acting almost as if the book of Revelation were the only book in the entire Bible and everything else leading up to it can be ignored. As some of you may know and you can probably think of certain well-known persons whose entire ministries have been devoted to interpreting and unpacking the book of Revelation for the church. All you have to do is Google "Revelation" or "apocalypse" and it's amazing all the websites that pop up that attempt to understand Revelation, usually by trying to help us make sense of how Revelation is actually predicting events in our own day and how those events are unfolding and already being fulfilled.

One of the assumptions behind this is we actually now have the key to reading Revelation. Presumably every other century except our own were in the dark and now when we look out at the world we can see all these things happening and all of a sudden we have the key to unlocking the mysteries and the secrets of the book of Revelation.

One of the most recent examples or literary demonstrations of this was the well-known “Left Behind” series. Although the series is fictional, and meant to be fictional, at the same time it’s meant to portray in fictional format what the authors literally thought, or how the authors literally thought Revelation and other prophetic texts in the Old and New Testament would be fulfilled and how they would unfold. So what it does, it correlates the images and the visions of the book of Revelation with events that they think are reflected in our own modern day in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and demonstrate in fictional form how those events correlate and line-up with the book of Revelation. So the assumption is John was actually predicting events that would transpire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and so he writes this down. As one author said it’s as if John was a time traveler and he traveled into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and saw all these events and now he goes back to his first century writers, writes these down presumably in some format that they would have never guessed and never been able to understand. But now in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, technological, political age and environment, now we all of a sudden have the key to understanding to how the book of Revelation actually is being fulfilled.

So that’s one approach that characterizes numerous periods of church history, an obsession with the book, an infatuation with the book of Revelation, which usually is an attempt to explain how Revelation is actually predicting events that are unfolding in the 4<sup>th</sup> century or 15<sup>th</sup> century or 20<sup>th</sup> or now the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The kind of opposite approach of that is a complete neglect of the book. That is for most people, when they read the rather fantastic images in the book of Revelation and some of the strange imagery and symbolism, they’re not really sure what to make of it. So the simplest solution is to neglect it and to retreat to the safer grounds of Paul’s letters or the more familiar stories in the Gospels or something like that. So, for example, when you open your Bibles to Revelation chapter nine, you read this strange description of

these locusts that swarm and fly out and when you read it they are like no other locust that you've ever encountered and sound more like something out of a science-fiction horror movie or something like that. So starting at verse two of chapter nine, the author of Revelation says, "When he opened the Abyss, smoke came out of it as smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke came locusts down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plants or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months."

And I'll skip down a couple of verses where the author begins to describe these locusts. "These locusts look like horses prepared for battle." So now you have these locusts coming out of this abyss from smoke but now the author says they actually look like horses prepared for battles. Then he says, "On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, their teeth were like the teeth of the lions. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails that stung like scorpions and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months." I'll stop right there; we'll look at that text later.

But, notice the rather strange combination of animal-like features and insect-like features and then human-like features and animal features as well all combined into this almost grotesque image that is more suitable for a science-fiction horror movie or something like that. People read this and the response is usually to become so bewildered with the book that it's safer to neglect it. Maybe some people become so put off by those that have been obsessed with the book of Revelation that again it's much easier to simply bypass Revelation and again retreat to the more safer books of Paul's letters or the Gospels. Revelation to many is still a book with seven seals, despite the fact that Revelation claims to be unsealed, for many the book of Revelation is still sealed.

As some of you probably know, well-known John Calvin, as brilliant as a thinker as he was, and although he wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament,

did not write one on the book of Revelation. Probably some writers in Revelation would have done better to follow his lead. So at best, we neglect the book and we would rather leave it in the hands of scholars or those who are better suited to try to make sense of this rather strange book. So it seems to me when you study church history, either we become obsessed with the book and trying to make sense of it and gearing entire ministries around the book, usually trying to read it in light of events going on in our own day, or we neglect it. It's so odd and strange we're not used to it, we haven't seen anything like this that it's easier to neglect it and leave it in the hands of the specialist to try to make sense of it.

Even outside of the church, the book of Revelation has gotten a reaction. Usually it is one of suspicion, because of the some of the violent imagery, Revelation has often been seen by those outside of the church as something to be treated with suspicion and even outright rejection of it as having any value at all for anyone. For example, it was Friedrich Nietzsche, the German thinker who said, "Revelation is the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all of recorded history." And George Bernard Shaw said that Revelation was a curious record of the visions of a drug addict; that's how he explained the book of Revelation. So even outside of the church people still aren't quite sure what to do with this book. It is treated with extreme suspicion and often seen as the source of all kinds of evil, woes and ills of society, etc.

But, the book of Revelation at the same time even outside of the church is often the source and inspiration for many of our movies and movie titles "The Apocalypse" or movies that have themes that come right out of the book of Revelation. So even outside the church, the book of Revelation has had an impact in our society.

#### Apocalyptic Nature of Revelation

So given the ambivalence with which the book of Revelation is treated in our church and outside of our church, it seems to me that it is necessary to take a look at the book again. If we believe that the book of Revelation is God's word and belongs in the canon of Scripture as part of God's word and his Revelation to his people then it seems that we need to stop again and perhaps reorient ourselves to the book and take another

look at it. That's exactly what I want to do in this course. I want to hopefully begin to take out some of the fear and some of the suspicion in reading the book of Revelation and also avoid some of the obsession and irresponsible ways the book of Revelation has been treated as well. In fact ironically the book of Revelation, the very title Revelation comes from a Greek word "apocalypse" or "apocalypses" that means "an unveiling" or "an uncovering."

Revelation then is primarily meant not to conceal its message and hide it as something so mysterious and secretive that no one couldn't possibly understand it, but actually at the very beginning Revelation as an unveiling or uncovering, it is actually meant to reveal God's truth and reveal God's word to his people and to his church. It is not meant to obscure and hide its meaning but to unveil it and to reveal it. The key to doing this though is asking ourselves what kind of book is Revelation and how does it uncover and reveal its meaning? As a British scholar Richard Bochim said part of the problem in the church's history with understanding Revelation and many of the misinterpretations have begun by failing to conceive of what type of book Revelation actually is. So the first thing that I want to do then is ask how should we read the book of Revelation; what kind of book is this? And why was it written in the first place?

#### Occasion and Nature of Revelation

So I want to do two things sort of in the introductory sections, leading up to actually looking at the book itself in more detail, and that is, to examine two questions: Number one why was the book of Revelation written in the first place? What were the circumstances that surrounded the production of the book and the writing of the book of Revelation? Why did John have these visions in the first place? What was going on historically and what were the circumstances that surrounded the writing of this book? And then second, along with that to ask the question: what kind of book is this? What is a scholars say the literary genre the literary type that this book belongs to? Since that is what's going to help us to begin to understand what is this book all about. What is it trying to do? What was God trying to say and reveal to his people by producing and inspiring this rather strange, at least to us, rather unique book.

### Why was the book written?

So what I want to do is start first of all by asking the question: Why was this book written? Or, that is, to read the book in light of its historical background and circumstances. It is interesting when we read the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament as well, when we read those books we're usually taught to read those books first of all in light of the historical circumstances to which those books were responses. So when you read the book of Galatians, for example in the New Testament, you are taught to read that in the light of the crisis, the problem, or situation that Paul was addressing. He was addressing a group that we often label Judaizers who were trying to get Gentile Christians to submit to the Law of Moses as a sign that they were truly God's people. So we read Galatians in light of its historical background and historical circumstances that Paul was addressing before we try to make sense of it in our own lives. In the Old Testament if you go back to the prophet Isaiah and you begin to read the book, one of the things you must do is to understand what was going on that causes Isaiah to write the book in the first place. You need to understand the situation leading up to exile as the nation was about ready to be carted off into captivity and exile and some of circumstances leading up to that in order to better understand the book, and why the author wrote it in the first place.

So we've learned that one of the most important hermeneutical principles in understanding biblical books is to understand them in light of their original historical context. Who the author was, what his situation, why was he writing this in the first place? Who were his readers and what was the problem or what were the issues that the author was trying to address? In other words, we realize that New Testament documents were not written in a vacuum but were written as sort of pastoral responses to different crises and situations. Now, the reason why I've spent a little bit of amount of time talking about this is, its intriguing that we ignore this when it comes to interpreting the book of Revelation. But why do we ignore this principle when it comes to reading a book like the book of Revelation? So again we either ignore the book or the other approach is we jump right to modern day parallels which again, historically, seems to have happened right



from the second century AD literally after Revelation was written. But then we begin to read Revelation in analogy to modern day events and things going on in our own day and we draw immediate correspondences and connections between the two as if Revelation was actually predicting whatever is going on in our own twenty-first century political environment and technological and historical situation.

### Occasion of Its Writing

I want to begin by suggesting that we need to treat Revelation like we do any other book in the New Testament and the Old Testament and that is, to read it in light of first of all in light of its own historical background. We need to read it as a response to specific historical situations. We need to read it as something written first of all to a group of readers in the first century, we'll see a group of churches in the first century who were facing a series of issues, problems and crises. What I want to do is spend little bit of time trying to unpack a little bit what might have been going on in the first century that caused John to write this book. Again, in my opinion, John didn't just sit down and have this vision in a vacuum out of thin air, but was actually responding to a specific series of issues and problems in a group of churches in the first century living in the culture and the environment and the empire that was yielding authority and control in that day.

### Seven Churches of Revelation

Now the starting point for this I think is with the book of Revelation itself. Revelation tells us itself quite a bit about the situation it was actually addressing. It does so in chapters two and three and we'll look at those chapters in more detail when we begin to actually work through the book. But in chapters two and three we find that the book of Revelation is actually written to seven historical churches that existed in Western Asia Minor or modern day Turkey. Those churches were actual known historical churches and were facing a series of issues and problems. A church existing in the city of Ephesus, a church in the city called Smyrna, one in a city called Pergamum, one in the city called Laodicea and a couple of others. But the starting point is to understand that Revelation is written to seven actual churches that existed historically and were facing a

series of issues given the environment and the context in which they found themselves.

### Roman Empire

The main issue is these churches, all seven of these churches, and many more like them in the region, were situated right at the heart of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was the political, religious, economic, and military power house of the day. It actually followed a number of other important empires such as the rule of the Greek Empire from Alexander and the Persian Empire etc. all the way back to the Babylonian Empire. But the Roman Empire eclipses all of those and emerges as the political, religious, military and economic powerhouse of the day. And these seven churches found themselves living right in the heart of Roman rule. Now, the Roman Empire expanded its borders beyond any known empire or any known kingdom up until that time. The Roman Empire divided its rule as it spread out, as its hegemony grew over all the land, the way that it maintained its rule over this large and widespread kingdom was to divide it up into provinces, sort of a little bit like states. Over these provinces would be rulers and this was a way that Rome kept control over its vast and growing empire. These seven churches were all situated in one of those provinces right at the heart of Roman rule and the Roman Empire.

### Pax Romana

Now, I'll sketch very very quickly a little bit about Rome so that you kind of understand what these seven churches and many more like them were up against in the first century. Rome, at least in the world's view and in Rome's own view, had brought peace and prosperity to the entire empire. In other words, its growing hegemony, its spread over all the land was seen basically as a positive thing. Yes, Rome had its own critics and there were people that were not happy with Rome's spread, its rule, and how it did things; but generally especially from inside Rome itself, it was seen as and Rome portrayed itself as a benefactor to the entire world. Rome had brought peace to the entire empire. It brought prosperity. Everyone who was under Rome's rule experienced its blessings and therefore it actually owed a debt of gratitude to Rome because Rome was responsible for all the blessings that all its citizens enjoyed and all those under its rule. Its

military might was responsible for helping it to spread its rule by conquering rebellious and harmful countries and peoples and one of the so called myths that Rome was based on the phrase “Pax Romana,” that is, the peace of Rome. Rome was known for bringing about peace. Part of that was through its military power it was able to subdue rebellion and to keep things under control and make sure that peace reigned throughout the empire. It was also responsible for economic prosperity as we already said. Rome was known for ushering in a golden era or a golden age. Rome also was known for bringing justice and righteousness to the entire world.

### Emperor Cult

Now, behind all of this lies the fact that Rome thought that it had been chosen by the gods to rule over the land and to bring peace and prosperity. Rome saw itself, and its rulers, and the emperors as the saviors of the world. Even the emperor himself began to be seen as an agent of the will of the gods. All the gods such as Zeus and others some of the famous Greek and Roman gods, the emperor was basically seen to do the will of the gods. Soon the emperor himself came to actually be at times treated as a god, especially after the emperors died. It seems even later living emperors could be treated as a god and they were seen as worthy of devotion and allegiance and one’s worship. Even the title “warden god” could be applied apparently to some of the emperors. The way that this was enforced, the way that recognition of the divine status of Rome and the gods behind it and even the emperor himself was through what is known as the emperor cult. That is the emperor cult was simply a system or ways of fostering worship and allegiance to Rome and to its emperor. Usually if you would go through a typical Greco-Roman city or a Roman city in one of the provinces, in Asia Minor and in the Roman Empire, you would see temples erected in dedication not only of foreign gods, but also in honor of the emperor himself. You would see images of the emperors, images and statues, even inscriptions on some of the walls and other visual reminders of the divine status of Rome and even the emperor and all that the emperor had done for you. So these reminders were meant to sort of enforce and encourage demonstrating allegiance and even worship of the emperor.

Some of these towns that John addresses in the seven churches in Revelations 2 and 3 also had what was known as “a temple warden.” That is someone who is responsible for maintaining and even enforcing the functioning of the emperor cult. It is a sort of system of acknowledging the debt of gratitude that you owed Rome and the Roman Empire for all the blessings they had provided you. There were even all kinds of festivals that took place in honor of the emperor that you could participate in.

It’s also important to recognize a couple of these cities actually the emperor himself, early on, and Rome was ruled by a series of emperors, but early on some of the emperors actually sanctioned the building of temples in a couple of these cities. Some of the other cities, it was simply the people themselves who decided in honor of the emperor to build a temple in the emperor’s name. But, all of the seven cities of Revelation 2 and 3 or all of the churches in the seven cities of Revelation 2 and 3 had an active emperor cult and many of them with temples in honor of the emperor as well in the honor of the other gods within those cities.

#### Emperor Cult and the Economic Setting

Now to make matters more interesting is that the emperor cult, or the system that maintained and enforced worship of the emperors and the gods of Rome this whole emperor cult and system of worship and its festivals, and celebrations and its temples and statues were integrated into the political but also the economic life of many of these cities. For example, if you held down a certain job, whether it was a commercial activity or something else in a first century city in the Roman empire often that was associated with opportunities and times where you would actually engage in worshipping the emperor and worshipping the gods. Many of the trade guilds that existed in some of the cities would have patron deities and it would be unthinkable that you would belong to one of these guilds or that you would carry out a certain job within one of these cities and not show your gratitude in the form of showing allegiance and participating in some of these festival events in honor of the gods or in honor of the emperor who is responsible for the blessing financially that you attained through your work. So, who was responsible for the peace that reigned throughout the empire? Who was responsible for the blessing

materially and otherwise? Who was responsible for your prosperity and well-being? Who was responsible for justice, et cetera.?

It would have been a sign of extreme ingratitude even rebellion to refuse to acknowledge ultimately Rome and its emperor for what they had done. Especially in a society that valued patronage and valued honor/shame it would be a serious breach to refuse to show honor.

So the political, the economic, the religious life of the Roman Empire was closely integrated. To many countries today such as the United States of America this is a rather foreign concept and I don't think we understand how integrated and closely associated the economic, political and religious life of Roman Empire was.

#### Date of the Book: Domitian over Nero

For the book of Revelation, though the date was not crucial to pin down and though there have been a number of options, two or three are highly likely. It seems the most popular option is that the book of Revelation was written probably in 95 or 96 AD, right in the middle of the last decade of the first century when the emperor of Rome at that time was Domitian. The other popular date is in the mid-60's AD when Nero was the emperor. But most scholars today side with and argue for a date of roughly 95 or 96. I'll follow that I think there is good evidence for that. But nothing I say will crucially depend on pinning down the precise date.

So that is a little bit about the historical background and the religious, political and economic situation that reigned over the entire Roman Empire and the situation that would have been prevalent in the provinces, provinces in which the churches found themselves in the first century.

#### Christian Dilemma: Resist or Compromise

Now as you can perhaps begin to see even given this brief explanation is that Christians would have been faced with a dilemma. There were actually two possible ways, among many others, but two prominent ways that a Christian belonging to one of the churches in the seven cities that Revelation addresses, there are two prominent ways they could respond to such a situation. Some of them could resist. They could refuse to

participate in acknowledging Caesar and the Roman Empire as Lord and God, as divine. They could refuse to participate in the emperor cult; refuse to participate in events such as feasts and other celebrations in honor of worshiping the emperor; refuse to go along with their trade guilds that offered opportunities to acknowledge that their prosperity came from the emperor; refuse to fully immerse themselves in the culture and the economy and the religion of the Roman Empire. They could resist that because for them this simply came into conflict with the fact that there is only one Savior and Lord and that is Jesus Christ. To acknowledge anyone else, to simply involve themselves fully with Greco-Roman culture, would violate that or compromise the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ. How can they claim Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior when over here the emperor is claiming the same thing.

So because of that many resisted and also faced the consequences which would be some level of ostracism or even persecution. Now it is important to realize that at this point when we talk about persecution there is not yet anything like an empire wide persecution of Christians where we conjure up this picture in our minds of Roman battalions going into towns and going door to door and dragging Christians out into the street and eventually into the amphitheatre to be devoured by wild animals. That did happen later on in the second century or so. But at this point most persecution was more sporadic and local. In other words, it was not so much the emperor himself who was going around officially having a vendetta against Christians. It was more at the local level. Most of the authorities and officials at a local level who were keen to curry favor with the emperor were enforcing this and causing the problems for Christians who refused to compromise. So there is nothing like an empire wide officially sanctioned persecution started by the emperor himself.

In fact, John tells us so far, there could be more, but John tells us he knows of only one person who has died. In chapter 2, verse 13, a man named Antipas has died for his faith. Although when you read Revelation carefully John seems to expect that more will follow and you do have this very strong language of persecution and saints being slaughtered, beheaded and martyred for their faith. So, John does expect more to come

apparently as Rome and the church clash. But at this point he's only aware of one who has died a man named Antipas. John himself is apparently in exile on the island of Patmos because of his testimony and because of preaching the gospel. But there is not yet anything like this widespread persecution although that certainly did come later on.

### Compromise and Complacency

However, besides resisting and suffering the consequences, I think there was a greater problem in the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 and that was compromising and complacency. It is interesting when you read the seven letters or seven messages to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 only two of them were suffering any type of persecution and ostracism at the hands of neighbors and officials in the Roman Empire. The other five churches actually get a very negative evaluation by the risen Jesus in the messages in chapters 2 and 3 because they are so compromising with their pagan environment and they are so complacent with their situation especially one church called the church of Laodicea that Jesus has nothing good to say about them at all. The only churches that receive a positive report are two churches: Smyrna and Philadelphia. They are both rather poor and they are suffering because they have taken a stand for their faith in Jesus Christ. They are his faithful witnesses.

The other five churches are so complacent with their surroundings they are so willing to compromise with the situation we just described with the Roman Empire that they seem to be free of any trouble and they actually get a very negative evaluation from Jesus Christ in the seven churches.

Perhaps some of these churches that were more complacent and compromising in character were doing it to avoid persecution, perhaps to avoid losing a job, to avoid ostracism, or to avoid even physical death like Antipas. Many of them were deliberately trying to rationalize that they could worship Jesus Christ but also worship Caesar at the same time. That Jesus Christ was Lord but they could also acknowledge Caesar and in doing so avoid what happened to Antipas or avoid some of the problems that the other churches who were taking a stand were experiencing. It is also possible that simply others did not realize what they were doing, that they had become so complacent in their

environment and their situation that they did not realize the extent to which they had compromised their witness to Jesus by becoming so ensconced in their surroundings and environment, the religious, political and economic life of Rome. They were blind to what was going on.

So for the book of Revelation, as well as the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, the rest of the book of Revelation is going to be a message first of all of comfort, consolation and encouragement to persevere for those two churches and any other churches like them that resisted and for those churches that are suffering because of their refusal to compromise and because they had maintained “their faithful witness and testimony” which is an important phrase in the book of Revelation. For those churches, those two churches in chapters 2 and 3 and any like them the book of Revelation will be a source of comfort and encouragement to persevere.

But for those who are compromising, for those who have become so complacent with their surrounding environment in the Roman Empire, the book of Revelation will be a source of warning and exhortation. It will serve to shock the readers out of their complacency. It will serve to wake them up, exhort them, to perceive their situation and just to understand the extent to which they have compromised, call them to repent and to turn to exclusive worship, allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences that will bring.

#### Purpose of Revelation to Expose the Roman Empire

So, to summarize the historical background of Revelation and its bearing on interpreting the book, in light of this the purpose of Revelation then to me seems to be to expose the true nature of the Roman Empire. That is, it will offer a counter view or counter evaluation of the Roman Empire to what Rome itself is presenting by its statues and its media and its propaganda as to the character and nature of the Roman Empire and how the world views it at large.

Instead, Revelation will offer a critique, a prophetic critique of and exposes the true nature of the Roman Empire. Remember we said, the title of the Book of Revelation or Apocalypse means an unveiling, an uncovering. Revelation is going to unveil Rome in



its true colors, to expose it for what it really is, to show it for what it really is. It's a corrupt, godless, idolatrous, violent system that opposes God, that absolutizes its own power. It sets itself up as God. It demands the worship of its people and it maintains that by violence. Everything about Rome is contrary to what one finds especially in the Old Testament prophets, but what one finds in the Book of Revelation.

So Revelation is a critique of Rome. Rome is not all it is cracked up to be. Rome is not all that it claims to be. Revelation is a call for their churches in the Roman Empire to look out and see Rome in its true colors, to see it what it really is. So Revelation is at one level an ideological critique of Rome. Again, it uncovers the true nature of Rome as an idolatrous, godless, violent, oppressive rule and an empire that Christians should resist. Therefore, Revelation, because of the nature of the Roman Empire; Revelation is a call to exclusive worship and obedience to God and Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. For Christians, the book of Revelation will be, especially to those who are persecuted, a source of comfort, a source of encouragement to persevere and to continue in their faithful witness no matter what the cost. For the compromising churches, it will be a call to repent, a call to wake up, and a call to resist, lest they also participate in the same fate as the Roman Empire. So according to Revelation then Jesus is Lord, Jesus himself is God and Savior. He is the one who brings peace. He is the one who brings righteousness, not Rome or its emperor.

Now just this understanding of Revelation so far, as a response to its background, I think helps us partly debunk what I still hear as a very common understanding of Revelation. It almost falls into the second category that we described as far as the Church's response of Revelation. The first one was obsession and the second one was neglect, because it's so strange and has so many strange images like those locusts with human features, et cetera, that many reject it.

#### “God Wins” is an Impoverished Understanding of the Book

But the common explanation of the book of Revelation is, in lieu of that, in lieu of trying to really grapple with the book, we say things like, “I know what the Book of Revelation is about. God wins.” I don't know how many times I've heard that. Just the

other day I was talking to someone that said, her words literally were, “I don’t need to read the book of Revelation. I know what it is about. God wins.” Now, however much truth is in that statement, it is far far too limited and far too truncated to deal with what Revelation is actually about. Yes, Revelation does tell us that God wins, but is that all its about? When you read Revelation, you are going to find that it’s not about “God wins;” it is about “how God wins.” God wins through sending his son Jesus Christ, sending his son as a slaughtered lamb through sacrificial faithful witness to accomplish God’s purposes. God wins almost paradoxically through suffering faithful witness of the Lamb and through the death of his Son Jesus Christ.

It’s also a book of how the church overcomes. The church also overcomes through its faithful witness, even to the point of death if necessary. The book of Revelation calls for a response. It’s not just about “God wins.” It calls for a response from God’s people. It calls on God’s people to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. The book of Revelation raises the question to us, “Who is really worthy of your worship? Who is truly worthy of your allegiance, your devotion and your worship? Who is truly worthy of your obedience? Is it the emperor or is it any other human ruler? Is it any other human institution or entity or is only God and his Lamb Jesus Christ that should be the exclusive objects of your worship?”

So we need to look beyond only seeing Revelation as a book where “God wins.” There’s some truth in that but it’s far too limited in scope. Revelation again tells us how God wins, through His suffering messiah, through a slaughtered lamb. God conquers almost paradoxically, and certainly unlike the Roman Empire, God conquers through a suffering Lamb who comes and dies for his people. It also is about how God’s people respond. How do God’s people overcome? How do God’s people win? The same way Jesus did, through their faithful witnessing even to the point of death. Revelation is also a call to exclusive obedience and to exclusive worship of God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ showing us that no other person, no other thing is deserving of our exclusive worship and devotion.

What King of Book is Revelation?

Now the second thing to look at in reading Revelation is, not only why was the book written looking at the historical circumstances, the seven churches and their situation in the Roman Empire and the challenges that brought, but then to ask another question, “What kind of book is Revelation? What kind of book are we dealing with? What kind of literature are we reading and how does that require that we actually read it and try to make sense of it? In other words, we simply have to read Revelation in light of the type of literature that John was writing and communicating to his first readers and what he was intending to communicate and how most likely they would have made sense of it as best as we are able to comprehend.

Again, it’s interesting. This is another important step that you are often taught in hermeneutics classes or Bible Study Methods class that you need to understand what kind of literature so we understand that we don’t read a Gospel the same way we do one of Paul’s letters or we don’t read Old Testament poetry the same way we read a prophetic text or a narrative text or something like that. But once again, this is often ignored or misunderstood when it comes to reading and interpreting the book of Revelation. I would suspect that one of the reasons perhaps is that we really don’t have any good models to follow when it comes to reading Revelation and even when Revelation is preached from our pulpits. Again the reaction of the neglect often prevails. Usually you’ll hear sermons on chapters two and three. Once in a while chapter one and sometimes someone will get into chapter four and five but seldom do you find the entire book of Revelation as the subject of a series of sermons. Interestingly, in the Eastern Orthodox lectionary, the book of Revelation does not play a role at all. The texts that do play a role again are chapters two and three are found in some of the hymns or something like that. So first of all, we often don’t have good models on to how to read and interpret Revelation, although I’m finding a lot more really helpful resources in books surfacing now.

### Apocalyptic Genre

But second is we simply don’t have any good analogies in our modern day to the book of Revelation. I’ll suggest a couple later on that are fairly close but when’s the last

time you sat down and read an apocalypse or when's the last time you sat down and wrote one. We read letters virtually every day, it's easy now in the form of email sometimes we're used to reading novels and story type of literature. Sometimes we'll even still dabble in poetry, reading or writing it but we really don't have any close analogies in our modern day to the book of Revelation. That can make it tricky when we really have nothing to compare it to help us orientate ourselves to the book.

A well-known, literary critical scholar named E.D. Hirsh said that "reading is genre bound." By that he meant simply that meaning in any given piece of literature is dependent on its literary genre, what kind of literature it is. That is the genre, we often think of meaning as in words and in sentences but the genre itself, the type of literature also carries meaning or suggest meaning and how we are to derive meaning from the text itself.

Now getting the literary genre of Revelation right does not help us solve all the problems, even people who can agree on what kind of literature it is still disagree on how they interpret certain passages in Revelation and even overall in what they do with Revelation. But at the same time understanding the genre of Revelation helps us at least to get off on the right foot and not to get off on the wrong foot. That is it helps us to make a right start and avoid missteps and mis-starts in trying to interpret the book of Revelation. Yes, Revelation still has its own logic, it still has its own unique structure in the way it's put together that we have to pay attention to, that not everyone is going to agree upon but at the same time understanding the literary genre or the literary type in which Revelation was written or in which John wrote will help us to get off on the right foot, to get a right start in interpreting and reading the book of Revelation.

Now, today, obviously we make genre identification ever day we do so intuitively. The easiest example that many people like to point to is when you pick up a morning newspaper. If you pick up your newspaper and start thumbing through the pages you begin to almost unconsciously make genre identifications. You realize that when you turn from the front page to the comic section that you've made a serious switch in literary genre. Hopefully you don't read the comics in the same way or take it with the same

seriousness or find the same information or treat it in the same way that you do the front page headlines. Nor do you treat the comics in the same way that you will a couple pages later in the newspaper, treat for example the classified ads. You realize that this is another type of literature within this one newspaper and it demands that you read it in a different way. But, you do that intuitively, you don't sit down and think, "Okay, now I've moved to a comic and a comic consists of these features and therefore here's a list of principles that I have to follow in interpreting the comics. You don't do that. You do that subconsciously and intuitively.

The problem is when we often deal with ancient literary genres, especially ones that are vastly different from ours or ones that do not have any analogy to our modern day literary genres. How do we wrestle with those, how do we deal with those? That raises the question then, what kind of literature is the book of Revelation? What kind of literary genre should we identify Revelation with? Perhaps more accurately, at least to start, is to ask, what did John intend and what would his first readers most likely identified Revelation as, in terms of literary genre? Presumably John if were to take seriously that John is addressing seven historical churches in the Roman Empire facing a crisis of how they live out their faith and whether its okay to worship Caesar along with Jesus Christ. If we take that seriously, John must have been writing something that they could comprehend to some degree. So what literary genre would the first readers most likely have identified Revelation with?

### Three Literary Types: Apocalypse, Prophecy, Letter

As I look at this book, and as I read what others have said about the book and read commentary and other interpreters of Revelation it seems that most have come down to an agreement that Revelation consists of a blend of at least three literary types. And that is three literary genres that would have been well known in the first century. And those genres are simply an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter or an epistle. It is interesting that the last one usually gets overlooked; but an apocalypse, a prophecy and an epistle. Revelation seems to be a blend of at least those three. It is not that John himself necessarily would have thought that he was blending three separate types, its more as

readers of Revelation we can distinguish three types of literature that help us to try and come to grips with what kind of book this is and how it communicates and how that makes a difference in the way we should read it. But the point is these are three literary types.

An apocalypse although we'll see in just a moment an apocalypse is more of a modern day title, it doesn't appear that John or that anybody else used the label "apocalypse" to refer to a certain type of a book. But it's still a useful label because as we see it does helpfully describe a group of writings that seem to share similar features and characteristics. An identifiable type of writing that can be distinguished from other types of literature and writing in the first century. But these three literary types an apocalypse, a prophecy and an epistle or letter were all well known to the first century readers. Much like when you sit down and read a newspaper and you skip from front page headlines to comics, to classified ads without having to think about what type of literature you reading and what principles that you need to activate to understand how to read them. In the same way, the first century readers would have understood and identified what it was they were reading almost intuitively because they probably would have been familiar with these types of works.

Let me begin by just briefly, or end this part of the lecture by just briefly, introducing to you an apocalypse. If I were to ask you what you think of when you think of the term "apocalypse," what comes to your mind? Today we usually use the word "apocalypse" and this may owe itself largely to how it's been used in even especially non-Christian parlance. As I said apocalypse a title that often gets applied to movies. So when we think of apocalypse, we think of the end of the world. Some cataclysmic end of the entire universe. Some worldwide disaster of apocalyptic proportion. So when we think of apocalypse we think of some end time and cataclysmic disaster or event that brings this world or entire universe to an end or something like that. I'm convinced though; in the first century the readers would not have understood it this way. In the first century the word that we call "apocalypse" would have, the terms as we use refers to a type of literature that, the first century readers would have grasped and would have

understood not necessarily as end of world or cataclysmic or end of history. But it refers to a literary type that the first century readers would have understood.

In the next session then I want to take a little bit of time and ask what is an apocalypse? The label “apocalypse” is a modern one that we use. John and first century people did not necessarily use it, but it’s a useful label to use to refer to a type of recognizable unique literature. What would they have understood by this type of literature? What is this kind of literature that we called an apocalypse? How should we read it and interpret it?

Transcribed by Courtney Scott, Taylor Hawks, Jennifer Krystyniak, Dominic Paradis, Abigail Sensing, Drew Sidell, Ted Hildebrandt and edited by Marirose Brown  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 2

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Literary Genres of Revelation: Apocalyptic, Prophetic, and Epistle

We've been talking a little bit about the historical background of Revelation and the literary background as well. I suggested that as with any other biblical book, especially New Testament book, it's important to understand the circumstances and the environment that actually occasion the book and often we neglect that or forget that when it comes to the book of Revelation we are often tempted to jump right to our own modern day and try to correlate what's going on in our day with what we find in Revelation. As we've seen that's nothing new, church history literally since the second, third, and fourth centuries, interpreters of Revelation have done that. They've seen events in their own day and have been convinced that those events were the key to understanding and unlocking Revelation. Revelation was directly speaking to or predicting those very events. But I suggested that as with any other book, we need to stop and first of all examine the book of Revelation in light of its context both historically and literarily.

We've looked a little bit at the literary genre or literary type of Revelation suggesting that Revelation, as most interpreters agree, consists of at least three literary forms: apocalypse, and prophecy, and an epistle. Apocalypse we're not familiar with and we don't have any very close modern-day analogies, though I'll suggest a couple that might help us make sense of it. It's important that we stop and examine what these literary types are because I'm convinced all these literary types would have been well-known to John and would have been well known to his first readers. So we have to ask, what were these literary types and how would the readers have understood them? Then, how does that make a difference in the way we interpret the book of Revelation?

### The Apocalyptic Genre

So we will start with an apocalypse. Today, as we've said before, today when we think of an apocalypse we think of a catastrophic end to history, some disaster on a



worldwide scale, the end of the world, a catastrophic cataclysmic end of the world and that's what we mean by "apocalypse." Yet, in the first century when we talk about an apocalypse in relationship to the first century, I'm not convinced they would have understood that as a reference to the end of the world or some worldwide disaster, but rather they would have understood it as a literary form. Again, the word "apocalypse" is not a literary term that they would have used to refer to a type of literature. It's the one we use.

The term "apocalypse," actually comes out of Revelation chapter 1 and verse 1. Scholars have taken this word and used it to refer to a group of literary works or a group of writings that resemble Revelation very carefully. So the point is there seems to exist a group of writings that have distinguishing and unique characteristic features to which Revelation belongs. Scholars have used the word "revelation" or "apocalypse," the Greek word "apocalypse" occurs in chapter 1 and verse 1 to refer to this type of literature.

So, Revelation 1 verse 1 begins with, "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show to his servants." So we've already looked at this word very briefly, the word "apocalypse," or "revelation." It refers to an unveiling or an uncovering. But again, it originally did not refer to a type of literature but even by using this word, John seems to suggest that he's writing a piece of literature that depends on or will be characterized by an uncovering or an unveiling.

We use it today, again, to refer to distinct type of writing. This type of writing that we call "an apocalypse" existed roughly from about or most of the apocalypses that we have record of existed as a common literary type that flourished from about 200 BC to 200 AD, roughly. This would've been a well-known recognizable type of literature and the only two examples that we have in the canon of Scripture in our Bibles of course is Revelation and the Old Testament book of Daniel. The book of Ezekiel has sections of it that resemble an apocalypse. The books of Isaiah and Zechariah also have sections that resemble an apocalypse but there are scores of other writings that resemble the books of Revelation/Daniel. So Revelation/Daniel are only part of a broader group of writings that scholars have come to label "an apocalypse." We'll look at what that is. If you're

interested in reading, and I would encourage you to do so, other apocalypses, the best one can do as far as in written form, in hard copy, one can secure the volumes by James Charlesworth the *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* and volume one is a collection of most of a collection of English translations of most of the apocalypses written, again, roughly between 200 BC and 200 AD. Otherwise you can go online anymore and Google most of them and find English translations. You might encounter works, such as 1 Enoch and 2 Enoch and 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra and the apocalypse of Abraham are common apocalypses. The Shepherd of Hermas was an early Christian apocalypse that was written roughly the same time as Revelation though it was not included in our New Testament canon. But these are all works that resemble very closely Revelation and Daniel and help us to understand a little bit more what Revelation is.

So, what is an apocalypse? First of all, an apocalypse, as a literary form, as a type of literature, an apocalypse was basically a first-person narrative account of someone's vision. It assumes that someone had a visionary experience and now writes that down in autobiographical form. It's a narrative of someone's visionary experience that now they have written down and it is available for others to read and in a sense almost re-experience what the seer, the name often applied to the person that had the vision, what the seer saw. Now, he writes that down and communicates that to his readership. The assumption behind an apocalypse is basically a way of knowing. Often, in the past, apocalypse was associated with a certain view of history where history was basically evil. It required an end to history and the inauguration of a new world, a new era that would bring in righteousness and blessing. So you sort of had this dualism between the present evil age, it was dominated by evil, and had largely been abandoned to evil. There was only a hope in some future coming age that would replace it and bring in righteousness and blessing. That could only come exclusively by an act of God to intervene into history and bring history to a close and inaugurate this age to come. So often apocalyptic literature was seen as indicating a type of eschatology, that is, that history was evil, history had been abandoned and our only hope was for a divine and direct intervention

from God into history to bring it to an end and to inaugurate his new world. However, I think that more fundamental, and in fact I would argue when you read a lot of the apocalypses they don't all fit that scenario.

#### Apocalypse as a Way of Knowing: Future & heavenly perspective

A more fundamental assumption behind apocalypses is a way of knowing. An apocalypse again is a first person narrative of someone's visionary experience. So there must be a visionary experience and the person now writes it down, describing what he saw. The assumption behind this is that the knowledge of the heavenly world, beyond what we see in the earthly world, there is another knowledge, a knowledge of the heavenly world, the knowledge of the universe, knowledge of a future, the secrets of heaven, that can only be made known by a divine and a direct revelation to God's people. This type of knowledge, the knowledge of the heavenly world, the knowledge of the future, the knowledge of the universe, the secrets of heaven, cannot be known by normal modes of communication. But can only come about by a direct revelation by receiving a direct revelation from God. So, this seems to be the assumption that lies behind an apocalypse, that there is a knowledge of the heavenly world and the future and the secrets of heaven that can only be grasped and known by a direct revelation from God. And that lies behind an apocalypse, that's why the person must have a vision.

This knowledge is communicated through visionary form. The author then receives this vision and then narrates what it was he saw. You find this already in books like Isaiah chapter 6, we'll look at that in connection with other texts in Revelation; Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2, and Ezekiel 40-48, the last several chapters of Ezekiel being a vision of the final end time temple. We said already the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, much of it is a record of Daniel's vision. Then all these other apocalypses share this feature that they communicate knowledge of the heavenly world and knowledge of the future that can only be gained by a direct revelation from God. One can only pierce the veil of heaven, so to speak, by having God open the heavens, and in fact, that's common language in these apocalypses that the heavens were opened because this

is the only way that the seer can gain this knowledge. This is divine knowledge, that God reveals and discloses to him so that he can communicate it to his people.

So that's the first thing, an apocalypse is a visionary account of a seer's vision, or a narrative account of the vision of a seer, which assumes that there's a heavenly knowledge, the secret of heaven and of the future, can only be known through a direct revelation. Now the author receives it and writes it down in narrative form for the benefit of his readers. Again, it's also possible that in doing this, in a sense, the writer was allowing his readers to, re-experience the vision and re-experience, at some level, what the person saw in his visionary experience.

The second thing is that, I already hinted at in what I just said, apocalypses are primarily about the heavenly world and about the future. Now again, this is important because there used to be this conception that an apocalypse was all about the future. There is plenty of information about the future found in apocalypses, however, there is also much information that discloses the environment of heaven. In fact, we'll see Revelation begins in chapters 4 and 5 not with a vision of the future, but with John going to heaven and seeing the heavenly environs. He sees the throne of God, God seated on the throne and all of heaven surrounding him before he ever talks about anything related to history or the future. So, apocalypses were not only, and probably we should say, were not primarily about the future. The burden of the apocalypse was not to predict the future. But again, the apocalypse was meant to disclose the secrets of heaven, to disclose the heavenly world, things and information that could not be made known or perceived by more rational modes of communication.

So, in an apocalypse we often find the seer ascending to heaven, being taken up to heaven, or sometimes taken to other locations. Again, you see that in Revelation 4 and 5, Isaiah chapter 6, Ezekiel 1 and 2, begin with the prophet going up to, or having a vision of the heavenly environs with God on his throne, and heaven or the angelic beings surrounding him. So it is not just about the future, although that is included, but also about the heavenly world. Still one of the more significant books, although an older

work, if you consider the early 1980s older is a work by Christopher Rolland called *The Open Heaven*, where he very helpfully develops this perspective. It is a long read, parts of it were very helpful where he demonstrates the content of apocalyptic literature was not just future, the content was varied. But he said the assumption was that there were secrets, heavenly secrets about God's intention for humanity and for the world and secrets of the heavenly world that could only be made known, could only be divulged, by a divine revelation in the form of a vision, and that's what an apocalypse is.

So first of all, an apocalypse is a narrative account of someone's visionary experience. Number two, it is often about the future but primarily about the heavenly world as the content of what the person saw, and again, the assumption is that the secrets of heaven and the secrets of God and his intention for humanity and the world can only be made known by a divine revelation.

#### Symbolic Language and Imagery

The third feature of an apocalypse is that usually this information about the heavenly world and the future is communicated through highly symbolic language and imagery. Metaphor and symbolism are the primary mode of communication. So, a seer has a visionary experience and what he sees is communicated to him in symbolic language and then he writes in symbolic language, and the symbolism that resembles, as closely as possible, what he actually saw in the vision. So you often find writers saying, "I saw something as shining like crystal" or "I saw someone as a son of man" or "I saw something as a throne." The idea is that it resembles as closely as possible what the author actually saw in his vision. So I take it that the author in his visionary experience sees things that are communicated to him or he sees in symbolic form. Then as he writes them down and narrates them, he narrates them using symbols and images that resemble as closely as possible what he actually saw. We'll come back to that and see why that is important, but perhaps one of the reasons for using symbolism is because the author is disclosing a heavenly reality. It is a reality that transcends this earthly reality so that symbolic language is most suitable, for communicating that reality as something that is

heavenly and transcends the earthly realm.

Also, symbolism has a way of communicating that is more powerful than straightforward, more literal means of communication. That is, symbolism often not only communicates content, but does so in a way that evokes emotions and involves the entire being both irrationally but also emotionally, perhaps more important, emotionally in communicating to the seer and to the readers as well. We'll see too that the symbolic language also has a way of focusing more on the theological meaning rather than the precise, exact identity of what it was the author saw.

So think about it, what impacts you more if you hear someone say, “watch out for him, because he knows how to be tricky and deceptive” or “watch out because he is a snake”? Calling him a snake evokes emotive, especially if you have an aversion to snakes like I do, that raises all kinds of emotions and plays on your emotive response. Calling him “a snake,” is a more powerful way, a metaphorical way, of saying that he's tricky and deceptive. So symbolism has a way of evoking our imaginations, of evoking our emotions, of bringing about not just rationally but an emotive response to the information that the seer now communicates. So, symbolism is a very important part of apocalyptic literature, what the author actually saw is not only communicated to him in symbolic form that now he writes in symbolic and metaphorical language that resembles very very closely what he actually saw. So part of interpreting an apocalypse is, as we'll see, is trying to come to grips with what is the meaning of the symbolism? Where did the author get the symbolism? What is it referring to? What is it trying to communicate? We'll look at that later on, and as we work through Revelation, of course, we'll have all kinds of opportunity to wrestle with the symbols and images.

#### New Perspective on the Present

Another feature of apocalyptic literature, related to some of the things we've already talked about, is it is as a vision of heavenly reality and the future, an apocalypse is meant to provide a new perspective on the present—the present time of the readers. Again, an apocalypse is not primarily meant to predict the future, especially a future far,

far beyond the horizons of the readers. An apocalypse is meant to provide a perspective on the present situation of the readers. Usually the assumption behind apocalypses is that, although this isn't true of all of them, I think the verdict is still out as far as what exactly caused a writer to have a vision, and to write an apocalypse: What sorts of situations is it used for? But one common situation is often when God's people are facing some sort of a crisis, such as living under the oppression of a dominant empire. An apocalypse was meant to help them come to grips with that, to provide a perspective on that. Remember we said an apocalypse is meant to reveal and divulge or disclose information of the heavenly realms and the heavenly world of God's intention and the secrets of heaven now revealed to a seer that he communicates to humanity or to his readers, to the people of God. The intention behind this was to provide a perspective on their situation, to allow them to see it in a new light, so that they can respond accordingly. Once they have this information, once they have this knowledge via an apocalyptic vision written down for them, once they now have this new perspective, they're now able to see their situation in a new light and they're able to respond accordingly.

### Modern Day Analogies to Apocalyptic Genre

A couple of modern-day analogies, perhaps, to how a vision or an apocalypse functions: one of them, and this is not unique with me, if you read much you'll find many people using this example, I've been able to trace it back to 1974 in a commentary by a scholar named George Beasley Murray, in a commentary he wrote in Revelation, which is still very helpful. He used the analogy of a political cartoon. It might go back before that, but he's, without searching, he's the earliest I've found to use that analogy. Many others have picked it up to the modern day. I think it's a helpful one.

Think about how a political cartoon works. When you read a political cartoon, there's two things that are important: number one is a political cartoon communicates through highly symbolic and exaggerated imagery. So you read a political cartoon if you're familiar with the image and if you're familiar with the political situation you're able to identify those images and what they mean and what they're suggesting and what

they're communicating about the political situation. A writer could just sit down and write a straightforward prose paragraph about his view of what's going on politically, but a political cartoon, is a highly imaginative and evocative way of commenting on, or even critiquing what's going on politically. When you read a political cartoon, again, you note that the images are sometimes exaggerated. Sometimes you can identify the president of the United States or the president or leader of another country by exaggerated features such as their head or something else, so that you can't miss the identification. Often animals function as indications or symbols of different political parties in the United States of America. The elephant functions as a symbol for a political party; the donkey functions as a symbol for a certain political party. The eagle functions as symbol for the United States of America. Other images that are stock images that we have become attuned to associated with certain things. So the writer of a political cartoon will use images and symbols that we are familiar with and almost exaggerate them to communicate something about the political situation in a way that does more than just communicate straightforward information. It plays on your emotions, it evokes a response, it plays in your imaginations and emotions so that you respond in a way, and see the situation in the way, that the author of the cartoon wants you to. So, the first thing about political cartoons is the symbolic nature, they communicate through symbol and metaphor, exaggerated, imaginative constructions of political leaders in countries and situation.

This brings me to the second feature is: political cartoons are referring to actual persons and events. They are not fictional. They are not just fairytale language or images or science fiction. They are actually referring to literal persons and events and places yet those persons, events, and places are depicted in highly symbolic and metaphorical language. The same is true of an apocalypse. An apocalypse refers to actual persons and places and events in history and in the future. Apocalypses do refer the future, though not exclusively so. So an apocalypse refers to actual persons, events, and places in history, in the time of the readers and in the future; but apocalypses describe those persons, places, and events like a political cartoon with highly symbolic and imaginative, sometimes even



exaggerated images so that you get the point, so that you look at the situation in a new way, so that you see the author's perspective in a new way. Then again you are enabled to see your situation in a new light. So, for example, if you are God's people living under an oppressive regime, an empire, an apocalypse might help you to reinterpret that situation and see it in a brand new light.

So political cartoons can, for example, help us to understand how an apocalypse works. Yes, it refers to actual, literal events, situations, and persons and places but it depicts them in highly symbolic, imaginative, sometimes even with exaggerated language so that you get the point and so that you see the situation in a new light.

#### Apocalypse as Going behind the Curtain of a Play

Another analogy that I like to use in describing an apocalypse, it's a little like watching a play. If you're sitting in an auditorium watching a play going on on stage, all you see is what is taking place on that stage. What you don't see is what goes on behind the curtain behind the stage that actually makes the play work. When you lift, if you could, lift the curtain and look behind it, you would see the stage manager, you would see all the people responsible for the lighting; perhaps you would see all the prop people responsible for the props and for the clothing. You would see people scurrying about and doing all kinds of things that actually make the play work. But you don't see that when you're just watching the play. That's sort of what Revelation is like, or an apocalypse is like. The play would be similar to simply what you see with your eyes--empirically, what is going on around me. What an apocalypse does, it lifts the curtain so that you can see behind the scenes and behind the stage to see what is actually going on; to see a whole new reality that actually influences and impinges upon the reality that I see with my eyes. Again, the whole point of an apocalypse is that the knowledge of the reality behind what I see is only available through an unveiling, a lifting of the curtain of heaven so that I can see behind this physical world. There's more than meets the eye. When I look out at the empirical world that I can taste and touch and feel with my senses and see, an apocalypse reminds me there's more to reality than that. There's a whole new reality,

a heavenly world, a heavenly reality and also a future that can only be disclosed and made known through this revelation, through this vision. That reality influences and determines what is going on in my world. Somehow it stands behind it and by seeing this reality I see the play in a whole new light and I'm able now to respond to it in a different light.

So, for example, again, with Revelation just initially perhaps now you can start to see how Revelation might work. This is why we spend a little bit of time talking about the historical background, given the situation of many of the readers in the first century the seven churches from Revelation 2 and 3, living in the Roman empire where Caesar was on his throne and where they were confronted with all kinds of images and reminders of the debt of gratitude they owed to Caesar, other gods, and the Roman empire for their prosperity, their peace. The temptation was to compromise the exclusive worship and allegiance to God with being involved in the culture, the commerce and the religion of the Roman empire and its politics which were all meshed together and carefully and closely intertwined.

The book of Revelation, then, as an apocalypse, says what you see when you look around and look out at the Roman Empire and what's going on with what you see in the empirical world is not all there is. There's more than meets the eye. As an apocalypse, Revelation then lifts the curtain, or lifts the veil, so that they can see behind the stage of history. They can actually see the heavenly world and they can see the future that then allows them to see their situation in a new light. Now Rome does not look like it did before. Now they see their situation in a new light and they understand how they need to respond. As an apocalypse it provides a whole different perspective by using symbols, images and metaphors that depict exactly what is going on in the world. So don't associate with Rome, be careful of throwing in your lot with Rome, and be careful not to violate the exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ and to God giving them the worship that only they deserve.

So, first of all we said Revelation was a narrative account of someone's visionary experience. Second, that visionary experience communicated a heavenly transcendent reality. Third, it communicated through highly symbolic language. It refers to actual persons, places and events in history but it does so symbolically and metaphorically. Fourth, Revelation as an apocalypse is a vision as a vision of the heavenly world and heavenly reality provides a different perspective on their present world. It allows them to see things in a new light. Then finally, the function of an apocalypse, again, is not to predict the future, the primary function of the apocalypse is encouragement and warning. It's to encourage those Christians who are, or people of God who are, suffering at the hands of an oppressive empire or society, for example. But it also is meant to warn of impending judgment for those who compromise or for those who refuse to demonstrate their allegiance to God alone.

As you look at Revelation, then, Revelation shares all of these features that characteristically belong to this type of literature called "an apocalypse." So Revelation can be categorized as an apocalypse: a first person narrative account of someone's vision, a visionary experience, of the heavenly world and of the future communicated in highly symbolic language that provides a transcendent a heavenly perspective on their situation for the purpose of both encouragement and warning. Revelation fits those features so it could be labeled "an apocalypse."

### Angels

Now, there are other features that sometimes you find an apocalypse in Revelation has bypassed. One of them is the prevalence of angelic beings. You often find angels in apocalypses either speaking and dialoging with the person having the vision or leading the person, sort of like the three spirits in Charles Dickens' "Christmas Carol." Ebenezer Scrooge is on kind of a visionary journey. Sometimes you find angels performing that role and a variety and other roles pouring out judgment on the earth. In Revelation, too, from the very start it is littered with references to angelic beings. Maybe not as extensive as some other apocalypses are but still, you find angelic beings throughout the book of

Revelation. So Revelation clearly can be categorized, I think, as an apocalypse. However unique it is, however different it is, from other apocalypses, Revelation can still be characterized as an apocalypse.

One feature that does distinguish Revelation clearly is most apocalypses written between about 200 BC to 200 AD were what the scholars call “pseudonymous.” They were usually written in someone else’s name, that is, the person that claims to have the vision is not really that person. Someone might be claimed to have a vision in the spirit of Enoch or Ezra. In other words, the books entitled 1 Enoch and 2 Enoch were not really written by that person, historically. They’re clearly written by someone else in the name of Enoch. It may be that this person is actually writing in the spirit of Enoch taking the mantle of Enoch on him and having this vision. Others suggest someone just trying to gain authority or gain a hearing so they write in the name of someone well known like Enoch or Ezra or someone like that. Revelation is not written in the name of someone else. John clearly identifies himself as a contemporary with his readers. He claims especially in chapter 1 and verse 9, “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus Christ.” John clearly writes not in the name of some historical figure in the past like an Enoch or Ezra or Abraham or Daniel or someone like that. John writes as a contemporary of his own readers. So he identifies with them in their suffering and in the kingdom of God and now he writes as their contemporary to address their direct situation. So Revelation then is an apocalypse. And later on we’ll look at what differences that makes in the way we read it.

### Revelation as a Prophecy

The second literary genre or literary type that Revelation clearly belongs to is that of a prophecy. In fact, John himself several times throughout the book at the beginning and especially the end, refers to his book as a prophecy. So, for example, in chapter 1 and verse 3, he said, “blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.” Chapter 22 and verse 7, “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this

book.” And verse 10 as well, “Then he told me, ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book.’” And verse 18 to 19, “I warn anyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book.” And 19, “And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy.” So John clearly labels his book or intends his book to be read as a prophecy.

As we’ll see, I think it’s significant that he does it at the beginning and the end of the book. And as we’ll see I’m convinced John, by writing and labeling it as a prophecy, he intends it to be understood as a type of first century Christian prophecy but at the same time John clearly writes as if he is writing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He’s writing something that he wants to be taken with the same authority and seriousness with which they would take an Isaiah or an Ezekiel. This can be seen from the fact that John, over and over, draws from the language of Old Testament prophets.

Where does John get a lot of his images and symbols? Most of them come right out of Old Testament prophetic texts. Even more than that, John uses language such as in chapter 10, of eating a scroll or he’ll use language of commissioning, or certain scenes that come right out of prophetic books. So that John intends his book to be, basically, a prophecy and a prophecy in line with, and in the tradition of, the Old Testament prophets such as, especially, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Jeremiah and other prophets as well.

I’m not convinced John would’ve distinguished an apocalypse from a prophecy. Most likely, again, we distinguish the two but probably John would’ve seen them as very similar or identical. In fact, as we’ve seen already in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 and 2 you have the prophets having visionary experiences that look much like John’s in Revelation. In fact, John will draw on those passages to describe his own visionary experience but John clearly intends his book to be read as an Old Testament prophet or writing in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets of the past.

#### Authorship

Let me say just something briefly about authorship. I don’t want to belabor this point and I don’t want to spend much time arguing for the exact identity of the author. The author identifies himself as “John” but throughout church history, and even reading

the New Testament, you find that there are a couple of Johns that could be potentially the author of Revelation. Reading church history you find a number of Johns that could be the author of the book of Revelation. It's interesting though that many have understood the author John in Revelation as the same author as the fourth gospel and the same author as the epistles of first, second, third John. That is, the apostle John- one of Jesus' disciples, one of Jesus' apostles he was the one who had this vision. Others have doubted that for various reasons and said John, that the same John could not have written this and so they look for other Johns that are mentioned in the literature in church history as the possible author for the book of Revelation. Perhaps, it was some other well-known John in the first century who was a prophet and who was well known to these churches and so he didn't have to spend time identifying himself, for example.

Although I think a case can be made, a good case can be made for John the apostle as the author of the book of Revelation. When you read the book of Revelation itself it's interesting the author does not claim the authority of an apostle. That's especially interesting since the author does write in the letter form as well as we'll see but unlike Paul, who begins almost all his letters with a reference to his apostolic authority in certain books like 1 Corinthians over and over he claims his authority as an apostle to address his readers. John doesn't do that. John does not claim even if this is the apostle John, its interesting he does not base his authority on his apostleship. Instead, he claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet. As Richard Baukham says John writes at the climax of the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Although John will demonstrate how these Old Testament prophets find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. But otherwise, John clearly claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet, he writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets showing, how they reach their climax and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

What is prophecy and what is the role of a prophet?

So, more specifically, what is a prophecy? That will help us to understand what's going on in Revelation. Basically, a prophet was simply one who proclaimed a message

of God to the people. When you read the Old Testament carefully, you begin to see that the prophets, historically, were called upon by God during specific times in Israel's history usually when they were straying from their covenant relationship with God. Usually they spoke when they were going after idols and into idolatry or often when they were in danger of being carded off into exile, in captivity for their sinfulness. When they needed words of comfort and encouragement or warning, God would call on a prophet and raise up a prophet with a message to address the people in those situations. In fact, one author said that basically a prophet was a covenant enforcer. One who would enforce and remind Israel of its covenant relationship with God that it was in danger of violating or had violated. A prophet was meant to call the people back to their covenant relationship with God, and to faithfulness to the covenant.

So the point of this is a prophet is not primarily a predictor of the future. We often, I think we often read prophets like someone who is a fortune teller who gazes into a crystal ball just to tell your future or a tarot card-reader, or a palm-reader just to satisfy your curiosity or to calm your apprehension and to give you a sense of control over what's going to happen in the future by simply predicting what's going to happen. That's not what a prophet did. A prophet was not a fortuneteller, simply telling the future for the sake of the people knowing what's going to happen in the future. A prophet, again, was one who proclaimed the message of God in certain periods of Israel's history to call them back to faithfulness to the covenant relationship with God. And again, by promising salvation, but also by warning them of impending judgment if they refused to respond in repentance and obedience. So a prophet called the people back to a relationship with their God. A prophet proclaimed a message. They did predict the future at times; there is plenty of anticipation of future salvation and judgment, but that wasn't their primary purpose. Even that was meant to inspire faithfulness in God's people and to call them back to repentance and a relationship with God.

At times we often see the prophets providing a critique of the ungodly nations and empires around them. Not only did they speak a message of the people of God about their own spiritual situation but they also revealed and critiqued the godless oppressive

empires of the day demonstrating that that would result in their judgment and their removal. So prophets were not primarily predictors of the future, but they were meant to call God's people back to a covenant relationship.

Prophets did predict the future but often what they did was they would place the present situation against the backdrop of God's broader picture and God's broader purposes for the world and humanity. So sometimes you'll find prophets speaking as if they're describing events in the reader's own day or near future on the very horizons of their own existence and their own world and then very quickly move to describing events that depict the wrap up or the conclusion or the end of the world and the end of history. Again, what the prophets were often doing is simply demonstrating how the present situation of the readers would eventually issue in part to be understood in light of God's broader intentions and purposes for all of history.

A second feature of prophetic literature is the prophets or prophetic literature or prophecy was rooted in history. Prophecy, again, was not just predicting future or was not just fantasy type of literature. Prophecy was clearly rooted in history. It was about God acting in history. It was about God's intervention in history. It was about God's plans and desires for his people living in history. So we should expect that as a prophecy a book like Revelation will be about actual events and persons and places in history. It'll be about God acting in history, in the midst of and on behalf of his people.

A third feature of prophecy, not only is it just a proclamation of a message of God to his people, especially to call them back to faithfulness to warn them about compromise and idolatry and in doing so also to provide a critique of godless, wicked empires and nations. Second, not only is it rooted in history depicting God's acts in history. Third, prophecy is primarily a message about judgment and salvation for both the faithful and the unfaithful. For God's faithful people God promises salvation and vindication and rewards them with their salvation. For those who compromise and refuse to repent and for wicked empires and nations that oppress God's people God promises judgment. Finally, much like an apocalypse, a prophecy was primarily written for the purpose of



encouragement and warning. Again, a prophet was not primarily on the scene to predict the future and line up all the Israelites and look into a crystal ball and tell them about their future. A prophet was primarily there to encourage and to warn God's people, to encourage them to remain faithful in their covenant relationship with God, and to warn them of the consequences of straying from that. And also to warn of judgment, impending judgment, on godless, wicked nations and empires. Revelation is characterized by all these features. Not to mention the fact that John clearly depicts his work as a prophecy and even calls it that. At the very beginning and end of his book, it's appropriate then to label Revelation and to read it as a prophecy.

### Revelation as an Epistle

The third thing, or the third literary type that Revelation clearly belongs to, is an epistle, or a letter. It's interesting we often overlook this for number one and two. We get enamored in the fact that Revelation is an apocalypse. When you read, especially chapters 4 through 22, that's basically what's going on. Very little of 4 through 22 resembles a letter. It's clearly an apocalypse or an apocalyptic prophecy and that's seen in all the visions and the strange images.

But what is intriguing is Revelation begins and ends just like a letter, a first century letter or epistle. The beginning and the end of the book sound a lot like one of Paul's letters. So, for example, starting in chapter one and verse 4 through 8, listen to this: "John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first born from the dead, and the ruler the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen." I'll stop there I won't read seven and eight at this point, though they belong to those verses.

Notice how it begins with an identification of the author John and then the readers to the seven churches and then a greeting or a blessing, a grace and peace section much

like what you find in some of Paul's letters. Then finally chapter 22 and verse 21, the very last verse of Revelation: "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people. Amen." It ends much like Paul's letters. So Revelation clearly intends to be a letter that will communicate something to the first readers, the seven churches, in chapters 2 and 3.

The significance of labeling Revelation as a letter, or better yet the significance of John writing in the form of a letter, he's had this visionary prophecy, this apocalyptic prophecy, a message from God in the form of an apocalyptic vision that he now writes down for the benefit of his readers by putting that within the framework of a first century letter or epistle.

### Epistle as Occasional Literature

What is significant about that? What is important to understand and is well known by many scholars, most interpreters and scholars of first century New Testament literature is that one of the characteristic features of a letter is what New Testament scholars call they are "occasional." What that means is not that they're written on occasion but "occasional" means that a letter was produced and written in response to very specific circumstances or problems or issues. That is why Paul's letters, Revelation was written in response to specific problems and crises, much like Galatians. We talked about earlier, Galatians is written in response to a very specific crisis, of so-called Judaizers, to get the readers to submit to the Mosaic Law. The book of 1 Corinthians addresses a number of issues related to problems in the Corinthian church, related to patronage system and related to spiritual elitism and dualism and other issues that had infiltrated the church. As a letter, then, we should expect that Revelation will be no less occasioned by a specific problem or crisis in the church. What this means is a letter was written to communicate information that would be irrelevant and understood by the first readers. Letters must communicate something that the readers can understand that will address their situation. A letter was aimed at specific needs and specific historical circumstances of the readers.

So Revelation, then, at least its beginning and end, resembles very closely and have a format of a letter. Though in between Revelation doesn't develop like one of Paul's letter necessarily. It was true that in the first century you could communicate just about anything in the form of a letter. So I find it significant that John has chosen to write down his apocalypse, to record his apocalyptic visionary experience, his prophetic message to the churches, in the form and in the framework of a letter. It is a literary form that was meant to address specific circumstances, specific problems, with information that would be understood and grasped by the readers that would meet their needs and their situation.

### Final Summary

So Revelation, then, seems to participate in and seems to be characterized by features of an apocalypse. It's a narrative account of a vision providing a transcendent perspective in highly symbolic language. It's a prophecy, it's a proclamation, a message from God meant to warn and also to encourage God's people. It does include information about the future but it's primarily relevant to the modern situation, to the modern-day of the readers. And then finally, it's couched in the form of a letter. A letter was highly occasional, it was meant to address the specific situation of the readers in a way that would enable them to understand their situation in a new light.

So Revelation, then, is a book that communicates in literary forms, however strange to us, and hopefully these last few minutes we've been able to un-strange it, I know that's not a word, or kind of disambiguate Revelation and it's literary genres by describing the genres that John chose to write in. They are genres that would've been familiar to the first century readers, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter.

Now, what I want to do next, then, is ask, given these three types of literature, how should we read Revelation? Given the fact that Revelation belongs in these three literary genres, an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter, what are the principles that must govern the way we read Revelation? What are the hermeneutic principles that must determine or influence the way we interpret the book? What differences does it make? It's not enough to simply categorize Revelation as an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter. What

difference does that make in the way we actually read it? In the next section we'll spend a little bit of time unpacking the principles of interpreting the book of Revelation that I think come out of and arise from these three unique literary types that Revelation participates in.

Transcribed by Elena Meyer  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 3

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Hermeneutics or Principles for Interpreting Revelation

So we've talked a little bit about the literary nature of Revelation as far as belonging to three types of literary genres: an apocalypse, a prophecy and a letter. Now we want to consider how that affects the way we interpret the book. E.D. Hirsch reminded us meaning is genre bound, that is genre communicates meaning, genre makes a difference in the way that a piece of literature communicates meaning. So how does Revelation mean? How does it communicate meaning, in light of the literary types? What we're going to do now is ask: What principles should guide us in the way we read and interpret the book?

Literary Genres Support Symbolic Interpretation

First of all, and I'll at times correlate these principles with specific literary genres, not always but sometimes I will. Hopefully, most of the time they will be evident from our discussion of the literary type. First of all is we must interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally. Again this comes out of its nature as an apocalypse. We said part of the literary genre of apocalypse is John saw his vision in symbolic form and then writes, using symbols and images that, as closely as possible, resemble what it was he saw. So we need to interpret Revelation symbolically and not literally.

When I was growing up, in the church context in which I was raised, I was taught, not so much from my parents, but from the church context and tradition I was raised in, which had a profound enthusiasm for and a profound interest, if not an obsession in the book of Revelation, I was taught that you must read Revelation literally. Interpret it literally unless there is really good reason not to: unless there is good reason to interpret it symbolically. I would suggest we need to turn that principle on its head and say we need to interpret Revelation symbolically unless there is good reason in the text to interpret in any other way, for example, literally. There are literal features of Revelation sometimes,

in chapter 4 through 22 is kind of the visionary or apocalyptic heart of John's work. In the visionary segment of it, you often find references to nations and people that obviously, I think, should be taken literally, but unless there is good reason not to, I think we should interpret John's symbols seriously and interpret them symbolically, not literally. We've seen that in interpreting Revelation, the symbols refer to actual persons and places and events. Like a political cartoon, it describes those events in a highly imaginative, highly symbolic, highly metaphorical way, not literally. It describes it in that way so that you get the point.

### Rev 13: Beast and Symbolic Meaning

So to take one example, to kind of jump ahead a little bit, we'll talk in more detail about some of the things that I'll refer to briefly, in the next hour or so. For example, when you read Revelation chapter 13, the very first several verses you are introduced to a beast. A seven-headed beast, and he's described as the color red. He's described in rather hideous and strange-looking imagery and we said an apocalypse often does that. It sometimes combines language in ways that are strange and sometimes bizarre, at least to us. In chapter 13 you're introduced to this seven-headed beast with crowns on his heads. It is a rather strange looking character indeed. If I'm a first century reader, what most likely am I going to associate that with? I'm convinced that the first readers would have associated that beast with Rome, with the Roman Empire, or perhaps even the emperor himself would have been represented by that beast or symbolized by that beast. So the point is not that John expects or has seen a beast that literally looks like this, and that's why I find it problematic, even those that claim to interpret Revelation literally stumble in a text like chapter 13. They don't think there's actually going to be a beast that looks like that, they think it represents a human being. Even if they think it's a future antichrist or something like that, they still expect a human figure, not a literal, actual beast.

In the same way that when I read a political cartoon and I see, as an American citizen, I read a political cartoon and I see an elephant or a donkey, I don't expect to go to the nation's capital in Washington DC and see a literal donkey or a literal elephant walking around Congress. I understand those are images or symbols of political parties.

In the same way, I'm convinced, the readers would have associated the beast with the Roman Empire or perhaps the emperor himself.

#### Rev 1:20 as Model

Revelation chapter 1 verse 20, I think, actually provides us the key, and I don't know if John intentionally did this but when you look at it, it provides the key of how we're to read the rest of the book and how we're to read the rest of the images. In chapter 1 which we'll look at later on, John has an inaugural vision of the Son of Man starting in verse 9 describes in some detail starting in verse 12. In chapter 1 verse 12 John says, "I turned around to see the voice," so John hears a voice speaking to him in the first few verses and then in verse 12 he says "I turned around to see this voice. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands." So keep that in mind. Then he says, "and among the lampstands was someone that looked like the son of man. He was dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and had a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, his eyes were blazing with fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters." Now listen to this: "In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance." And then John says, in verse 17, "When I saw him, I fell down at his feet as though dead," which interestingly was a common response to an apocalyptic vision that the seer would become weak, almost sick. Here John falls down on his face, again demonstrating John's connection with apocalyptic visions. But what I want you to look at in verses 19 and 20, especially 20, we'll focus on verse 20 the last verse of chapter 1. John hears a voice, which this is probably Jesus Christ, now the risen Lord that he's just described speaking to him and notice what happens in verse 20: "The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lamp stands is this, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." So do you see what this voice has done or do you see what John has done in verse 20? He's demonstrated that these lampstands and the stars were actually symbolic of something else. I take that that's the way we should read the rest of Revelation, to ask what are

these things symbolizing. We'll talk a little but more about that in a moment.

But I also want to back up and just notice a description of Christ again. John sees this vision of a son of man in verses 12 through 17 and he describes him as wearing a robe. He has hair on his head that's white like snow, his eyes like blazing fire, his feet like glowing bronze, and his voice sounds like thunderous rushing water. In his right hand are seven stars, out of his mouth comes a sharp, two-edged sword. That's not the Jesus I want to see and not the Jesus you read about in the Gospels. The point is John is not literally describing Jesus. He's using images and symbols to say something about Jesus. Later on we'll see that the sword coming out of his mouth most likely is a symbol of Jesus' judgment. He simply speaks and by his word he judges nations and people and wicked humanity and even his church when they refused to obey him and give him exclusive allegiance. So that first chapter, provides a context in how we're to read the rest of John's apocalypse and the rest of his vision, by taking the symbols and images seriously, not literally, but as symbols and metaphorical depictions of certain places and events. We'll talk a little bit more about that.

But the difficulty is John doesn't do this for us anywhere else. There is one other place in chapter 17 where some of the symbols get interpreted, but it doesn't help us a whole lot. We'll see that when we get to chapter 17. But, in Revelation chapter 1, John gives us a clue as to how to interpret a couple of the symbols that provide a model for interpreting the rest of them, but the problem is John doesn't do this elsewhere.

So how can we figure out the meaning of these symbols? And how can we figure out what they actually might refer to what persons, places, and events? The first thing is to come to grips with the historical background and circumstances of Revelation, which is why we spent some time at the very beginning, talking a little bit about the Roman Empire, and the emperor, and the challenges that created for Christians, that can help us to understand, again perhaps why the beast most likely represents Rome or the Roman Empire for first century Christians reading this thing.

#### Old Testament Backgrounds

Elsewhere in Revelation, I think most of our help will come from realizing where



John gets these images. Most of them, as we've already said, come right out of the Old Testament as is very well known and at times we'll spend a little bit of time doing this at other times we can only go rather quickly. As is very well known, John never quotes the Old Testament, like you find, for example, in Matthew "as it is written," or "thus says the prophet" or "just as was written or predicted in the prophet Isaiah" or something like that. Instead, John takes language and images from the Old Testament and weaves them into his own discourse. So by going back and understanding the Old Testament background and source of these images, we're often able better to understand their meaning and also sometimes exactly what they might be referring to.

#### Greco-Roman Imagery

But the other source is, I'm convinced also that a lot of John's images would have resonated with the Greco-Roman background, that is, some of the literature, some of the language, some of the images that would have been familiar to the readers and the Greco-Roman world and from Greco-Roman literature. John may use those images to describe what he saw as well. In fact, I'm convinced a lot of times, and we'll see this, John may use images because they're evocative of more than one background. He may choose to use an image to describe what he saw or a symbol because not only does it come out the Old Testament and resonates with the Old Testament Jewish background, but it also has parallels with, and resonates with the Greco-Roman background as well. So for readers who are probably familiar with the Old Testament who were well ensconced in the Roman Empire and Greco-Roman society would have been able to draw connections perhaps both ways. So I wonder if at times John did not deliberately choose some of his symbols and images because they were evocative of more than 1 background.

#### Good Commentaries

One of the keys, and I think this is inescapable, is to understand and unpack some of John's symbols and images is here, if ever, you just need to use good commentaries, I would recommend the commentaries by Greg Beale and David Aune and Grant Osborne and even an older one by George Caird and some of the work by Richard Bauckham, all provide highly reliable guides for unpacking the background of some of the images and

their meaning and also what they refer to. That last one is the most difficult. Sometimes it's very difficult to determine exactly who or what the images and symbols are referring to. I wonder if sometimes that is because we need to focus more on the meaning of the symbols rather than on exactly what they're referring to or exactly what they're depicting. Whether we can be confident that it refers to Rome or the Roman Empire or we're not sure which, at the same time we can still understand the meaning of the beast. The image of a beast as we'll see actually had a fairly long history going all the way back to the Old Testament. In the Old Testament text you find this in the Psalms, you find this in the prophetic literature where a beast or dragon type figure or serpent type figure was often used not only in Genesis 3 to depict Satan but throughout the history of God's people was often used to depict oppressive godless idolatrous foreign nations or rulers. So John has used an image that actually has a long history of meaning that it brings with it. John doesn't just pull it out of thin air, but John uses an image that has a long history of describing wicked godless rulers and oppressive nations. So at the very least when we read this we should understand that the beast represents a nation, a ruler, a kingdom that is violent and oppressive and godless and idolatrous and opposed to God and his people.

But again I think with the historical background perhaps we can fill out in a little more detail and understand most likely, given the context in which Revelation was written, it's hard for me to think that the first readers would not have read Revelation 13 and the beast as representing or referring to the Roman empire or the Emperor himself. Especially since it has a history in the Old Testament referring to nations and rulers, as well, being opposed to God's people. But other than that sometimes I think we need to focus more in the meaning and theological significance of those images rather than getting too caught up with exactly what they refer to and exactly what person or event or what precisely those are pointing to and referring to and sometimes that's the tricky one.

#### Log Cabin and Political Cartoons Analogy

I remember one time, I like to tell this story to describe, at least as a partial analogy to describing the struggle that we face when we interpret Revelation's images and symbols. One time when I was living in Montana, a rancher called me one day and

asked if I would help him dismantle a log cabin. It was a log cabin that had been built in the 1930's or so, and some of the logs, it had been abandoned for years, but some of the logs were still very good and in good shape, and the rancher wanted to keep those to build his own cabin. So with the help of a couple implements or machines and our bare hands, we were going to dismantle this cabin and keep the good logs. As we were doing that I began to notice that between the logs, probably stuffed in there to fill holes and cracks to keep out the cold Montana winds, I found newspapers and I pulled a couple out and I looked at them. They were dated from the 40's and 50's quite early, and one of the things that caught my attention was the political cartoons. I looked at a couple of them and I began to realize that I had no idea what they were talking about. Number one, although some of the symbols I recognized, there were some symbols I simply wasn't familiar with. Second, my 1940's or 1950's political and historical knowledge escaped me at that point. I wasn't sure exactly what was going on in the United States and in the world that these images and symbols in this political cartoon were probably referring to. That's kind of what we're up against when we're reading the book of Revelation. Number one, some of the images and symbols are unfamiliar to us that would have been familiar to John and his first readers. Second, we're not entirely certain as to what exactly all the things that were going on and exactly the events and persons and things that John was predicting or talking about or referring to or describing. So that's why I say I think we need to rely on some of the better commentaries and pay attention to the Old Testament, and know as much as we can about the Greco Roman world, to try to come up with as best as possible what most likely did these images and symbols mean? Theologically, what meaning were they trying to convey? Then again, what might they refer to, persons, places, events in the modern day of the readers but also in the future as well. So that is the first principle in interpreting Revelation, we must interpret it symbolically, not literally.

I like to say Revelation is more like walking through an art gallery and seeing different artistic depictions, sometimes of the same event and situation. It's more like that than watching a CNN news flash or documentary that we're to read as a more literal,

straight forward historical description. Revelation is more artistic. Yes, it refers to actual events and persons and places but it describes them more artistically in the language of symbol and metaphor. To take Revelation seriously, not literally, we must take seriously its symbols and images.

The second principle in interpreting Revelation is to realize that Revelation, as an apocalypse, as a prophecy, and as a letter, is probably going to be about both the present and the future and even at times, perhaps the past. I would say primarily at least I would say of the greatest importance would be the present element. That is, Revelation is trying to help, the readers make sense of the present situation. As an apocalypse, it's trying to unveil reality so they can see behind the empirical world in which they live, there's a whole new reality that lies behind it and somehow influences it. That will help the readers make more sense of their situation. So I would say much of Revelation is probably an apocalyptic description and prophetic description and critique and evaluation of the reader's first century situation living under the Roman Empire. This is another reason we spent some time trying to unpack the historical situation behind Revelation. But much of Revelation probably describes present persons and events of the first century, even though we can't always be sure of exactly what those are. Sometimes we're the ones in the dark about that. Revelation seems, to most importantly, help its first readers come to grips with and understand how they should respond in light of their present situation.

But clearly, Revelation does include future events. Especially when you get to chapters 19 and 22, you're clearly in the future, at what theologians call the second coming of Christ. There we find history coming to its conclusion with Christ arriving, or breaking into history and arriving on the scene of history to now set up his kingdom. Revelation as a prophet, as a prophecy, and as an apocalypse, it is and does project the present onto the broader screen of God's intention for all of world history. It does depict future judgment and future salvation just as Old Testament prophets did. So there are clear references to the future throughout Revelation, but usually Revelation does that by placing its present circumstances against the screen or against the backdrop of the broader screen of God's intention to bring history to its conclusion. Again that's part of

helping the readers make better sense of their present situation.

#### Rev 12:1-8 as Symbolic

But there is at least one, example of Revelation especially in chapter 4 through 22, the prophetic apocalyptic proper section we might say of Revelation. In chapter 12:1-8 let me read this: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head.” If you doubt Revelation’s symbolic, where have you ever seen a woman like that with twelve stars and the moon under her feet and clothed with the sun clearly drawn as this is whatever he’s referring to he’s describing it in highly symbolic language. Verse 2: She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. Again, clearly we’re in the realm of symbolic visionary material. “His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter,” an allusion to Psalm chapter 2. “And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.”

It’s almost impossible not to read this without thinking of and seeing this as a reference to the birth of Christ. And almost every commentary I’ve read reads it that way. So, here, at least, even if he were writing in the 60’s, if he is writing in the mid-90’s AD, John is referring to an event that occurred almost 90 years earlier. He is referring to the birth of Christ itself. Clearly, it is a past event from the perspective of John writing much later. So at least in chapter 12 we find a reference to an event not in the future but in the past. So Revelation probably should be read as a combination of events and persons and places that in depicting events that take place in the present, but also in the future and perhaps occasionally events that have already transpired in the past.

Now what this means, too, is an important feature of Revelation we are still talking about the principle number two Revelation is about the present and the future and also, at times, perhaps the past.

### Cyclical Aspect of Revelation

In regard to that, an important principle for understanding Revelation is Revelation, although there is a logic to it and kind of a literarily at least, a linear progression, it does appear that Revelation temporally seems to cycle. It seems to act more like a cycle, that is, over and over again Revelation will begin by describing events I think in the first century during the days of the reader and their contemporary situation help make sense of it. Then it will end by referring to the end of history, to the future, or again what theologians call the second coming of Christ. Then we'll back right up and do it again. We'll describe the present and that will lead right into the future salvation and judgment, then the author will back up again. So it kind of goes cyclically as far as the time period refers to, so that once again it will start by describing the present, and then place that against the backdrop of God's intention to bring history to its conclusion.

So for example, in chapter 6, I'll just use a couple of examples, at the very end of chapter 6 we read this: starting on verse 12 this records the seven seals that get broken and as each seal is unsealed. Something happens and this is where you have the four horsemen. We'll talk more about that, but the very last seal in chapter 6 it's described. Seal number 6 [Rev 6:12]: John says, "I watched as he opens the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree." Again, principle number 1, authors using highly symbolic language we'll talk about this later "like a fig tree when shaken by the strong wind." The sky we see like a scroll rolling up "and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who could stand?"

We'll see later on that John actually draws on Old Testament text for all this language of stars falling, and moons like blood red and mountains falling and people hiding in caves. This comes out of the Old Testament but clearly John is referring to

the final judgment at this point. This is the second coming of Christ. This is the end of history. So chapter 6 has already brought us to the end, but as you realize, we still have 16 chapters more to go in Revelation, and so we're not done.

Chapter 7, again I will read this, but chapter 7 ends with God's people standing before the throne of God and celebrating their final salvation, their eschatological salvation yet again we still have 15 more chapters to go. Or chapter 11, which also ends with this, verse 15: "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, [this is at the end of the series of trumpets now after the seals, the seventh angel sounded his trumpet] and there were loud voices in heaven which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on the thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God," etc. etc. Clearly again we are at the end where the kingdom has now become God's kingdom and he will now reign for ever and ever. Clearly we are at the end of history again yet we still have, what, 11 more chapters to go in Revelation. Chapter 14 gives images of both final salvation and final judgment, yet we still have several more chapters to go before we get to the end of the book. So Revelation over and over again brings you up to the brink, to the end, only to start over and give you another one to bring you to the end and to start over. So you have this pattern of John cycling, where again, he'll describe using images and symbols he'll describe what's going on in the situation of his readers, what's going on in the first century, only then to move to the end of history to show how those events relate to, or how the future relates to those events. Then he'll back up and do it again and he'll back up and do it again. It's as if he's exploring the meaning of the reader's situation by using different images and different symbols to help them again come to grips with what it is they are experiencing. These different perspective are meant to help them get the picture and again this has another effect, the fact that the author brings you to the end only to back up again. It's as if he's wetting your appetite you get to the end of chapter 6 and that description of the end is sort of vague and kind of cryptic. It doesn't tell you a lot, and over and over again the author brings you to the end only to start over again and go back to the first century and describe

the events going on in his readers' day. It's as if the author's wetting your appetite for a fuller disclosure of the future of judgment and salvation and the reader is not disappointed.

When you get to chapters 19 and 22 the writer pulls out all the stops and gives you a full, what you've been waiting for, a full disclosure, a full description of the second coming of Christ, the grand finale of what will happen when Christ does return to set up his kingdom and to inaugurate a new creation, to reward his people with salvation and to bring judgment at his coming on evil, wicked humanity.

So first of all treat Revelation symbolically, interpret it symbolically, not literally, take it seriously but not literally as it refers to actual persons and events and places but it describes them in highly symbolic and metaphorical language. Second is, understand that Revelation is about most importantly probably the present trying to help the readers make sense of the present situation but about the future as well and sometimes the past.

Must Be Relevant and Understood by the First Century Author and Readers

Then a third principle is, and I think this is very important, interpretations of Revelation must be something that John could have intended and his first century readers could have understood. Let me say that again. Interpretations of Revelation must be consistent with what John could have intended and his first century readers could have understood. If not, I think any interpretation that John couldn't have possibly intended and his first century readers living in a pre-technological age living in a political situation very different from our own, any interpretation they could not have possibly understood should be rejected, in my opinion.

I was raised in an environment, also in a church environment that understood Revelation, going back to our very first, the very beginning of our discussion of Revelation where church history has often had an obsession with the book of Revelation. I was raised in an environment similar to the Left Behind series where basically the assumption seemed to be, though it wasn't clearly stated, that nobody really understood Revelation until today, until the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now we have the key, now we can look around and see all these events being fulfilled and taking place. Now we have the



key to interpreting Revelation and so at least the corollary to that would seem to be and no one else has understood it. First century readers had no idea what was going on, church history from the second to 20<sup>th</sup> century had no idea what was going on. Now all of the sudden, in the environment that I was taught to read Revelation, we have the key to interpreting Revelation. We can look around and see all these things taking place and we can read them and now we can actually see what John was referring to and predicting and trying to make sense of.

Obviously, that kind of reading depends on, misunderstanding what an apocalypse is and what a prophecy was. They were meant to speak to the first century, not just predict the future. But this type of reading depends almost solely on Revelation as a future prediction. Not just a few years into the future but centuries, far, far past what the first readers and what John could have ever conceived of. But again I think that needs to be turned on its head. The principle was apparently that we now have the key to reading Revelation. It was a complete mystery to the first century readers. That should be flipped on its head. I think the first century readers understood very well what was going on and we're the ones that are in the dark. We're the ones that need to do the hard work and try to figure out what was John intending to communicate to these readers and what, most likely, they would have understood. Again, recall that John, one of the interesting features of all the literary types of Revelation, apocalypse, a prophecy, a letter, they were all meant to communicate something to the contemporaries of the author. They were meant to say something about the present situation of the readers—not to predict some events far, far into the future. They were meant at least, yes they did refer to future events, but at the same time, they were meant to describe and to explain, and to provide a perspective on the present situation of the readers. So we should read Revelation then as addressing the specific issues and specific problems of the first century readers, not some shot-in-the-dark, way down centuries later down the historical tunnel from the perspective of the readers.

For example, beyond the fact that John chose to write in three literary genres that addressed the readers' own situation, it's interesting, number one, we already said a

letter, as a letter, John was trying to communicate information that would actually address the needs of the first century readers like any of Paul's letters. So, presumably then, as a letter Revelation is communicating information that was meant to be understood by the first readers, not something that was incomprehensible and only taking place way, way far beyond in the future, far beyond the horizons of the first century readers.

Furthermore, it's interesting to know how John ends his book. One of the references that I read earlier to the book of Revelation as a prophecy, in chapter 22 in verse 10, John, hearing the voice again clearly of an angel was addressing him from back up in verses 6 and following of chapter 22.

#### Revelation and Daniel Contrasted: Sealing Up?

Now in verse 10 here's what the angel says to him: "Then he [the angel] told me 'Do not seal up the words of this prophecy of this book because the time is near.'" It's interesting that this is the direct opposite strategy of what you find in the book of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, Daniel is told to seal up the prophecy because it's for a later time. Now John, and I think some other apocalypses also use this theme of sealing up the book, now John is told just the opposite. Don't seal it up. Why? Because it's not for some future time, the time of fulfillment is already here. This is for you, this is speaking to your own situation. This is not information for a distant future, this is not referring to events that will take place in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century or however long history goes on. Do not seal up the words of this prophecy because it's not for a later time and generation. Do not seal them up because it's directly relevant to the life of the first century readers. So therefore, again any interpretation, whether it's one that we come up with or one that we read, any interpretation that John could not have intended, or his first readers living in a pre-technological age, living in the first century, a specific political and religious and economic situation, anything they could not have intended or understood should probably be rejected, and any interpretation must be consistent with what John could have intended and what his readers would have grasped.

Again it's interesting, that's not a new principle when we think in terms of other

New Testament books. We're taught to read Paul's letters in light of what most likely was the situation Paul was addressing and what was he saying to his readers. We should read Revelation in the same way. I'm not saying it only refers to first century events and it's only relevant to the first century, we'll see later on that many of its images and symbols have the power and ability to even transcend the first century situation and continue to speak to God's people throughout the century leading up to whenever Christ brings history to a close. But, at the end of the day, we must begin with what John probably intended for his first century readers and what they most likely would have understood and picked up on.

#### Exhorting and Encouraging God's People

A fourth principle is we must read Revelation as intended to encourage and exhort God's people. It provided encouragement to a suffering, persecuted church, but even more so it provided exhortation to a compromising and complacent church. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not focus or read primarily as intended to persuade its readers to a certain course of action, to provide comfort for those who are suffering because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ, but exhorts and warns those who are compromising their faithfulness to Christ or who are so complacent to their surroundings that they are buying into what Rome was doing, any reading of Revelation that just sees it as a prediction of the future, or just uses it to feel enthusiasm about what's happening in the political situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or the nearness of Christ's return has completely missed the point of Revelation. It's not primarily about prediction of the future, yes it does have future elements in it, but it's not primarily about the prediction of the future, it's primarily a book of the encouragement and exhortation.

#### Main Message of Revelation

It's to get us to wake up and see what is really at stake. It's to get God's people to worship God and the Lamb no matter what the consequences. It's to remind us that nothing, no one, no entity, no nation, no person, no other thing is worthy of the exclusive worship that belongs only to God and Jesus Christ. In the words of John, it's trying to get us "to follow the Lamb wherever he goes" no matter what consequences that entails.

That's what Revelation is about. It is not primarily about predicting the future. It is not meant to satisfy our curiosity as to what's going to happen next and where we are situated in relationship to the end, to help us plot our existence on some chart as far as how close we are to the end. Anyone who reads Revelation and is not motivated to exclusive obedience to Christ, is not motivated to further holiness, is not motivated to worship God and the lamb no matter what the consequences has not yet heard Revelation accurately and clearly.

### Humility as an Interpretive Principle

Finally, and I think perhaps one of the most important principles is interpreting Revelation requires a good dose of humility. We must be willing to admit at times that we could be wrong or we're not sure. We must be willing to at least consider and listen to other ways of reading the book of Revelation. Revelation is not the place for dogmatic certainty on time events or how things are going to be fulfilled, or what exactly things are going to look like when Christ comes to consummate his purposes for history. Dogmatic assertions are simply out of place in reading a book like Revelation. Instead, not that we should not be certain about the meaning of the book at any time, not that we should not decide on how we interpret texts and hold to those, and even provide reasons why we hold to those interpretations, but at the end of the day we must approach the book in extreme humility, recognizing some of the difficulties that attend to trying to interpret and read the book, and recognizing the church has largely, throughout history, disagreed on many points of interpretation. Here, if ever, again I would repeat, here if ever we need to rely, I think, on some of the better commentaries to help us to read Revelation. Those who have thought about the book, those who have done the research and the work to try to make sense of the book and that can function as our teachers and our guides through a difficult book like Revelation.

### Summary of the Five Principles for Interpreting Revelation

So keep those five principles in mind as you read and interpret Revelation, and as we move through the book. We will refer back to these principles at times and even if we don't explicitly do so, hopefully you'll be able to draw the connection at times. Again

number one: Revelation is to be interpreted symbolically and not literally, yes it does refer to actual persons, places, and events, in the present, in the future, but it refers to those symbolically so we must take Revelation's images and symbols seriously, though not literally. Second, it's about the present and the future most likely, and at times the past. Third, any interpretation of Revelation must be something John could have intended, and his first century readers could have grasped and made sense of. Fourth, Revelation must be read primarily as an encouragement and warning to the people of God. It must be read as an encouragement to those who are suffering but as a warning and a wake-up call to those who are compromising their faith in Jesus Christ. And finally, our interpretations and our reading of Revelation must always be tempered with a good dose of humility.

#### Numbers in Revelation

One other feature of Revelation that I want to just describe very briefly relates to number one and is kind of an excursus that goes back to principle number one that we need to interpret the book symbolically and not literally is the fact that among other images and symbols, and we'll deal with those throughout the book of Revelation, but one of the interesting things that you find in Revelation is a book full of numbers. There are all sorts of different numbers and multiples of numbers or fractions that we find throughout the book. There are references to different time periods, different numerical values found throughout the book of Revelation and obviously the number 7 is probably the one that jumps to your mind immediately. You're actually confronted with the significant of numbers at the very beginning of the book when in chapter 1 in verse 12 in John's vision of the son of man he sees the son of man holding 7 golden lamp stands and 7 stars. So already the number 7 plays a key role in the first chapter of Revelation and the 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3, which actually were mentioned already in chapter 1. The number 7 playing a key role in the 7 seals the 7 bowls, or the 7 trumpets the 7 bowls and the number 7 occurring a couple other times, the 7 spirits of God in chapter 1 and also in chapter 5 verses 4 and 5. So the number 7 is the most obvious example that plays a key role.

One of the questions is how should we deal with the numbers in Revelation. Interestingly, I find sometimes that interpreters of Revelation who are quite willing to interpret it symbolically elsewhere still insist on taking the numbers with an unusual strict literalism. That the numbers mean exactly what they say. If the author talks about 7, there must be exactly 7 or something like that. Sometimes they recognize yes, there is some symbolic value to it but still it must be taken as the literal numerical value of that number. So the number 7, it may have symbolic connotations, but we should still take it as referring to a literal number 7 of whatever it's referring to. I would suggest to you though that our interpretive principle number one, interpret it symbolically, not literally applies to the number as well. The numbers are not in Revelation for their literal value, or their literal numerical value, but the numbers are there because of what they symbolically connote, and what they suggest on the symbolic level.

So what I want to do is just discuss very briefly some of the primary numbers that one finds about Revelation and what their symbolic values should be. So, for example, let's start with the number  $3\frac{1}{2}$ , that literally in Revelation is times, time, and half a time, which basically is understood as  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years. Probably the number  $3\frac{1}{2}$  or  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years that you find in chapter 11 and 12, 13, kind of in the center of the book of Revelation, you'll find references to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years, again some of your translations might have times, time, and half a time,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years should probably be understood as simply half of 7. 7 being the number of perfection and completion that we'll see in just a moment, 7 being the number of perfection and completion,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  falls short of that. So probably when the author talks about a period of time that characterized as  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years, he's not talking about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years of 360 days, he's using  $3\frac{1}{2}$  symbolically, it's only half of 7. It falls short of 7. I take it the  $3\frac{1}{2}$  means a rather intense period of time that gets cut short. It falls far short of the perfect number 7. It's only half of that. So again  $3\frac{1}{2}$  is not there for its literal numerical or temporal value, the significance of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  is not how long the period of time lasts, the significance is what it symbolizes, what it says about that, that it's however intense that period of time may be. It simply won't last, it falls short of 7.

Another number is 4, the number 4 probably symbolizes the entire earth, similar to

what we might say the four corners of the earth. For example, the 4 living creatures in Revelation 4 and 5, the 4 is not significant for there's literally 4 of them, but symbolically the number 4 symbolizes the entire earth. The entire globe is now under consideration.

The number 6 probably signifies again, imperfection, it falls one short of the number 7. The number 7 we've already seen symbolizes perfection and completion, so again the significance is not a literal number 7 times or 7 things that take place, but 7 symbolically probably goes back to Genesis 1 and 2, and the 7 days of creation, the number 7 is important for symbolizing completion or perfection.

The number 10 and its multiples, so we are not only talking about these numbers in and of themselves, but their multiples. The number 10 signifies completion or wholeness, it's a large round number that signifies the wholeness of 10 and its multiples.

Number 12, another significant number, the number 12 and its multiples like 144 or 144,000, or just the number 12 or even 24, adding 12 and 12. The number 12 signifies or symbolizes the people of God modeled after the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. The 12 apostles in the New Testament, so when you see 12 or its multiples, again the significance is not the literal number of 12, but what 12 symbolizes. 12 symbolizes the people of God.

We also find a number of fractions in Revelation whether  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{1}{3}$ , again the fractions are not there for their precise mathematical value, but the fractions symbolize a fragment or what is partial or what is limited. So we'll see, for example, when God pours out the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments often a third of the earth gets harmed or only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the earth or  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the population. Again it's not meant so that we figure how many people are alive now then we siphon off a fourth as those subject to judgment, again the point is the symbolic value of these numbers. The fractions represent something that is fragmented or something that is only partial or something that is limited in its scope. That's the significance of the fragment. So I would suggest then that we interpret the numbers in Revelation not for their literal value, not for their literal mathematical value, or not for their literal temporal value, but we also interpret the numbers for their symbolic value and meaning.

Preview of Next Session

So, having talked a little bit about the hermeneutical principles that will guide us in the interpretation, in the next section we are going to begin with Revelation chapter 1. We'll begin to work through each section of John's apocalypse, his prophecy, his letter, and be alert to the symbols and images, and be alert to the type of literature that we're reading and how that makes a difference in the way we actually interpret the text.

Transcribed by Joe Olszak  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt



Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 4

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Revelation 1

Introduction

Now that we have provided the historical, framework and literary framework for reading and interpreting Revelation, what I want to do now is begin to work through the book itself, starting at the first chapter. The way we are going to look at it and the method that we'll follow is twofold. Number one, I want to begin each section by giving you a sense of the overall function and its context and overall meaning of the vision or the section that we are dealing with. Then, the second is, in light of that we will examine some, not all of the details, the language, visions or symbols, looking at the background on the meaning and how they function as well. Again, I do not want to look at every single detail; I do not want to repeat what you can find in other commentaries. But, I do want to spend some time at exploring, examining some of the more significant details in each of the section.

Revelation 1

So we will start with chapter one. Chapter one actually can be divided into two separate sections. Chapter one and the first eight verses, which we have already seen, starting with verse 4 through verse 8 is sort of the epistolary introduction to the book as a letter and as an epistle, though it expands and contains a lot more than you are used to seeing in one of Paul's letters, for example, in his introductions. Chapter 1 verses 8 through 20 functions as the inaugural vision of Jesus Christ.

So verses 1 through 8, functions as introduction to the nature and character of the book. It almost tells us how it's meant to be read and how we are to approach it. It also seems to introduce us the major ideas and some of the major themes that will get picked up and developed in the rest of the book. Then as we said, 1:9 through the rest of chapter one is an inaugural vision of Christ, who comes to now to commission John to bring a message to the seven churches which will get further developed in chapters 2 and 3.

The other thing is verses 9 through 20 in the second section also function to provide legitimacy or authenticity to the Revelation that John and the messages that he is going to bring to churches in chapter 3. I am not sure whether it is quite a prophetic calling. We will see in chapter 1, a lot of evidence exactly like the prophetic call narratives that you will find in some of the prophetic literature in the Old Testament. But it is clearly commissioning; John is now being commissioned to address seven churches and also it functions to provide authentication, legitimation for the rest of the book of the Revelation as well in chapters 4 through 20. It does so by grounding John's vision in no one less than the exalted, resurrected Christ, who now reveals himself to John, and commissions him to bring the authoritative messages to seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.

In chapter 1, we will actually find, and we won't look at all of these, but we will try to highlight the most important ones. In chapter 1, we find John gathering language and images, especially from the Old Testament, and especially the Old Testament prophets such as Daniel. Daniel chapter 7, where Daniel has the vision of the Son of Man plays a very crucial role in John's vision of Christ in this inaugural vision in chapter 1; and again we will look at some of these.

#### Rev 1:1-2 Revelation of Jesus Christ

So, let's look at those two sections in little bit more detail. Chapter 1, verses 1 through 8 introduces character of the book, what kind of book it is and how it is to be read. It introduces some of the major themes that will get developed in the rest of the book and provides the framework for reading the rest of the book of Revelation. As we have already said, Revelation begins by identifying itself, or John begins the work by identifying it as a revelation or apocalypse of Jesus Christ. We have already said, so I do not want to spend a lot more time on it; that, at this point, the title "apocalypse," most of your English translations will translate rather "revelation." But in the title, the word "apocalypse" was not yet a title for a type of literature or literary genre. However, by labeling his work as "revelation," John does expect us to read this book within the context of other texts that provided divine revelation. His will be, especially, in the form

of a vision. So we should expect to find, in the book of Revelation, an unveiling, disclosing and uncovering of God's will and God's intention and God's word for his people, revealing, unveiling of the true nature of the situation in which the readers find themselves. It is interesting that we find this title, this term, "revelations," as the title of this book: the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Most English translations translated it as the "Revelation of Jesus Christ," which is rather ambiguous. Most commentaries debate over what is this revelation is about. Is Jesus Christ is content of what is revealed, or Jesus Christ is the one who is doing revealing? It can go either way. Some who don't want to decide opt for both. Both are revelation about Jesus. Jesus is the content of the revelation, he is also the one who is subject of the revelation; and he is the one who is doing revealing.

However, in my opinion, as you read the text carefully, again, look at verses 1 and 2, "the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." Notice this, sort of, chain of revelation or chain of communication begins with God, then Jesus Christ, and then to the angels, then his servant John. In light of that, I think we should take this as Jesus Christ is the one who is doing the revealing. He is the subject, not the content, although I want to say that is not true, especially in chapter 1. Jesus, indeed, is the one who reveals. But, if you read the whole book of Revelation, it reveals more than just the person of Christ. There are images of judgment, there are images of salvation; Revelation reveals true nature of the Roman Empire. So the focus is not so much on Jesus as the content of the revelation and what is revealed, although that is true. But in 1:1 in this revelation of Jesus Christ, I think it should be understood as the revelation of Jesus Christ as it is the revelation that Jesus Christ himself gives. Jesus is the agent of this revelation that is now given to John.

The second feature of this introduction, chapter 1, verses 1 through 8, notice the phrase the "testimony" or "the witness of Jesus Christ." So John says, this is the revelation of Jesus Christ, "he has made it known by saying to his angel to his servant, John, who testifies everything that he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of

Jesus Christ.” Here I think, the emphasis is on Jesus himself as the one who testifies to the content of the book. Jesus, again, is providing authenticity to the authority to the book.

Jesus Christ is the one who witnesses to the content in the information that is now revealed to John. In fact, this phrase introduces a very important concept for the rest of the book of Revelation. That is, the terms, “witness,” or “testimony.” It is important to understand, at this point, first of all, it is tempting to read these terms “witness,” or “testimony,” which is what you find in most English translations. But this Greek word that was translated “witness,” or “testimony,” is the word for which we get our English word, “martyr.” So it is tempting to read this as; when we find the word “testimony,” or “witness,” throughout the book of Revelation in terms of “martyr.” That is, most of the time we use the word, “martyr,” at least in Christian circles, in terms of someone who has died for their faith; someone who has been put to death for their faith in Jesus Christ. At this point in church history, and at this point of writing of the New Testament, the word does not quite mean that yet. The word simply means “to witness” or “to testify” to something. But Revelation does make it clear already that witnessing and testifying to something often results in a death of the one witnessing. Later on, it did come to mean “one who dies,” because of the faith of that witness. But at this point, the words, “witness,” or “testimony,” do not quite mean what we mean by “martyr.” Although again, I do want to make it clear, John is convinced that the witness or testimony that Jesus gives, that John gives, to what he saw and which Christians are supposed to give throughout the Revelation, that witness or testifying to the person of Jesus Christ does often, and can be expected often to result in the suffering and death of the one who witnesses. We saw that John was aware of one person who had already died; he witnessed the faith of faithful witness Antipas, who clearly died for his testimony or his witness.

So the book of Revelation is a testimony or witness of Jesus; Jesus is testifying and witnessing to what now John writes. John writes himself and, especially the other Christians are also called upon to be a witness or to testify to the truth and reality of Jesus

Christ through the book, which often results in their deaths.

#### Rev 1:1-8 Prophecy

The third thing to say about this introductory section in chapter 1:1-8, as we have already seen, this is where John also clearly identifies the work as prophecy. In verse 3, this is where we find John saying, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.” It is interesting that John distinguishes between the one who reads and one who hears it. This probably simply reflects the way the revelation would have been communicated in the churches. Someone would have read it and the rest would have heard it read, most likely in one setting perhaps.

But, what is interesting here is the blessing is pronounced on the one who hears it and who keeps or takes to heart what is read or what they hear. That is Revelation as prophecy is clearly meant to be taken seriously and therefore to be obeyed. So again, Revelation is not primarily a book about predicting the future, but already John is telling us there is blessing for the one who hears it and who actually responds in obedience to what John is going to say. Again, that situation is the first century readers, who were tempted to compromise with the pagan Roman rule, and perhaps to compromise their faithfulness and exclusive allegiance to Christ for allegiance to the emperor, maybe some of them are trying to avoid persecution by thinking they can combine emperor worship and worship of Jesus Christ. Revelation as the book is meant to be kept and observed and obeyed; not just for information that tells us about the future.

#### Rev 1:4-8 Epistle/Letter

Fourth, Revelation also, as we have already seen, is clearly a letter. In chapter 1 verses 4 through 8, John addresses his work in epistolary form using the format of a typical first century letter. Although he is unique in how he expands the introduction, John uses this to address seven specific churches. So, in other words, Revelation is meant to communicate and to address this specific situation of seven historical churches in Asia Minor, or Western Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. Seven churches that John names and can be identified as churches existing in the center of the imperial Roman rule.

What is unique about this introduction is, interestingly, John also tells us that he wants us to read the rest of the book in trinitarian fashion. Notice the references to, first of all, in this greeting this epistolary reading he begins, “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” We will talk about that in a little bit. There is clear reference to the sovereign God; God the Father is over all thing and then from the seven spirits. Probably the number seven here should not be taken literally for seven separate spirits, but, seven as the symbol of fullness and perfection and completion. This is seen as the fullness of God’s spirit. So, I do not think it is referencing seven separate spirits. But it is a reference to the Holy Spirit, himself, who was before the throne. Then verse 5, “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness.” There is the term “witness” again. “The faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” So at the beginning, John tells us he wants us to read the book in trinitarian fashion that God the father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit all will be involved in this book and the process of revelation and the outworking of God’s purposes and intensions for humanity and for the world.

A second feature of this letter introduction in verses 4 through 8 is the dimension of throne in verse 4. Notice God is described as the one who is and is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne. This term “throne,” already introduces an important theme or concept that not only gets developed throughout the rest of the Revelation, but is crucial for understanding the beginning of it. That is, Revelation deals with the issue with the question of who is truly in control. Who is truly sovereign over the universe? Who is truly in control over destiny of humanity? Who is truly the sovereign ruler over all the affairs of the world and of universe? This dimension of the book brings Revelation already in direct conflict with claims of the Roman Empire. It was Caesar who was on the throne; and according to the Roman way of viewing things, Caesar was on his throne; Caesar was the sovereign ruler of the world; Caesar was the one in charge of the destiny of humanity; Caesar was the one who claimed sovereignty and claimed to be divine; and now by using the word “throne,” I am convinced that John intended this probably, but any first century reader reading this would have understood that this was direct

counterclaim to Caesar. No one else's throne was important but Jesus Christ.

I am also convinced too. Maybe we will mention this elsewhere, I oppose one of the common understandings that one of the reasons why John wrote the way he did with the symbols and images was, to hide the information from getting into the wrong hands. If Caesar would have seen this, or someone such as one of the local authorities in town would have read this, they would have been confused by the symbolism and images. So, it was, meant to hide its message from unbelieving world should they have received it. However, I am convinced that was not the case. John was not trying to write them, neither he was trying to hide anything. I cannot imagine that anybody outside of the church in one of the cities, not to mention Rome, would have picked this up and read that there is a throne. The immediate question would have been raised in their minds that, "There is another throne but Caesar's?" So I understand this, in a sense, John is being very culturally counter imperial. He is laying claim to sovereignty and the throne and the ruler-ship that was not of this world that does not belong to Caesar, but belongs solely to God and to the Holy Spirit and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Also, notice the fact that Jesus himself was called "the ruler of kings of the earth." Again, this would be something that most people would have associated with Caesar. But now, John is claiming this for Jesus Christ. Do you already see what John is doing? He is introducing the way his book to be read. It is addressing specific situation to his readers, but already, John is being counter imperial. He is already introducing the only one who has the right to the throne; the only one who has the right to the claim of authority; the only one who has the right to the true worship of the people of God and that is only God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

#### Rev 1:5-8--Who is the True Sovereign?

In verse 5 through 8, we find more specifically what Christ, God and Holy Spirit have done for the people. Verse 4 and verse 5 have introduced exactly who it is providing the revelation for John. Who it is truly sovereign? Now versed 5 through 8 go on to describe exactly what the sovereign God has done for his people, exactly what the Holy Spirit and exactly what Jesus Christ has done for the seven churches. Notice halfway

through verse 5, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priest to serve his God and Father--to him the glory and power for ever and ever, Amen.”

So, first of all, in these two verses, verses 5 and 6, what Jesus has done is describe in language full of Exodus imagery. Notice this language of redeeming us by his blood. That recalls what God did for his people redeeming them and freeing them from bondage in Egypt. Now, as John wants to say, a new Exodus has now been achieved by God, through the person of Jesus Christ who is now redeeming his people for himself.

### Exodus Imagery

We talked about five principles of interpreting revelation. Perhaps, we can add another one. I did not want to add another one because I do not want to have six. Another principle that can be added falls under the principle of symbolism but that would be to read the New Testament in connection with and with light and constant interaction with the Old Testament. In my opinion, we hinted at this already. But I do not think you can fully understand Revelation apart from understanding its constant relationship to and constant interaction with the Old Testament text. Here is one of them. This is full of Old Testament Exodus language. But notice too, it is almost as if John is assuming a narrative, not only was Israel redeemed and freed from Egypt, but God redeemed and freed them according to the book of Exodus. So, in chapter 19 verse 6 of Exodus, it says they would be “a kingdom of priests” for God which is exactly what you find here. John reiterates the language of Exodus and says, God has freed us in a new Exodus. God has freed and redeemed his people in a new exodus out of Rome. Now they are to function like the old Israelites, they were to function as God’s kingdom and priest to serve God the Father “to him the glory and power for ever and ever, Amen.” In other words, God’s intention for Israel is fulfilled in a new community that is the church which is made up of Jews and Gentiles. Go back and read Ephesians 2 sometime, especially verse 22 to see Paul’s understanding of the basis for this. So now, God’s intention for Israel to redeem them and to create a kingdom of priests now has been achieved by God redeeming his people from every tribe and every nation, out from the oppression of Roman Empire.



Now to be a kingdom and priests for God, a community is now all centered around the person of Jesus Christ. So it is interesting already John conceives in first chapter of a community that will already represent the person of Jesus Christ, that will represent God and his kingdom as a kingdom of priests. John already recognizes that Christ is creating a community of people that will represent his rule over all the earth, incidentally what Adam and Eve were supposed to do in the Garden, and Israel was supposed to do but God's Messiah was supposed to do, and what God's king was supposed to do in the Old Testament. Now, through Jesus Christ, humanity finally achieves by a new community that Christ creates that represents his rule and kingdom as an anticipation in the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. Already, God is creating that community to be his faithful witness to function as his kingdom and priests.

The rest of Revelation will be how this works out and how the church was to do this. They will be his kingdom and priests though. It is interesting that Revelation is going to make it clear and you already find this in chapter 1. They will do this through suffering; and almost ironically they will be a kingdom and priests, they will represent God's rule, but they will do so through suffering and conflict and for some of them, ultimately their death. But, these words already provide comfort in the midst all of this. Christ is already creating his people. Christ already has a kingdom of priests who will function as God's representatives of his rule and of his presence in the world. Revelation 21 and 22 is the climax of that. Already God's intention for humanity form a community of a kingdom and priests who will be his faithful witnesses even in the midst of suffering and conflict. God has already established that through creating a people.

Now I cannot help think that John may have intended this and his readers would have seen this as anti-Roman rhetoric. That is, God's people already represent a kingdom and priesthood. There is already a kingdom that challenges the kingdom and rule of Rome, consisting of God's people themselves. Now to move this story, first God has redeemed and released people through the blood of Jesus Christ and he has done that in order to create a community, a kingdom and priests, in fulfillment of the Old Testament. God's intentions in the Exodus are now achieved through new people made of Jews and

Gentiles. The church was to be his kingdom of priests. Chapter 1:7, then, anticipates the future. Using language from Daniel chapter 7 and Zechariah 12, John says, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” So God’s kings and priests live in anticipation, live out their lives and they maintain their faithful witness, in anticipation of the day when Christ will come and consummate history when he will bring judgment and salvation. So, the point of verse 7 is Christ coming as imminent. Christ is coming to bring history to its conclusion as promised in the Old Testament prophets is imminent. Therefore, this kingdom and priesthood should live in light of this. The coming of Christ should motivate and sustain this new people, his kingdom of priests to carry out their mission of being faithful witnesses found in verses 5 and 6.

#### Rev 1:8 Titles of God

All of this then is grounded in verse 8 in two titles, particularly used to refer God. Those verse 8, after this, verse 7, which demonstrates and already anticipates the future in light of which God’s kingdom and priests should live. Verse 8 grounds all of this in the character of God himself in two titles. Number one, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Actually, there are three. The last one is the title, “Almighty.” But I want to focus on the first two. The first one is “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” The second is, “I am,” God is described as the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” The first one, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” being first and last letters of the alphabet. Even today if you think about it and you can deduce why exactly John chose the “Alpha and the Omega,” or A and the Z to use the American alphabet. The “Alpha and the Omega,” probably here is interpreting a saying that one finds or a title applied to God from the Old Testament in the book of Isaiah, that is the title, “First and the Last.” If you go back to Isaiah chapter 41:4, interestingly too, much of Isaiah 40, especially 40 through 66, describes God’s future salvation of his people Israel, in terms of a new Exodus. We have already seen John applying Exodus language to the people of God. He is redeeming them by the by the Lamb and making them a kingdom of priests, what God intended for Israel, now is for his

new people of the church. But now notice in Isaiah chapter 41 in verse 4, “Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord--with the first of them and with the last--I am he.” Also, let me skip ahead to 44 and 43:10. Also 44:6: “This is what the Lord says--Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” The “Alpha and the Omega,” we will see later on in Revelation John will use “Alpha and the Omega,” again with the terms “First and Last.” “Alpha and the Omega,” then, I think is meant to recall Isaiah 41:4 and Isaiah 44:6 – the title applied to God in the Old Testament as “First and the Last.”

Obviously, if one thinks of about it, this probably refers to God as standing at the beginning and at the end of history, and everywhere in between. This is the title that demonstrates God is the sovereign ruler of all of history. But there is something else significant about it. In the context of Isaiah 41 and 43 and 44, where it occurs, it occurs in the context of God being the exclusive God over against other idols. So by claiming God as the “Alpha and the Omega,” that is the “First and the Last,” from Isaiah 41:4 and 44:6, for example, John is claiming in the context of the Roman Empire where there were other gods and you have Caesar clamoring for attention and full authority and exclusive worship and allegiance that belongs to God. Now by using this title, John is taking a text from the Old Testament from the context where God’s absolute authority and sovereignty, his absolute uniqueness is over against every other god. His exclusive right to worship and sovereignty in the face of other gods and idols, now John uses that to demonstrate once again the exclusive sovereignty of God and the exclusive worship that belongs to God over all over Rome’s idols.

The second title is God is described as the “one who is, and the one who was, and the one who is coming.” As most of us realize this probably also expands on and draws on an Old Testament text – God’s words in Exodus 3:14, when God tells Moses that he is the “I am.” But the “who was and who is coming,” are the ones that are absent in that formula. When you add all of these up, when John describes God as the one who was and the who is and the one who is coming, this probably is a formula that expresses God’s

eternity, who stands at the beginning of history and he is the one who stands at the end of the history and beyond. He is everywhere in between as well.

Therefore, God not only stands at the beginning of the history as the creator and the originator as we will see in chapter 4 of the Revelation, he also stands in the midst of history, he is with his people and he is present with his people. So it is not just a title of God's exalted status, far beyond his creation. It is also indicating not only God's eternity as the one who stands before creation, but as the one who is in creation, who is present with his people. But he is also the one who is to come; that is, God is the one who will consummate history. The coming of God is one of the main themes of Revelation. It anticipates God's coming through his son Jesus Christ to bring history to a close.

So already these titles anticipate important themes and perspectives for reading Revelation. God is the one who sits at the beginning and at the end, the Alpha and Omega, he is the one who was and the one who is and the one who is to come. He is sovereign over history, he is present with his people; he will bring in the consummation. In the meantime, to worship anything or anyone else is simply a idolatry. One should not fail to recognize the Alpha and Omega, the sovereign God who is the exclusive the Lord of the universe and the only one worthy of our worship.

So already the seven churches are meant to take comfort in this. God stands at the beginning of history, he is now present with seven churches; and he assures them of future that he will bring things, the history, to its consummation. So what have they to fear from the hostile world? What have they to fear from the Roman Empire? Why would they want to give their allegiance to anyone or anything else? And as kings and priests then, they have no other option, but every motivation and reason to maintain their faithful witness in the hostile Roman world in which they would find themselves.

So, already chapter 1:1-8 provides an important perspective for reading the rest of the book of Revelation. It introduces us to the important themes, the way that God is to be understood; and the role that God and Jesus Christ and the Spirit play throughout the rest of Revelation. It is a reminder of the exclusive allegiance that was owed to God and

to Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ and God are the ones who will bring history to their consummation.

### Rev 1:9-20 Inaugural Vision

Verses 9-20, then, move on then to the inauguration, or inaugural vision that John has of Jesus Christ to come to commission him to address the seven churches of the Revelation in chapters 2 and 3. As we have said, these verses serve to authenticate John's vision to make it in a sense, more likely that readers respond and even accept what it is he says in the rest of the book; and to respond in the way that John calls for. It also demonstrates, as we will see, chapter 1 cannot really be separated from chapters 2 and 3. Let me say at this point to another excursus, and we will see and draw attention to this elsewhere. This is the kind of thing that makes it very difficult to outline Revelation and divide it. So many parts of it mesh together; we will see some sections actually function as conclusions to something before it, and at the same time, function as introduction to what comes after. So often, you find sections with revealing sections. Revelation is very difficult to come up with a precise outline. So I am not going to assume any specific outline, but at this point to recognize chapter 1 clearly provides an introduction to and is clearly related chapters 2 and 3, where John then tells he words of the risen Christ, which does address to seven churches, that are introduced in chapter 1.

Again, I want to say a handful of few things about this chapter. First of all, in this section, John already reminds us that he writes not as one who stands over his readers, but one who actually identifies with their plight. Notice, also the paradoxical phrase in verse 9, this is where we find, "I, John, your brother and companion." John writes as the one who actually identifies with the plight of his readers. It is interesting some have suggested, I am not certain about this, that John, just the fact that he was in exile on Patmos rather than executed shows something about his status; that he may have been more elite and wealthy in society. Now he chooses to stoop and identify with his suffering companions in their faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever the case though, John does write not as the one who stands over his readers, but one who identifies with them. Note the paradoxical phrase when he says; he identifies in their suffering and kingdom. That is

not the kind of combination that you would expect. That a kingdom or rule will bring about suffering. That is the exact type of kingdom that John would portray that Christians belong to. The fact that they belong to God's rule and his kingdom brings them into conflict with the evil empire of the day: the Roman Empire. It inevitably means suffering. In fact, John is also convinced that it is exactly the way that Jesus Christ went. Jesus Christ comes as the King, but he came and suffered and died. Now his followers follow suit as they represent and are part of God's kingdom and rule in the present and that still entails suffering and endurance on the part of God's kingdom.

#### Vision of Christ

The next thing that I want to draw your attention to, then, is the vision that John has of the exalted Christ. Finally, John has a vision of the exalted Christ appearing to John to commission him, basically with his authority to address the seven churches. Once more, we find that in John's inaugural vision of Jesus Christ, it is the Old Testament text that dominates. The almost every description given especially in verses 12 and following, almost every description or descriptive phrase or word were given from Jesus Christ, describing John's vision of Christ, comes right out of the Old Testament. Again, what I think is probably going on is, yes, John actually has this vision. He is describing what he saw; but John draws on the Old Testament to make clear exactly what it was he saw and to help his readers understand the meaning of exactly what it was that John experienced. So John draws on all kinds of Old Testament texts. For example, he begins by describing the seven golden lampstands, which clearly describe the lampstand example in the holy place of the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 25 and the temple in 1 Kings chapter 7. And then interestingly, in Zechariah chapter 4, one of the prophets in Zechariah's has a vision like John's, Zechariah's vision of heavenly temple where we find the lampstands. So already, John is not only drawing on the Old Testament, but already in chapter 1, he is creating a scene, a picture of a heavenly temple. He is understanding heaven and he understands Jesus Christ in very priestly terms as now dwelling and residing in the heavenly temple. Part of that is communicated through using Old Testament temple language such as lampstands, which later on John interprets for us.

It is also intriguing that John tells us that Christ is in the midst of these lampstands. Later on in verse 20, we have already seen talking about the imagery and symbolism of Revelation, John is going to describe, identify the lampstands as the seven churches. Already he describes Christ in the midst of these lampstands. That is, Christ is already portrayed as present with his people. So later on in the seven messages to the churches in the chapters 2 and 3, he can tell them things like “I know what you go through; I know what you experienced; I know where your short comings are; I know your faults are,” because Christ is already portrayed not as some distant deity far above his people with no concern of what is going on. But the one who actually is in the midst of and walks in the presence of his church; and therefore, knows intimately what they are going through and what they are lacking or what they are suffering.

So this, in a sense is setting us up for chapters 2 and 3, where Jesus will begin to diagnose the seven churches and the issue that they face and provide both comfort and warning. So, what that means interestingly, is that Jesus' presence among the lampstands, the churches will mean different things for the churches. For those that are suffering, Jesus' presence means comfort and encouragement. For those that are compromising or becoming complacent, Jesus' presence means something else. It means he comes as a judge. Remember that Jesus is portrayed as having a sword coming out of his mouth, another Old Testament image. So for those who are compromising or becoming complacent, Jesus comes to them as a judge the one who has a sword that comes out of his mouth.

### Son of Man

Jesus is further described as one like Son of Man. This is language taken right out from Daniel chapter 7, following four beastly type kingdoms. Daniel saw Son of Man contrasted to the beast. Now you have Son of Man, a humanlike figure who is vindicated and receives a kingdom. Now John sees Jesus as that exalted Son of Man from Daniel chapter 7 and already Jesus has received his kingdom. Already, Jesus has inaugurated his rule through his death and through his resurrection and exaltation the Son of Man has

already been vindicated and entered into his kingly rule. Now he will inspect his churches in chapters 2 and 3.

One intriguing feature of this description of the Son of Man though, is in verse 14, where he describes the Son of Man as having head and white hair, which was white like wool and white as snow. If you go back to Daniel chapter 7, there are actually two figures. One of them is the Son of Man and the other is God Himself as the Ancient of Days seated on throne. What is interesting in Daniel 7 it, is the Ancient of Days on throne who is described with white hair, as white as wool and as white as snow. Now that language gets applied to Jesus as the Son of Man. We are going to see this all throughout Revelation where you find the language in the Old Testament that was applied to God, now applies to Jesus Christ. Because, already, John is saying exalted Son of Man is none other than God himself.

This is this one of the strongest statements the deity of Christ is found in the whole Bible, especially in the New Testament where you have Jesus described in language that is reserved for God himself. Especially when you add part of what Revelation is doing is asking who is truly in control. It is idolatry to worship and give allegiance, or to have any other form that only belongs to God himself. Remember he is the Alpha and Omega. There can be no other god before him. Revelation is the book of about exclusive worship that belongs only to God. How then can you have John applying Old Testament texts celebrating the uniqueness over against every other God, which is idolatry and now applying that to the person Jesus Christ.

John seems to suggest that the Son of Man is a unique figure. He is none other than God himself. Further, if you go on and read verse 17: “When I saw him,” when John sees the Son of Man, he falls at his feet. This is a typical reaction found in apocalyptic language, when a seer sees a vision, he becomes weak or falls down at their feet. John falls at this feet and Son of Man who places his right hand on John and said, “Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last.” That is language resembling Alpha and Omega, from chapter 1 verse 8. Now we find that language of God in chapter 1 verse 8, now applied to Jesus Christ.



Moreover, we have already seen the context of this language as Isaiah chapter 41, 43, and 44. “First and Last” was language referring to the eternal God, though it did, that he was at the beginning and end of the history as sovereign over all of creation and all of history. But it was also used to refer to God as the exclusive God over against all other gods, which were idols. Now that language gets applied to Jesus Christ. To apply this language to anyone else would be outright idolatry. Yet, John applies it to Jesus Christ, suggesting that Jesus Christ stands with God on the God’s side of God’s creation divide. The God who stands at the beginning and end of history is also the same as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the sovereign Lord over history.

Because of his resurrection now, he holds the keys of death. So in the rest of Revelation when we find God’s people suffering or wondering if they should suffer, when we read chapters 2 and 3, and the messages of the seven churches, we find that two are suffering persecution because they are faithful witnesses. But the others think it is okay to compromise. Already, Revelation chapter 1 provides the message: the Son of Man is the sovereign Lord of the universe who stands over all creation and furthermore, because of his resurrection, he has now conquered death. He now holds the keys of death. So what did the readers have to fear? Those who were suffering persecution, what did they have to fear at the hands of Rome or anyone else? Those who were compromising have every means and every reason to take a stance for Jesus Christ, no matter what the consequences because Jesus has already won the victory over death. So if their faithful witness should result in persecution, even to the point of death, as it almost did for one person, what have they to fear?

In fact, his resurrection means not only he has overcome the death, but he is the one who gives life. So later on in chapter 20, and chapter 21 and chapter 22 of Revelation, we find the book resulting in a new creation where God now finally vindicates his people by giving them life. So what have they to fear if the faithful witnesses should lose their lives? God’s presence with the church then will either provide a message of comfort or a message of warning to the people of God who are depending

on their spiritual conditions. But now, Jesus is prepared to address through John and evaluate the situation of the seven churches existing in Asia Minor.

#### Rev 1:19 as an Outline of the Book?

Before we do that, there are two other points that I want to draw your attention to in this section, or two additional features. One of them is found in verse 19, where Jesus is speaking to John and commands him to write. It is interesting, several times throughout the Revelation, John is commanded to write what he saw. Right there, chapter 1, verse 19, “Write, therefore what you have seen [or what you saw], what is now and what will take place later.” It has been very popular to interpret this threefold phrase: “What you have seen, what is, and what is about to happen” (or “what is to come,” depending on your translation). This has commonly been seen as a rough outline of the entire book of the Revelation, where each of these: “What you have seen, what is, and what is to come,” corresponds to certain sections of Revelation. The most common one is chapter 1, refers to what John has seen. Chapters 2 and 3 refer to “what is,” as in the present day of John and his readers. Then chapters 4-22 is “what is to come.” This is all future that is yet to take place, and often this is associated with certain ways of reading the book of Revelation. So chapter 1 verse 19 is often taken as the rough temporal outline for when the different events of Revelation occur.

The only difficulty is that, first of all, to summarize it does not work. It does not fit what one actually finds in the text of Revelation. For example, in chapters 2 and 3, especially, starting with chapter 1, in chapter 1:7, John already moves to the future; he already anticipates the future. Furthermore, chapters 2 and 3, the seven messages of the church are about seven churches in the first century in the John’s present day. He is addressing them in their situations and trying to make sense of their present situations. But interestingly, when we look at seven churches, they all end with future promise. They all end with a promise to the church of what will happen if it endures, overcomes, conquers and retains its faithful witness. All are the messages of the promise of future. Then chapter 4-22, we have already seen that chapter 12 refers to the past event, that is death of Jesus Christ. I am going to argue again that chapter 4-22 cycles through

references to present events going on in the readers' days, as well as the future. So, it seems to me that it is too limited to use this as an outline associated with strict sections of Revelation.

Instead, another possibility is that the word when John was told, "Write what you have seen," I think that actually can be translated, "write what you see," as a reference to the whole book. The whole book is what he sees. Then the next two elements were what is and what is to come; simply describe in more detail of what it is to see within the content of the book – and that certainly makes sense. Write what you see, and that is the entire book. And the entire book contains both "What is," making sense of their present situation and also "What is to come." Another way of looking at it too is: "Write what you have seen and what is and what is to come," simply reflects title used to God, "The one who is the one who was and the one who is to come," or "The one who was the one who is and the one who is to come." That is the whole book contains making sense of the past, present and future. The point of either is that Revelation will include references to the past, present, and future; especially present and future throughout the entire book. We cannot limit this phrase to specific discreet sections of Revelation. But the, whole, entire phrase, however we take it, probably describes the character of the entire book.

#### Rev 1:20

The second thing that I want to mention briefly is, in verse 20, we will go over this very briefly because we have gone over this already. Verse 20 provides, in a sense a model for interpreting the rest of the book of Revelation. And we see this is actually the only one of two places where John actually has something interpreted for him. The other is in chapter 17. Here, risen Christ speaking to John and addressing John tells him that angels and seven stars represents the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands actually represent or symbolize the seven churches of Revelation in chapter 2 and chapter 3. We will talk about the significance of that. In other words, in true apocalyptic fashion, we find symbols referring to actual persons and events. But those persons and events are described not literally but metaphorically. This is how we should interpret the rest of the book of Revelation.

Now, in the section, we will begin now that the John has been commission by the risen Christ, now that he has told us little bit about the character of his book and how it is to be read. Now we will begin and prepare to examine how Christ addresses and how he evaluates the seven churches in Asia Minor and how the churches were to respond and to read the rest of the book of Revelation.

Transcribed by Chan Yoon  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 5

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 2: Intro., Ephesus, Smyrna

In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation Jesus through John is now ready to and prepared to address, diagnose and evaluate the seven churches that John now is specifically writing this apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a letter to. A couple of things to discuss before we look at the seven letters themselves.

## 7 Angels Identified

First of all, one issue is that sort of goes back to the end of chapter one where John identified, or Jesus speaking to John, identifies the seven stars as the angels of the seven churches and one of the questions is, who are these seven angels of the seven churches. There are basically two ways this has been understood. One is that they are to be understood, the word “angel” as many understand, as many of you may know can be used more generally to refer to a messenger or something like that. So some have understood these seven angels as seven messengers, that are actual human beings. One commentator I read actually envision seven messengers traveling together and dropping off the messages to each of the seven churches. So it is possible that there could be seven messengers. Some have suggested that they are the seven leaders of the churches or elder or something like that of each of the churches.

The other possibility, the second one, is that these are to be understood as supernatural beings, that is actually angelic beings. One of the things you find in apocalyptic literature, and you find this going on in Daniel a little bit, but some of the apocalypses like 1 Enoch and other apocalyptic Jewish apocalyptic works is that you frequently find, and this is part of the understanding of an apocalypse as an unveiling. We said it's like watching a play, all you see when you look out at the world and at history is what goes on on the stage. You don't see what goes on behind the scenes that influences what goes on on the stage. An apocalypse lifts the curtain so that you can see behind history to a whole new reality, a heavenly world, a heavenly reality in the future, that

influences what goes on, but also how you interpret and respond to the present. Keeping that in mind, one of the things that you find in apocalypses is often earthly persons and institutions often have an angelic heavenly representative behind them. You find this going on in the book of Daniel in a couple places. So I think that probably we should understand these angels as the heavenly counterparts, or heavenly representatives, of the earthly church. The idea is not that each church, every church, has a heavenly guardian or something like that. It's just in apocalyptic fashion you find that what goes on on earth has a counterpart and is reflected in a heavenly reality.

So I take it that probably these seven angels of the churches are the heavenly representatives, or heavenly counterparts as part of the apocalyptic perspective, the heavenly counterparts of the seven earthly churches in Asia Minor that John addresses.

#### Temple Imagery Applied to the Church

The other thing to comment upon is that this is only the beginning of a series of observations we'll make on the people of God throughout the apocalypse, but by calling or identifying the seven lamp stands as the seven churches this is another example in Revelation, but we find this elsewhere in the New Testament, of taking temple imagery from the Old Testament and now applying it to the church. So a feature of the temple which are the seven lampstands, part of the tabernacle and the temple, now are representative of, or now symbolize, the church. So in a sense John is already describing the church as God's temple. We have already seen that they are the kingdom and priests from Revelation chapter 1, but now they are also the temple who are to represent God's presence in the world. They are to represent God in the world to be his witness, to be his light in the world as his temple represented and is symbolized by the seven lamp stands.

#### Rev 2-3 Image of Christ

So let's move on to chapters two and three having kind of drawn that connection back to chapter one. Now in chapter two and three John speaking for the Son, the exalted resurrected Son of Man, heavenly Son of Man now Christ through John will address the seven churches with an authoritative message from Christ to his people. We have already seen Christ does this as the one who walks in the midst of the lamp stands, Christ does

this as the one who holds the stars in his hands, the one who is sovereign over his churches, the one who stands in authority over his churches, but the one who also is present in the midst of the church; as represented by the fact that he walks in the midst of the lamp stands. Because of this he is now in a position to evaluate his church. He is present with it and his presence with his church, as we have already seen, will result in and mean either comfort and encouragement for the churches or warning and exhortation, warning of judgment, for those who are compromising and refuse to repent and who refuse to maintain their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ. We've said these seven churches are seven literal and historic churches in Asia Minor, in western part of Asia Minor or modern day Turkey, that now Jesus will address.

#### Seven Preliminary Observations

Before we look specifically at the seven churches themselves and the messages delivered through John, by the risen Christ, to these churches I want to make several observations. Actually, I am going to try to make seven of them. I don't know if that was intentional or not, but that's how many I have and it is certainly fitting for an apocalypse and for the seven churches, but that's beside the point. The first observation I want to make overall in reading these is again, first of all, the seven churches are all actual historical churches situated within the heart of Imperial Roman rule. All of these churches belong to and are situated in one of the Roman provinces and at the heart of emperor worship. We talked a little bit about this in the introduction. So I'd refer you back to that for some of the issues this raised for churches and Christians living in an environment dominated by Roman rule, imperial Roman rule, in the context of Roman commerce and Roman politics and religion that were all intricately intertwined and joined and the temptations and the issues that that caused for Christians who were convinced that only Jesus Christ, only God and the Lamb, are worthy of worship. That raises issues for those living in the imperial Roman context and rule. But that's the first point. All these seven churches are situated right at the heart of Imperial Roman rule and in the heart of the emperor cult and emperor worship.

### Letters, Prophetic Texts or Royal Edicts?

The second thing to say is interestingly these seven so called letters, although they are often labeled letters are probably not technically letters at all. It's interesting when you read them they don't begin or end like a letter. They begin sort of like a letter when they introduce, "To the angel at the church at Pergamum" or "To the angel at the church of Smyrna", or "To the angel at the church of Ephesus write this." That could resemble a letter, but it's interesting that these really don't resemble the format of a letter. Instead, I would go along with those that think these actually resemble more closely prophetic proclamations or prophetic messages, even some of this material, when he says, "these are the words of him," some of this language resembles Old Testament prophetic texts. The message of warning or the message of comfort resembles what one finds in Old Testament prophetic texts. So, I think that more accurate than letters, although they function similar to letters, is that John is proclaiming a prophetic message or bringing a prophetic proclamation or message to the seven churches after the manner, or resembling closely, the prophetic proclamations or prophetic messages from Old Testament prophetic texts.

Interestingly, along with this, David Aune, in an article or two and also in his recent commentary on Revelation in his three volume commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series, suggests that these letters also resemble very closely royal or imperial edicts found in other cultures. But even in the Roman Empire and a royal edict or imperial edict was a message that a king or a ruler or an emperor would issue to the people. So the idea here may be now that Jesus is King, King Jesus as exalted ruler and king now issues and edict, or imperial edict or proclamation, to his subjects, to his people, that is, the seven churches. So technically it might not be best to label these as seven letters, but as seven prophetic messages issued to the church and perhaps in the form of an imperial edict or a royal edict that a king or ruler would give to his people that now Jesus gives to the churches.

### Repeated Structure of the Address to the Seven Churches

The third thing to say about these letters in general, that is also well known, but



just to remind you to look for as you read the seven letters and I will read them individually. By the way, I will be reading large sections of Revelations as we read through it because back in chapter one Revelation was meant to be heard by the readers and I think there is something to reading Revelation, in letting it's images kind of roll over us and letting them pass before our eyes and our minds to get a sense, not just to analyze the details, but to kind of get a sense of the effect that Revelation is trying to create. So I will read the seven messages to the churches as well, but as I read them my third point is be alert to the similar structure that they reveal.

First of all, all of them begin by addressing a church: "To the angel of the church of" fill in the blank--Smyrna, Ephesus, Laodicea, Philadelphia, whatever. Second, they then are followed by an identification of Christ, a character quality from chapter one then is used to identify Christ in the beginning of each of the letters.

This is then followed by the "I know" section. "I know" and then the situation that Jesus knows about the church is described.

Then this is followed by either commendation or condemnation and sometimes a little bit of both is mixed. Sometimes the church is commended by "yes, you are doing this well, but I have this against you." Two of the churches receive no condemnation, no judgment at all, because they are the only two that are suffering because they are faithful witnesses. At least one church receives no commendation; everything is negative, that is the church of Laodicea, the very last one--so commendation or condemnation.

The fifth thing is, and there are different ways to divide it, I'm just following a simple and common way. The fifth thing is a promise to the overcomer in terms of a future blessing. So every one of the letters ends, "To the one who overcomes I will give" and there is a reference to a future eschatological blessing that is promised. Usually a blessing is taken from chapters 20 through 22 of Revelation.

Then, finally, there is a call to the one who hears resembling and perhaps depending on Jesus' use of this phrase in his own parables: "to the one who has an ear let that person hear." "To the churches who have an ear let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." So again this is a prophetic warning and exhortation. It is not

something just to speculate about or to try to figure out what will happen in the future, but this is a prophetic warning that the church is to listen to and take heed, that the church is to attempt to understand and attempt to operate and to respond in obedience. So be alert to those six things: the address to the church; the identification of Christ; an “I know” section that describes a situation; commendation or condemnation, one of those or both of those; and then a promise to the one who overcomes of a future eschatological blessing; and then finally a call to the one who hears. Some variation of most or all of those occur in each of the seven letters.

#### Message to the Churches Integrated into the Rest of the Book

A fourth thing comes out of number three and that is the seven messages are clearly integrated and this will lead to a couple of other important conclusions I think. The seven messages to the churches are clearly integrated through the rest of the book of Revelation, both what comes before it, what comes before chapters two and three and what comes after. First of all, with what comes before, the seven messages all begin, as we have already said, with some aspect of Christ from the description in chapter 1:2-16. Some aspect of the description of the exalted risen Christ as the Son of Man in chapter one now is applied to each of the churches in chapters two and three. As you read them it becomes clear that each of the features, the specific feature chosen for each church, as we are going to show, is directly relevant to the problem or situation in each of those churches. So again if you go back and read verses twelve through sixteen and the description of Christ as the feet of burnished bronze, and the eyes like flames of fire, and having a sword coming out of his mouth, walking among the lamp stands, et cetera, one of those features gets picked up in each of the letters. It is a feature that is specifically relevant to the problem or issue that Christ is addressing.

The other thing that we already have seen is that it's connect with what comes after it in that the promises of blessing, of future eschatological blessing to the one who overcomes, comes right out of chapter 20 to 22. References to reigning with Christ, overcoming the second death, the New Jerusalem, the Tree of Life, et cetera, all of those images and some other ones, but all of those images get picked up as what is promised to

the churches if they overcome. There's actually some other language as well, for example, language of faithful witness, language of deceiving, other types of language also is reflected later on in chapters 4 through 22. So, chapters 2 and 3 are intricately connected back with chapter 1 through the images of Christ and also chapter 34 through 22, especially the later chapters with the promises to those who overcome.

### The Number 7

A fifth thing is, we've already seen that number seven is important. The number seven is important not only or specifically for the literal number seven, seven in a sequence, or seven in a series, but for its symbolic value. We have seen that the number seven connotes perfection and completeness. So here is one example prior to the actual vision itself, where the number seven does first of all refer to seven literal historical churches in Asia Minor located in Ephesus, Thyatira, Smyrna, Pergamum, in Philadelphia, et cetera, but at the same time, probably the number seven is deliberate because the number seven, symbolizing completeness and perfection, is meant to represent churches more broadly.

Now some have taken this to suggest, although I don't find this happening a lot anymore, it used to be popular to read Revelation 2 and 3 as the seven churches actually predicting seven stages or seven periods of church history. Obviously our modern day church in the 20<sup>th</sup> and now 21<sup>st</sup> century would be predicted by Laodicea. So the seven churches starting with Ephesus are meant to predict seven successive periods of the church's history leading up to our modern day. Now the difficulty with that is at least two-fold. Number one, I don't see any hint that that is what John is doing, that he is actually linking or predicting by the messages, there is prediction, but it is for the overcomer. Outside of that, I'm not sure that I see any hint that John is actually forecasting or predicting future periods of church history.

Instead, it becomes clear to me, the second point is that all of these seven churches and the problems that surround them are actually things that were taking place already in the first century AD. So they are not limited to future periods of church history. These were events already taking place in the first century. These are seven churches and seven

specific situations and problems and issues that the historical churches were already facing in the first century. Therefore, I think this precludes seeing these as only forecasts of what is going to happen in the future. They are already taking place in these churches in the first century.

And third, when you read them closely and if you study church history closely, it becomes evident that it is hard to limit any one of these letters or messages, to any one period of church history. Instead, what you find is it's better to see these seven messages to the churches as representing issues and problems already taking place in these seven churches and other churches in the first century, but also problems that can be reflected in nearly any period of church history leading up until the present day.

So I think the number seven is intentional, not because it predicts seven periods of church history, it's intentional because it represents the full range of faithfulness and unfaithfulness that characterizes churches in any period of church history leading up the present day. Though the one thing I would agree with, at least in North America, reading it in the context of the United States of America, I think you could make a good case that probably the church in America most closely resembles the Laodicean church, the seventh one. We will talk more about that later.

#### 7 Churches = Spectrum of Faithfulness to Unfaithfulness

So number five the number seven is probably important. It does refer to seven literal historical churches in Asia Minor, but they are probably meant to represent the church more broadly. In the first century, but also until Christ comes back, representing the full spectrum of faithfulness and faithlessness represented in the churches in different times and different places throughout church history.

The sixth thing to say about the seven churches, that we have already hinted at, is it's interesting that when you read it closely you find that five of the churches were actually faithless and suffered rather serious problems usually related to compromise and or complacency. For various reasons that we talked about in surveying the historical background some of these churches, not all of them, some of them to avoid persecution, some of them were willing to compromise their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and were

willing to immerse themselves fully in Roman culture, in Roman commerce, and religion, including emperor worship, thus violating the exclusive worship and allegiance that belongs to Jesus Christ. Five of the churches seem to fall in that category. Five of them had serious problems. Five of them received negative evaluations and only two of the churches are suffering and are recipients of any kind of persecution and only these two churches receive a positive evaluation with no condemnation or no negative evaluation.

So again, that says something about the way we read Revelation. Revelation is not, despite the popularity of this approach, although it does this at least for two of the churches, it's not primarily, or exclusively, for comforting and encouraging persecuted Christians. More so, it's meant as a wakeup call and a warning to churches that are willing to compromise and become so complacent that are in danger of losing their witness.

#### Integration of Rev 2-3 with Rev 4-22

The seventh and the last thing that I want to say, by way of introduction, is it's important to understand how chapters 2 and 3, how the seven churches, relate to chapters 4 through 22. Chapter 4, as we will see in a moment, introduces kind of the visionary section proper, or the apocalypse proper, one might say, following the messages of the seven churches in a little bit more strait forward manor, diagnose and describe the issues in the seven churches. Chapter 4 then, sort of begins the vision itself where John actually ascends, the heavens are open in true apocalyptic fashion, like one finds in Jewish apocalypses, like one finds in Ezekiel 1 and 2, heaven is opened and John then is invited to go into heaven to see the heavenly environment and the heavenly realms and the rest of Revelation then records the visions that result from that all the way through most of chapter 22.

Now, how we're to understand, I'm afraid that may times we've been too keen to separate the two sections. What I think is going on is this: what John says in a more strait forward manner in two and three, he now says in a more symbolic way in chapters 4 through 22. In other words, I think that chapters 4 through 22, the visionary section, is another way of saying the exact same thing as John refers to in chapters 2 through 3 in

the message to the seven churches. It's just that now, what John says in chapters 2 and 3 he now says in a more symbolic and metaphorical way, but I think referring to the exact same things.

So, chapters 4 through 22 will further interpret the situation of the churches in chapters 2 and 3. That is by providing a vision, an apocalyptic and visionary perspective on the situation of the churches in chapters 2 and 3. And so, each of the churches from chapters 2 and 3 will see their situation, revealed in symbolic form in chapters 4 through 22. Each church will see 4 through 22 applying to their situation. In different ways, they will read, the rest of Revelation, in different ways depending upon their specific situation and circumstances and their spiritual condition. Whether they are complacent and compromising, whether they are suffering for their faith, Revelation 4 through 22 will be seen as applying to them differently depending upon their situation as revealed and embodied in chapters 4 through 22.

We will also see as we work through 4 through 22, as I have already said, the promises to the churches, those who overcome, will receive an eschatological promise in the form of blessings of salvation. Those often are taken right out of chapters 20 through 22. We are going to see some of the terms and themes in chapters 2 and 3 get developed more fully in chapters 4 through 22. So I think that is a crucial principle for reading Revelation that in chapters 2 and 3 and that is to understand 4 through 22 is not different material. It's not referring to a different time period; it's not referring to different events. You don't have John doing one thing in chapters 2 and 3 and then jumping to do something else in 4 through 22. Instead, again, chapters 4 through 22 says in symbolic apocalyptic imagery the exact same thing that he says, in a little bit more strait forward way, in chapters 2 and 3. Again, depending upon the situation and spiritual condition of the church, each of the churches will read 4 through 22 as addressing their own unique situation and will read it in a little bit different light, again depending on whether they are complacent or whether they are suffering for their faithfulness and their faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

### Approach to Rev 2-3

Now to look at chapters 2 and 3 in a little bit more detail. What we are going to do again is, I want to proceed by not examining every single image or verse or text or part of the text in Revelation 2 and 3, but number one, I want to begin by talking a little bit about the significance of the cities in relationship to their role within the Roman Empire. I want to look at the situation and the background of each letter and what problem the author was addressing and then again, what is the main message to each of the churches, what is it that that author says by way of commendation, by way of condemnation, and maybe draw some conclusion and make some hints as to how each of the churches may have read the remaining of Revelation chapter 4 through 22. So beginning in chapter two, and if chapter one the risen Christ is now prepared, now commissioned John, to address these churches with the prophetic messages, here now we begin to read the messages of the seven churches.

### Ephesus

The first church that we encounter in chapter 2 is the church in the city of Ephesus. So it begins, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus,” again the angel perhaps being the heavenly counterpart, the heavenly representative of the human church, rather than a human messenger or human leader. Another important thing to understand about the seven messages, that this is common knowledge and you can see this very easily if you look at any map of ancient Asia Minor, western Asia Minor. Ephesus, if you look at the church, Ephesus is the first church on a circular route that encompasses all the seven churches. That is, it’s interesting starting with Ephesus, the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 are listed in the order in which they would have been visited in a typical circular route. It’s possible that this is the route that John may have taken at times in visiting the churches. It appears that John may have had a prophetic ministry among these churches and this may represent the route he took, but the order in which the churches are address appear to represent the order in which they would have been visited in a circuit, in a circular route.

Ephesus, as we will see, may be first because of its significance in the Roman

Empire in the provinces of Asia Minor and the significant role that Ephesus may be reflected in the fact that it occurs first. Ephesus, was probably the most important and powerful city in Asia Minor. It boasted a population of about two hundred and fifty-thousand, or a quarter of a million, at this time. As most of you recognize, one of the things Ephesus is known for, and if you've studied Ephesus at all, this is probably one of the things that popped into your mind first, is the goddess Artemis or Diana, depending upon whether you use the Roman or the Greek name. Artemis or Diana, when you read in Acts 18, in that context, you read of Paul's confrontation with and issues with Artemis in Ephesus when Paul, visited Ephesus. Artemis was simply the goddess of fertility and another example of how what happened commercially, or your prosperity, was to be attributed to a patron goddess. Interestingly, though Ephesus was not only known for the goddess Diana or Artemis and for its pagan religion, but Ephesus was also the hot bed of the imperial cult. It had a temple erected in honor of the emperor Domitian, who was probably the emperor ruling at the time when Revelation was written in the middle of the last decade of the first century.

But here was, in the context, what Jesus, speaking now through John's writing to the seven churches, here's how Jesus addresses the church at Ephesus: "To the angel at the church of Ephesus write this: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name, and have not grown weary." So apparently this is one church that has undergone some persecution and hardship, but verse 4: "Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practice of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise [or the garden] of God."



First of all, notice how Christ is identified in the message to the church at Ephesus. Christ is identified as the one who holds the seven lampstands or the seven stars and he walks in their midst, that is, he is present with his people. Again this probably suggests Christ is present with his people both to comfort them, but that he also exercises control over them. The reason I say that is notice in chapter 2 and verse 5 when Christ begins to diagnose the situation in Ephesus they are in danger of losing their lampstand, that is, as the one who holds the stars, as the one who is present in the midst of the lampstands, Christ has the authority to remove it. He has the authority to remove their lampstand, their faithful witness in the world, if they do not repent. And notice that the church of Ephesus receives a message of both commendation, at the very beginning Christ commends them, that he's aware of their deeds, he's aware that they have refused to follow some who claim to be apostles, perhaps claim to be speaking with the authority of Christ's apostles, yet John says they are not. They have endured hardship and suffering. So, Jesus has much to commend the church at Ephesus for, yet at the same time, Christ is convinced that they are lacking in something, that is they have lost their first love and they are in danger of losing their witness.

Now, this seems to me to suggest that the church in Ephesus probably the issue is while they are very orthodox in their belief and while they are even intent on resisting false teaching, the problem is they have lost their first love and in a moment we will look at what is the first love, first love for what or for whom. It's interesting, in verse 6, if I can jump ahead just a moment, John does, after a negative evaluation, he jumps back to a positive one, in verse 6 he says, "you have this in your favor, you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans." Probably, the Nicolaitans refer to a group that was teaching that it is okay to participate in the pagan idolatrous culture of the Roman Empire, in the context of the city of Ephesus in their Roman province and it was okay to participate in that. So that's why I say it appears that one of the issues and the fact that they resisted those who claimed to be apostles but really were not probably this is a church that is very orthodox in their belief and their teaching and are intent on refusing to compromise with pagan idolatrous society and a pagan idolatrous empire. They are keen with retaining the doctrinal purity of their

teaching. Yet, at the same time they have lost their first love.

The question is love for what or whom? There are two options: many have suggest this is love for the church, love for other Christians that they have lost that they are so intent on their orthodoxy that they have lost their love for each other. The other view is that this is love for Christ. A third view is we cannot decide so we'll combine both. It's love for God's people and for Christ as well. I think the reason for taking the second view that this is love for Christ that they have lost is because, Jesus describes himself as the one who is in the midst of the lampstands. He is the one who is holding the lampstand and in chapter 2 verse 5. He is the one who has the authority to remove it. So I think what is going on is, in the midst of retaining their concern for orthodox purity doctrinally and not compromising theologically and ethically with the world, at the same time they have lost their love for Christ to the extent that they are no longer functioning as his faithful witness in the world. Because of that, because they have lost their first love which motivated their witness in the world, they are now told to repent. Their doctrinal correctness cannot cover up or cannot provide a facade for their lack of love for Christ and that should cause their faithful witness in the world. So, Christ's command for them is to repent, that is to recover their first love and therefore to maintain and to recover their faithful witness in the world.

The promise that they receive for overcoming is the tree of life. Interestingly, the tree of life in the paradise of God links this to Revelation chapter 22 in verses 1 and 2 which describes the new creation as containing the tree of life which was originally in the paradise in the Garden of Eden. The new creation in chapter 22, as we will see, is describes as a Garden of Eden, or as a return of the Garden of Eden. So now that is what is promised to the one who overcomes, a restoration of the conditions of Genesis 2 and 3 in the original creation of the Garden of Eden which God will restore in Revelation 22. So that is held out as the promise for this church that is prizing a doctrinal correctness perhaps over a love for Christ that motivates them for faithful witness.

It's also important to understand what it means to overcome. When John calls on them to overcome, overcoming again for each church will mean something slightly

different. Overcoming here means a refusal to compromise and maintaining their faithful witness even to the point of death and suffering. That's probably generally what lies behind most of the commands to overcome for each of the seven churches. That is refusing to compromise with pagan society and instead maintaining one's faithful witness in the world even to the point of death. That's how the church overcomes. For those who do that now, the Ephesian church is promised that they will receive eschatological salvation, they will receive the new creation, the final kingdom, the ultimate kingdom of God in the new creation from Revelation 21 and 22.

### Smyrna

Church number two, Rev 2:8-11, the message to the church at Smyrna The next city in a circular route after Ephesus would be the church, going north to the church, of Smyrna. Smyrna was another center of the imperial cult. Also, Smyrna had a fairly large Jewish population as well as most of these cities in Asia Minor did. It appears that this Jewish population is opposing God's people, is opposing the church in Smyrna, causing some of the problem. It is one of the only two churches, along with Philadelphia, that does not receive a negative report. Although it's apparently living out its life in a very hostile environment where not only they are in the center of imperial cult worship, but they are also receiving pressure from a substantial Jewish population as well.

Here's what Jesus, through John, says to the church at Smyrna: "To the angel of the church at Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

The issue in the church at Smyrna then was simply the church was probably the closest thing in the seven churches to a church that was under some type of severe

persecution. Though John does not clearly mention that any have yet died for their faith at this point, clearly they are suffering some type of persecution at the hands of, it may have been local authorities keen to make sure that everyone conformed to participating in the emperor cult or in the worship of pagan gods and things like that, but also especially at the hands of the Jews.

Paul talks about those who slander the church, who are Jews, but they are really not. Their synagogue is one of Satan. In other words, in the first century, a possible scenario is this: the Jews may have been very quick to point out and to distinguish Christians from Jews because Judaism in the first century for the most part seemed to enjoy protection under the Roman government and was accepted as a valid religion. But some of the Christians may have been seen as subversive and refusing to compromise the more some of the Jewish constituency may have wanted to draw attention to them and here maybe that's what the reference is to slandering them so that not only would they be further distanced from Christians, but Rome will take action on Christians and not on them. So this may have been an expediency for the Jewish synagogue to separate, to draw attention to these Christians who are refusing to compromise and acting subversively and that any persecution would be directed at them and John says, no, actually this group is nothing less than the synagogue of Satan.

The title that Jesus uses from chapter 1 to apply to this persecuted church, perhaps because of their refusal to compromise and also receiving slander at the hands of Jews who may have been intent on distancing themselves from Christians, the title Jesus uses from chapter 1 is most relevant to the church. Notice again that he says that: "I am the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life." That is to a church who is suffering persecution because of their failure to compromise because of maintaining their faithful witness. Jesus now is the one who is the first and the last, who is in control over all of the affairs of history and who is present with them in their situation and also is the one who has already died, but who has come to life and defeated and conquered death. So again, what does the church have to fear? What does the church have to fear if they suffer persecution and perhaps even die as the ultimate cost for their faithful witness? Because

Jesus now is the one who has overcome death through his faithful witness and the one who stands at the beginning and the end as the sovereign Lord over all history.

Notice three strategies the author uses in this chapter to encourage the Christians to maintain their faithful witness and endure in the face of suffering at the hands of Roman criticism and perhaps also at the hands of Jews in the Jewish synagogue, first of all, John reminds them that they are the true people of God. Notice that he says, he calls these Jews, those who claim to be Jews, but really are not. I think he is simply saying the fact that they slander and persecute the church of Jesus Christ is a demonstration that they are not the true people of God at all. In fact their claim to be the true people of God is a false one because they actually persecute the true people of God, which is the Church of Jesus Christ, those who respond in faith to Jesus Christ and maintain their faithful witness are the true people of God.

Second, he reminds them the true source of their suffering is ultimately Satan himself. As we said, as an apocalypse John is trying to unveil the true nature of their conflict. When they look out at their world they see pressure from the Roman authorities, they see pressure from the Jewish synagogue, but John reminds them, in anticipation of chapter 12, of the true nature of their struggle. He unveils the true nature of their struggle and that is: behind their struggle and behind their persecution lies the attempt of Satan himself to thwart God's people. This will get unpacked in even more detail in chapter 12. So, the author's second strategy is to enable them to endure and persevere is not only to remind them and assure them of their nature as the true people of God and to remind them of the true nature of their persecution, that is, Satan himself.

Then third, the author appeals to an Old Testament example when he says in verse 10, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer I tell you the Devil [or Satan, the true source of their conflict] will put you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days." Now that phrase when I first read that years ago I wondered, "Why ten days?" What is this referring to? Does Jesus have insight? Is he predicting a future period of time exactly? Does he know of some ten day period when they are going to undergo intense persecution? What is this ten day period? When does it take place?

Why does the author choose ten days? Is it something that happened in the past? Is something going to happen in the future which the text seems to suggest? Why ten days?

In his commentary on Revelation Greg Beale has solved the mystery and he's demonstrated that the ten days of testing is an intentional illusion to Daniel chapter 1 and verses 12 through 15 where Daniel and his three friends were tested for ten days. Let me read Daniel chapter 1 and the verses 12 through 15 where Daniel and his three friends are tested in relationship to eating meat, or refusing to eat meat offered to the king, and starting with verse 11, "Daniel then said to the guard, the chief official who appointed Daniel, Hananiah, Misheal, and Azariah, his three friends, 'please test your servant for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat royal food, [all the meat and wine that the king offers] and treat you servants in accordance with what you see.' So he agreed to do this and tested them for ten days." In the context of Daniel and his three friends that find themselves under the pressure of another pagan empire and pagan ruler John now picks up this theme from Daniel chapter 1 of ten days to describe a period of testing that his readers will undergo.

In other words, I'm convinced that the number ten again is symbolic for completion, but primarily it's meant to recall Daniel. In the same way that Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days, but they endured and they were rendered a favorable verdict, in the same way God's people in Smyrna will suffer a limited persecution, they will be tested like Daniel and his friends were as well, giving them therefore the encouragement to endure. So I don't think the ten days is referring to ten literal twenty-four hour days, but instead symbolically is meant to recall the situation of Daniel and his three friends who were tested and likewise the church in Smyrna is in for a period of testing in a hostile pagan environment like Daniel and his friends were. Therefore like Daniel, having recalled that story, like Daniel and his three friends they can take heart, endure, and persevere through any period of testing that they will face.

The promise that they receive then is the crown of life and also that they will be spared from the second death. Again that is relevant to the persons who are undergoing

persecution that may result in death. They are now promised life and preservation from the second death. Both concepts occur in Revelation chapter 20. Revelation 20 is where the saints who are beheaded come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years and do not participate in the second death, that's what is now promised to a church that is undergoing persecution.

### Pergamum

The next church that John addresses, or that Jesus, the risen Lord, addresses through John, is the church in Pergamum, in chapter two verses twelve through seventeen. This would have been next on a circular route of these seven churches further north of Smyrna. Pergamum was an important city economically, culturally, and religiously. Now John goes after a church that is influenced by this culture. The city of Pergamum was well known for its library. It was also well known for its shrines and its altars in honor of pagan gods. It was also known for gods such as the god Zeus. Also, Asclepius, the god of healing. The sign of Asclepius was a serpent you still find that, especially in the United States, you find that symbol still on ambulances and things like that in association with the medical field and hospitals. It was the first city to actually erect a temple to a living emperor. So again it was in the hot bed of the Emperor Cult. It erected the temple to Augustus in AD 29 and so it was an important center of emperor worship.

Let me just quickly read 2:12-17, the message to the letter of Pergamum, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city- where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword that comes out of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear

what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

So, next we will look at what the situation was that the author was addressing in the church at Pergamum? What is the unique title of Christ applied to that? What is the message that is given to the church at Pergamum in light of their situation?

Transcribed by Gabrielle Martin  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt



Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 6

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Revelation 2: Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis

### Pergamum

So let's look at some of the details of the church at Pergamum as far as the identity of Christ or what feature of Christ from chapter one the author draws on as it relates to the situation of the church. What was the situation of the church? What was the problem, the issue? What does the author tell them as his message to them? And then what is the eschatological promise if they overcome? And then again we will look a little bit at how they might have read Revelation and how the rest of Revelation, especially chapters 4 through 22 would have been relevant to their situation.

The church at Pergamum in chapter 2 verses 12 through 17 is one of the churches that receives both a positive and negative evaluation, or we could use the words commendation and condemnation. Christ is portrayed in the first couple verses as having a sharp double edged sword coming out of his mouth. We saw that was one of the features of Christ description back in chapter 1. We said probably the sword coming out of his mouth is a good example of how Revelation communicates primarily through symbolism. We are not obviously going to take this literally but the sword coming out of the mouth is actually a symbol that goes back to the Old Testament and a symbol that portrays Christ as one who judges. He is one who simply speaks the word and issues judgment on his people. Now Christ is portrayed as having this double edged sword preceding from his mouth from chapter 1. In other words, Christ now comes to the church of Pergamum primarily as a warrior; primarily as one who will judge. When you jump forward and read verse 16 in the message to the church of Pergamum it says, "Repent therefore, otherwise I will come to you and fight against you with the sword of my mouth." Though the message of Pergamum is primarily going to be a negative one and Christ's portrayal of having a sword indicates this, that he is primarily coming in

terms of judgment if they refuse to repent for whatever it is that they are doing that we will look at in just a moment.

First of all, it is important to see the church at Pergamum is commended. They are commended because they live in a tough and hostile environment. In fact when you begin in verse 14, you begin with the message after the description of Christ, Jesus tells the church through John, "I know where you live, where Satan has his throne." Now there has been a lot of speculation about what Satan's throne is. The most common suggestion is this would have been a reference to the altar of Zeus, one of the primary and major gods that Pergamum celebrated and that altar which was conspicuous in the city was in John's mind when he writes this, when he gives this message from Jesus to the church that the throne of Satan would have been a reference to or an illusion to the altar of Zeus.

There have actually been a number of other explanations such as a throne, like a *bema* seat or other temples or memorials to gods and things like that in Pergamum that this could have referred to. First of all, I am not certain that we can be certain exactly what that may of corresponded to or if John had in mind some specific entity such as the altar of Zeus. In fact, I would suspect rather that John does not have a specific reference to anything and that the throne of Satan is simply meant to contrast with God's throne that he has introduced us to in the first chapter. So that the throne of Satan simply means this is Satan's domain. Satan rules here, this is his realm that he has control of. Again this sort of introduces what we will read in Revelations chapter 12. We said the messages to the churches also are a forward to the events in chapters 4 through 22 so that chapters 4 through 22 are more of a symbolic apocalyptic portrayal of the exact same thing John is doing in chapters 2 and 3. And in chapter 12 we are introduced to the dragon, Satan, who comes to deceive and to persecute God's people. We see that happening already in chapter 2 in the message to Pergamum. So again, I think throne of Satan probably should not be too closely related to the altar of Zeus but then again it could just be another metaphorical way of John's saying this is the domain of Satan. This is where Satan rules in this city of Pergamum.

So the Christians find themselves in a rather tough and hostile environment. Yet the condemnation rather commendation reminds us that in the face of this, they have actually maintained their faithful witness. So apparently here, at least by and large, the church has maintained its witness for the person of Jesus Christ even in an environment where Satan has his throne and Satan rules and Satan is able to deceive. In fact John tells us, this is the message where he tells us at least one person in this environment has died for his faith and that is a man named Antipas. This is the only person John specifically tells us has died, he does not tell us whether others have. But when you read Revelation, especially when you get into chapters 4 through 22 we will see that persecution and martyrdom for witness and testimony to the point of death is a common theme. That is, John seems to expect that what happened with Antipas and especially what happened with Jesus Christ is sort of a harbinger of more to come. John expects that the clash between Rome and the evil world system and God's people and their faithful witness will result in more who will give up their lives for their testimony and their witness. So that is John's commendation of the church in this environment where Satan rules and has his throne and holds sway they have maintained their faithful witness and one person, Antipas, has even died for that witness.

However, John's commendation is tempered by condemnation or tempered by a negative evaluation as Jesus diagnoses the situation at the church of Pergamum. Basically, what John tells us is the church of Pergamum, starting with verse 14, the church of Pergamum has people, "there are those who hold the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you have those who hold to the teachings of Nicolaitans, repent therefore." So the problem with the church is they are allowing or they have some people, though the church at large is maintaining their faithful witness, they are permitting some people who hold to the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Now the difficulty is who or what are these people. Who are these people who hold to the teaching of Balaam? Who are the Nicolaitans that John criticizes the

church for sort of giving a foot hold to?

### Balaam

First of all, Balaam, this is another example of the author alluding to the Old Testament and what the author is going to do in a couple of places in Revelation 2 and 3 is already an example. We have already seen John use the ten days of testing in the previous message to Smyrna where John uses the example from Daniel and his three friends as sort of a model to and a connection to the situation that the readers are facing. Also we seen John using the Old Testament in the sense negatively, that is to demonstrate that in the same way God's people were tempted by false teaching and by idolatry et cetera, in the Old Testament. In the same way, his readers are now susceptible to the same error. And so he will use Old Testament labels, persons, and titles to refer to certain persons or groups or entities that are promoting a similar type of false teaching.

So, if you were to turn back to the Old Testament in Numbers chapters 22 to 24, you read the account of Balaam. Balaam was a Gentile prophet who the king of Moab called upon to try to pronounce a curse over the nation of Israel. Instead, he pronounces a blessing. In chapter 25 of Numbers, the Israelites then end up straying into idolatry and into sexual immorality with the women of Moab, which was a foreign nation. Now interestingly, to move on to Numbers in chapter 31 Moses attributes this to Balaam himself. He was responsible then, apparently, for leading Israel into immorality and into idolatry. So Balaam may in a sense have become proverbial for false teaching which leads people astray, as he apparently led the Israelites astray into immorality and false teaching and into compromising with idolatry. Now also John is aware of a group or even a person that he can label as Balaam because Balaam provides a model or maybe proverbial for one who leads God's people astray by false teaching. So it is a fitting title, a fitting designation for now what is going on in the city of Pergamum. Apparently the church in Pergamum is allowing this Balaam to do the same thing that he did in the Old Testament, that is, to lead some of God's people astray into idolatry and sexual immorality.

Now one of the questions is who is this Balaam? Is Balaam a specific person in the

church at Pergamum? Does Balaam refer to a certain group of people? We cannot be sure whether Balaam is just a certain individual who is head over a group or refers mainly to a group, John is not specific. But the main point is whoever this Balaam is, he or she or they are teaching the church that it is alright to compromise with the Roman system of commerce, economy and worship. Remember all these things are closely intertwined. This person was teaching the church that it is acceptable for Christians to compromise with Roman empire and to engage in emperor worship, to engage in idolatrous worship of pagan gods especially perhaps in connection with some of their commercial activities and feasts and festivals and things like that. That is they were tempted to idolatry and fornication or immorality in the same way that Balaam had tempted the Israelites.

This idea suggest some continuity between in Old Testament and the New Testament people of God. That is John is doing more than just, providing an illustration. Saying this illustrates what is going on now. But instead there is a continuity, it is in the same way that this happened to the old covenant people of God, now the new people of God, the church consisting of Jew and Gentile, now is tempted by the same thing and faces the same situation. So there is a continuity between the old and new people of God in terms of unfaithfulness and idolatry.

#### Nicolaitans

The second group that is listed besides Balaam, Balaam being an Old Testament figure, the second group is called the Nicolaitans. One of the questions is: Is this the exact same group as the group or person represented by Balaam or is this a different group from the first one? Whatever the case, it is apparent, that whether this is a similar or different group, this group called the Nicolaitans are teaching the same thing. They are trying to get the church to compromise with their pagan surroundings. They are trying to get the church to compromise with the pagan culture, with the Roman empire, by actually eating meat offered to idols and committing adultery.

Now two issues relating to eating meat offered to idols and committing adultery. First of all, that, especially in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 through 10, we find Paul addressing a similar situation of eating meat offered to idols and there Paul does not

outright condemn eating meat offered to idols, he does condemn doing that in such a way to cause another brother or sister to actually violate their conscience by entering into that relationship by eating meat when they think it is wrong in their own mind. Paul does seem to draw the line at participating in situations where they would worship foreign pagan gods. But what is John doing in his complete prohibition, against eating meat offered to idols. Most likely John is envisioning a situation where the eating meat offered to idols is not done simply in someone's private home but probably the eating meat offered to idols would have been taken place, in this context, during certain occasions where they would have participated in feast and festivals in honor of the emperor or in honor of the pagan gods to which this meat had been sacrificed.

So in other words I think that John is condemning a situation that verges on overt idolatry. Overt worship of pagan gods and eating meat in such a context is what John is forbidding. Again this could have been part of the trade guilds where as part of their commerce and part of their job they would have participated in these guilds and participated in certain feast and festivals in honor of the gods and so what John may be condemning then is overt actions of worship by eating meat in certain context.

What about the adultery that he warns them against? Again is this physical or spiritual? It is possible, especially in connection with some of the pagan worship, it is well known that in some context of the Greco-Roman world that participating in temple worship would also afford opportunity to be involved with temple prostitutes, that may be what John has in mind. But perhaps more explicitly and probably John's main point is to use idolatry or immorality in the same way it was often used in the Old Testament. And that is the assumption behind this is that God was the husband of his people, His people were the wife, and to go after idols, to go after other gods, to forsake the covenant with God was to commit spiritual adultery. So I wonder if John is using this in terms of not condemning to much physical and sexual immorality and idolatry, although that could be implied, but primarily he is using this in terms of his Old Testament background to imply by going after idolatry, by worshiping the emperor or other pagan gods, they are spiritually committing adultery by being unfaithful to Jesus Christ.

In fact, later on in the book we will see, especially in chapter 19 and chapter 21, we will see the theme of the people of God as the bride of Jesus Christ, as the bride of the lamb, and here is the metaphor that lies behind it that they are committing spiritual adultery. So John's response to this is that they repent, that the church stops permitting this teaching in the church that is leading the people to compromise with the pagan idolatrous immoral society in which they live, where Satan's throne is and where he rules and instead they are to maintain their faithful witness. Otherwise, the image used to describe Christ in the first couple verses, sword coming out of his mouth, will come into play and Christ will come and battle with them and war with them, which interestingly is another metaphor, one finds throughout chapters 4 to 22, the metaphor of a battle or a war, especially in chapter 19. But Christ will come and fight with them with a sword that comes out his mouth, if they refuse to repent. But if they do overcome, Christ promises eschatological or future blessing.

Again, by the way, we have already mentioned for each church, the idea of overcoming or conquering will look a little bit different. For the church in Pergamum to overcome would mean then to repent and to refuse to compromise, to refuse to allow these teachers and the church that is teaching the people of God, leading them astray by saying that it is alright to compromise with the pagan Roman environment and society and instead to refuse that and to repent would be what it means for that church to overcome.

### Hidden Manna

Now the promises that Jesus holds out for the church, the eschatological future blessings if they overcome, are interesting. First of all, Jesus promises them the hidden manna. Notice starting in verse 17, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says of the churches, To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna." Now the issue is what is the hidden manna because interestingly as we have mentioned already, most of the blessings that Christ promises to the one who overcomes are found at the very end of Revelations in chapters 20, 21, and 22, the blessings that are associated with Christ's kingdom, his rule, his establishment of the new creation. In chapters 21 and 22,

those get picked up in the promises to the overcomer. But it is intriguing that at least one or two of these here do not appear in chapters 20 through 22, and so the question is: What is the promise of this hidden manna that the author promises to the one who overcomes?

Now as you recall from your Old Testament understanding and recollection manna is often associated with the wilderness generation of Israelites as God brought them out of Egypt and they made their trek across the wilderness, on the way to the promise land. One of God's provisions for his people was the manna that came down from heaven as a gift from God to sustain the people. We read about that through various places throughout the Old Testament in the accounts of the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness or made their trek throughout the wilderness and came to the promise land.

Perhaps this notion of hidden manna, and we have to talk about where that concept might come from, but perhaps the reason the author refers to hidden manna maybe because of the Balaam story which was part of the story during the time of Moses. So it is possible that the Balaam story that the author has referred to evokes the broader narrative and so he recalls the manna that God provided for his people. However, this idea of hidden manna may also recall the idea that the manna played a role in expectations of future eschatological salvation. In fact some Jewish writers were convinced that when the temple was destroyed, the manna that was hidden in the ark would be revealed at the coming of the Messiah. So here John may have that idea in mind of this hidden manna that will be revealed when the Messiah comes, as found in some literature.

Again John uses a symbol of end time salvation, the end time eschatological salvation that God's people will participate in and enjoy if they remain faithful. So John has taken a common image from the Old Testament, perhaps as it has been interpreted in other literature to refer to manna that would be revealed in the end time and now uses it symbolically as another way of saying the same thing that he says in other promises, the tree of life, and the paradise of God, and participating in the temple of God, being a pillar in God's temple is another image he will use later. All of these are simply different metaphoric ways of describing the salvation that God will provide in the end when God



comes to defeat evil and set up his kingdom and inaugurate his new creation in Revelation chapters 20 through 22. So the hidden manna probably has its background in Old Testament Jewish understanding of the manna.

### White Stone

What about the second component in verse 17, he goes on and says to the one who overcomes not only will I give the hidden manna, I will also give him a white stone with the new name written on it. Now the question is: what in the world is this white stone, because again we don't find, like the hidden manna, a white stone specifically anywhere else in Revelation especially in 20 through 22 where the text John draws on the blessings that he promises to the churches that overcome.

So what is this white stone? Obviously, two thousand years distance has made it very very difficult, and I think almost impossible to be certain exactly what John was intending. Although there have been numerous proposals and I just want to look at a couple of them. There have been several but for example it is well known that a white stone could indicate in the court system a vote of an acquittal, a vote of not guilty. A white stone could also be used as a pass to get into certain events, especially a banquet for example. So you get into a banquet, your white stone would kind of be like your RSVP or whatever you have to show in order to get into the banquet. Third, a white stone could also be worn on an amulet to ward off demons. There are other possible proposals, but these are three major ones that have often surfaced in discussions of the white stone. But it is almost impossible to tell exactly what John had in mind as far as the background. John may have had all of these in mind, I don't think that is the case. John may have had one or two of these in mind. Often John uses imagery we will see, John may use imagery because it is evocative of more than one meaning. Sometimes John's imagery comes to us with a richness that refuses to be pinned down to just one meaning, without suggesting it can mean everything. It is to be aware sometimes John's images are evocative more than one meaning. So it is possible that John had one or more ideas in mind although at the end of the day.

I don't think we can be certain exactly was John referring to getting into a vote of

acquittal, for example. Back then that would make sense against the background of Satan being the accuser and now God's people go free and they are acquitted, vindicated which is another important theme in Revelation. A pass to get into a banquet, that would certainly make sense. In chapter 19 when God's people enter into the banquet of the lamb, does it refer to warding off demons? That is also possible given the influence of demonic beings and given the role that Satan plays even in this text, it is possible that that could come into play. We simply can't be certain. What we can be certain of is that the white stone symbolizes the heavenly eschatological reward and their heavenly salvation. So the manna and the white stone are simply two images that describe the same thing from different perspectives: they are eschatological salvation.

#### New Name

The new name, again it is difficult to tell exactly what is this new name that the author has in mind but the idea of a new name actually has again Old Testament precedents. If you go back to the book of Isaiah which is a book that plays very crucial role in John's writings. There is a book entitled by an author named John Facus, a book entitled basically the use of Isaiah in the book of Revelation and has to do with the prophetic and antecedents to the book of Revelation. He surveys in detail how John uses Isaiah in numerous texts and so the new name actually is one that is found in a couple of places in Isaiah, for example, in chapter 62. Most of these texts are anticipations of in the future God restoring. So the new name actually is one that is found in a couple of places in Isaiah, for example, in chapter 62. Most of these texts are anticipations of in the future God restoring his people. And in chapter 62 verse 2, the author says, "The nations will see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow." You also find the similar idea in chapter 65. Isaiah chapter 65 in verse 15, again this is in the context of the new creation that in a couple verses later in Isaiah chapter 65, a text that gets picked up in chapter 21 of Revelation, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth." In chapter 65 in verse 15 of Isaiah, "You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign Lord will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name."

So this concept of a new name, it is hard to tell what is the new name John has in mind but maybe he is simply alluding or referring back to Old Testament texts again to say now Isaiah's anticipation of a new creation that gets picked up in Revelation 21 is the promise that lies in store for the church of Pergamum if they will repent and if they will overcome and refuse to compromise with the pagan world.

So for the church at Pergamum, the rest of Revelation would function for them as a call to persevere. It would function as a call not only to persevere, but to those who are compromising or who are permitting people into the church who are compromising, the rest of the book of Revelation will function as a word of exhortation. They will read the battle scenes in Revelation as something that they are in danger of being at the wrong end of, if they refuse to repent. Jesus promised to come to them with a sword, what will be flashed out and become more of a reality, when they read chapters 4 through 22 and the depictions of battle, the depictions of Christ, for example, in chapter 19, coming on a white horse to do battle. So once again, depending on whether those in the church are maintaining their faithful witness or whether they are tempted to compromise, they will read the rest of the book of Revelation in a different way, whether they repent or whether they refuse to repent.

### Thyatira

The next church, in chapter 2, the last church mentioned in Revelation chapter two is the church of Thyatira. Thyatira, in chapter 2, verses 18 through 29. This would be the next city on a circular route that again possibly John himself had a ministry among these churches. That would be the next city and the natural route that would encompass these seven churches. Thyatira was known as being a commercial town, but at the same time perhaps it was the least significant of the seven cities politically and commercially but it would attain greater status and greater prosperity by the second and third century, a little bit later on. It was known for its trade guilds. We talked a little bit about that, to participate in the trade guilds would also mean participating in the social and religious life of the trade guilds connected with your commerce and the social and religious life of Thyatira. Most of the guilds would have had a patron deity, a god that was sort of

responsible for their prosperity and for their success. To refuse to participate in these guilds and refuse to acknowledge the debt of gratitude you owe to the gods, let alone to the Roman empire, would have been seen as an extreme sign of refusal to conform and an extreme sign of ingratitude to the gods and to those who were responsible for your success.

Also Thyatira was kind of a hot bed in the sense of emperor worship. So once again the city of Thyatira would have provided a context where Christians were tempted to compromise and to accommodate to not only pagan worship but to also worship of the emperor as well.

So here is what Jesus says to this church in Thyatira, “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and your faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet.” By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who lay with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all of the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets, (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him who overcomes and does my will until the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ just as I received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Now as we read this section you will realize that like the previous churches, like Pergamum, Thyatira receives both a positive and a negative evaluation, though the negative evaluation far outweighs in the space devoted to it, the positive evaluation. But

this is a church that receives both commination and condemnation. But notice how Christ is described, the feature attributed to him, from chapter 1, he is described as the one who has eyes like blazing fire and the feet are like burnished bronze back from chapter 1, the description of the son of man in the starting of verse 9 and following. This suggests that Christ primary posture towards the church in Thyatira is again one of a judge. As one who has blazing eyes like fire, notice how Jesus describes himself in verse 23, "I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds." That is with eyes blazing like fire Christ is able to look into the minds and hearts of his church and of his people and evaluate their true condition. So even though he will commend them, Christ's primary posture will be eyes blazing with fire who is able to pierce into their beings and see their minds and hearts and who will come to them in judgment if they refuse to repent. It is interesting here, Christ in all these letters gives his churches time to repent of what they are doing. So he does not just come and say I am coming now to destroy you but he calls on them and persists with them in order that they might repent of their ways so that they can enter into their eschatological blessing so that they can overcome and inherit the promises that God has for his people.

Now the commendation is that he commends them for their good works and it is interesting to see that it says your later works are even greater than your first. So apparently their works, and their obedience and their faithful witness has increased and is even greater now than it was at first. Yet the commendation is short lived because immediately in verse 20 Jesus turns to the condemnation and the condemnation in this chapter seems to be very very similar to the one in Pergamum, that is, the church in Thyatira is in danger of compromising with their pagan surroundings. They are compromising their faithful witness by permitting teaching in the church that is basically leading the church astray and saying it is alright to compromise with your pagan environment. It's alright to worship gods and to worship Caesar and to eat meat offered to idols and to engage in sexual immorality or spiritual idolatry as a result of idolatry and still worship Jesus Christ. Now Christ condemns the church, or gives them a negative

evaluation because they have tolerated this teaching to the church.

### Jezebel

The image that John uses in this section--I use John and Jesus almost interchangeably because John is writing this obviously but he is recording the words of Jesus so I don't want you to confuse that. Sometimes I will refer to it as this is Jesus speaking and other times I will refer to it as John because he is the one writing it down to address the churches. He is the one who has been commissioned in chapter 1, to address the churches. But now John uses an image from the Old Testament again, this time it is the image of a woman named Jezebel. John gets this from the Old Testament, back in 1 Kings chapter 16 and also chapter 21 we read of this Jezebel who is the wife of king Ahab. It was Jezebel who led Israel into worship of the foreign god Baal. John now uses that story once again, much like he did Balaam, John uses that story now to help the church preserve of a similar threat. Again he is assuming there is continuity between the old covenant people of God and now the new people of God in the same way that they were led astray into idolatry in the Old Testament, now, once again, God's people are faced with a teaching that would lead them astray into worshipping idols by getting them to accommodate with their pagan surrounding and cultures and worship of pagan gods and worship the emperor as well. So Jezebel becomes kind of a fitting code for what now is going on in the church in Thyatira.

Once again it is difficult to be certain whether Jezebel refers to a specific individual or refers to a group. The way the author describes her here it does appear that he may have in mind a specific female prophet, a prophetess that is the one who is infiltrating the church and is teaching the church or leading them astray and deceiving them, trying to get them to again accommodate by participating in idolatrous practices in Thyatira. It is interesting that what Jezebel does and how she is described here is in verse 20, "By her teaching she misleads or deceives my servants into sexual immorality." Interestingly, this concept of deceiving is the exact language that crops up again in chapter 12 and 13 of Revelation. It is Satan, in chapter 12, and the two beasts who are guilty of deceiving the whole world and leading them astray. Getting them, in chapter 13,

the second beast tries to get them to worship the first beast and in fact that has been Satan's pose since Genesis chapter 3, where Satan deceived Adam and Eve. So this notion of Jezebel deceiving, or this female prophetess, if that is how we are to understand it, in Thyatira, deceiving the people of God, that will get described later on in Revelation chapter 13, in 12 and 13, where the two beasts are the ones guilty of deceiving the whole world and deceiving God's people. Now in more straight forward language, John describes this female prophetess, this Jezebel, as leading the church astray into idolatry. Again we said in chapters 4 through 22 of Revelation is a more of an apocalyptic view or an apocalyptic description of what John is already describing in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

Well in verses 22 and 23 of the message of Thyatira the author says, "I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent." So again I think this warning to those who participate with Jezebel. Notice the symbolic imagery he is not talking about literally throwing her on a bed and again notice the use of adultery and fornication and immorality language, probably again mainly metaphorically to refer to unfaithfulness to Jesus Christ and participating in idol worship and idolatry.

Now I think that what is described in these verses once again anticipates the different plagues and the different judgments that chapters 4 through 22 will spell out in more detail. So already John is warning the church that by participating in Jezebel and her teaching, and by participating in her teaching that leads them astray to engage in idolatry they will be the recipients of the plagues and the tribulations that one finds in chapters 4 through 22 if they refuse to repent.

When you read this it also raises the question how many groups are involved here because you have a reference to Jezebel, you have a reference to her children, you have a reference to those who commit adultery with her. Probably, one way to look at it is the author may have simply two groups in mind here. Jezebel and her children would simply refer to those who are promoting this false teaching, that is, those who are trying to deceive God's people into committing adultery and to committing idolatry, and then

those who commit adultery with her would be those members of the church who are in danger of following her.

But in any case, again the picture is clear, what has Jesus concerned about with this church is much like Pergamum and some of the other churches in chapters 2 and 3 that Christ addresses, is that they are guilty of permitting a teaching that would lead the people astray by getting them to accommodate or compromise their faithful witness to Jesus Christ by participating in idolatry through worshipping pagan gods and also emperor worship as well. So then Jesus calls on them to repent and also, in starting of verse 26, promises or provides a promise for those who overcome, that is, for those who repent and refuse to accommodate and refuse to give in to this teaching, that they can compromise their faith in Jesus Christ with idolatrous activity, for those who overcome Jesus' promises that they will overcome and rule over the nations. So rather than being deceived by their pagan world and environment, in fact, they will rule over it. They are seen to conquer and rule over the nations.

Notice in verse 27 the author supports that by quoting from the Old Testament again by quoting from Psalm chapter 2, "He will rule them with an iron scepter, he will dash them to pieces like pottery." Intriguingly this is a text elsewhere in the New Testament that gets applied to Jesus Christ and later on in chapter 12. We read and looked briefly at chapter 12 as an example of a passage that actually refers to a past event that is the birth of Christ. It is that narrative of a woman who is pregnant and a dragon waiting to devour her child. She gives birth to a son and he is quickly raised to heaven out of the grasp of the dragon. That son is described as one who rules with an iron scepter, as one who will shepherd his people with an iron rod coming out of Psalm chapter 2. Now it is interesting that that gets applied to the people of God. So not only is Christ the one who conquers and rules but his people share in that rule if they overcome. So again the irony is kind of interesting, instead of being deceived by and led astray by the nations and by the pagan environment, if they overcome they will actually rule over it. They will actually share in Christ rule of the nations and they will share in Jesus defeat of their enemies who are trying to deceive them and lead them astray.



So similar to the church in Pergamum, this is a call to the church to repent, that is they will read the rest of Revelation as a call to repent, as a warning of what will happen if they refuse to repent, and a call not to be deceived by Rome's power. So again there are connections with the rest of chapters 4 through 22. So they will read Revelation primarily as a warning, a warning that if they refuse to repent, if they compromise, they will participate in the judgments and the plagues that is issued in the rest of the chapter but if they overcome, again, they will inherit the eschatological salvation, the blessing that God has in store for his people.

### Sardis

The next church that Jesus addresses, that John addresses writing the words of Jesus, the message of Jesus to the church is a church in the city of Sardis, in chapter 3 and verses 1 through 6. This again would have been the next city on the circular route. It was south east of the city of Thyatira that we just looked at at the end of chapter 2. In the past, interestingly, Sardis was an important military strong hold and in fact Sardis almost became synonymous with military strength and with military might. Also it was a city of great wealth that it had gained through trade and commerce. One interesting story, at one point in the history of the city Antiochus III, years before John addresses the city here, a king named Antiochus III actually defeated it in a very important defeat. When a Cretan descended the cliffs, it was known for its fortress, when a Cretan actually descended the cliff on the acropolis of the city and found a spot that was unguarded and unoccupied he was able to get into the city and the city suffered one of its very few defeats, otherwise the city was known as a military stronghold and kind of had a reputation for that.

In about AD 17, again several years before John addresses the church here, the city of Sardis as well as a couple of other cities that we will see in the vicinity of Sardis, suffered a debilitating earthquake. It was rebuilt through the aid provided by the emperor Augustus. We will see in a moment another city actually suffered an earthquake but it was rebuilt by its own wealth, by the wealth of its own citizens, but here Augustus provided the aid that rebuilt the city after it suffered an earthquake in AD 17. It was also

the home of numerous pagan gods and interestingly it also contained a fairly substantial Jewish population and as well it was in the heart of emperor worship.

Now Christ addresses the church in Sardis starting in chapter 3 verse 1 with these words, “To the angel in the church of Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will be like them, and be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

So the problem with the church of Sardis is, apparently, they have a reputation of being alive yet Christ as the one who walks in the midst of his people and notice he is the one who holds the seven spirits. He is the one who holds the seven stars in his hands. He is the one who is in the midst of his people, and is able to evaluate and see their situation. He evaluates them as actually being dead though they have a reputation of being alive. In other words, the evaluation of the Sardis in chapter 3 is primarily going to be negative though later on the author will say, “there are some in your midst who have not soiled their garments.” What that means is simply that they have not compromised with idolatry and the pagan environment. They have maintained their faithful witness and they have refused to compromise. Yet by and large most of the church has and because of that they have a reputation of being spiritually alive, yet at the same time they are actually spiritually dead.

Notice it is interesting, the fact that he holds the spirits, that he is described as the one who holds the seven spirits of God and we see that this is a description from chapter 1 as well. We said the seven spirits of God probably suggest the fullness of God’s Spirit,

seven being the number of perfection and completion. So we probably should not think in terms of seven separate spirits but the fullness of God's Spirit. The significance of that then is again not only that Christ is present with his people and able to see their situation and evaluate it, but it is only by the power of the Spirit that they are able to emerge from their situation of appearing to be alive, but actually being spiritually dead. So Christ comes as the one who holds exactly what they need to become spiritually alive again, as those who are spiritually dead.

In reality then, although they appear to be alive in their own evaluation and in their own estimation, they are dead. Again perhaps because they have refused to witness in their sexual culture, they have refused to maintain their faithful witness, and instead they are like the church of Pergamum, like the church in Thyatira, they are compromising and facing the same pressure the other churches have faced, that is the temptation to be involved in idolatry and idolatrous worship, the temptation to worship pagan gods and emperor worship, the temptation to be involved in certain aspects of the life of Sardis that would have caused them to be involved in idolatrous activities, just as the other churches have faced as well. Perhaps to avoid those pressures, now they are willing to compromise and accommodate with their surroundings in order to avoid the persecution that churches like Smyrna and later on Philadelphia are facing because of their refusal to compromise and because they have maintained their faithful witness.

The solution then for this situation where they appear to be alive but somehow they have accommodated to the extent that they are now effectively spiritually dead because of accommodating and compromising with their surroundings. The solution to this again like other churches is simply that they have to repent. That is they must live consistently with their claims as the people of God. They must live consistently with their reputation that they are spiritually alive.

Now notice Jesus' words to them if they do not repent, if they do not wake up, Jesus says to them, "I will come as a thief and you will not know at what time I will come." This is an interesting example of where the author does not draw on the Old Testament but probably the teaching of Jesus from a text like Matthew 24. Back in

Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus teaches about his second coming, in the so-called “Olivet Discourse” or so-called “Eschatological Discourse.” In one of Jesus’ parables he compares his coming to, “like a thief in the night.” And he also warns his disciples to remain awake and to be watchful. So most likely the author here is recalling the exact words of Jesus to his followers, to his disciples back in his teaching in Matthew 24 and 25. Whether the author, John, had access to that is not the point. The point is that John would have been aware of Jesus’ teaching and now Jesus addressing the church at Sardis draws on the teaching we find from Matthew 24 and 25 warning the church that if they do not repent and if they do not wake up from their spiritual stupor, that their reputation of being alive but actually being dead and perhaps they are sort of trying to maintain a low profile in Sardis so as not to attract attention and persecution, if they do not wake up from that, then Jesus will come as a thief. Instead of one who holds the spirit that is able to bring them out of death and into life, instead he will come as a thief unexpectedly to those who are not prepared. Probably this then is a reference to his second coming. The second coming of Christ we find later on in chapters 19 and 20. So if they do not wake up they will encounter Christ who comes, for example in chapter 19, as the one who comes to do battle and to defeat his enemies.

So what does it mean to overcome then to the church of Sardis, again it means to refuse to compromise. It means to maintain their faithful witness; to live consistently with their reputation and their claims of being alive especially in the midst of this hostile environment. The next section we will look at what are the promises that are given to the church at Sardis if they do overcome.

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 7

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

The seven churches of Revelation: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

### The Promises to the Church of Sardis

We said Sardis had a reputation of being alive yet actually they were dead. Another thing to say about their reputation being alive: first, this may not have been only their evaluation but perhaps the evaluation of the other churches in the region. They had a reputation among them of being alive. It's also possible that there is a little bit of hyperbole going on in Jesus' statement and even irony by saying you have the name or reputation of being alive but you are actually dead.

### White Garments

But, in any case, Jesus calls them to repent and "to those who overcome" we find at least two promises given to them. Again, these promises are clearly taken from the rest of the book, especially towards the end in chapters 19-22 which, in my opinion, all demonstrate or all refer to what happens when Jesus comes to bring history to its conclusion at his second coming. The first one is if they overcome they will be given white garments; they will be dressed in white. Probably again this language picks up what we find in texts, like chapter 7. In chapter 7 we find a sort of a preliminary reward. Revelation sort of cycles—it has anticipations of the future reward of God's people in advance of the full exposition in chapters 21 and 22. Already in chapter 7 we see a vision of God's people standing victorious before the throne. We find, especially in verse 9, it says, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could number or count, from every nation, tribe, people, language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." So here are God's people standing victorious at the end of history and in God's presence. "They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands."

We find similar language in chapter 19 after the destruction of Babylon in chapter 18, which we will describe in beginning of chapter 19 and deal with later. In 19:8, again a reference to the glorified saints, the people of God who now stand victorious in God's presence.

Verses 7-8: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the lamb has come, and the bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." The Bride, being an image or symbol of the church, the glorified people of God, now they

are given bright and white linen to wear.

So this promise now gets picked up in the promise made to the church at Sardis that they also will wear white garments if they overcome, that is if they refuse to compromise. Probably the garments then are simply a symbol of their final salvation and perfection. Probably, even more specifically, it is a symbol of victory and even vindication. Vindication because they have suffered at the hands of the Roman empire; they have maintained faithful witness in a hostile environment even to the point of death. They will receive white robes as a symbol of their victory and their purity that now they possess in their final salvation but also the vindication as well. So that's the first promises made to them from later sections of Revelation: they will receive a white robe of purity, vindication, and victory.

#### Book of Life

Second, they also will have their names in the Book of Life, but with the assurance that their names will not be blotted out. When you read the rest of the book of Revelation we will be introduced to a number of books or scrolls, starting in chapter 5. Here we are introduced to a book called "The Book of Life." It is probably again not a literal book but a book that is symbolic of the security of and the belonging of God's people and to God himself. The book symbolizes their salvation, and the certainty of their salvation that now they possess. Interestingly, the author tells them that their names will not be blotted out.

Now this raises the question, "is it possible that their names could be blotted out of this book?" That is, could it be in there but it could be taken out? That's entirely possible. But the emphasis on this text is not so much that it hangs on the balance, "are they going to have their names taken out or not?" This fits the language of your names will not be blotted out. It is a figure of speech called "litotes" which is a way of saying something by stressing its opposite or it's negative. So someone might say, "How are you doing?" and you might reply, "Not bad," which means you are doing well but you state the opposite. So not blotting one's name out is a way of stating the opposite. God will keep you, you can be certain that you will reach the goal of your eschatological salvation if you overcome and persevere. By the way, the Book of Life we'll see does appear later on in the book of Revelation. So again, John is drawing on images of final eschatological salvation in the rest of the book to provide a motivation for overcoming in the present for his churches. So for the church at Sardis, they would read the book of Revelation as, again like other churches, a warning not to participate in or not to be part of the pagan Roman

empire and its idolatrous practices. They should not compromise and accommodate with that lest they find themselves the objects of the vision's judgments and the visions of plagues and judgments that God pours out upon Rome and upon a wicked and godless world if they refuse to repent. Instead, again, for those who do maintain their purity, for those who do maintain their faithful witness then they have the promise that they will participate in the eschatological salvation that God promises for his people, that is, white robes and being victorious and being vindicated and also the certainty that they will inherit their eschatological salvation in the future.

#### The Church of Philadelphia

The next church that we encounter in the book Revelation is the church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13. The city of Philadelphia was an ancient city on this circular route. It would have been a little bit southeast of Sardis, the previous city we looked at. Along with Sardis then, it was also devastated with this earthquake in AD 17. It was also important because of the influence of the emperor cult in the city and also other pagan gods and religions. What is significant about Philadelphia is it is the only other church, along with Smyrna, that receives a positive evaluation and does not include any rebuke or condemnation. Like Smyrna it is a church of the suffering because it has maintained its faithful witness.

So when Jesus addresses the church in Philadelphia this is what he says, "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars--I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches." So he said to Philadelphia.

As we read those words, Philadelphia does not receive condemnation or negative evaluation but the evaluation is positive. The problem is the church is described as having little power. Probably that means that they are socially and economically of little influence in the city of Philadelphia; they are a church of little significance. Perhaps they are unable then to protect themselves from persecution that they are receiving, but they have remained faithful in their lives and in their witness. Therefore, notice the title that is given to Christ from chapter 1. In chapter 3 the message to the church in Philadelphia—Jesus is described as the one who is holy and true and he holds the keys of David. That is, the one who now addresses them as holy, he is faithful and he also holds the keys of David. This interestingly is another illusion back to the Old Testament.

#### Isaiah Parallels

Later on Jesus tells the Philadelphian church I have placed before you an open door. The key to understanding this is to understand the Old Testament background, which, once again, comes right out of the book of Isaiah chapter 22. In Isaiah chapter 22, we read these words addressed to Eliakim the King of Israel, the one who is the King on the throne in the line of David. In Isaiah chapter 22:20-24, “In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiyah. I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash about him.” Interestingly, a parallel to the way Jesus is described in chapter 1. “And hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.” Notice that language of “father.”

“I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I will drive him like a peg into a firm place: he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father. All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots.” Notice again the language of offspring or seed. Also an important theme in the Old Testament and in the Davidic covenant as well. “All its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars.”

The context of this then is Eliakim as king who sits on David’s throne, is now given the authority of David and is now given the keys to the entrance into the kingdom or entrance into the palace. Eliakim is almost portrayed as an administrator and who can permit entrance or exclusion into the palace itself and into the Davidic kingdom. The question then is how does this get applied to Christ? How does a text that is specific as Isaiah 22, in reference to Eliakim, now get applied to the person of Jesus Christ. First of all we’ve already noted a couple of times the



connection with David. Often what was true of those who sat on the Davidic throne, and this is true of a number of the so-called “royal psalms” that get applied to Jesus later on in the New Testament; what often was true of those who sat on David’s throne was also true of David’s greater son who is Jesus Christ. So Jesus then would be seen as the ultimate one who has the keys and the authority. The keys being the symbol of authority of entrance into or exclusion from the Davidic kingdom that Jesus has now inaugurated. So Jesus, as the true son of David, now has the authority of entrance into or exclusion from the kingdom of God and from the Davidic kingdom that he is now inaugurated.

Furthermore, it is possible that Isaiah chapter 22 should also be read in light of Isaiah 9:6-7, you remember the well-known text we often read at Christmas time. Isaiah 9:6, “For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. And the government will be upon his shoulders.” This language appears in Isaiah 22. “And he will be called wonderful, councilor, mighty God, everlasting Father (which is a term applied to Eliakim in 22) prince of peace, of the increase of his government in peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”

Now Isaiah 22 probably would have been read by John in light of Isaiah chapter 9—that is, the coming of a son to sit on the throne of David to establish his rule forever, to reign in righteousness, and the government will be upon his shoulders. So now Jesus Christ, in being that son of Isaiah 9 then also takes on the authority of chapter 22 as a Davidic king who has the right, the keys and the authority, to include, to give entrance to or to exclude from entrance into his kingdom.

The second reason is probably in Isaiah 22, John would have read Eliakim, sort of typologically. Typologically it anticipates a greater son, someone who would actually provide the climatic expression of someone who would come along and take the keys that would signify authority of inclusion and exclusion in the Davidic kingdom. So Eliakim is probably to be understood as a type or model or pattern of a greater son who is to come along. This again receives even more corroboration if we are to read chapter 22 of Isaiah in light of chapter 9.

Then finally notice interestingly in Isaiah 22:23, Eliakim is compared to a peg, “I will drive him like a peg into a firm place.” But notice later on in verse 25, “In that day, declares the Lord almighty, the peg driven into the firm place will give away. It will be sheared off.” It’s

almost as if this anticipates a time when that peg must be restored. That peg must be driven back into its firm place, expecting that someone will come in the future to fulfill that. So given all these things: the connection between Christ and David, especially in light of Isaiah 9; the typological connection between Eliakim in Isaiah 22 and Jesus Christ; and then also even within the context of verse 22—the breaking off of this peg, almost anticipating this peg would be restored. All of this then, I think, leads to identifying Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of not only Isaiah 9 but now also Isaiah 22. Christ now comes as the final son of David who now takes up the keys and has the authority of including or excluding from the Kingdom of God that he is now established. This will become important later on in Revelation chapter 20 and following when Jesus Christ comes to establish his kingdom, that ultimately establishes a new creation. It is Christ who has authority to include or exclude from entrance into his kingdom.

Interestingly, though, in Rev 1:8 Jesus is described not as having the keys of the kingdom but as the keys over death and Hades. Now in chapter 3, Christ is the one who has the keys of the kingdom of God. In other words, it appears to me the connection is Christ overcoming death and Hades is the means by which Christ grants entrance into the kingdom of God. But again, for those who refuse to acknowledge it, he excludes and, as we see in the end of Revelation, they suffered the second death and they ended up in the lake of fire. We will talk about those images later on, but it's Christ overcoming death and Hades. He does so by granting entrance into the kingdom of God and he possesses the keys and the authority to do so. But he shuts it from those who refuse to acknowledge and who refuse to repent.

#### Connections to the Church in Philadelphia

But for the church who was suffering in Philadelphia this image would be good news that they having nothing to fear because it is Christ himself who holds the keys over death and Hades and who now holds the keys to the kingdom and grants them entrance. So this is how we are to understand Revelation 3:8, and the message to the church at Philadelphia.

Jesus says this, "I know your deeds, see I have placed before you an open door." What is that open door? Traditionally this has been understood, especially in popular circles, as a reference to evangelism. He's given them an open door of witness; an open door to evangelism. However, in light of verse 7, in light of the connection with Isaiah 22 with Christ having the keys as symbols of the authority to permit entrance into or exclude entrance into the kingdom of God, the Messianic Kingdom, the open door here is not a door of opportunity for evangelism. The

open door is entrance into the kingdom of God. So now Jesus is assuring them that they have an open door. He is the one who holds the keys of death and Hades. He is the one who exclusively holds the keys that permit entrance. He is the only one who permits entrance into the Messianic Kingdom by overcoming death and hell through his resurrection. Now he has given the Philadelphians an open door. So no matter what they suffer, no matter how insignificant they seem, no matter how powerless they are in their current situation, they have already been granted entrance into the Messianic Kingdom by the king, the son of David who holds the keys and who grants entrance into the kingdom of God. By the one who has, through his death and resurrection, conquered the power of death and Hades.

Another significant aspect of this message to the church at Philadelphia then is found in verse 9. He says, “I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan.” Recall back a couple of churches earlier those also struggled were the church of Smyrna, the other church that receives a positive evaluation. Now likewise, the Philadelphians seem to be suffering or receiving some measure of persecution because of the Jewish population in the city of Philadelphia. Probably, we are to understand this in a similar way that we did earlier. That is, it’s highly possible that the Jews who enjoyed protection under the Roman rule as a religion were keen to distance themselves from this new religion that we call Christianity. Some, especially local authorities, as we said the persecution so far was not yet empire wide or officially sanctioned, but there would have been many at the local level who would have seen Christians as subversive and refusing to accommodate, and refusing to conform acting in a way that would show lack of gratitude towards the gods in Rome. The Jews may have been keen to preserve their privileges under Roman rule and to distance themselves from Christians. So the reference here may be taken that way, as those who claim to be Jews but they really are not. That is, they claim to be God’s people but they really are not because of the fact that they actually persecute and slander the Christians who are in the city of Philadelphia.

#### Isaiah Connections

What is interesting is what is said about them. John says, “Actually, I will make them [that is, the Jews who claim they are Jews but really are not], “I will make them come and acknowledge that I have loved you.” This is actually taken, again, from the book of Isaiah. Several texts, Isaiah 45:14, 49:23, and 60:14. This idea that the nations will come to Israel, bow down and acknowledge them and acknowledge that God has loved them. Now, interestingly,

John reverses that and he says, “Actually, it won’t be just the nations who come and bow down to the nation of Israel and acknowledge that you are God’s people, now these Jews who persecute God’s people, they will come and bow down to the people of God—the church in Philadelphia and acknowledge that God loves them.” So John uses this text almost ironically to assure the Philadelphians not only that they have entrance into the Messianic Kingdom because Christ holds the keys but one day those who persecute them, even those who belong to the Jewish synagogue, will bow down and acknowledge, in the future, that they are truly God’s people.

#### The Promise to the Philadelphian Church

The promise then that Jesus gives to the Philadelphian church is twofold starting in verse 10. First of all, Jesus promises that if they overcome and again for the Philadelphian church to overcome means to maintain their faithful witness that they already have, to refuse the compromise. If they overcome, verse 10, Christ promises that he will keep them from the hour of trial. Probably, the hour of trial, we’ll see gets unpacked in more detail in Revelation 4:21. This probably then implies, in my opinion and there’s a lot of debate what this entails, that they will be kept in the hour of trial. John is not so much focusing on their physical removal from that but it could equally imply that God will simply keep them and preserve them, that even in the midst of trial, and even in the midst of what is to come in the rest of Revelation, God will preserve them so that they will not participate in that. Yes, the church is not promised preservation necessarily from persecution and especially at the hands of the Roman empire but when God pours out his judgment, this text promises that God will keep them, God will preserve them, in the midst of that.

#### Connection with Rev 21 and 22

Second, the author then appeals directly to Revelation 21 and 22 with both temple and new Jerusalem imagery. Notice he promises they will be a pillar in the temple of God and he also promises that they will participate in the New Jerusalem that comes out of heaven. Both of those images come right out of Revelation 21 and 22.

In Revelation 21, John describes the New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven, to be inhabited and inherited by the people of God. But interestingly, this pillar imagery, the image of a pillar in the temple of God, also resonates with chapters 21 and 22 because there the New Jerusalem is not only portrayed as a city, it is clearly portrayed as a temple as well. The New

Jerusalem is not only an in-time city, it's an in-time temple. So, by using the image of a pillar in the temple of God and then turning right around and using the language of the New Jerusalem, John is saying the same thing: they will inherit the new Jerusalem/temple of God.

I wonder to what extent the pillar may also reflect the peg in the temple of Eliakim from Isaiah 22. Now they are promised that they will participate in the final kingdom of God. In the temple when Christ comes to restore it and to bring eschatological salvation to his people.

We also see here the anticipation of something we'll see in other places in Revelation, and we find this elsewhere in the New Testament such as Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 3 where temple imagery is applied to the people themselves. That is, the restored temple is not to be understood in terms of a physical structure but in terms of the people themselves. The people now constitute the true temple of God and it consists of other New Testament texts. So, the church in Philadelphia will read the rest of the book of Revelation as, number one, they are protected from the plagues and from the judgments that God pours out upon the earth. They will be protected from and they will receive the promise salvation because of their faithful witness and because of their endurance.

#### The Church of Laodicea: Background

That brings us to the last church, the church of Laodicea in chapter 3:14-22. This last church then, kind of lies at the end of this circular route, it's about 45 miles or so from the city of Philadelphia (southeast of it). As I read this, this is probably one of the more disturbing messages to any of the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. And we'll see why. Laodicea is a church that was also destroyed by an earthquake. It was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, so only 30 years or so from the time that John is now addressing this church. The city was rebuilt, but interestingly, not by help from Rome but from its own wealthy citizens, from the wealth of its own citizens and inhabitants. They personally funded the rebuilding of the city.

What is well known about the city of Laodicea, at least one factor that will come into play in another section of this message to the church in Laodicea is that the city of Laodicea lacked one well known requirement of any ancient city and that was a good water supply. One of the most important features for criteria for a city was not only a place that could be protected but it also must have a water supply. That's one of the things that Laodicea lacked. In fact, as most realize (and you can even see pictures of the aqueduct system) is Laodicea got its water by piping it in through an aqueduct from elsewhere.

Also Laodicea was the center of worship of a number of foreign and pagan gods. Again, the emperor cult was also influential in the city of Laodicea. So here is what Jesus says to the city of Laodicea, or to the church of the city in Laodicea, “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put under your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Although some of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 receive both a positive and a negative evaluation, Laodicea’s evaluation is solely negative. Christ has nothing good to say, such as, “I know where you are and I praise you for your faithfulness and I praise you because you have done some good works. But I have this against you.” Instead, the entire evaluation of the church is negative. Christ has nothing good to say about the church at Laodicea. Interestingly there is no persecution, there is no suffering, instead the problem appears to be a complete lack of wisdom and the horrid spiritual condition of the church due to their complacency and compromise brought about by their wealth. It is interesting Jesus does not seem to say anything about their compromise with pagan worship and involvement in emperor worship, although that may be implied. Instead, Christ goes after their complete complacency, that is, they are so reliant on their own wealth and their comfort in their situation that they simply have no witness at all. In fact, notice some of the language of wealth where Jesus tells them to buy gold refined with fire so that you can really be rich. This is sort of the language of irony, that is, Jesus chides their physical wealth and their physical status and says in reality you are poor because you lack true wealth. You lack true wealth which is spiritual.

The city of Laodicea, as we've already seen, was known for its wealth that's how it rebuilt itself after the earthquake in 60 AD. But also, the fact that the reference that I said may reflect the fact the Laodicea had a medicinal school that was well known for producing eye salve. Now John uses that ironically to say spiritually you are poor in contrast to your so called economic status you are actually poor and in contrast to the reputation for your medicinal center in that eye salve you are actually spiritually blind. So he counsels them instead to get those things that actually promote spiritual wealth and spiritual insight and spiritual sight.

#### Hot, Cold, and Lukewarm

The image from chapter 1 that is applied to Christ is he is seen as "the Amen and the faithful witness" which is the very thing that Laodicea was not. They were not a faithful witness, instead Jesus Christ is portrayed as the ruler of all creation. Interestingly, in language very similar to what one finds addressed to a neighboring church, the church of Colossae, in Colossians 1:15, 20. Christ is the ruler of the church and he is the power over the church. He is in the situation of authority over their lives and their wealth and their economic situation. So the condition of the church is, although one of physical wealth and in a fluent prosperous environment, spiritually that has led to extreme complacency and complete spiritual ineffectiveness, and one might even say complete spiritual deadness.

This I think helps us to understand Jesus' words in verses 13-16, as well as utilizing what we know of the background of the Laodicean community. This I think helps us understand Jesus' words in verses 13-16, that is, that he condemns the church for being neither hot nor cold but instead being lukewarm.

Now, traditionally, we have understood this to mean the church in Laodicea is lukewarm, that is, lukewarm is to be understood in the middle of, or half way between hot and cold. We treat hot and cold as binary opposites with lukewarm in the middle. Usually we equate those, then we equate hot, lukewarm and cold with spiritual temperature. So hot would be to be on fire for Christ and to be effective and to be a witness. Cold would be the opposite: to be turned off and to be dead and just unresponsive to the gospel. Lukewarm is in between, it's sort of uncommitted, it's wishy-washy, it's half-hearted, it's sort of riding the fence, not wanting to take a stand for Christ but not wanting to reject him either, but just kind of being a wishy-washy, middle of the road Christianity, that's usually how this metaphor is understood.

I am convinced and follow a number of others who suggest that this is not what John had in mind. The way to understand this is to read it in light of the cultural background of the Laodiceans. We already said one of the interesting, intriguing features of Laodicea is that it lacked one of the most important criteria for a city, and that is to have a good water supply. Instead through a system of an elaborate aqueducts it had its water piped in from elsewhere. Now, along with that, the other thing to recognize is two other cities very close to Laodicea were in fact known for their water supplies. One of those was a city named Hierapolis. It was known for its hot springs that were beneficial for medicinal purposes. People would come from all over to bathe in these springs. If you've ever seen pictures of them it looks a little bit like those of you who have ever visited Yellow Stone Park in the United States of America the mammoth hot springs with all the bubbling hot springs. Hierapolis was not far from Laodicea and was well-known for its hot water supply. Again, people would come all over for their medicinal and healing value.

The other city, Colossae, also near Laodicea was also known for its water supply. It was known for its cold and refreshing water that was good to drink. So you have Laodicea surrounded by two cities Hierapolis and Colossae known for their water supplies, one for the hot water supply, one for the cold, refreshing water. But instead Laodicea has to pipe its water in and by the time it gets there it's tepid, stale, lukewarm, not like the hot water of Hierapolis that's good for healing. It's not like the cold, refreshing water of Colossae that's good for drinking and refreshment. Instead, it is lukewarm—it is good for nothing. In fact, it is so grotesque that Christ says I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.

If you think about it, no one likes lukewarm water. A better analogy than spiritual temperature, I think would be this: when you go in a restaurant why does the waiter or waitress keep filling up your coffee cup, your hot coffee cup? Because no one likes lukewarm coffee. Or why do they keep coming by and filling up your water glass? Because no one likes lukewarm, or tepid, stale water. We like it fresh. In the same way, Jesus is calling on the church at Laodicea "I wish you were hot," like the hot water of Hierapolis is good for healing. Or "I wish you were cold," like the cold, refreshing water of Colossae. Both cold and hot are positive things for John and for his readers. "I wish you were like your neighboring cities which have good water: hot and cold." They at least are good for something. "Instead, you are like your own water supply. It's lukewarm. It is so gross and disgusting it's good for nothing. And it's so gross I am about to



vomit you out of my mouth.” So lukewarm does not stand for wishy-washy middle-of-the-road Christianity. It stands for dead, ineffective, useless Christians. They have become so complacent in their wealth and in their situation so that they are completely useless and completely ineffective witnesses for the person of Jesus Christ.

The solution then, again, is unequivocally to repent and to find true wealth, to find true eye sight and to find true garments. Again even the language of garments, wearing white garments, as we said in Revelation symbolizes overcoming victory, and purity. That may also reflect the commerce of the city of Laodicea. But John’s solution is repent. They have no other option to get out of their spiritual deadness, their spiritual uselessness, their spiritual poverty and blindness and impurity but to repent and act as God’s faithful witnesses.

Notice 3:20 as a final instruction to the church. Look at 3:20 which is one of the well known texts that often, again I think gets misread slightly because we fail to understand how it fits within the entire message to Laodicea. In 3:20 Christ describes himself in this way, “Here I am. I stand at the door and I knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat with him and that person will eat with me.” Often we have read this verse more individualistically as an individualistic call to salvation and I certainly want to say that this imagery could provide a fitting description of that. But that’s not what John is talking about. John is not talking about a call to individual salvation—that Christ is standing, knocking at the door of our hearts wanting to come in, though that could be true. Instead, the picture here is more insidious. Jesus Christ is seen as standing outside of his church, not welcomed in it. So complacent and ineffective has the Laodicean church become so reliant on its wealth and its status and society and it’s surroundings that Jesus Christ is no longer welcome in this church and stands outside of the church. The only solution is they must open the door and allow him to come back in and share a meal.

Perhaps a reference to the fact that the church celebrated feasts including communion, maybe a reference of the love feast or something like that. Communion which is almost even more ironic if this is a reference to the church celebrating a feast and celebrating communion together, than Jesus Christ is all of a sudden left out of that and excluded from that. Now he is asking to be welcomed back into his church and to be present and at the center of his church again. The one who walks around the lamp stands is now asking to be at the center of his church.

So, for the Laodicean church, they must stop compromising, they must stop their sense of complacency, comfort and reliance on their wealth and their social economic status and instead they must let Christ, the ruler of creation, the faithful witness, come into their midst and back in the center of the church. They too then must become Christ's faithful witnesses no matter what the consequences.

Notice also the promise that is given to them if they overcome, "To the one who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I overcame." In other words, if the Laodiceans repent, that is, if they overcome by repenting, refusing to compromise by ceasing to live lives of complacency by allowing Christ back into their midst, by becoming Christ's faithful witnesses; if they overcome in that way Christ promises that they will rule with him.

It's sort of interesting that this promise of them doesn't quite fit in some respects. You'll wonder, how does it actually fit their situation? Well, in one sense, you can see by promising them rule that would be motivation for getting out of their spiritual stupor, but on the other hand, I wonder if perhaps this promise is deliberately meant as more of a general promise to prepare us for chapter 4 and 5. In these chapters we find God and the Lamb seated on the throne and ruling in heaven and their sovereignty acknowledged by all of heaven, ruling over the entire earth. Now in preparation for that, the church of Laodicea, and probably the other churches are promised participation in that as well if they overcome. So perhaps this is more of a general promise to the church of Laodicea in preparation for the vision that comes next in chapters 4 and 5 where God and the Lamb, on their throne, is at the center.

So for the Laodiceans they will read the rest of the book of Revelation as a rather stern warning of judgment. They will read the rest of the plagues and the judgments of God in Revelation as falling on them if they refuse to repent. They will read the rest of the book of Revelation as an attempt to shock them out of their complacency, and to get them to pursue true wealth and true sight and true purity that comes only by faithfulness to Jesus Christ and being a faithful witness for Christ no matter what the cost.

#### Christ's Diagnoses

So, at this point first of all we've seen Christ has diagnosed the situation of his churches. Only two of them have been faithful to the point of suffering for their faithfulness. Most of the others have something they've done right but most of them receive a rather negative evaluation. Most of them are lacking something that Christ draws attention to. One of them, the Laodicean

church, receives a wholly negative evaluation. The problem with all of these to some degree is compromise and accommodation with the pagan Roman environment, that is, the idolatry, worship of pagan gods, involvement in emperor worship, and often in connection with their commercial life. The difficulty is refusal to separate from that and some of them may have been willing to compromise precisely to avoid persecution, being ostracized and perhaps even losing jobs. Others may have simply been so complacent that they needed to be woken up and shocked into understanding and seeing the gravity of the situation in what it was they were doing. But most of them were compromising, to some degree, with the pagan Roman Empire and the pagan society and what they found themselves.

So chapters 2-3 then speak to various situations that the church in the first century, and I would add the church today and every other century, finds itself in, not just persecution, and I would say at least for many churches today especially in the west, seldom is persecution the main problem they face.

Second, then it is seen that chapters 2 and 3 will determine how each of the churches read the rest of the book of Revelation or how the rest of Revelation applies specifically to each church. Then finally we've said, starting with chapter 4 and continuing into chapters 5-22 they will reinterpret it from a symbolic, an apocalyptic, perspective. Chapters 4-22 will, from a visionary perspective, interpret what John has actually said in chapters 2 and 3.

#### He Who Has An Ear

The last scene I want to mention is the phrase that we have overlooked and that is at the end, along with the promises although sometimes before, sometimes right after, along with the promise we have the message, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says of the churches." That is with chapters 2 and 3 we find the need for spiritual discernment to see what is wrong with the churches. The only way for the churches to wake up from their situation; the only way for the churches to maintain their faithful witness, even in the face of persecution, the only way for the church to understand its complacency; its compromise, its spiritual blindness, its need to maintain its a faithful witness, is by having spiritual insight into the situation of the church. Chapters 2-3 provide the insight that is necessary for the church especially the churches that compromise to wake up and discern their situation and to discern what the rest of the book of Revelation says to the people of God.

This simply reinforces that chapters 4-22 are not meant to simply predict the future and to

provide us with information to help us figure out what's going to happen in the future and where we are to plot our existence in some timeline that shows how close we are to the end. Instead, Rev 4-24 requires spiritual insight. It requires understanding and the spirits, the eyes of the spirits, the seven-fold spirit, to help us to grasp and understand the true situation of the church and what is at stake and what God requires of his church, if they are to respond to him in obedience and if they are to maintain their faithful witness in a hostile, pagan environment and to maintain that witness no matter what the cost.

#### Introduction to Chapters 4-22

Having looked at the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, we are now prepared to move ahead and to begin to read and consider the visionary, kind of the apocalyptic portion of chapters 4-22. What I propose we do then is we will continue to move through 4-22 and, starting with chapters 4-5 as the entry point or the beginning point of John's vision, we'll look overall what is the main function of the vision and we'll also ask how it might relate back to the situation of the churches in chapters 2-3. But we'll look at the overall function and its context but then also look at some of the details and especially some of the more important or interesting, or problematic details in the form of the languages, symbols and images. In doing this we will try to come to a greater understanding of the main function and purpose of the different sections and parts of the vision that we find in the remainder of the book.

Transcribed by Kaitlyn Marken

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 8

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

### Revelation 4-5: An Introduction

With chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation we come to a section that's different in character as we've already hinted at several times from chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 2 and 3 being sort of a more straight forward description using some a lot of imagery still but a straight forward or evaluation of the situation of seven historical churches.

Now beginning with chapter 4 we arrive at the apocalyptic section of the book. This is the vision proper. We saw an inaugural vision in chapter 1 but now starting in chapter 4. John commences a vision that will extend all the way to the end of the book, or at least through parts of chapter 22. Some have labeled chapters 4 and 5 as sort of the fulcrum of the book or the theological center of the book. There's probably some truth to that. Chapters 4 and 5 have inspired countless hymns and songs of the church. You don't have to think very hard to recall hymns like "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God Almighty" or "Worthy is the lamb who was slain," or "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne," etc. You can think of many other songs that have been verbally inspired by Revelation chapter 4 and 5.

#### Overall Content of Rev 4-5: No dualism

What I want to do, and hopefully as we progress in looking at these two chapters we will see how these two fit together. Chapters 4 and 5 probably should not be treated as two separate chapters at all. Chapters 4 and 5 constitute one visionary piece within the narrative within the section. But let me make several initial comments about the overall function, the overall content, kind of an overall orientation to Revelation chapters 4 and 5. Literarily, the first point I want to make, from a literary perspective is that chapters 4 and 5 provide sort of the setting or preparation for the rest of the vision, that is, chapters 6 through 22. All that happens in chapters 6 through 22 stems from and flows from this visionary section. All the blessing of salvation that are described in the rest of Revelation result from this section. All the judgments that we read about in chapter 6 through 19 starting with chapter 6 and the seven seals, all of these judgments issue from chapters 4

and 5.

Also another way to look at it is, in light of this as things become rather intense in the rest of the book we see God's judgment is being poured out as we see things getting a little chaotic. For example, it is like sending in an airplane with all kinds of turbulence going on and getting thrown about. Revelation 4 and 5 reminds us that in the cockpit, so to speak, in the throne room, God is seated on his throne and he is in control of all things that take place in chapters 6 through 19. Nothing happens apart from his watchful eye. So what this means is we cannot read Revelation in terms of some dualism between good and evil as if there is a dualistic conflict between the powers of good and the powers of evil whose outcome is uncertain until it gets resolved at the end. Chapters 4 and 5 remind us at the beginning that there is no dualism between good and evil but the starting point is God sovereignly seated on his throne and he is sovereignly in control of all the events that take place in the world.

#### God's sovereignty in Heaven, while earth resists

Second, Revelation 4 and 5 functions and prepares chapters 6 through 22 in another way. In chapters 4 and 5 we find this vision of all of heaven worshipping God seated on his throne. All heaven is portrayed in chapters 4 and 5 and again to back up just a little bit the location is clearly in the heavenlies. We're going to see in the rest of Revelation John will show that his perspective kind of oscillates between heaven and earth. Chapter 4 and 5 begins with John in heaven where all of heaven acknowledges God's sovereignty. Heaven is a place where all of heaven bows down and worships God acknowledging his sovereignty. The problem is, earth does not. The earth contests God's sovereignty. The earth refuses to acknowledge God's sovereignty, especially the Roman Empire. Rome instead, claims its own sovereignty and refuses to and rejects and even rebels against and contests the absolute sovereignty of God which is acknowledged in heaven. So heaven is a place that acknowledges God's sovereignty and worships God. Earth is a place that largely does not, especially empires and kingdoms like Rome. So the question that chapters 4 and 5 raise is: how will God's sovereignty that is completely acknowledged in heaven, how will that eventually get acknowledged on earth? How will

the worship of God eventually take place on earth, on an earth that refuses to acknowledge it, an earth that contests it. The rest of Revelation 6 through 22 is the answer to that question. Chapters 6 through 22 describe how the scene in heaven eventually transpires on earth. It takes place through a series of judgments that leads eventually to chapters 21 and 22 in a new heavens and a new earth, on a new creation where all of earth, all of creation, finally acknowledges God's sovereignty, All of creation people from every tribe and tongue and nation and language finally emerge as worshipping God on his throne. So the situation in chapters 4 and 5 finally in the new heavens and the new earth, God's sovereignty that is acknowledged in heaven finally gets acknowledged on earth, an earth that at the present time contests it, refuses it, rebels against it.

#### Lord's Prayer and Rev 4-22

In a sense chapter 4 through 22 of Revelation, and I owe this insight to Richard Bacham and I'm convinced he's right, Revelation 4 through 22 could be seen as an expansion as part of the Lord's Prayer in Mathew chapter 6. Jesus tells his disciples to pray, "Our father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So heaven is a place where God's name is hallowed and worshiped. Heaven is a place where God's kingdom is and where God's will is realized. But that has yet to be acknowledged on earth. God name has yet to be hallowed on earth. God's will and God's kingdom has yet to be completely accomplished on earth. In a sense Revelation is an expression of how that's going to happen and how the Lord's prayer will eventually get worked out.

#### Revelation is a Book about Worship

Third, chapters 4 and 5 remind us that Revelation is also primarily a book about worship and not again about the end times. I've said this in several connections and I can't stress it enough. Yes, Revelation does refer to the end times, but not to give us privileged insight into what's going to happen in the future, or giving us information that satisfies our curiosity and allows us to construct timelines and charts and things like that. At the essence Revelation is a book about worship. Chapters 4 and 5 remind us again

raising the question, who is really worthy of our worship? Who is worthy of our allegiance? Is it Rome? For the first century Christians, is it Rome and the emperor who were claiming allegiance and worship as those who provided peace and stability and prosperity and blessing for the entire world? But Revelation 4 and 5 remind us up front that one of the questions Revelation will wrestle with and the question people must wrestle with is: Who is really worthy of our worship? Who is worthy of our allegiance? No other human being, no other nation, no other entity is worthy of our worship, only God and the Lamb. To worship anything else is nothing less than idolatry. Revelation 4 and 5 gives us a glimpse into the true reality that only God and the lamb seated on the throne sovereign over all things only they are worthy of our worship.

#### Rev 4-5 as Direct Counter Claim to Roman Empire

Number four, and related to the third one is, Revelation 4 and 5 as we've already seen this happening in chapter 1 but now we see it even more so in 4 and 5; chapters 4 and 5 are a direct counter claim to the claims of the Roman Empire. Chapters 4 and 5 present God as seated on his throne worthy of worship and all of creation acknowledging his sovereignty and the Lamb as well. Chapters 4 and 5 conflict with the claims of Rome.

I've already mentioned this before but it bears repeating again because I hear it so often. Many are still convinced that Revelation was written in symbolic language, so that if it fell into the wrong hands its message would sort of be hidden. It would have been too conspicuous and overt; it could have brought even more persecution for Christians. However, I cannot imagine any Roman emperor reading chapters 4 and 5 and not being upset because their reign and their throne and their own claims were being contested. You cannot have two thrones, you cannot have God and the Lamb on their throne sovereign over all things and Caesar –it doesn't work. So Revelation 4 and 5 conflicts and brings Revelation into overt and direct conflict with the claims of the Roman Empire.

Number five, Revelation 4 and 5 consists of two separate scenes but continuous. They both have the same setting. The throne room of God and the throne is the central point around which both scenes revolve. In chapter 4 God is seated on his throne and he's worshiped as the creator of the universe. In chapter 5 we find a lamb who unseals the



scroll and who is likewise ends up on God's throne and is worshiped by all of heaven. So, chapters 4 and 5 again are on continuous vision two scenes but part of one vision and have the same setting which is the heavenly throne room.

#### Interpretation Schema for Rev 4-22

So having said that, as kind of the way of introducing this section and orienting ourselves with chapters 4 and 5 what I want to do is look at each of the chapters and consider their main functions examine some of the details, and also focus on the Old Testament, particularly the Old Testament that lies behind the images. As we begin chapter 4, one other point to make by way of introduction to 4 through 22, so we're not just focusing on chapters 4 and 5 but 4 through 22. Chapter 4 begins the visionary section of Revelation and there has been there have been many attempts to try to categorize and try to systematize different ways of approaching chapter 4 through 22. The most popular way that has emerged has been to categorize throughout church history and looking at the way Christians have interpreted Revelation is to categorize it according to a number of labels. Virtually every commentary I have ever picked up and read utilizes these labels and I certainly would not want to say they are unhelpful or inaccurate or anything like that but I just want to talk a little bit about the way we approach 4 through 22. Scholars and commentaries on Revelation again you can pick up anyone and read the introduction and you'll be introduced to these different categories as ways of approaching and interpreting Revelation 4 through 22. The assumption is almost any approach can be placed into one or more of these categories. For example, commentaries are convinced that many approaches to interpreting Revelation 4 through 22 can be labeled with what is known as the "Preterist Approach. The Preterist Approach basically says all of Revelation 4 through 22, or most of it refers solely to the first century. That is, it's simply a commentary on what's going on in the first century. That is one common way of describing it. That is, the further away we get, the further history goes on, the further away we get from the events of Revelation 4 through 22. That is because 4 through 22 is only describing what is happening in the first century. That's called the Preterist Approach.

Another approach is called the historical approach. Interestingly, I don't find this approach described much anymore and you'll see why as I describe it. The historical approach basically is similar to one of the views of the seven churches we've looked at. We said a popular view that doesn't seem to be very popular anymore but one that was popular in the past was that the seven churches predicted seven periods of church history. Some read Revelation 4 through 22 as actually predicting periods of Church history leading up to the modern day. Now obviously the difficulty with that as history goes on and changes this has to keep being continually revised. In fact, the difficulty too is you can often find sections all through chapter 4 through 22 that could almost fit any period of church history. So for that reason the "Historical View" is sort of a forecast of church history starting in the first century leading up to the modern day and finally culminating with the second coming of Christ. I don't find it popular view anymore.

A third view is known as the idealist view. The idealist view says Revelation really is not referring to specific events either in the first century or through church history but instead Revelation should be understood more as a symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and Satan or good and evil. So, all the images and symbols of Revelation are sort of to be taken as trans-temporal they. Yes, they apply to the first century, but they can apply to any century. They describe the images of Revelation chapter 4 through 22 are a symbolic way of depicting the struggle between the church and Satan between God and Satan all through church history leading up to the second coming of Christ. So, the images transcend just the first century but they are general symbols just the symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil that eventually God is victorious in the end. They are not to be restricted to any one event person or time period.

A final view is known as the futurist view that is, all or most of if not all of 4 through 22 has yet to happen. It has not yet happened it is solely future and the Church awaits and looks forward to chapters 4 through 22. Now I said little about this approach in the beginning and that is because while this approach has some value in helping us see the way the church interpreted things and helping point attention to how we might

understand Revelation 4 through 22, it is far too limited because it only focuses on a temporal understanding as if that is the most important feature and classification for how we interpret Revelation. We're going to see the focus of Revelation is not about temporally when did these events occur, in fact some Christians interpreters of Revelation get obsessed where these events fit temporally into one of these categories. Instead, our focus is going to be solely on what does the text seem to say? How are these visions functioning? What are they saying to Christians? How would Christians in first century Asia Minor have made sense of these? Probably as we've hinted at already, our interpretation is going to fit two or three of these approaches at time. It's probably unnecessary to try and pigeon hole Revelation into one of those. To suggest that these are the most important categories restricts Revelation to the most important features when did these events occur temporally? We'll focus our attention more on how do we understand these texts functioning in their literary context and how would they have addressed the situation of the seven churches.

#### Revelation 4

So Revelation chapter 4, and what I want to do is, especially with chapters 4 and 5, to spend time reading chapters 4 and 5 again I want you to hear the text. I want you in a sense, as John did, and probably intended for his readers to visualize what is going on before we try to talk about the details because we don't want to just dissect this text and examine the details under a microscope lest we lose the force of the vision and the images and its beauty as passing before our eyes and helping us to feel the effect of the vision.

So chapter 4 begins the vision proper. "After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me there was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of

lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, were seven lamps blazing. There are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stopped singing: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty four elders will fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’”

#### Vision of Heaven Opened

So this is the beginning of the vision proper. As we’ve said, it begins in heaven and Revelation as I already mentioned will alternate between John being in heaven and being on earth or seeing things on earth and then he will be in heaven again. Try to be alert to that. But the beginning point with the heavenly vision is appropriate because as you remember as an apocalypse, John is trying to provide a heavenly perspective on reality. As his readers look out on the empirical physical world, John now is permitted to see into heaven. The curtain is removed; the veil is lifted; the covering is taken away so that John can see another reality. It’s not a separate different reality as if John enters some dream fantasy world; but this is true reality. It is the reader’s situation now expanded to include the heavenly reality that influences it and lies behind it. So now John’s vision begins with the heavens opened so that now he can peer into heaven and see a whole new reality that will shape him and his readers view of their present situation.

It’s important to see that John begins chapter 4 with a reference to heaven open a door standing open in heaven and then hearing a voice. This was part and parcel of apocalyptic literature. In many other Jewish apocalypses you often see reference to the

seer or the visionary going up to heaven and hearing a voice addressing him. There are numerous references to heaven opened.

In fact, you see in the book of Acts there is a reference to heaven opened. Peter has a vision of heaven opened. I have even argued elsewhere that Jesus after his baptism when he sees heaven opened he is having an apocalyptic vision, and in chapter 4 verses 1 through 11, in Mathew are all a part of an apocalyptic vision Jesus had much like John's. So this opening of the heavens was part and parcel of apocalyptic literature. More specifically it seems to have its background in the book of Ezekiel, a book that, along with Isaiah, plays a crucial role for John in Revelation.

In fact, what is interesting just to make a brief comment about John's use of the Old Testament. What is interesting is that when John draws on the book of Isaiah he often draws on it thematically. That is, in different sections he'll draw on main texts that communicate the theme he is trying to communicate in that section. When John follows Ezekiel, he follows it pretty much in the order of the book of Ezekiel itself.

So in chapter 4 the reference to the open heaven resembles Ezekiel chapter 1 and verse 1. And notice it begins, "In the thirteenth year," this is Ezekiel 1 verse 1, "In the thirteenth year in the fourth month of the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God." And probably that verse alone provided the impotence for other apocalypses. I mention before a work by a British Scholar named Christopher Roland whose book was entitled *The Open Heaven* he demonstrates how Ezekiel 1:1, was very influential in this notion of apocalyptic visions. Certainly John now draws specifically from Ezekiel 1:1, to describe his own apocalyptic vision. He wants to make clear he is having a visionary experience in line with that of Ezekiel. So the heaven opens and hearing the voice, are common themes of apocalyptic literature where now the veil is lifted and John is allowed to see behind the scenes and glimpse the heavenly reality.

Interestingly, at this point John actually ascends to heaven, and let me back up John is not only dependent on Ezekiel for this concept of a vision of heaven, but we're going to see Isaiah chapter 6 as well. But, as the heaven is opened John is told to come up

here. Hopefully, most of us realize this is not a reference to the rapture. This is just a common part of the visionary experience. The heaven is open and the seer is taken up to heaven or taken on a visionary experience.

One common theme in many Jewish apocalypses is what are called “Merkabah Apocalypses” or sort of apocalypses of ascent. That is you often find, what you don’t find here in John. You find in some other Jewish apocalypses where they often ascend through various heavens and the number differs. Sometimes it’s three, sometimes it’s seven, sometimes it’s more than that. But the seer ascends through various heavens and sees something in each one. The goal is to arrive at the final heaven, the seventh one or wherever the throne room of God is. We have no reference of John ascending through levels of heaven, we simply have John being summoned up to the heaven, that is, the throne room of God or the temple of God where God dwells. John is summoned by this voice and in preparation for his apocalyptic vision he now ascends to heaven.

The rest of chapter 4 then will describe what John saw in this visionary experience, Again it is important to realize John draws very heavily from Ezekiel, especially chapters 1 and 2 which is Ezekiel’s heavenly vision. He also draws very heavily on Isaiah chapter 6 which portrays Isaiah in a heavenly visionary experience and seeing different creatures surrounding the throne of God as Ezekiel does. So again, John is making clear that his vision is to be understood along the same lines as Ezekiel and Isaiah. What John is seeing is the same heavenly throne room and what John experiences is to be understood in the same way as Isaiah and Ezekiel as John sort of takes the mantle of Isaiah and Ezekiel upon himself in this apocalyptic vision. As I said, John will draw on these two books especially Ezekiel and Isaiah, throughout the rest of his work. Isaiah more thematically, he’ll move throughout the book drawing on texts that support his themes but Ezekiel he will follow almost in the identical order Ezekiel himself has followed.

The other thing to reiterate by saying John has drawn on Ezekiel and Isaiah for his own presentation of his own vision, I want to emphasize that John has had a real visionary experience, but that experience has been communicated to him in images and

language like Ezekiel and Isaiah. John goes back to Ezekiel and Isaiah to draw on those texts to make clear what he saw and to draw the connection with the Old Testament texts. Those who have had similar visionary experiences to his own, he has his own vision yet he writes in the language of his Old Testament predecessors, but now he shows even the vision of his predecessors have now been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

One other thing to say before we look at some of the detailed features of John's vision is, to realize that this phrase that begins verse 4 "after this" or "after these things," again I want to make clear this language that we will see throughout Revelation "after this I saw," or "after these things then I looked and saw this," that language is not meant to convey chronological order of how these things will transpire as if the events of chapters 2 and 3 happened first and then when they're done chapters 4 and 5 happen. Instead, this is the order in which John writes or this is the order in which he saw these things.

So after hearing the message after seeing what he did in chapter 1, the vision of the exalted Christ, and after hearing and writing the messages of chapter 2 and 3, now John sees this and John will now record his visionary experience in chapters 4 and 5.

#### Revelation 4: The Throne

The first thing to note about chapter four is the mention of the throne. That will provide the focal point, the center point, almost the gravitational pull for everything else that takes place in chapters 4 and 5. The throne is significant because actually we already have been introduced to the throne and its significance back in chapter 1. Now in John's vision in chapters 4 and 5 it begins to emerge and play a more crucial role where the throne is significant because it is a symbol of sovereignty and rulership which again suggests an important feature or theme throughout the rest of Revelation. Who is really in control? Who is really the sovereign ruler of the universe? Who is really the sovereign ruler over all the nations and over the world? Is it Caesar, or someone else?

Just the mention of the throne here would immediately be a counter imperial claim. You can't have two thrones. It's either God is seated on his throne or Caesar is seated on his throne. Either God is worthy of worship and allegiance or Caesar is worthy

of worship and allegiance. So, who is in control? Who is truly the sovereign ruler of the universe? That question is already raised simply by the appearance of God's throne, in John's initial part of his vision in chapter 4. In fact, the word "throne," appears thirteen times in Revelation chapter 4 alone will occur also in chapter 5 as well. The other way that I contrast this to, is we've already been introduced back in chapter 2 to Satan's throne as well. And so, once again the image of the throne plays a crucial role in who is in control. God's sovereignty is contested by Satan and ultimately by Caesar and any other human ruler. But Chapter 4 at the forefront reminds us that there is no dualism in Revelation as if the outcome of this contest is in doubt until we come to the end. But already we are introduced to Jesus and the Lamb and God seated on the highest throne, the heavenly throne, and that just has to get worked out on this earth, and earth contests it.

One other question that is inevitably raised in our mind is we read these verses in chapter 4 is: when does this take place? What is John describing? Is he describing a specific scene historically in the past or is he describing what's going on now? Is this some event to take place in the future? What is interesting when you read it's really not clear. There are no clear temporal indicators of when that takes place. Should we perhaps take this more a temporally? John is not describing a specific event at a certain time, but is simply describing a reality that is simply true at all times. That God is depicted as seated on his throne and all of heaven acknowledging his sovereignty without John being concerned exactly when this takes place. Is there a certain time when this is evident? It's interesting there is a lack of any specific temporal indications as to when this is going on. Perhaps we're not to limit it to any specific temporal moment. So there's no specific chronology as far as when this text takes place. The other thing to mention about chapter 4 in relationship to what is going on is, its intriguing to me, when you read this carefully, one thing that your English translations hide is the fact that (and this is necessary because we have to do this in English usually), if you were to read the Greek text, there are very, very, very few indicative verbs that would suggest movement and activity. There are only a couple of them. One is associated with the thunder and lightning coming from the



throne. But other than that, there are very few verbs at all that describe activities and actions and movement actually going on in chapter 4. Instead, chapter 4 is almost a static scene that's highly descriptive of the heavenly environs but it is in a sense fairly static. I think the reason for that is, chapter 4 probably functions to provide the setting for chapter 5. And interestingly to go back to the Greek text, if you could read the Greek text, when you get to chapter 5 there are all of the sudden a bunch of indicative verbs—that is verbs that describe actions and activities going on in heaven. So again, chapter 4 provides the backdrop and the setting for chapter 5.

What that means is the main focus of our attention should be in chapter 5. That does not mean chapter 4 is not important (yes, of course, it is). But chapter 4 mainly provides the setting and the backdrop for what's going to happen in chapter 5 where the Lamb emerges on his throne and that's where the main action begins to take place and everything is leading up to that in chapter 4.

It's interesting too that in chapter 4 John does not describe directly the one who is seated on the throne. Again, following Isaiah and Ezekiel, it's interesting John's attention is going to move very quickly away from the one seated on the throne to what goes on around it. So he begins again notice in verse 2, "at once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone seated on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, was encircling the throne." So notice he says almost nothing about the person on the throne. He doesn't describe this person in detail—he just says there's one seated on the throne and his appearance was like this. But immediately he moves away to describe this rainbow encircling him and then in verse 4 he begins to describe other thrones, the twenty-four thrones and these twenty-four elders that encircled the throne and then also these four living creatures. So it's intriguing that John does not directly describe the one seated on the throne but moves very quickly away from the throne to describe the environs and the surroundings of the throne itself.

One interesting feature of the throne and the one seated on the throne that John does bring out is that the appearance of the one on the throne is described as precious

stones or precious jewels. The NIV translation that I read used the word “the appearance of jasper and carnelian” and “then a rainbow surrounding the throne that resembled an emerald.” Now obviously at one level this sort of language adds to the aura of the vision, it adds to the splendor and the beauty of the vision and the awe of what John sees but probably we should push a little bit more beyond that. It’s interesting that there are two things to draw your attention to: number one, it’s interesting that these precious stones recall I think the foundations of the stones that belong to the temple. For example, the stones in the breastplate of the high priest. Elsewhere texts like Isaiah 54 describe the rebuilding of the New Jerusalem in terms of precious stones. Elsewhere in Jewish literature we find the temple described as gold and precious stones. So at one level the precious stones recall the temple. This is the place of God’s dwelling. This is the holy temple where God dwells where his throne is seated. But second, these precious stones probably function to symbolize divine presence. And interestingly, these stones will appear later on in Revelation 21 and 22 as the stones that make up the New Jerusalem temple where God dwells with his people. So these stones then are probably not meant to represent certain attributes of God. We shouldn’t worry, what does this refer to as far as God’s character. The rainbow may suggest the flood account in Genesis and God’s faithfulness to his creation which I think certainly fits here because God back in Genesis chapter 9, verses 12 and following the rainbow was part of the demonstration of God’s covenant and the demonstration of his faithfulness to his creation from Genesis 1 and 2. It’s interesting that here in Revelation 4 God is celebrated as the creator of all things. So the rainbow is an appropriate element in John’s vision and we’re going to see later on in just a moment why that’s significant. It’s appropriate in celebrating God as the creator of all things that the rainbow would emerge as a sign from Genesis 9 once again as an indication of God’s faithfulness to his creation. I want to return to that in a moment. But the point is the stones we probably don’t need to be too specific as far as what in God’s character attributes they represent but simply to gather they represent God’s glorious and shining presence in the heavenly temple in anticipation of the time he will dwell with his people in a new creation in Revelation 21 and 22.

But as we said, now we move away from the throne and its occupant which John hesitates to describe but that's common in apocalyptic literature. Often in apocalyptic literature the person on the throne is not described but everything around him and what the appearance of his appearance and shining.

#### Around the Throne: 24 Elders and 4 Living Creatures

What happens next then John's attention moves away from the throne and its occupant to what surrounds it. John singles out two separate groups. A group of twenty-four elders or twenty-four thrones and twenty-four elders are seated on those thrones and then another group of four living creatures. Now, at one level it's easy to deal with both these groups in that it's easy to answer the question what did these do? What did these two groups, the twenty-four elders and the twenty-four thrones, and the four living creatures, what is their function in this vision?

When you read it closely they seem to have one function and that is to offer up ceaseless praise to the one seated on the throne, day and night they worship the one on the throne—they worship God. Their primary function is to acknowledge God's sovereignty and they offer up worship to the one who is the sovereign creator of all of the entire universe.

The difficulty comes in trying to identify who these groups are. Who are these twenty-four elders who sit on the throne? Who are these four loving creatures that are described in rather strange language? Now up until this point you hopefully will come to the conclusion these groups are symbolic of someone or something though that is the question. What or whom do these two groups represent? What do these two groups symbolize? The obvious question is, are these groups symbolic of angelic beings, or are they symbolic of human beings? Or some groups of human beings? Again we should resist deciding and pigeon-holing the one group or the other and suggest some combination of the two.

We'll start by looking at the twenty-four elders. Actually, the twenty-four elders play an important role in the rest of the book of Revelation. We'll see them cropping up in chapter 7 and a couple other places throughout the book of Revelation. But again, the

twenty-four elders have had, probably even more than the four living creatures, a number of attempts to try to explain and describe their precise identity. Again, at one level we don't need to worry too much about this as we said, the main point is their function.

Whoever they are, their primary function in the vision is to worship God, to acknowledge his sovereignty, and day and night to worship the one who sits on the throne, the one who is the sovereign Lord over all creation. That is the main point you need to understand.

But at the same time, I think it is also necessary to ask, who might they be? Can we identify these twenty-four elders? One option, again I'm not going to survey all the possibilities I just want to focus on a few that I think are perhaps the most likely and might provide the best explanation for what we find in chapter 4. One possibility is that the twenty-four elders are simply heavenly beings that are modeled, of course, on the twenty-four courses of priests that one finds back in the Old Testament especially 1 Chronicles 23:6 and 1 Chronicles 24:7-18. So the twenty-four courses of priests in 1 Chronicles provides a model for these twenty-four heavenly beings who function apparently as priests. Now the difficulty with that is it's not abundantly clear that these twenty-four elders function as priests in a way the fact that they offer a praise to God and worship to God may suggest a priestly function but they don't do some other things one might expect from a priest such as offering up sacrifices or some other things that actually one finds going on in the book of Revelation.

Others have suggested the twenty-four elders represent the church who has now been taken to heaven. This is often associated with a certain view of how we interpret Revelation that one can see for example in the *Left Behind* series that is before all these end time events in Revelation 4-22 happen, the church will actually be raptured away. At the present, God is actually dealing with the church but before he pours out his wrath, before he pours out his judgment, before he begins to deal with the nation of Israel again, before all that happens, before the end time anti-Christ and the enemy arrives. Before any of that happens, starting in chapter 4, God will rapture his church away and that is what the twenty-four elders are. Again, that might be convincing if one follows that line of interpretation if you're convinced that chapters 4-22 are only future and it's mainly God

dealing with Israel and mainly God pouring out his judgment on humanity that the church will be spared from. Then seeing the twenty-four elders as representing the church might be a valid conclusion.

A third possibility is that the 24 elders are the heavenly representatives of Israel and the church. Remember we suggested that the apocalyptic literature functions to demonstrate or present the heavenly counterpart to earthly realities or the heavenly reality that is a counter part to the earthly reality. So it could be that what we have here is a counterpoint to or a counterpart or reflection in heaven of the earthly people of God. That is, for example, we saw with the seven angels of the seven churches, the seven angels being the seven heavenly representatives of the earthly churches. So here we might have the heavenly representatives of the earthly people of God that is the nation of Israel in the Old Testament as well as the church so you'd get twenty-four by adding up two 12's. Remember we said 12 is a number of the people of God. So the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles representing the church together end up being twenty-four. So the number of the twenty-four elders are the heavenly representatives of Israel and the church.

A fourth option is that these are simply angelic beings who belong to a heavenly court. When one reads texts like 1 Kings 22:19, but also another text Isaiah chapter 24:23, both of these portray the heavenly court or heaven with God seated on his throne and a heavenly court surrounding him, apparently. So, for example, Isaiah chapter 24 and verse 23 may provide some more situation or provide the background for what one finds here. So in 24 verse 23 we read, I'll back up and read 22 and interestingly these verses have often been labeled as Isaiah's apocalypse. Verse 22: "They will be herded together [all the nations and the kings of the earth] like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days. The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed; for the Lord almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before its elders, gloriously." Some have suggested the portrayal is God on his throne with his heavenly court, with elders surrounding him, and that is the model for what we find in chapter 4 of Revelation with the twenty-four elders. So this would be angelic beings a heavenly angelic court, that surrounds God seated on his throne who is surrounded by

these angelic beings.

There are other possibilities that we could explain, but I simply focused on the main ones that I think could provide potential background for understanding the twenty-four elders seated on the throne. Again, I want to remind you that what is important is not so much that we pin down exactly who these are in the background as much as we remember and recall their function. Their primary function is that they surround the throne of God, they acknowledge God's sovereignty, they in a sense lead heaven in worshiping the one who sits on the throne, who is the sovereign ruler over all the universe.

In the next section then I want to look a little bit more detail at the twenty-four elders and see if we can, out of these different options, determine if one of them fits. And how does that help us understand what is going on in the book of Revelation.

Transcribed by Reece Brown  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 9

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 4-5 continued

Out of the different ways we could understand the twenty-four elders, in my opinion, out of the four options we surveyed; the heavenly beings modeled on angelic beings- modeled on the twenty-four courses of priests from 1 Chronicles; the church in heaven raptured away or removed before the events in Revelation 4:22 chapters 4 through 22; the heavenly twenty-four elders as twenty-four representatives of Israel in the church; and the angelic beings that belong to the heavenly court. Out of these I find it difficult to pin it down to one precisely. I wonder if probably a combination of number one and number three, perhaps even four. I would find it hard to exclude four, the idea of heavenly court especially the connection with the mention of elders in Isaiah 24:23. In any case, these then would be angelic beings who would worship God and function as the heavenly representatives of God's people on earth.

Furthermore, another interesting twist to what's going on in chapter 4 and in chapter 5 as well, and this might help to provide us also a background for the twenty-four elders, interestingly in some of the images of the literature that depict the emperor in the context of the Roman world the emperor is often described as accompanied by lectors, or the closest thing would be body guards. So the emperor would often go places or be at certain banquets or public events surrounded by lectors or bodyguards. Interestingly according to Suetonius the historian Domitian had 24 lectors that often accompanied him. Domitian often had these lectors would follow him or when Domitian presided over games or other events often he was accompanied by priests who intriguingly were described as wearing golden crowns. In fact in another literature in Asia Minor the imperial priests who ran the emperor cult, the priests responsible for the emperor cult were often depicted as wearing emperor crowns. So is it possible that John has constructed an image that relates both to the Old Testament background of maybe twenty-four courses of priests or the heavenly counsel and angelic beings as the heavenly beings as the heavenly representatives of God's people. But at the same time he has used

image that reflects what was going on in the Greco-Roman background so that God is actually being compared to Domitian if that is the emperor ruling- So that chapter 4 again is adding more fuel to the fire of chapter 4 being counter-imperial. Although it may be better to say that God is not so much being compared to Domitian as vice versa. Domitian is being compared to God and Domitian's rule is being said to fall short. God's rule is contested by the Caesar but Caesar is a poor parody of, or the Caesar is the poor imitation of God's rule which is in conflict with Caesar.

So therefore, Caesar's rule can be described in similar ways as God's reign and God's rule. Again John may be directly drawing on Greco-Roman imagery is evocative of Jewish background but is also evocative of Greco-Roman background and who is in charge. Who is really the ruler of the universe? It's not Caesar who is surrounded by his entourage, but it is God who is seated on his throne, surrounded by his entourage of angelic beings who worship and acknowledge his sovereignty indirect contrast to Caesar.

In fact intriguingly, without going into all the details, the whole scene of chapters 4 and 5 may at one level again although we have seen chapters 4 and 5 appears to deliberately modeled on the heavenly throne room of Ezekiel 1 and 2 and Isaiah 6, at the same time chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation may also contrast with known courts scenes in the Roman world.

A series of works, starting with a couple of articles and ending with his major commentary in the Word Biblical Commentary series the first volume that covers chapter 4 and 5. David Aune has argued that much of what one finds in chapters 4 and 5 resembles what we know and what we can know about courts scenes in the Roman world. Where Aune suggests Caesar would have been seated on his throne, he would have been surrounded by his friends. Similar to these lectors or priests he would have been surrounded by his friends. His friends and those surrounding him would have shouted words of praise and acclamation to Caesar who is seated on his throne. Now in direct parody to that God is depicted as on his throne surrounded by his followers, his friends, his court and they are now shouting words of praise and acclamation to God. So it is God who is King and Caesar is not.



So as I said it may not be so much that God's throne is a parody of Caesar's as vice versa. Caesar's throne is seen to be a parody, a poor parody, and a deficient one of God's throne. But clearly there's anti-imperial rhetoric going on here. As John, as I said, drawing in both Old Testament imagery but also Greco-Roman imagery to contrast a scene from the heavenly throne room where God is seated on his throne and all of the residents of the heavenly throne, or the heavenly court, surround God and worship him and acknowledge his sovereignty as creator and ruler over the entire universe.

The other feature to draw attention to in relationship to part of the environs surrounding throne is this reference to "a glassy sea," or "a sea of glass" starting with verse 4 again. "Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated among twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning. In front of the throne lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass."

I am going to skip over the seven spirits. We have already seen them introduced. We have said that those seven spirits probably represent the seven-fold spirit of God and not seven separate spirits, but seven being a symbol of perfection and completeness. Here is the full fullness of God, the complete spirit of God.

#### Glassy Sea

In connection to the throne of God the one I want to focus on is actually two features, starting with this glassy sea. Probably the sea of glass furthers the temple imagery. It probably represents the basin or laver in Solomon's temple. But also it appears that this sea of glass may represent again a feature that we find in Ezekiel's description of his throne vision, back in Ezekiel chapter 1, verse 22. As we said John is heavily dependent on Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2 for describing what he sees and John's own vision in chapter 4 and 5. But in chapter 1 and verse 22 I will start with verse 19. "When the living creatures moved," [it kind of anticipates the next group that we will look at the four living creatures]. "wheels beside them moved; and when the living

creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose.” Let me skip down then to verse 22. “Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse sparkling like crystal, and awesome.” So this vision of an expanse sparkling may resemble or may be the impetus for John’s glassy sea that he now sees. But again there’s probably more reason to limit it to just one than it may given the temple imagery that one finds if this the throne room scene is God’s temple than the background of the basin in Solomon’s temple would certainly provide a fitting background.

But since he is drawing from Ezekiel, Ezekiel 1:22 this sparkling expanse may also provide the background for what John sees. A further possible background would be the Red Sea. Which I will argue plays a role elsewhere in Revelation. In fact, this I think becomes more apparent in chapter 15 in verse 2 of Revelation where intriguingly you see the saints standing victorious starting in chapter 15:1 in heaven. “I saw in heaven another great marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--lasts because with them God’s wrath is completed.” Now listen to this verse 2, “And I saw what looked like a sea of glass [from chapter 4] “mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image, and over the number of its name. They held harps given to them by God and sang the song of Moses, the servant of God.” So in chapter 15 you have this picture of the saints and the new exodus being delivered from the oppression of evil and from Satan and the beast and the oppressive Roman Empire. Now they stand victorious as Moses and the Israelites did by the sea, and they sing the song of Moses as the Israelites did. So, having said that, this glassy sea in chapter 4 may also anticipate the Red Sea. The point of this is probably I think simply this, in Revelation the sea often is seen, and I think this was true back in the Exodus account as well, as something that is evil. Later on a beast will come out of the sea. The sea seems to be the same as the abyss from which demonic beings come, from which evil comes. The sea is the home of the dead later on in Revelation. So the sea has all kinds of negative connotations in Revelation. You can find this in Jewish literature as well. The sea is the home of the sea monster, the beast that comes to oppress God’s people. So what you find happening in chapter 4 is this sea of chaos and evil have already been calmed and

defeated. So what have God's people to fear? This sea of evil is already subdued and it is already calmed.

Not only does this anticipate chapter 15 where the people stand beside the sea, it has been calmed and subdued; but it also anticipates chapter 20 verse 21 where the sea was no more. The sea of evil has been removed so that God now brings about a new creative act in Revelation chapter 21. So the idea is all in God's dwelling, in God's temple, all is calm. The sea that will cause problem for God's people in Revelation has already been subdued and already calmed by God's very presence and by his very sovereignty.

### Thunder and Lightning

The other feature to briefly draw your attention to is the thunder and lightning that comes from the throne in verse 5. "From the throne came flashes of lightning and rumblings and peals of thunder." Interestingly, here is another allusion to the Exodus and to Mount Sinai clearly indicating a theophany. This clearly also demonstrates that chapter 4 also is a scene of God on his throne ready to judge. We'll see again part of what happens with chapter 6 is God begins to judge this creation and wicked humanity in establishing his kingdom.

### Four Living Creatures

This then provides us with the backdrop for the next group in verses 6-8 and that is the four living creatures. This is apocalyptic symbolism at its best. Again you have these creatures that have animal features and they have human features as well. One of them looks like a lion, one looks like an ox, another looks like a human being, another looks like a flying eagle. They all have six wings and eyes all over them. They are really strange creatures indeed. Again, this is apocalyptic symbolism at its best.

Clearly John draws his inspiration for this from Ezekiel chapter 1. We have already read about the living creatures in Ezekiel. But also some of the language of six wings comes out of Isaiah chapter 6. So, again, John is drawing on his prophetic predecessors to construct a scene, to make clear that exactly what he saw is in continuity with the other prophets of the past. He is sort of taking on their mantle. But now John writes in light of Jesus Christ who will appear on the scene, in chapter 5.

What you end up having then I think is this picture that John constructs. We said that the throne is the center and with broadening centric circles you have the twenty-four elders next and then I think we are to picture the four living creatures out side of them. The creatures and the elders have the same function they are to worship God day and night. They are to offer God ceaseless praise because he is the creator of all things and because he is the sovereign ruler over all of his creation. Given the background of Ezekiel and Isaiah, we are probably to understand these four living creatures as angelic beings much like the twenty-four elders. Again the important point that I want to stress is that it is not so important to figure out exactly and precisely who they are as it is to recognize their function--ceaseless praise and worship of the one who is seated on the throne.

One of the questions that could be raised is why four? To go back to our discussion of symbolism we said even the numbers in Revelation are to be taken not for their strict mathematical or numerical precision but for what they cannot symbolically. We saw number four was the number symbolic of the entire earth. So, these four touch the four corners of the entire earth suggesting that these four living creatures are probably heavenly angelic beings that represent all of created order. This is the heavenly created counter part of all of heavenly creation. All of animate creation and all of life is now represented by these four living creatures. These may be suggested by their identity. One is a lion, one is a calf, one is a man and one is an eagle. Again this may suggest the full spectrum of animal creation now that four living creatures is representative of that, offering up the ceaseless praise that interestingly began in anticipation of the universal praise and worship that will eventually transpire on this present earth that now, at this time, contests God's sovereignty and the worship of God

So the point of all of this is that all of heaven acknowledges God's sovereignty. All of heaven, or heaven is a place where God's sovereignty as creator and ruler over the universe is fully acknowledged by all of heaven, worshiping, offering praise and worship to God.

### On Worship

Verses 8 through 11 then depict in a couple places exactly what it is that the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures say and express in their worship. Again if I can read that starting in verse 8: "Each of the four living creatures...day and night never stopped saying 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'" And whenever the creatures do this, then the 24 elders bow down and here's what they say, "You are worthy our LORD and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and they have their being." In other words, the point is God is worthy of worship because he is the sovereign creator of all that there is. He is the holy sovereign almighty God who is the creator of all, and who is sovereign over all of creation and for that reason God is worthy of worship.

In other words, if I can be pastoral for just a moment, when we think in terms of worship and why do we worship, sometimes we think that somehow God needs our worship, that God is simply waiting on his creatures to come and worship. He feeds off of our worship and somehow he needs our worship. Or that God is up there watching down and waiting to make sure that we get our worship right, that we sing the right worship songs and we do things in the right way lest God goes away disappointed because he didn't receive the worship that he wanted, or again that somehow God needs our worship to sort of boost his ego or something like that. But Revelation chapter 4 reminds us that, no, the reason we worship God is solely because he is worthy of it and because he is deserving of it. God does not need our worship. God does not need his ego boosted by the worship of his creatures. God does not need our worship to find personal fulfillment. He does not need our worship because he is so lonely or because he needs someone to recognize his worth. We worship God solely because he is worthy of it, because he is the

sovereign creator of all that is; because he is the holy almighty God that is sovereign over all his creation. For that reason alone, the church must worship and should worship God who is seated on the throne.

So in a sense Revelation 4 and 5 remind us then of a true reality that transcends our earthly reality. It reminds us of who is really in control. It reminds us of who is really worthy of our worship in a context and in an environment where that is contested and in a world that refuses to acknowledge God's sovereignty. Revelation begins with a vision that is truly real and true that transcends our earthly reality. At the same time, Revelation 4 and 5 anticipates a day when all of creation will acknowledge God's sovereignty. That's when all of creation will worship God as the creator of all that there is. Where God's will will be done "on earth as it is in Heaven." Chapters 4 and 5 then reminds us that what takes place in heaven has yet to be, but will be, accomplished here on earth despite the fact that earth contested and earth is a place where that is resisted. But in advance of that, Revelation chapters 4 and 5 remind us that we join heaven now in worshipping God. In light of the LORD's prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" although we still await that. Revelation 21:22, when the church gathers to worship in Revelation or in the first century or in any other time, the church joins in heaven in acknowledging God's sovereignty in already worshipping God and acknowledging that God is the sovereign ruler over all of the universe in a world that contests and refuses to acknowledge it.

Also chapters 4 and 5 by providing this vision of worship expose and overthrow all our modern day idols. Anything that would compete with the worship and sovereignty that only God deserves. It reminds us to give the worship and the allegiance to anything or anyone or any group or nation or entity to give them the worship and allegiance that only God deserves is nothing less than idolatry.

A couple of other interesting things about this text, first of all, just to again debunk a modern day popular notion. I was raised with this notion that one day when we get to

heaven we will cast our crowns at Jesus' feet. There are even some songs that reflect us casting our crowns at Jesus' feet. The only place you would find that notion is Revelation 4:10. They lay their crowns before the throne. Who is it that is laying their crowns before the throne? It's the twenty-four elders. Who are the twenty-four elders? If we are correct the twenty-four elders are angelic beings and there's no picture in the New Testament of God's people casting their crowns or throwing their crowns at Jesus' feet. It is the angels here in chapter 4 doing that. Again, that may be true. It is just to realize that if a proper understanding of chapter 4 of Revelation, it is not the saints, it is not God's people that cast their crowns before God's feet, but this is an expression of the twenty-four elders who are angelic beings, representatives of God's people so maybe the implication could be God's people do the same thing one day, that may be true. But primarily, in chapter 4 it is the angelic beings who surround God's throne and worship him, who cast their crowns. They do that, there's at least at this point, not primarily a reference only taking place in the future as well.

The other thing is, chapter 4 also provides a glimpse of, or an anticipation of what is going to happen in chapter 21 and 22; especially, the final hymn that the twenty-four elders sing in chapter 4, but also the hymn that the living creatures sing. But this last hymn, "You are worthy, our LORD our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being."

Interestingly, as we said earlier, the emergence of the rainbow, if it alludes as most scholars think, to Genesis chapter 6 and the rainbow that represented God's covenant and God's commitment to creation, putting it all together, it seems to me that the fact that God is celebrated and worshiped as the Creator of all things anticipates or suggests the fact therefore that God is fully able and powerful enough to preform new creative acts, especially the new creation, Revelation 21 and 22. So already, and again this may be wrapped up with the rainbow as a demonstration of God's faithfulness to his creation, as the sovereign creator of all things and worthy of worship, God is able to bring about a new creation which he in fact will do in Revelation 21 and 22.

## Revelation 5: Continuation of Chapter 4

So, the fact that God is seated on his throne surrounded by his heavenly entourage who render him ceaseless praise and worship, who acknowledge his sovereignty as the sovereign ruler over all of creation, as the sovereign creator of all; now we are prepared to move on to chapter 5. This sets the tone for chapter 5. As we said, chapter 4 provides the backdrop for, or provides the setting, for what one finds in chapter 5.

So chapter 5 then is a continuation of the vision in chapter 4, and as we have already mentioned it is linked by the image of the throne. The same throne that chapter 4 begins with and the one seated on the throne begins chapter 5 in verse 1 where John says, “Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne...” This is the same image mentioned at the beginning of chapter 4. Now as I did with the beginning of chapter 4 I want to read chapter 5. I want you to let the images roll before your eyes so you can visualize what is going on, as John has seen and is now recording. So Revelation chapter 5 in verse 1.

“Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ <sup>3</sup> But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. <sup>4</sup> I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’ <sup>6</sup> Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s



people.<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying:

‘You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased for God  
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

<sup>10</sup> You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth.’ <sup>11</sup> Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels,  
numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They  
encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. <sup>12</sup> In a loud voice they were  
saying:

‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!’

<sup>13</sup> Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea,  
and all that is in them, saying:

‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honor and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!’

<sup>14</sup> The four living creatures said, ‘Amen,’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.”

So chapter 5 as we said is a continuation of chapter 4, but it functions as the climax of chapter 4. Chapter 4 provides the setting for chapter 5. This is what chapter 4 is driving at. This is where the action takes place in chapter 4. This is the main focus of these two chapters. We have already seen that there is continuity between the two because some of the same images were still in the heavenly throne. We have already noted the one seated upon the throne. We have in reading this chapter seen the four living creatures emerge again. We have seen the twenty-four elders emerge again. So we have

the same setting the throne room of God but two additional features emerge in this visionary segment in chapter 5 that are highly significant for understanding what goes on in this chapter.

The two new features or characters are the book of the scroll and the Lamb. These are the two focal points of chapter 5, the scroll or book and the lamb that John sees. The vision revolves around these two things. So chapter 5 begins with God holding, a God who is seated on the throne, the sovereign ruler of the universe, holding the scroll in his hands. Obviously, any sane reader of this chapter would wonder, we haven't seen this scroll before, I wonder what is in the scroll? What is contained in it? Why is God holding this scroll in his right hand? The right hand is a symbol of authority and power. Why is the one on the throne holding this scroll in his right hand, what does it contain? Why is it significant?

#### Possible Backgrounds of the Scroll

First of all, the image of a scroll could have multiple backgrounds in a number of scrolls and documents that would have been familiar in the Greco-Roman world such as a document written on either side known as an epistograph, or wills or testaments. There's a number of things that John's scroll could resemble. But at the heart of it, John's scroll primarily recalls Ezekiel's in chapter 2 starting in verse 9. This is Ezekiel 2 and 9, which is part of Ezekiel's throne room vision starting in chapter 1 that John draws on. Now in chapter 2, verse 9, "Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me." Now listen o this, "On both sides of it were written words" So Ezekiel sees a scroll that has writing on both sides which resembles exactly what John's is. There are obviously some differences. John has seven seals, and it is not unrolled before him, at least in this scene it is not. Ezekiel associated it primarily with words of lament, mourning and woes, more of a judgment theme. John doesn't tell us exactly what was in the scroll.

As we said, there's all kind of evidence of scrolls in the Greco-Roman world. The other Old Testament background from Daniel 12--Daniel sees a sealed scroll. So, all of this provides the background for this scroll that John sees in God's right hand that is

written on both sides. Again, one popular notion is that “well, what this scroll is, this scroll is to be understood as a testament, that is a testament that is to be sealed until the death of a person. Jesus Christ’s death now enables him to open the testament and divulge it’s content. Others have drawn attention to other types of scrolls or documents in the Greco-Roman world, and you can look at commentaries, to read all the different types of descriptions. Whatever it is, and again I would reiterate the primary model comes from Ezekiel 2 and Daniel 12, and also John may be drawing on the image that has resonances with the Greco-Roman world.

But whatever it is, the most important issue is perhaps what it contains and in my opinion, and I would be in agreement with a number of others that suggest something similar, probably this scroll simply contains God’s plan for establishing his kingdom on earth. It is, or maybe, God’s plan for bringing both salvation and judgment to the earth. That is, remember, we said part of the issue with chapter 4 is, how is the scene in heaven where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged, where God rules over all of creation, where all of heaven worships, how does that get acknowledged and realized on earth? The scroll is the plan for how that will happen. It contains the plan for establishing God’s kingdom on earth. It contains God’s plan for bringing about judgment and salvation on this present earth. Now God’s sovereignty holds that plan in his hands, symbolized by a scroll. Again, I don’t think we should see it as a literal scroll especially since later on the Lamb is going to come and take it. How do you envision a lamb coming and taking the scroll at least literally. So again the scroll functions as a symbol of God’s plan to establish his kingdom through judgment and salvation upon the earth.

### The Angel

The next figure that kind of appears although the angel, although he does not play an important role, at least by himself in the rest of Revelation 5, the next figure is an angel. We have already suggested and talked about the fact that angels are a part and parcel of apocalyptic literature. You read Jewish apocalypses and you find angels doing various things, and playing various roles in apocalypses in terms of the vision that the

seer had and you see the same thing happening in Revelation. Later on we will see the angel taking John to see certain things. John is often in dialogue with angelic beings. Twice he is tempted to bow down and worship an angelic being. But here the angel appears to John and in this vision he plays the role of articulating the main problem of chapter 5 that has to be solved. So the angel's voice raises the main problem in the form of a question. And that question is this: Who is worthy to break the seal and open the scroll? So the question or issue is, here God is seated as the sovereign creator of the universe, the scroll is in his hand, the scroll that contains his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth, for bringing about salvation and judgment: God is sovereignly holding that scroll. Now the question is: Who in the world is able to walk up and simply take the scroll out of the right hand of the Almighty God, the sovereign creator of all the universe and to open it and divulge its contents and to set its contents into motion? That is the main question. When the angel says, "who is worthy," and John says, "Who is worthy to open it and look inside of it?" The idea is not just reading it, that someone would unroll it and read it and roll it back up and say, "that was interesting, let me tell you what it was about." The idea is by unrolling it and unsealing it someone is able to divulge its contents and to set the contents of the scroll in motion, which are God's purposes of establishing his kingdom on earth. It is not to be read like any other book on earth. The contents are to be set in motion.

Now in an attempt to answer this question John goes on a universe wide hunt to try to find suitable person to do so. Again the question, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" that is the main question this chapter answers. This is the main problem that is raised. Where can we find someone worthy to go up to the one seated on the throne, the sovereign creator of the universe, who holds the scroll in his right hand, the symbol of authority and power; who has the authority to go up and take that scroll and then to open it, and enact its contents? So John goes on a universe wide hunt to find a suitable person to do so. What I find interesting here John becomes a participant in his own vision. He is not just seeing a vision now, he actually becomes a participant in his own vision and he

goes on a journey, although the text doesn't tell us exactly how he did so. But the text says he goes through a journey all through the universe as a participant in his own vision to look for someone who can open the scroll. The scope of his search is completely exhausted. He goes to the heavens, all the heavens, including this throne room, the heavenly throne room. He searches through all the earth. To add to that, he searches under the earth. In other words, this is meant to suggest that John leaves no stone unturned. His search for someone worthy is completely exhaustive. The problem too is not so much to figure out physically and geographically where these locations are, the point is this is universal and this is exhaustive. The entire scope of the universe including heaven and I take it that the heavenly throne room, is ransacked to find someone who can walk up and take this scroll and open it and set its contents in motion. Why I say that too, will be important for understanding the rest of the vision. It is important that John does not even find anybody in heaven. Heaven is full of all kinds of exalted angelic beings, but John does not even find any one in heaven. Among all these heavenly beings, twenty-four elders and four living creatures and what ever other exalted powerful angelic being exists in the heavenly realm, including all the other heavenly parts of the universe, John finds no one who is worthy. Even in heaven where you might expect to find one. One might not expect on earth or under the earth, but even in heaven where one might expect to find someone powerful enough and worthy enough to open the scroll, John finds no one who can open it. Notice three times John emphasizes, no one was worthy to open the scroll. He could find no one that was fit and suitable to take the scroll out of the right hand of God, open its seals and set its contents in motion.

Because of that we are told that John weeps and begins to cry. The construction here in Greek is rather intense. This is not just John's over in the corner whimpering, it's an outright weeping and crying, despair because he cannot find anyone to open the scroll. John is freaking out because he can't find someone to come open the scroll. My question, I have always read this text and wondered, why is that? I have always passed over this as a vestige of apocalyptic literature that's just what happens, John weeps to add some suspense, to add some interest in the narrative. But when you think about it, why does

John weep? If this scroll contains God's plan to establish his kingdom and to bring about judgment and salvation, if John can't find anyone to open the scroll, and again he hasn't. He has searched the universe over every nook and cranny and found no one worthy. If he cannot find one worthy then there is no salvation for God's people. If God cannot find anyone worthy then there is no vindication for God's people that are suffering. If John cannot find anyone worthy there is no justice on this earth. If John cannot find anyone worthy, the church's suffering is completely vain and their sacrifice, even those that have sacrificed in death, it is in vain. If John does not find anyone worthy there is no hope for God's people there is no justice in the world; there is no salvation for God's people.

#### The Lion of Judah

So John weeps, and no wonder he weeps. One of the twenty-four elders that we were introduced to back in chapter 4 then interrupts John's weeping with good news. There is someone worthy who has been found. There is someone worthy to open the scroll. That is the person that the twenty-four elders introduce as the lion of the tribe of Judah.

Now what I want to emphasize here, this will become important, is that John only hears about this. The elder tells John in a speech that there's someone. So John hasn't seen this person. The elder simply says there is someone worthy, it is the lion of the tribe of Judah. Using Old Testament imagery from Genesis chapter 49 and verse 9 and also Isaiah chapter 11 and verse 1, this is imagery of the tribe. The Messiah came from the line of Judah and a lion as well. This is the one the angel says, this lion from the tribe of Judah, from the root of David is again a theme from Isaiah. This person has triumphed or conquered, the same word used back in chapters 2 or 3 of the church overcoming. Now this lion from the tribe of Judah, a clear reference to Jesus as the Messiah, has overcome, or conquered or triumphed, depending on your English translation. Now he is able because he has overcome and triumphed, he is able to open the scroll and the seven seals in order to divulge its contents.

Now it is interesting the author does not tell us specifically at this point how the lion from the tribe of Judah has overcome. One would expect through a display of might and power, perhaps military power, one who is depicted as a lion and from the tribe of Judah. So as one might perhaps read this and expect he must have overcome through a display of might and power. Therefore he is now able to overcome; he is now able to take this scroll out of the right hand of God, and to take away its seals and divulge its contents, and to set the content in motion. And again that is a reminder that the scroll contains God's plan of establishing his kingdom on earth, bringing about salvation and judgment.

What follows is one of the greatest paradoxes in the book of Revelation, if not in the entire New Testament, and maybe in the entire Bible. The elder has introduced John through speech simply communicating to him and telling him that there is someone, there is a lion from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, who has already overcome, perhaps conjuring up ideas of military victory and might. This person has overcome and that's what John hears.

### The Lamb

Now what happens is... what John sees next is anything but a conquering lion from the tribe of Judah. Instead, when John turns around he sees the Lamb standing as slain. He sees the Lamb who looks as if it had been slaughtered. The fact that literally the text says, "appears as slaughtered." By that John doesn't mean that he looks like he was slaughtered but wasn't; he more likely means that the lamb looks like he was slaughtered because he actually was. But now he stands alive before John, but he still looks like he was slaughtered because he actually was. So John is not questioning saying that he looks like he was slaughtered by the really wasn't. But what is intriguing is the paradox or the tension between, John hearing the solution: there is a lion from the tribe of Judah. But when he turns to see the lion from the tribe of Judah he doesn't see a lion. He sees just the opposite, he sees a lamb, and moreover a lamb that has been slain or slaughtered.

Probably the background of this is the Passover lamb of the exodus and as well as the suffering from Isaiah chapter 53, the lamb that was slaughtered. But the paradox is startling. A lion that now looks like a lamb. This will be important. Actually, this

introduced an important principle that we will see elsewhere in Revelation. It will help us make sense of a couple other places in Revelation that have been disputed as far as how you interpret them. Again, British scholar Richard Bauckham has done more than anyone else to highlight this theme and show its significance. That is, the importance of Revelation is that you often find a juxtaposition throughout Revelation of what John hears and what John sees. Several times John will hear something followed immediately by what John sees. Often what he sees interprets from a different angle what it was he heard. So here, what John hears is a lion from the tribe of Judah who conquers; but what he sees then is not, so these are not two different entities. He sees the same thing from different perspectives. But what he sees further interprets what he heard. He hears there is a lion from the tribe of Judah who has overcome, but when he turns to see he doesn't see a lion of Judah, he sees a lamb that has been slain.

The question then is, how has the Lamb overcome? How has the lion from the tribe of Judah overcome? How is this lamb worthy to take the scroll? It's through his suffering and death. How has God conquered and won the victory? How has the Lamb overcome? He overcomes through his suffering and death. He conquers through his sacrificial death and because of the death and the resurrection of the Lamb, because he is the one who has died and is now above. He is worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals and divulge its contents something that no one else could do, therefore setting the events in motion.

So unlike the Roman Empire, it's as if John wants to present an alternative vision of conquering. The Roman Empire conquers by the sword, they conquer by violence, they overcome by military might and by extending their empire. Now by contrast John presents a vision of conquests that is completely counter to that. That is Jesus Christ overcomes through his suffering, death and sacrifice. It's his resurrection that vindicated him. So this makes him worthy to take the scroll. In fact, this then also becomes a model of how his churches are to overcome.

So then back to chapters 2 and 3 there was a promise made to those who had overcome. How were they to overcome? How were they to conquer and be victorious in



the same way the Lamb does? Through his faithful suffering witness. Through their faithful sacrificing witnessing the church will overcome in the same way the lamb does.

### The Climax of Rev 5

What happens next then again you begin to find a number of verbs of action, indicative verbs that carry the words and the scene along. In verse 7 we find what I think is the climax of chapter 5. This is what everything is leading up to. Finally, the Lamb, in verse 7, came and took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. This is the climax of the scene. In fact, the verb tense of the verb “took” is in the perfect tense in Greek, which is one of the tenses an author can use to foreground an activity to make it stand out from everything else. And that is exactly what John is doing here by using the perfect tense form of this verb “took.” John wants this to stick out. This is the climax. This is the centerpiece of chapter 5. This is what the whole vision has been leading to. This is the solution to the problem raised by the angel. Who can take the scroll? Here he is, the Lamb who was slain who has conquered through his sacrificial death is now worthy to come and take the scroll from the right hand of the one who is seated on the throne.

Now one of the questions that this raises is who is it that can simply walk up to the one who is seated on the throne and snatch the scroll from his hand? Remember this is the sovereign God who is seated on the throne, who holds the scroll in his hands, the plan for establishing his kingdom on earth for judgment and salvation. Who can simply walk right up and snatch the scroll from his hand? Who is worthy and fit enough to do that? And notice too, that it’s interesting that the Lamb, and this is related to something we have mentioned previously, it is intriguing that the lamb just sort of emerges from the throne. You don’t see an all of a sudden as you see in some interesting scenes like in science fiction movies. You don’t see a crowd parting and some warrior walks up to the

throne. You don't see the lamb coming from outside or simply, "O, I missed that person standing over there" and then the Lamb comes and enters the throne room. Instead, the Lamb just sort of emerges from the center of the throne. He doesn't come from the outside.

Furthermore, we have already said remember John has looked everywhere including in heaven. So it is not as if this is someone John missed. John looked throughout heaven and O, it's not presented; O, he missed the Lamb. Somehow he failed to see the Lamb. No, he has looked all over the place. He has looked throughout the heavens and he has found no one. And that raises the question, who is this person who can simply walk up to the throne and take the scroll out of the right hand of the one seated on the throne? And who is this person who emerges from the throne when John has already looked throughout the heavens and even the most exalted and angelic beings is not worthy to take the scroll. Who is this person who emerges from the throne and now takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne?

The point I think is that this is no ordinary figure. This is someone who is greater than anyone else in the universe. Even the highest and exalted and most powerful angelic being, this is none other than God himself. This is someone who the divide between God and all of creation, this person stands on the God side of the divide. This is someone who shares in the very being of God. This is someone who is unique and none other than God himself, as I think the rest of Revelation chapter 5 will demonstrate.

But now that the crucial event has happened, now that the dilemma has been solved, who is worthy to open the scroll? Now someone has been found worthy, but kind of ironically through his sacrificial death and resurrection and now that the event of taking the scroll has happened, now that the dilemma has been solved, we are now prepared for the rest of the chapter where heaven is going to respond to this unique event.

Next time we will look at heaven's response to the lamb taking the scroll and preparing to open it and act on its contents.

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 10

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Rev 5-6: The Lamb and the Seals on the Scroll

### Introduction

So Christ has taken the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne, the scroll that contains God's plan for establishing his kingdom. The point of chapter 5, as we've seen, is that Jesus is worthy, the only one worthy to take the scroll. That is because he is the slaughtered lamb, the one who was slain. He is the one who has purchased people from all of humanity to be a kingdom of priests as we'll see and it's based on his death, his sacrificial death on the cross as the Passover lamb and perhaps also as the suffering servant lamb in Isaiah 53 that Jesus now is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals meaning that he will now set its contents into motion. The rest of the chapter 5 then is actually a response to what happens in verse 7. Starting with verse 8 we begin to see heaven's response to this act.

So 8 through the rest of chapter 5 will be the response of all of heaven and we've already been introduced to the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures but we will be introduced to other angelic beings that inhabit the heavenly throne room. The rest of chapter 5 will articulate their response to what happens in verse 7 with the lamb taking the scroll. Notice how often the word "take" or "receive" depending on your translation, occurs in verses 8 to the end of chapter 5. Because the remainder of this section is actually a section of hymns. We're introduced to a couple of hymns that were sung by the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures in chapter 4 but now we'll see more extensive singing of hymns by angelic beings as they celebrate this event in verse 7 of the lamb taking the scroll. All of these hymns function then to interpret the scene in verses 1-7 of what has just happened.

### Old Testament Backgrounds

Now one important text to keep in mind what lies behind chapter 5 especially as we've said chapter 4 and 5 belong together. One of the things that suggests that not only the similar imagery occur such as the throne and the one seated on the throne and the

twenty-four elders and the four living creatures and some of the similar characters and features but also the fact that the same Old Testament text lies behind both of them. That is Ezekiel chapter 1 and 2 and also Isaiah chapter 6, both throne room visions of the prophets now provide the model for John's vision.

There's another important text that particularly comes into play in chapter 5 and that is a text we've already seen play a roll back in chapter 1 where Jesus appears to John in an inaugural vision to commission him to address the seven churches. There Jesus is portrayed as the exalted son of man in fulfillment of Daniel chapter 7. And in Daniel chapter 7, especially verses 13 and 14, this is what we read: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence." So Jesus here in chapter 5, approaching the one seated on the throne and now verse 14, "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." So Daniel chapter 7 which portrays the son of man approaching the throne, the Ancient of Days seated on the throne now receives authority and power. Now he receives a kingdom from him and enters into his kingly rule. That now gets fulfilled with the lamb entering into his rule by receiving the scroll from the one seated on the throne and receiving power and authority. In fact, we'll see that's exactly what the hymns celebrate. The hymns celebrate the reception of power and authority and might and wisdom and glory and honor. The very things that we find anticipated in Daniel chapter 7. So this act in chapter 5 is the fulfillment of Daniel chapter 7, where now Jesus receives his kingly authority.

#### Investiture Scene

What this means is when we read chapter 5, we probably should not read this so much as or just as an enthronement scene as if Jesus now is led to the throne and now sits on the throne as much as seeing it as what David Aune and his commentary calls "an investiture scene." That is Jesus is now invested with authority and power and this is what question three was all about: Who is worthy to receive and take this scroll and to

open it? Who has the authority, who is worthy to do so? Now Christ is celebrating this event as Christ is now invested with the power and the authority to take the scroll that is, to receive the kingdom of God and now to enact the contents of the scroll.

### Heavenly Temple

What I want to do then is as we've done in other texts is simply highlight some of the more important features of this section especially verses 8 through 12 which again is sort out the hymnic celebration of what happens in verse 7 and that is, Christ now receiving the authority to take the scroll and to open it. First of all, notice the significance once again that the temple imagery plays in chapter 5. We've already seen a couple of the features in chapter 4 and 5 that suggest that this is not just the picture of heaven, but that heaven is being conceived of as God's temple. It is a heavenly temple where God dwells and one of those is the presence of the golden bowls. Notice verse 8 "and when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense." The golden bowls probably suggesting those bowls that were on the table of the presence of the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 25, for example. It's interesting that the golden bowls occur no less than 12 times throughout the book of Revelation and here again they function to indicate that this should be seen as a heavenly temple. Perhaps the angels here are meant to be the four creatures and the twenty-four elders are meant to be portrayed as having a priestly function by the fact that they hold these golden bowls. What is important is they contain incense which the author identifies as "the prayer of the saints" in verse 8. Now this will become important because later on, especially in chapter 6, in the fifth seal, the incense and later on in Revelation, the incense will be identified as the prayer of the saints which God responds to vindicate them and to show that their suffering was not in vain, to bring about vindication, that is portrayed as the prayer of the saints. So what that means is we are to see the rest of chapter 6 through 20, in a sense, as a response to the prayer of the saints which are identified with the bowls full of incense. We'll look at that as we work through Revelations and see the golden bowls crop up and see how they function at times.

## Heaven Breaking out in Worship

The second thing to notice about this section is note how in verses 8 through the end of the chapter five, heaven breaks out in worship in response to verse 7. Heaven breaks out in worship and ever widening concentric circles. So again you have this picture where the throne is at the center of all things and then the heavenly response moves outward, in ever broadening concentric circles. So note in verse 8, it's the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures who in verse 9 sing this song "You are worthy to take the scroll. [Notice that to take the scroll, link right back to verse 7] and open its seals." The reason is because "you were slain and with that purchased the people of God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom of priests, to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." So beginning with the twenty-four elders and the four creatures that were introduced to in chapter 4, now they were the first surrounding the throne celebrating what happened in verse 7, the taking of the scroll by the Lamb. They give the reason here clearly because he was slain and through his death he purchased salvation for humanity.

But notice second in verse 11, John says "then I looked and I heard the voice of many angels numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and elders." So now you have another layer, the myriads of angels or thousands and thousands and ten thousands upon thousands circling the throne and they also sing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive to power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

But then finally, in verse 13, John says, "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them." So now you have a circle that encompasses basically all of creation saying "to him who sits on the throne" in verse 13, "and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever." So heaven bursts out in worship and ever widening concentric circle centered around the throne where eventually all things, all of creation focuses on the center, again everything flows from the center. God's rule and everything that's going to happen in chapters 6-22, after chapter 5, all flow from the center, from the throne, and eventually all

creation joins in worshipping. Perhaps what we see here is an anticipation of the final scene in chapter 21 and 22 where all of creation then comes under God's rule and acknowledges God's sovereignty.

### The Slain Lamb

Number three, the third thing to say is the point of this chapter then especially in that first hymn that the twenty-four elders and four living creatures sing and also the vision of Christ back in chapter 5 verses 5 and 6 is that the Lamb is worthy precisely because through his death on the cross he has accomplished redemption for humanity. One interesting thing that we've already seen is the author forges an interesting concept of overcoming, or conquering. Remember we said the scene begins by John hearing that there was someone that was worthy to open the scroll, one who had overcome and had done so because he was the lion of the tribe of Judah. When John turns around to see this person what he sees is not a lion but a slain lamb.

Interestingly too, this lamb is described back in verses 5 and 6 as having seven horns with seven eyes, which again seems to connote a very militaristic image and connotes power and strength. In fact, this image of a seven horned lamb occurs elsewhere in Jewish apocalyptic literature, for example, and this is a text from one of the early apocalypses that is not found in the canonical New Testament. But a very common one and an influential apocalypse called the book of 1 Enoch. In one of his visions using animals to symbolize different persons and nations, he envisions a lamb that grows horns and has strength and great military power. This is first Enoch chapter 90. The author says, "Then behold, lambs were born from the snow white sheep and they begin to open their eyes and see and they cried out to the sheep but it is for the sheep they cried out aloud to them. Yet they did not listen to what the lambs were telling them. But they became exceedingly deafened and their eyes became exceedingly dim sighted. Then I saw in a vision ravens flying above the lambs and they seized one of those lambs and then smashing the sheep they ate them. I kept seeing until those lambs grew horns. But the ravens crushed their horns. Then I kept seeing until one great horn sprouted on one of the sheep and he opened their eyes and they had vision in them and their eyes were opened.

And he cried aloud and the sheep and all the rams saw him and they ran onto him.” I’ll stop right there but the point is note the image of the sheep with horns suggesting power and might.

But once again John reinterprets that by demonstrating at least initially the horned lamb comes to conquer but he does so as a slain lamb. As one who purchases, who is worthy to open the scroll because he was slain and through his blood he’s purchased and redeemed humanity unto himself.

#### Deity of Christ Who Receives Worship

The next point to note is in the section and we’ve already seen hints of this in that the lamb seems to be very unique feature, a unique person. John has already sought all through earth and under the earth and all through the heavens and has found no one worthy. So now that the lamb has been found to be worthy and can simply walk up and take the scroll out of the right hand of the one on the throne, the question is raised: “What kind of person is this? What kind of lamb is this?” This is unlike any other person on earth, under the earth, or even in the heavens. But now in the rest of this hymnic section, I think we find one of the strongest statements for Christ’s deity anywhere in the New Testament. Notice that Christ receives some of the identical worship as God does back in chapter 4. For example, notice especially in verse 12 “Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” Go back to verse 11 of chapter 4, the hymn sung to God “you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.” So Jesus Christ actually receives even an identical wording, “power and glory and might and honor,” receiving the exact same worship as God did in chapter 4. Now Jesus Christ receives it in chapter 5.

What is significant about that is that he receives this praise in the context of strict monotheistic worship. That is if you go back to chapter 4, the scene in chapter 4 would not have been unusual or anything new of God. God seated on the throne and sovereign over all creation and receiving the worship of all of heaven, that would not have been strange or startling to any Jewish reader. But chapter 5 introduces a twist in such a



monotheistic context in chapter 4 where God as the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the only one worthy of worship and to worship any other thing in creation is pure idolatry. Now the author places not only Jesus Christ receiving the same worship as God did in chapter 4 by the same persons, but now also he does so by placing Jesus on the exact same throne. Look at, for example, look at verse 13 “then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in heaven saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb.” So now this last hymn worships both God on the throne and the lamb in the same breathe.

What is more interesting is that twice in Revelation, we see this very interesting event. It occurs in chapter 19 and it also occurs back in chapter 22, right at the very end of the book. I’ll read the one from chapter 22 at the end of the book, at the very end of his vision where an angelic being has taken John on a tour. He showed him the New Jerusalem. And now at the very end of his vision he addresses John and here’s what happens in verse 8, “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But the angel said to me, ‘Do not do it. I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’” That happens twice, in other words, even this angelic being refused worship because only God is worthy of worship. So in this sort of a context where only God is worthy of worship and no other being, however exalted an angelic being, is worthy of worship how can one have Jesus Christ on the same throne as God and receiving the same worship as God?

Elsewhere it’s interesting, the author will portray, we saw this already back in one of the letters to the churches that the saints themselves will sit on the throne and rule with Christ, but something very different is going on here. The saints are not worshiped as the creature and worthy of worship. Only the lamb is portrayed as worthy of worship and on the throne of God, in a context that is strictly monotheistic. In other words, what the author is doing is that in some sense Jesus Christ then participates in the very being an essence of God. How can Jesus be worshiped without violating strict monotheism? That

there is only one God, who is worthy of worship? To worship anything else is idolatry, unless somehow Jesus participates in the very being of God. So this is the kind of thing that resulted in later Nicene Creeds and Caledonian Christology that affirmed the deity of Christ and that Jesus Christ shared, as the second person of the God head, and shared in the very essence and being of God. Without using that kind of language we find that idea here already in having Jesus Christ being the object of worship, the same worship that God receives without in any sense violating strict monotheism.

#### New Song: Kingdom Inauguration

Another point to emphasize in verse 9 is it's interesting that the psalm that the living creature sings and the twenty-four elders sing is called "a new song." This word "new" or "newness" is significant because it reflects an important idea that God through Jesus Christ, is going to establish a new creation which happens in chapter 21 in verse 22. But already by singing a new song, it's as if Christ has inaugurated a new creation through his death on the cross and through establishing a kingdom of priests which again in chapter 22 of Revelation it ends by God's people functioning as kings and priests. They function as priests in God's presence and they reign forever and ever. But already that new creation has been inaugurated through Jesus Christ's death and by purchasing humanity to become his kingdom of priests. Already the new creation has been inaugurated and this text celebrates that but it also anticipates the consummated new creation in Revelation 21 and 22 where in chapter 21 verse 1 is "I saw a new heavens and a new earth."

#### Kingdom of Priests

Another significant element of this section is one that we've already seen and that is the salvation that God provides for his people, the establishment of his kingdom that issues from the throne and from the scene is to be understood as a new Exodus. That is the verse I just read again, Jesus is "worthy to take the scroll because he was slain and by his blood he purchased men for God or people for God from every tribe, language and people and he's made them to be a kingdom of priests." We saw this back in chapters 1, 5, and 6 in the epistolary introduction in Revelation and now it's repeated here. In other

words, the slaughtered lamb, the slain lamb, which we said probably recalls both Isaiah 53:7 “The slaughtered lamb and the suffering servant passage, but also the Passover lamb, by Jesus’ blood he ransoms humanity; he frees them as he did his people in the Exodus.

Then he frees them from bondage and leads them to become a kingdom of priests. He establishes them and creates them to function as a kingdom of priests. This language of “kingdom of priests” we said indicates a connection with Exodus 19:6 where God leads his people out of Egypt and establishes them to be his kingdom of priests, which itself goes all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2. Adam and Eve were to function as kings and priests. They were to rule over all creation as God’s representatives. They were to be priests in God’s presence and to worship him. Now Israel was called in Exodus 19:6 to do the same thing and now God’s people, his universal, transcultural people from every tribe and tongue and language are now meant to function as kings and priests in fulfillment of God’s intention for the Exodus. Now this note the very end of verse 10 says this kingdom of priests is to serve God and they will reign on the earth.

#### Already/but not yet Aspect of Our Reign

Now interestingly as hopefully most of you know, the New Testament comes down in a number of manuscripts, we don’t have the original copies of the New Testament text, we don’t have the original manuscript that John wrote but we have copies of copies of copies. In fact, we have a number of copies and sometimes those manuscripts differ slightly and through a process called textual criticism scholars have been able to, with a high degree of confidence, restore what most likely it was John wrote. Most of the differences are rather minor, but some manuscripts actually have the present tense that is “they reign on the earth.” Others have the future, “they will reign on the earth” and so the question is: Is this an anticipation of a future reign or is this an anticipation of a present reign? Whatever the case, again, throughout Revelation I think it makes it clear that it’s a both/end because already God’s people are a kingdom of priests. Already God has created a kingdom of priests that represent his rule on earth.

However, this text perhaps may focus more on the future fulfillment of that,

especially in texts like Revelation 20 in verse 4 and 6, in the passage on the millennial kingdom where those who have suffered and have been beheaded come to life. Now they are raised to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand years, presenting a fulfillment of this text. They said also chapter 22 in the new creation, the fact that 22:5 ends by saying “and they will reign forever and ever.” So this section, this last line of verse 10, “they will reign on the earth” may be an anticipation of chapters 20, and 21 where in the future God’s people will reign with Christ on this earth and in chapter 22 in a new creation forever and ever. But it’s important to realize that Revelation elsewhere does suggest that already God’s people reign because already Christ has created through His death on the cross has purchased people and created a kingdom of priests.

This verse created in a kingdom of priests and suggesting they will reign on the earth. This probably also reflects Daniel chapter 7 when Daniel interprets that vision that he had of the son of man coming to the ancient of days to receive a kingdom, to receive authority, glory, and power, and all people bowing before him. Interestingly, in verse 22, starting in verse 21 he says, “as I watched this horn was raging war against the saints and defeating them until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints and the most high and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.” So even Daniel 7 includes the saints also possessing the kingdom. Now we see not only then does Christ have the authority and possess the kingdom in fulfillment of the son of man, prophecy in Daniel 7 but now also his people will reign in a fulfillment of Daniel 7, they also will possess the kingdom and will reign on the earth. We said this ultimately gets fulfilled in Revelation 20 in the millennial kingdom text and even beyond that in the new creation in chapters 21 and 22.

Another important feature is this language still found in verses 9 and 10, this language of people from every tribe and language and people and nation. This is also language that seems to primarily come out of the book of Daniel. In fact, you find a similar list of words that refer to people, not just Jewish nations, but people generally, Gentile and the nations, you find that sort of language in several places in Daniel. For example, starting in chapter 3 and verse 4 and 7 he says, I’ll back up and read 4, that was

7, “then the herald loudly proclaimed ‘this is what you’re commanded to do’” and this is in the context of Nebuchadnezzar requiring everyone to bow down to an image. “This is what you’re commanded to do, O peoples, nations, and men of every language, as soon as you hear the sound, then you bow down.” Then later on in verse 7, “therefore as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations, and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image.” Then, for example, in Daniel chapter 7 in verse 14, which is significant because John is drawing on Daniel 7 in this text. Daniel 7 says the son of man who comes to the Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom, “He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all people’s, nations, and men of every language worshiped him.” Interestingly, you’ll note that those had three categories. If you read the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Daniel, it actually includes four, just like Revelation does. Again Revelation has a four-fold, “every tribe language, people, and nation,” and the Greek translation, the Septuagint, the LXX, of Daniel also includes a four-fold division.

#### People of God

What is interesting about that is, what John does then is introduces an important theme throughout the rest of the chapter that has a two-fold significance. First of all is the people of God. Now that Christ will redeem and fulfill his promises through and make a kingdom of priests, they are no longer restricted to national Israel but now it is a transcultural, universal people of God consisting of every tribe and language and people and tongue including Israel, but not limited Israel any longer. Now faith in Jesus Christ is the criteria for which one becomes a member of the true people of God. So all throughout Revelation we’re going to see this happen over and over again where promises given to Israel in the Old Testament now are fulfilled not solely through national Israel, but through a universal transcultural people of God, people from every tribe and language and tongue. We see that here in the fact that Exodus 19:6 “Making a kingdom of priests” now is fulfilled by a people of every language, tribe, and tongue.

### Kingdom Transfer

The second reason why that is significant is because in order for God to establish his kingdom, we said that part of Revelation is to show how God's sovereignty and his rule that is acknowledged perfectly in heaven and realized in heaven, how does that finally get worked out on earth? What that means is there must be a taking away or a transfer of the kingdom of Satan and of this world and of the human rulers and authorities such as the Roman Empire that is transferred to God and to the Lamb, Jesus Christ. That also means though, that God must also rescue those who are under the rule of Satan and under the rule of the wicked empire such as Rome and now he must transfer them into his kingdom. So what that means is all the nations now, an important theme throughout Revelation, who find themselves under the bondage of Satan and under the oppressive regime of Rome and human kingdoms now are rescued from that and transferred under the rulership of God and the Lamb. That's what's going on here in verses 9 and 10. God has purchased people through Jesus Christ and now has made them his kingdom and priests for himself to represent his rule, to represent his presence in the earth. So this transfer of the kingdom from Satan from the beast to God and the lamb also entails transference of its subjects of the people of all of the nations under the rule of Satan and the beast now to become a kingdom of priests for God and for the Lamb.

It's interesting too that some form of this phrase "nations, people, tribe, language, etc.," occurs seven times in Revelation. So this is probably deliberate, not coincidental. John has repeated this phrase seven times. We find it here in chapter 5 in verse 9, we'll find it in chapter 7 in verse 9, in chapter 10 and verse 11, in chapter 11 and verse 9, and chapter 13 in verse 7 in the context of the beast rule over the earth. Then it will be used in chapter 14 verse 6, and finally chapter 17 and verse 15. So those seven times you find some version of this fourfold phrase that we find here in chapter 5 in verse 9, "people from every tribe and language and people and nation."

### He is Worthy: Seven-fold Praise

Finally, the last thing I want to say is interestingly, in Rev 5:11, and 12 especially verse 12 which constitutes the hymn that was sung in praise and honor of Jesus Christ

celebrating the fact that he is worthy, along with God himself, he is worthy to be worshiped by all of creation and he's worthy to take the scroll and open it and set its contents in motion. Notice the ascriptions given to him: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Note interestingly that this is seven-fold. Note that there are seven elements that are mentioned I'm in chapter 5, verse 13, "power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise." There are seven elements given, again probably to indicate the fullness and perfection of the worship and praise given to Christ and the praise that he deserves.

It's intriguing you can find numerous parallels to this in the Old Testament, one of the more intriguing ones is the prayer of David in 1 Chronicles 29:11. I'll read verse 10 as well, "David praised the Lord in the presence of the whole assembly saying, 'Praise to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and on earth is yours.'" And you can find other similar praises but intriguingly you have, I think not coincidentally, but intentionally, but not only allusions not only to the New Testament but praise given to God and now to Christ but it's intriguing that it is seven-fold. Again, probably playing off the number seven, indicating perfection and completeness.

#### Revelation 5

Now interestingly, to contrast that with the next and last hymn that is sung in verse 13 where all of the creatures in heaven and in earth and under the earth come and they now sing to the one sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Here's what they say, "praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever,... Amen." It's interesting that this praise is only four-fold. There are only four items mentioned although they overlap with what has been said to the Lamb before. But it's intriguing only four are mentioned. I would suggest again perhaps that this is intentional. Four being the number that suggests the entire earth such as the four corners of the earth. We talked a little bit about that with four being symbolic of all creation. That would be sitting here because in the beginning of

verse 13 it's all of creation that gives praise to God, so it's natural that number four would play a role. There would be four elements corresponding with all of creation, the entirety of creation, now worships God. Again this probably anticipates the universal worship and praise of God that is obvious in and present in the new creation in chapter 21 and 22.

So chapter 5 has demonstrated that God is the creator of all things and because of that, because God is the sovereign creator of all things and sovereign overall his creation, for that reason he is worthy of worship. Therefore all of heaven surrounds the throne of God, the symbol of his power and authority and sovereignty, all of creation surrounds God recognizing his holiness, his sovereignty over all of the created order. But it is important to realize God has not abandoned his creation. The assumption in a sense, between chapter 4 and 5 is that sin has somehow tainted and marred his created order.

So that chapter 5, assuming sin and assuming evil, assuming that Satan is now the ruler of the world, assuming that the beast now controls things, in the first century in the form of the Roman empire. Evil, wicked, oppressive regimes rule this earth with Satan as the main impetus behind that. But chapter 5 tells us God has not abandoned his creation. Instead, God has now acted to reclaim and redeem his creation. Primarily focused on his people, but we're going to see in chapters 21 and 22 eventually the physical earth as well. So God has not abandoned his creation but through the sacrificial death of his son he has overcome. God has set in motion a plan to reclaim his creation to set right, to rescue it from the oppressive powers of Satan and evil and the beast and to restore it to its intended goal in a new creative act that we find consummated in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation.

#### Opening the Scroll (Rev 6)

So then, having looked at chapter 5, the scene is now set by having someone who is worthy to take the scroll and open it. Jesus Christ through his sacrificial death is worthy now to take the scroll and open the scroll that contains God's plan for judgment, salvation, and establishing his kingdom. The stage is now set for Revelation chapter 6. Again, chapter 6 we should understand as a continuation of chapter 5. And that is because what happens now in chapter 6 is the seals that are sealing the scroll from chapter 5 are



now opened and as each of the seven seals are taken off the scroll, something will happen in chapter 6.

### Features of Rev 6

The other interesting thing about chapter 6 is that the scene is now going to shift. In chapters 4 and 5, the scene was a heavenly one where John as we saw in the beginning of chapter four, is summoned up to heaven and permitted to have a glimpse of the heavenly throne room and to see the worship that takes place and the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, and to see something of the unfolding of God's plan, for the redemption and salvation and reclaiming his creation and his people for himself. John has been privileged to see that. Now the scene shifts back to earth as this scroll that he saw in heaven now begins to get unsealed by the lamb who is worthy to do so. The scroll begins to be unsealed and we begin to see how both judgment and salvation, but especially judgment will now issue from the throne and from the seal, again as Christ holds it and begins to open its seals as a result of his death and resurrection and his authority and ability to do so.

Now what is unique about the chapter 6 which narrates the opening of six, of the seven seals from the scroll in chapter 5, and we'll see this happening elsewhere, but in chapter 6, only six of the seals get unleashed. The seventh seal actually does not get opened until the beginning of chapter 8. And in between there is chapter 7, that functions as most commentaries say, it functions an interlude. There's probably some truth to that, although I would not want to say that it's a digression that has nothing to do with the seals. That would be incorrect as well. We'll look at chapter 7 and talk a little bit about its function when we get there. But when we read chapter 6, as we will in a moment, the first thing you note is that only six of the seals actually get opened or unsealed and the seventh one does not get taken off until the beginning of chapter 8 and then there's that intervening chapter, chapter 7 that we'll talk about later.

Another interesting feature of the 7 seals in chapter 6 is that the last one seal number 6 in verses 12-17, seems to bring us to the end of history. It seems to bring us right up to the final judgment, which theologians call the second coming of Christ. We

talked a little about this in the introduction to Revelation; the book in a sense could stop here temporally. It would be a very unsatisfying ending because it says nothing about the salvation of God's people. Chapter 6 ends in the judgment scene, but it seems to bring us to the very end of the world, of the second coming of Christ. Although, as you know, we still have several more chapters to go--18 more chapters in Revelation. But as we said, Revelation seems to temporally to cycle. That is it gives you different images and gives you different perspectives of John's day culminating in the wrap up in history, seeing that in light of the backdrop of God's intention for the end of history and for his final consummation of history and his plan for ultimate judgment and salvation. We find that already taking place here. We'll look more at that in just a moment.

Another important feature to understand is the first four seals seem to go together, as most people recognize. They're united in from two perspectives. Number one, the fact that only the first four seals are identified as horses and we'll look at why that's the case. So literarily the first four seals are joined together because all four are represented by four horses. Then second, logically they seem to go together as we'll see in just a moment. That is, logically the first four seals seem to be intertwined. They seem to result from or be related to each other as well and we'll look at that.

#### Relationship of Seal, Trumpet and Bowl Judgments

Before we look at chapter 6 in more detail and read, again I want to read chapter 6, but I want to raise briefly a question that we might deal with a little bit in more detail when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and also chapter 16. One thing that you'd note when you read Revelation, a prominent feature of the book is that it seems, at least in the center of chapters 4 through 22, sort of in the center of this section, one of the prominent features is the three-fold repetition of seven plagues in the form of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. The seven seals found here in chapter 6 and chapter 8 and then chapters 8 and 9 recount the seven trumpets, seven trumpets are blown and more plagues take place. Then finally, in chapter 16, we find seven bowls poured out. So this threefold series of sevens in the form of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls seems to play a crucial role in this section of Revelation. And one of the questions that rises is:

what do these refer to? What do these three series of sevens refer to and how do they relate to each other since they're all in the series of seven, since they're all plagues, judgment plagues that take place on earth and strike the earth and humanity? Especially when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and 16, we'll see that there is a little bit of overlap with the seals and the judgment that takes place in those two sections. So the question is: what are these and how do they relate to each other?

One possibility in explaining the relationship is to see these three sets of seven, again we're talking about the seals, trumpets, and bowls in chapters 6 through 16; one way to look at it is that these series of judgments happen in chronological sequence. That is, first of all the seals happen when they are finished, the trumpets then take place and when the trumpets are finished, then the bowls take place. So, there is a progression between the three groups of seven. Some would even say that they could even function in the telescoping manner. Remember when we said the seventh seal does not get unleashed until chapter 8. But chapters 8 and 9 then contain the trumpets so some have suggested the seventh seal actually contains the trumpets. Then you'll note the seventh trumpet does not get opened until later on in chapter 11 and some have suggested the seventh trumpet then actually contains the seven bowls so it's sort of like a telescope that each one contains the rest of the sections in it as you pull it out. So many have seen the seals, trumpets, and bowls as indicating a chronological sequence: first the seals take place, followed by the trumpets, followed by the bowls.

Another important view and common view that depends on seeing Revelation as sort of the cycle that repeats itself is what is known as the recapitulation view. That is all three of these series of seven, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, are referring to roughly the same events during the same time period. Greg Beale, in his commentary on Revelation, holds this approach. He argues that when you look at them carefully, especially the trumpets and bowls, the reason why many of them are similar is because they're referring to the same events. And he would say the same is true with the seals in chapter 6. So the seals, trumpets, and bowls are not referring to different events, different judgments and different time periods. This is part of the cyclical nature or recapitulation of Revelation.

That is, it's simply three different perspectives on, what Beale argues, is the whole sweep of church history, all of church history starting in the first century leading up to the second coming of Christ can be characterized by these judgments that God pours out on the earth. So what we're to understand is these are not in chronological sequence, but repeating, from again different perspectives, different ways at looking at the same events. One might compare it to looking at an event or a play in a football game or baseball game or basketball game or soccer or whatever from different perspectives. You see the event in real time but then the camera crew will slow down in an instant replay and they'll give you another picture of that. Then maybe from a different angle and zoomed up they will give you another view. It's all the same event and same play but from different perspectives. That may be one way to understand this way of looking at the seals, the trumpets and the bowls.

Another way of looking at it and one that I will prefer, but we'll look at this in more detail when we get to chapters 8 and 9 and 16, is what could be called a "progressive view." That is, it kind of combines one and two. There is some overlap between the three, but there's also a progression temporally and intensity that is probably the seals in chapter 6, represent events that will characterize the entirety of church history starting in the first century and I'm going to argue that in a moment when we look at chapter 6. The seals, we'll see that these things are already characterizing God's judgment on the Roman Empire. So already the seals are taking place and will do so until the coming of Christ. However, the trumpets then would portray events that overlap to some extent with the seals but probably more intense and a little more from a closer perspective to the end, the second coming of Christ. And then finally the bowls in chapter 16 are to be portrayed as primarily taking place even more intensely and even from a closer perspective to the end to the second coming of Christ, characterizing the judgment's that will be poured out, leading up to the day of the Lord and till the end. So understanding at that way there may be some progression or there's some overlap as far as time and judgment, but there is an intensification and a progression temporally. So it's as if the author starts with the seals and looks at God's judgment leading to the end, then

he backs up but from a closer more intense perspective and describes God's judgment that will lead to the end. Then once more backs up but from an even more intense final perspective looks at God's final judgment that he pours out right before he consummates history at the very end.

A couple things that might suggest this is number one, if when you read the trumpets or the seals, trumpets and bowls, note that they all seem to take you to the very end. Notice that Revelation chapter 6, the final seal, seal number six as we said and as we'll see when we look more closely at this section, takes you to the end, to the day of the Lord, the day of God's wrath and the wrath of the Lamb. So already you're at the very end and the same is true with the trumpets in chapters 8 and 9. The seventh trumpet in chapter 11, gets blown in chapter 11. And they use language to suggest that you are at the end; God's kingdom, Christ's kingdom has finally arrived. Then chapter 16 obviously brings you up until the end as well. So in other words, all three series bring you to the end but each one from a more intense and a closer perspective to a little bit to the very end, the consummation of history, the final judgment of God upon the earth.

The second thing is notice the fractions that are used. The seals in one place, end up harming a fourth of humanity, whereas the trumpets end up harming a third of the earth and a third of humanity, slightly larger numbers. When you look at the bowls in chapter 16, there are no limits to the judgment. So again there seems to be a progression, both temporally and in intensity as well. And again, the fourth and one third are not to be taken with strict mathematical precision but as we said, fractions suggest intensity but limitation and limit in what they can do and so these are the four, so we don't need to add up how much and how big the population is today and envision exactly, precisely one fourth of them and then what's left over, then one third with the trumpets. That's not the point. The one fourth and the one third suggest intensity but limitation. But the limitation becomes less so that the bowl judgments have no limits at all and God's final pouring out of his judgments before the end of the world and the second coming of Christ.

One other item to say about these is that the number seven probably suggests that we should not take these as seven literal judgments that take place in that order; that first

this one happens and then this one. Again seven being the number of perfection and completeness, the perfect and complete judgment of God expressed in the seals and the trumpets and bowls. So, the seven again suggest not necessarily seven sequential judgments but seven playing its typical symbolic function and role.

All of the seals then in chapter 6 will prepare for and function as a sort of a prelude to the final time of judgment and I want to talk about that again later, but all of these are simply warning shots, anticipations of the final judgment that is yet to come and we will read about that in chapters 19 and 20.

Transcribed by Caroline Walton  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 11

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Rev 6: The Scroll Seals

Revelation chapter 6, records the events that take place when the seals are released and opened from the scroll. Chapter 5 reads like this: “I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come.’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come.’ Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword. When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come.’ I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, ‘Two quarts of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine.’ When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, ‘Come.’ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were killed, who were to be killed as they had been. I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, and the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, being rolled *up*, and every mountain and island was removed from

*its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and every free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’ One of the questions that most are interested in asking and trying to answer is twofold – number one: What are these seals, especially the ones associated with the four horses? Second, when do these occur? Are these things that have already taken place? Is John depicting a future series of seals or series of events that are going to take place? When do these take place? What exactly are these seals, especially the first four horses? One thing I think we need to start with is to realize that we need to be cautious in trying to identify exactly what these are and exactly when they took place or will take place because two thousand years later, we are reading something that we are foreigners looking back nearly two thousands to something that the first writers probably, the first writer and the first readers probably would have understood to a large degree. Now 2,000 years later, we look at this and try to make sense of it. So I think it requires a fair amount of caution, recognizing the difference in genre and historical distance that we face in trying to overcome.*

*But I want to suggest to you, right out front what I think chapter 6 of Revelation is doing. My thesis is that God’s judgment is being poured out on Rome’s idolatrous, godless, oppressive empire and its economy and any other nation or any other people that participates in Rome’s mistake. As we’ve seen, the series of seals leads up to the second coming of Christ. Seal number 6 brings us to the great day of God’s wrath at the end of history. Because of that, I would suggest therefore, that although Rome is the center of attention, and the author takes this situation and places it against the back-drop of the final judgment, of the Day of the Lord, of the great day of God’s wrath. Therefore any other people or any other nation that participated in and repeats Rome’s mistake at any point in history also it could be referred to, not that John was seeing different successive empires, but that he uses images that reach all the way to the second coming of Christ. So anyone as Richard Bauckham says, “Anyone for whom the prophetic cap*



*fits must wear it.” As we’ve already said, the first four seals go together, and the reason is we’ve said logically, we’re going to see all these events kind of relate to each other and result from one another. And second, they’re all united with the image of a horse that rides out upon the earth.*

### *Horse Imagery in Zechariah*

*The background, one of the primary backgrounds for the horse imagery again is the Old Testament, if you go back to Zechariah chapter 6, and as we’ve seen John – I’m convinced John actually had a vision of these horses. But he interprets them clearly in light of other prophetic visions, his prophetic predecessors make clear and interpret and describe for his readers exactly what it was he saw. In Zechariah chapter 6, which also as a prophet also much like Ezekiel much of it is in the form of a vision. It is kind of a precursor to later apocalyptic works, such as Daniel and Revelation, 1 Enoch that we read from a little bit earlier.*

Here’s what Zechariah says, chapter 6 and I’ll read the first eight verses, “I looked up again, and there before me were four chariots coming out from between two mountains –mountains of bronze. The first chariots had red horses, the second black [horses], the third a white, and the fourth dappled—all of them powerful. I asked the angel who was speaking to me, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel answered me, ‘These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord and the whole world. The one with the black horses going toward the north country, the one with the white horse going towards the west, the one with the dappled towards the south.’ When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the entire earth. And he said, ‘Go throughout the earth!’ So that they went throughout the earth. Then he called to me, ‘Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.’”

And the my point of reading that is simply to demonstrate although John appears to do something a little bit different from them, John draws his imagery and his description of his vision from texts, especially one like Zechariah chapter 6.

But I think John might also have another text in mind, and that is another place

where we find a more specific account of the types of plagues and things that John identifies the horses with. It is found in Jesus's eschatological discourse in Matthew 24. At the very beginning of Jesus's teaching in Matthew 24, he begins to recount things that must take place before the end. These are not signs just of tribulation that guarantees that we're in the end, in fact Jesus says the opposite. It's interesting, he says, "These things have to take place, but the end is not yet. So don't be deceived when you see these things." Usually the opposite of what we do today – we see earthquakes and wars and famines, and we're convinced that this must be the end. But Jesus warned against that and said, "Don't be deceived. These things must happen. Yes, they're signs that the end is coming, but they have to happen and they are not to be confused with the end itself." So here are the signs that Jesus says will happen, and I think Jesus is suggesting these are the kinds of things that will characterize church history – the history of God's people until the coming of Christ when he does come back to bring history to its consummation. So starting at verse 4 of chapter 24, "Watch out then, that no one deceives you; for many will come in my name claiming, 'I am the Christ' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, [keep that in mind – wars and rumors of wars]. But see to it that you are not alarmed, such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places, all these things are the beginning of the birth pangs. Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and be put to death. You will be hated by the nations because of me, at that time many will turn away, betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of many will grow cold."

I'll stop right there, but I want to draw your attention to some of the things that Jesus mentions that we just read about in the four horses, the seal plagues that are connected with the four horses. Note, Jesus's emphasis on war and rumors of war and nation rising up against nation, kingdom against kingdom. Notice the mention of death and notice the mention of famine as well. All of those emerge in Revelation chapter 6 so that most likely along with texts like Zechariah 6, John is probably aware of Jesus's own

eschatological discourse and the sorts of things that would happen, they would function as preludes to the coming of Christ, to the second coming or to the day of the Lord that would come in the future.

### The Four Horses

Now, what I want to do is think about and look at each of the four horses especially and the other two seals as well and to ask the question about what these seals might signify and look at possible background information that might help us figure out exactly what's going on. How are these judgments upon the world, in what way is the Lamb now pouring out its judgment on humanity. As I said, I am convinced that primarily chapter 6 is meant to be a judgment on Rome's way of doing things. This is God's judgment on an empire that is idolatrous, wicked and oppressive, violent, by demonstrating and by judging its economy, by judging its entire empire and the way it's doing things.

### Seal #1: White Horse

So starting with horse number one, or seal number one, and that is the white horse. Now the white horse is described as one who goes out and conquers and who is bent on conquering, who wears a crown and has a bow. Interestingly, there have been a couple of ways to understand this. Whether negatively or positively, some have actually taken this positively and said this first horse actually refers to the person of Jesus Christ who also wears a white robe and rides out on a horse and conquers in Revelation chapter 19 and verses 11 and following. Some are convinced that this is a picture of Jesus Christ who comes out and conquers. And there have been other positive suggestions as to how we understand this. Some have suggested this is a picture of the triumph of the gospel, or something like that.

However, what is intriguing is the other three horses as we'll see and as you picked up on when you read it, seem clearly to be negative, and seem clearly to be images of judgment. So there's a good reason then, to take this first horse also as an image of judgment, especially if we're to correlate this with Zechariah 6 and also with Jesus's teaching in Matthew 24. I think there's good reason to take this not as a positive

image of Christ or the gospel conquering, but instead taking it as an image of judgment.

I see what that might be a second view and another common view is that some take this as a reference to a future Antichrist; that is this person riding out on the horse, this rider and the horse is an actual person – it would be the end-time Antichrist. In those approaches of Revelation that see chapter 4-22 as solely future, they often see this as the end-time Antichrist. After the church has been removed, now the Antichrist emerges on the scene to cause problems, so some would see this as a solely future event and person. I'm going to argue that though in just a moment, and try to demonstrate that probably we should not limit this to just a future person or event.

Which brings me to a third approach – I think that is a preferred view that this rider, is simply a symbol of conquest and military power. It would correspond to Jesus's statement, "You will hear of war and rumors of war, nation will rise up against nation, kingdom against kingdom." And so here we find a symbol of military power and conquest in the context of warfare, and in my opinion, this image fits Rome perfectly. That is, Rome established its peace through military conquest and military power. In fact, perhaps the way to connect this was through chapter 19 with Jesus Christ coming out on a horse and wearing a robe, and coming out on a white horse, is to see this is a parody of Christ. And again, this is to be seen as a poor reflection of the conquest and the perversion of the conquest and the victory that Jesus Christ himself will eventually win. But this probably reflects the military expansion and the conquest and the violent fighting that characterized the Roman Empire. Perhaps it also reflects the fact that Rome tries to conquer the saints. Later on in chapter 12, especially chapter 13 for example, we see that Rome comes to defeat and it comes out and does war with, it does battle with the saints. So horse number one probably refers to Rome, as a mighty military and refers to it as bent on conquest. It achieves peace at the expense of fighting and conquest. It conquers through warfare, it expands its boundaries only through its military might. In a sense, this might be a critique of the Roman myth of Pax Romana, that Rome provides peace. Rome actually brings peace at a price. I think this will be true of the second horse as well, Rome brings peace at a price – that is through violence and through warfare, which brings us

then to horse number 2.

### Seal #2: Red Horse

Horse number one then symbolizes the fact that Rome is bent on conquering and conquest and warfare, and that's how it establishes peace. Horse number 2 then, seal number 2 is a red horse which indicates and symbolizes bloodshed and slaughter. Notice the rider on this horse is also given a sword. Again the picture here, in my opinion is that John is dismantling a view of Rome, that holds the myth of Pax Romana—that Rome benefits all its people, that Rome is here to establish peace. Rome has brought blessing and prosperity and peace to the entire empire. But again, John reminds us it has done so with at a price. Rome's promise of peace comes at a price and that is warfare, bloodshed and violence. The sword here again may contrast with the sword that comes out of the mouth of Christ. Yes, Rome does violence and conquers and accomplishes victory, but Christ ultimately with his sword will do so, we see that image in chapter one. You see that again in chapter 19. So the sword is probably meant to contrast with that. The sword but does so with violence and bloodshed, it conquers and establishes peace at a cost. So Rome is portrayed here as a violent and bloodthirsty empire.

This becomes clear when you begin to study the history of Rome. You find that it is one of conflict, both externally and internally. Yes, Rome again conquers nations by bloodshed, and it would subdue nations. It brought peace to the empire, it expanded its empire through violence and bloodshed. But even internally, Roman emperors would slaughter each other or others who they saw was a threat to the throne.

The vying for control and the vying for the throne resulted in an interesting series of acts of bloodshed and acts of violence. For example, even right at the beginning in 44BC – Julius Caesar is assassinated. After that follows an interesting series of events of rivalry in an attempt to succeed him. We find story after story of rivals being executed. In AD 68 and 69, there were actually a series of 3 emperors during that very short period of time who came to power but were soon killed. So Roman history is one of bloodshed and slaughter to gain power and to control the world and to spread its rule.

So already we see then, in contrast to the way Christ conquers back in chapter 5 –

as a slain slaughtered Lamb through a suffering sacrifice by contrast, Rome conquers through its military might through violence and through bloodshed and through unending strife and conflict.

### Seal #3: Black Horse

Horse number 3 then, equivalent to seal number 3 is described as a black horse. The rider on this horse comes carrying a scale. Immediately a first century reader would read this and recognize a scale symbolized imbalance, especially in commerce. You can go back to a couple of the Proverbs in the Old Testament and elsewhere to understand this language of an unjust scale. Justice was perverted when the scale was not balanced appropriately in situations of commerce and trade, and so by carrying a scale, this suggests and symbolizes that this seal and this horse is going to have something to do with an imbalance in commerce, or in my opinion – an imbalance and a perversion of justice in the Roman economy and Roman system of commerce. This horse then, clearly suggests suffering and famine.

As a result of that, one can see the progression from war and desire to conquer and desire to spread ones rule through military might and bloodshed and internal conflict. The result often of such a situation would be famine and suffering for many of the people involved, and so there's a sort of progression here.

### Voice Announcing Famine

The interesting feature about this seal is the statement that comes from an anonymous voice in verse 6 where a voice among the four living creatures – it's not clear if this is one of the four living creatures, more likely an anonymous voice among them. Is it God himself speaking? Is it the Lamb? It's not red letters in my Bible, so it can't be the Lamb, it can't be Jesus. No, we simply don't know who this voice exactly is and we find a number of anonymous voices in Revelation where it's not clear, is this God or the Lamb or some angelic being? But what is important is what this voice says, "A quart of wheat for a days wages, and three quarts of barley for a days wages, and do not harm or do not damage the oil and the wine." Now what is going on here is simply this – what is portrayed here does seem to be a famine, a situation of famine where wheat costs an

entire day's wage. That is enough wheat, just a daily amount of wheat; in other words, when it says in verse 6, "A quart of wheat" in the NIV translation translates it "a quart of wheat" – A quart of wheat would have been enough to feed one person. Now the author says, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages." In other words, some of your translations might say a denarius. It was well-known that a denarius was roughly a day's wage. But to feed one person with wheat, wheat would have been a necessary staple – that was a common and desirable to eat, to sustain someone for only one person, let alone an entire family; for one person, the daily ration of wheat would cost an entire day's wage. Then he says after that, "Three quarts of barley for a day's wage". Three quarts of barley was about enough to feed a family, but it also cost an entire day's wage. Furthermore, barley was not as desirable as wheat, it was not as beneficial and perhaps nutritious as wheat. So three quarts of a less important grain, which would be barley – enough roughly to feed a small family, would also be a days wage.

So you have this situation where wheat and barley are scarce, and again the image may be as a result of warfare et cetera. You now have a situation of famine, and now because of the famine, the staples – the most important staple, wheat, enough to feed one person, costs an entire day's wage. So there's not enough left for your family. And three quarts of barley which is less desirable, but still a staple of sustenance – enough to feed a small family was still an entire day's wage. So these are exorbitant prices for these staples. This is not food for the wealthy, this was just common food that would sustain someone for a day is scarce and the price is exorbitant because of inflation.

But there's also another interesting part of this the wheat and barley were not for the rich just food of the rich, it was a common staple for rich and poor alike. But in this case, only the rich could afford enough to feed their family. So you begin to see that the situation is an economy that is out of balance, it's perverted, and it's oppressive.

But there's something else that's interesting, the voice also ends by saying, "And do not damage the oil and the wine". Now what is going on here? To feed a growing population; as Rome begins to grow and expand the city itself, it required importing grain, such as wheat and barley and corn and things like that – so for Rome to sustain its

ever burgeoning city and empire, required importing grain. But often this took place at the expense of the rest of the empire, at the expense of some of the provinces, where they would often exploit the provinces, they would import grain from the provinces to feed an ever-growing population in Rome. This meant the provinces are then going to have less. On top of that, where does the oil and wine come in? When the author says, “Don’t touch the oil and the wine,” the oil and the wine, although some suggest this would be food for the rich; oil and wine probably were not limited to the rich. Again, this was just a staple, and would have been there for common consumption – olive oil and wine. But the point is that oil and wine are not staples like wheat and barley. So what you have again is something out of balance, while the staples and necessities of life – wheat and barley are scarce and exorbitantly priced, so only the rich could afford it, and put most people in a situation of famine. Ironically, the very things that are not necessary – oil and wine, are now in abundance.

Reflected in this language, “Do not damage the oil and the wine,” and what might lie behind that is this: What often happen is, because trading and exporting oil and wine to Rome was more lucrative, many wealthy land owners, instead of growing wheat and corn and staples and things like that, would grow vineyards and olive trees for oil because those were more beneficial for trade. So again you have this economy out of whack or upside-down, especially in the provinces where the necessities of life, the staples of life like wheat and even lesser things like barley were scarce, and so exorbitantly priced most people couldn’t afford them, while things that were not staples such as oil and wine, things that were not necessary for life are now in abundance. Perhaps again because wealthy land owners would find it more lucrative to grow those things and to export them for their own commerce, so you have an economy or a commerce that is sort of upside-down. Now you have wealthy land owners benefitting from wine and oil and all the staples are scarce and can’t be afforded by many, only the wealthy could possibly afford them, although John doesn’t emphasize that.

So you have things upside-down, Rome’s economy is exploitative of the provinces around it, and in my opinion then, what John is doing is attacking Rome’s economy, to



demonstrate what happens when you have an oppressive, godless, idolatrous, violent empire that is bent on conquest, bent on establishing its own rule. Then what happens is not only violence and bloodshed, but famine results in an economy that is perverted and is upside-down and is all out of whack and all out of balance. In other words, the city of Rome survived at the expense of other nations and at the expense of the rest of the empire. In fact, we do know that there were numerous famines that took place in Rome. I doubt that John is referring to one specific famine. There's some who have even suggested that this language, "Do not damage the oil and the wine," some have suggested that this may have reflected an edict from Domitian, that all the vineyards be cut down because of shortage in grain. That is, vineyards that would have been used for growing things for wine were to be cut down and instead replaced by growing corn and other grain because of the shortage. The empire rebelled against that, and again because wealthy land owners would want to grow those things that would be most lucrative and beneficial, such as things for oil and wine. I'm not certain at all that that is reflected here. I'm not quite convinced that this reflects the verdict, or I'm sorry the edict of Domitian. Instead, I think again that it's just the voice is a way of demonstrating and pointing out the inequity and imbalance of the Roman economy as part of God's judgment on the Roman empire due to their violence and their arrogance, their godlessness or idolatry, and their being bent on conquest and conquering. Now this is part of the judgment on the nation through an economy that is upside-down. In fact it appears, if you read it carefully, Domitian's edict is just the opposite of what the voice here is saying in chapter 6 and the third seal.

So the first seal judgment was on Rome's desire for conquest and spreading its kingdom perhaps an attack on Pax Romana. Seal number 2 as a result of its desire for conquest means that it accomplished peace at a price, that is bloodshed and violence, both externally and perhaps internally. Then finally the result of that was often famine and an economy that was upside-down, and an economy that was out of balance and lack equity and was oppressive and unjust.

#### Seal #4: The Pale Horse

Finally, horse number 4 or seal number 4, which is a pale horse, and as you

hopefully can see the colors in a sense are representative of what happens as each of the horses ride out. Horse number 4 then is a pale horse that is the climax of the first 3, and again the pale horse when he comes out is described as death, the rider is named Death, and Hades follows close behind. They were given power over fourth of the earth to kill by sword, which sort of summarizes the first two seals, and then famine and plague and wild beasts which would then summarize seal number 3, especially famine. The injustice and plagues the unjust economy and the famine were results from warfare. So seal number 4, horse number 4 sort of stands at the climax and summary of the first four. So seal number 4 signifies death and Hades being the place of the death, the place of death. This is a term that will crop up later on in Revelation again resulting from warfare, resulting from conquering, resulting from bloodshed and famine in an upside-down economy. The death on many of the earth, and especially within the Roman empire is the result.

#### Summary of Seals 1-4

So putting all these together, in my opinion the first four seals are exposing Rome's military expansion, its economic practices, its claim to provide peace and benefits and prosperity for the entire empire. These seals then, as God's judgment, and as the Lamb's judgment, on Rome reminds us then that Rome's promise of peace and prosperity comes at a price – it comes at the price of unsettlement and conflict and constant strife. It comes at the cost of bloodshed and violence and death, it comes at the cost of famine and an economy that is out of balance and upside-down. Then the result of that is death of those within the Roman Empire. So you have a picture of an empire that is being turned upside-down. In true apocalyptic fashion, John is exposing Rome for what it really is. It is really a bloodthirsty, violent, oppressive empire that exploits others within its empire and exploits other nations. Its promise of the peace and the prosperity is really a mirage, because in the midst of that is famine and there's death and there's bloodshed in order to maintain its empire and to try to maintain its rule over all things. So you find an empire that is full of conflict and warfare and bloodshed and strife and violence and economic disparity and collapse. These are seen as judgments of God upon

Rome. I want to talk about that in just a moment. But again it's important to see, I think one of the things John's doing is attacking Rome's own clients of Pax Romana bringing peace and security.

So back to chapters 2 and 3, how does this relate back to chapters 2 and 3? For those churches that want to compromise with the Roman Empire, for those churches that are dependent on Rome for their wealth and prosperity, for those who think it's okay to participate in Rome's commerce and Rome's religion, and to buy into Rome's promises of peace and prosperity, chapter 6 then demonstrates that actually if you want to do so, you must also participate in Rome's judgments in chapter 6. It reminds us that Rome does not deliver what it promises. For the faithful, it's a reminder that God is already judging the wicked Roman empire, God is already in the process of establishing his own kingdom, by beginning to undo the kingdom of Rome and the empire of Rome. So, therefore, resist and do not compromise, instead maintain your faithful witness in Jesus Christ because Rome is already under God's judgment.

### Three Further Issues

Now, three further issues to talk about before we move onto the last two seals: first of all, one might ask, How are these God's act of judgments? And I would suggest that they are. Notice how many times with each of the four seals, it begins with the horse being called to "come" by one of the four living creatures and begins in chapter 6, verse 1, "I watched as the Lamb opened the six seals." So these judgments cannot take place until the Lamb opens the seals and until the horses are summoned to "come" by the four living creatures. The notice in a couple places, we find the passive form of a verb for example, in verse 4, "to him was given." A couple times we find the passive form "was given" suggesting that these things can only happen by permission, so you have this picture where the Lamb, and this would also include chapter 4 and 5 from which all these judgment scenes in chapter 6 and beyond in subsequent chapters issue from and come from the throne. So what you have here is a scene where the Lamb and where God are sovereign over these events. The question is, "How are these judgments?" The fact that they go out and conquer and there's internal conflict and fighting and warfare and

dissent, where there's bloodshed and violence to sustain and maintain the rule and the empire, and even internally for the emperor to remain on the throne where there is famine, where there is an economy that is actually out of balance and out of whack that results in famine and death of many people, how is that God's judgment on the Roman empire? Don't those sound more like natural consequences that happen with the empire doing this. First of all, I would say in a sense these do look like natural consequences that occur, but at the same time Revelation 6 makes it clear this is still God's active judgment on Rome.

This is not just God simply turning his back and then Rome kind of does its thing and all these bad kind of consequences happen. Instead I think, we should see this as perhaps in light of the way we should read Romans chapter 1, where Romans chapter 1 verse 18 begins by God indicting humanity, especially Gentiles for their refusal to acknowledge God and for their refusal to give God glory. Instead, what they do is they rather worship the creation, rather worship idols than worship God. And verse 18 begins in Romans chapter 1 by saying, "The wrath of God is already being poured out," the active wrath of God, God's judgment on sin and sinful humanity is already being poured out. But when you read the rest of Romans you find this interesting phrase, that God hands them over, three times it says, "Then God handed them over to their sins," and "God handed them over to their sins," and "God handed them over to their sins." So what we find going on here is something similar: God's judgment on Rome is by handing them over to their sin, by handing them over to their desire to conquer, to the fact that they're bent on warfare, to their violence, to their economic practices, God now will hand them over to that and they will indeed reap the consequences of their evil godless idolatrous practices, but that is part of God's judgment on the Roman empire. That is God's judgment on any other nation or empire that absolutetizes its power and sets itself up as God, that rules and spreads its rule and maintains its kingdom through violence and warfare and bloodshed, this then is God's judgment by handing them over to those sins, and the disastrous effects of those sins.

A second issue is: Are not Christians also affected by this? I mean if anyone living

in the Roman Empire, even Christians could not help but be affected by warfare and bloodshed. If you're a Christian living in Rome or any of the Roman provinces of the seven cities from chapters 2 and 3, "You could not help but be affected by famine and plague" and some of the things listed here. So, are not Christians affected as well? How can these be God's judgment if Christians are also affected? A suggestion by Greg Beale again in his commentary I think is helpful, he suggests that yes, Christians would have been subject to these things, but for them these were not judgments but serve to refine them, serve to test them and produce endurance and faithfulness. Only for unbelievers would these result in judgment. In fact we already saw in chapters 2 and 3, some of the churches were already suffering because of what Rome was doing, and because of what was going on in the empire. So Christians would not necessarily be physically protected from these things, but for them it would not function as a judgment, but function as a means of strengthening and refining and bringing about perseverance and faithfulness in the people of God and endurance in God's people.

Finally, number three, the same is true with the seals as I think is the case of the trumpets and the bowls later on is: what is going on? One of the themes that is taking place here is in the context of God's judgment on Rome and on wicked humanity, and again in the other empire that chooses to follow Rome's footsteps is God is now seen as judging and dismantling this present creation in sort of a de-creative act in preparation for a new creation that will emerge in chapters 21 and 22. So by judging Rome and its empire and its economy, God is in a sense judging and dismantling or de-creating this present world in order to bring about the emergence of a new creation in Revelation chapter 21 and 22.

#### Seal #5

Now, that brings us to seal number 5. Seal number 5 is of a very different character in the first four seals, which were four plagues that revolved around four horses. Seal number 5 is not a plague necessarily, there's a message of judgment inherent in seal number 5, but seal number 5 itself is not a record of a judgment or an event in the same manner as the first four seals which were identified as the four horses. Instead, in seal

number 5 in chapter 6: 9-11, I think we might find the description of what happens to those faithful followers of Jesus Christ that are affected by the first four seals – that is those who primarily are slaughtered or put to death by the Roman empire. In John it might be a people like Antipas and others that were put to death at the hands of the officials in the provinces of Rome. But what happens to those affected faithful followers of Jesus Christ who are affected by the first four seals, those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness for the person of Jesus Christ.

Now the scene shifts again from earth back to heaven, with seal number 5, again and answering the question, What about God's people in the context of these judgments in chapter 6? What this seal does is raise an important issue for the rest of the book of Revelation, that is the vindication of God's people. God's people who suffer at the hands of Rome for their faithful witness are now in chapter 6, the fifth seal anticipates an important theme, that is, their vindication. Their suffering, and even to the point of death, their faithful witness that led to their suffering and even to death must be shown not to be in vain. God will vindicate his faithful people who suffered and even died for their faith.

Notice in this seal, in seal number 5, again the temple imagery. It begins by the souls of those who have been put to death because of their faith, now under the altar in the seal the altar also is probably the same altar that will pop up again in chapter 8:3-5. The fact that the souls are under the altar, the altar probably reflects the altar of burnt offering in the temple. It may also be a combination of the altar of incense and the altar of burnt offering, but the fact that the souls are found under the heavenly altar, heaven is being portrayed as a temple. This is God's dwelling place and you find the heavenly counterpart in the form of the altar to the physical temple and the physical features of the temple. But the fact that the souls are under the altar probably suggest their protection and what they do, those who have been put to death, the souls of those who have been put to death, the souls here probably suggesting the life that continues even after physical death.

So, these are the souls of those who have been put to death because of their witness for Christ, those who have been slaughtered. Notice the language here, it says in

seal number 5, “Those who are under the altar have been slain.” That is the same word used as the Lamb who was slain or slaughtered back in chapter 5. They have been slain for the same reason Jesus was, because of the word of God and because of their faithful witness or their testimony. These are terms that we were introduced to all the way back in chapter 1. Now because of their faithful testimony, they have suffered the same fate as Jesus Christ. Now their souls are protected in heaven under the altar. What they do then is they cry out for their enemies to be punished and for their blood to be avenged.

Now, a couple things about this: number one, the fact that they are found in association with the altar probably also views their death as a sacrifice, the language of their blood in association with the altar probably portrays their deaths in sacrificial terms, as a sacrifice.

The other thing to say about this before we look at the cry that they make and God’s response to it is: this is where we begin to see the language of those who have been put to death because of their faithful witness; whereas we’ve only seen so far that John is aware of one person named Antipas who has given his life, who has died because of his faithful witness. But an image like this probably suggests that there is a lot more to come, this is where we often get the idea that the Revelation is primarily meant to be an encouragement to those who are suffering persecution for their faith, and that is indeed true. But we’ve seen, at least at this point, there is no empire-wide persecution, there is no officially sanctioned persecution by the empire going out and dragging Christians out into the streets and into the amphitheaters and putting them to death. That came later in the second, third, beginning of the fourth century. At this point I think John is aware that the clash between the Roman empire and the church is only going to get worse and there will be many, many more who in fact, because of their faithful witness, it will result in their death and experiencing the same fate as their master Jesus Christ.

Now their cry for vengeance then in verse 10 needs to be understood more accurately I think in light of Old Testament imagery, this cry when the saints say, “How long, O Lord before you judge the inhabitants of the earth.” “Inhabitants” is an important term, those who dwell in the earth, that occurs throughout Revelation in negative terms as

those who side with the beast, those who are under the authority in the kingdom of Satan, those who persecute and who resist and oppose God's people. "How long before you judge them and avenge our blood?" I think it's important to see that this is not so much a cry for personal revenge on one's enemies as much as this is a cry in Old Testament terms again for their blood to be vindicated, for their death to be shown and not in vain. In other words, they have suffered death. Rome and the world's evaluation of Christians has been: they're worthless and we can put them to death, they're witness was in vain, they sacrificed their lives for nothing, they died needlessly and senselessly for nothing, they died for what is a lie.

So what needs to take place is they need to be vindicated, they need to show that their suffering and death was not in vain, they need to be vindicated or awarded which actually will happen then in chapter 20 and following. They have suffered at the hands of the evil empire and that means justice in terms of judgment on those who have put to death and killed God's people and oppose God and his kingdom, but also vindication and reward showing that their death and their suffering and death because of their faithful witness was not in vain. In fact, one finds a similar cry in Psalm chapter 79 for vengeance, or "How long, O Lord, until you act on our behalf." Hosea chapter 1 and verse 4, God promises to avenge the blood of his people, so again John is picking up Old Testament language where God promises that his people's suffering will not be in vain, he will judge those who have put them to death and He will reward them and vindicate them showing that their suffering was not in vain.



## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 12

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 6 on the 6 seals

## Revelation chapter 7 “Who can stand interlude?”

We’ve seen that the cry of the saints in seal number five introduces a very important theme throughout the book of Revelation and several times we’ll be referring back to seal number five in the, so called, cry of vengeance. We’ve said that theme is one that is actually rooted in the Old Testament, in some of the Psalms and even some of the prophetic literature. It is the promise of God, avenging the blood of His people; the promise of God vindicating his suffering people, those who have suffered and died at the hands of a godless, oppressive empire. God would vindicate them by rewarding and vindicating his saints but also by punishing those who have oppressed them and those who have harmed them and even put them to death. We’ll see how that plays out in a couple of other places in Revelation, but what I want to look at before we move on to the final seal, and then into chapter 7, is the two-fold response to the saints in their cry for vengeance—the souls who are under the altar.

## Souls under the Altar

First of all, God responds to their cry by giving them white robes. Some have suggested, this is a picture of the resurrection of the saints and that the white robes would be the resurrection body they will now receive. However, I would suggest that we do not see the saints, who are beheaded for their faith, receiving their resurrection bodies until Revelation chapter 20 verses 4 through 6 where those who have been beheaded for their faith are then finally raised and they come to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand years. So at this point, I don’t think this is the picture of the saints receiving the resurrection bodies, which doesn’t happen until chapter 20. So in a sense, chapter 20 will be the ultimate answer to the cry of the saints in chapter 6, when they are finally vindicated and are raised. They come to life and they reign with Christ for a thousand

years and contrast to how they have been treated on this earth and in a context where the beast reigns, they will reign and they will be raised.

Instead, probably as elsewhere in Revelation, the white robes suggest victory and probably even purity as well and righteousness. For example, back in Revelation chapter 3, in one of the messages to the churches, to the church in Sardis in verse 4, “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not yet soiled their garments. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.” Probably as in that section, the white seems to suggest purity in contrast to those who’ve not soiled their garments by being tainted by the world by compromising with the Roman Empire and their idolatrous, godless system of worship; instead, they have maintained their purity. So I take it here that the white robes demonstrate their purity or righteousness. The white robes are identified with the righteous acts of the saints later on in Chapter 19 of Revelation. So here, probably indicating their righteousness and purity and their victory as well and here God, in a sense, is already reversing the world’s verdict on the saints that their witness was useless that they suffered in vain, and that they were conquered by the beasts and death. Now, God already vindicates them and rewards them with white garments, indicating their victory, their righteousness, and their purity.

The second response of God to the saints is after giving them the white robes; he tells them that they must wait patiently until the full number of the others who are to suffer for their faith, is completed and fulfilled. In another words, we have this interesting picture that God seems to suggest that there is a set number, or predetermined number, or at least a number of God’s people who have yet to be martyred or who have yet to be put to death for their “martyr” or for their witness or for their faith and that number must be filled up. That number must be complete before God comes to render his final verdict, before God comes to avenge the blood of the saints, before he comes and vindicates them finally by raising them and by giving them life.

We find that idea already in number of Jewish, apocalyptic books or texts, and we’ve alluded to books like 1 Enoch and others. Jewish, apocalyptic texts that are not included in the Old and New Testaments, along with Daniel and Revelation which are

two canonical examples. But books that would have provided understanding of a certain type of literature and sometimes these books provide background since Revelation is an apocalypse. Often we see John picking up on themes and ideas, and language that are not only from Old Testament but sometimes themes, and ideas, and language we find in some of the Jewish apocalypses.

#### Parallels in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra

In two apocalypses in particular, we find this idea of a set number of God's people or a set number of those who must suffer before, that must be fulfilled before God comes and consummates his purposes for history and brings about final and ultimate judgment. For example, in 1 Enoch, this is from the book of 1 Enoch that we've read about. We read briefly earlier, in chapter 47 in 1 Enoch he says, "In those days, the prayers of the righteous ascended to heaven,"—and notice interestingly the connection with the prayers of the righteous, a theme in John's apocalypse and Revelation as well, the prayers of the righteous ascending to heaven or the prayers of the righteous, the cry of the righteous and God responding to that. "In those days, the prayer of the righteous ascended to heaven, and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the Lord of the Spirits, there shall be days when all the holy ones who draw on heaven above shall dwell together. And with one voice they shall supplicate and pray, glorifying, praising, and blessing the name of the Lord of the Spirits on behalf of the blood of the righteous ones, which has been shed. Their prayer shall not stop from exhaustion before the Lord of the Spirits; neither will they relax forever until judgment is executed for them. In those days, I saw him, the antecedent of time, while he was sitting upon his throne of glory and the books of the living one were open before him and all his power in heaven above and his escorts stood before him. The hearts of the holy ones were filled with joy because the number of the righteous had been offered. The prayers of the righteous ones had been heard, and the blood of the righteous has been admitted before the Lord of the Spirit." And that phrase, "the number of the righteous" and again connected this idea of the prayer of the saints on behalf of those whose blood has been shed, and that in connection with a certain number who had now been offered up, so that now God's judgment will follow.

We find this similar idea in another very popular and important apocalyptic work known as 4 Ezra. And in 4 Ezra chapter 4 in verses 33 through 37, and again 4 Ezra is a book where the seer has a vision and enters into an extensive dialogue with an angelic being, but it also includes visionary material. In dialogue with this angelic being in chapter 4 in verses 33 through 37, we read this, “Then I answered and said, ‘How long,’”—and again notice the phrase—“‘How long and when will these things be? Why are our years few and evil?’—And he answered me and said, [the angel who is dialoguing with him, answered and said], “You do not hasten faster than the Most High, for your haste is for yourself but the Highest hastens on behalf of many. Do not the souls of the righteous in chambers ask about this matter saying, “How long are we to remain here?” This is a similar situation to the fifth seal in Revelation chapter 6. And “When will come the harvest of our rewards?” And they again are crying out for, “When will we be vindicated? When will you judge? When will history be consummated?” and “When will you come to judge?” The archangel answered them and said, “When the number of those like yourself is completed, for he has weighed the age in the balance, measured the times by the measure, and numbered the times by the number. And he will not move around or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.”

And so in these two works, in 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, that I just read, you have this concept of set number or a number of saints of God’s people who must still be martyred, who must still suffer, and be put to death for their faith. Only when that time is completed, and 4 Ezra also adds the idea of that there is a set amount of time when that is completed then God will come and judge and God will vindicate and reward his people fully.

So John may be drawing on that concept whether he read 1 Enoch or 4 Ezra, I don’t know, but John is probably drawing on that concept found in apocalyptic literature of a set number and an appointed number of God’s people yet to suffer and perhaps in appointed time and only when that is filled up, only when that is complete, then God will come and bring full vindication for his people, avenge their blood, and will judge those who have caused them to suffer.

The use of this motif from apocalyptic literature may be used to demonstrate why a delay may be one of the explanations for it is embodied in this voice of those souls of the martyrs but also probably to demonstrate again God's sovereignty over these events. No matter how bad it gets, they can understand that God has a set time and there's a set number of God's people that still have yet to be fulfilled and yet to be filled up. Perhaps John is thinking literally in terms of God has a precise set number that once it gets there, God will come for his people. But certainly, John is drawing on this idea to explain the delay and to provide assurance for his people who are suffering for their faithful witness for Jesus Christ. Therefore, for those who are compromising to wake them up and to cause them to maintain a faithful witness for Jesus Christ for the other two churches back in chapters 2 and 3, that are suffering, again this would be a message of assurance, that their suffering will not last even though there is some delay, but God certainly will come and avenge the blood of his faithful people.

#### Seal Six

This brings us now to seal number six in verses 12 through 17. Interestingly it's actually seal number 6 that at least begins to answer the question of seal number 5 in the cry of the saints, who are the souls of those who are under the altar who cry out "How long?" And now we see God beginning, in seal number 6, to pour out his judgment on an unbelieving world. In this last seal, which is quite lengthy, the author once again alludes to, and draws from the language from a number of Old Testaments texts that all have in common this notion of or this vision, this description of cosmic upheavals and the constellations of the universe doing all kinds of whacky things and the image of the sky bring rolled up etc., obviously using metaphorical language of the whole kind of a dismantling of the entire universe. So, to read again starting in verse 12 John says, "I watched as he opened the sixth seal." And when he did, here's what happens. "There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes,

the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man, hid in the caves among the rocks in the mountains.”

#### Day of the Lord Prophetic Imagery

So God is portrayed as no respecter of persons when it comes to judging. All spectrums of people belonging to socio-economic spectrum are now subject to God’s final judgment. These people called out in verse 16, “to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of the wrath has come, and who can [stand]?’” That language of “the Great Day” probably reflects the Day of the Lord language from the Old Testament prophetic literature. The Day of the Lord is the time where in the future when God would come to bring history to its end. He would come and bring judgments on an unbelieving, wicked world but also reward and vindicate his people. And here we see John borrowing from Old Testament prophetic texts, the language of judgment by drawing on what is probably rather simply stock imagery, or stock language, he finds from a prophetic texts. So we are probably not to take this language with strict literalness as if you were standing outside in this day, you can actually see the moon turning red and see a meteorite shower or something like that. Certainly one could not watch the sky get rolled up, I’m not sure what that would even look like. So clearly, John is speaking in the language of symbols, but symbols that he find, from his Old Testament predecessors.

So, for example, one significant text is Isaiah chapter 24 and also chapter 34. Isaiah chapter 24, for example, in verses 1 through 6, “See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—it will be the same for priest as for people, for the master as for servant, for the mistress for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor. The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word. The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languished. The earth is defiled by its people, they have disobeyed its laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.” In that text notice the devastation of the

earth affecting everyone along the entire spectrum of the socio-economic classes in the beginning part of chapter 24. But another important text is chapter 34 in verse 4 of Isaiah, “All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; and all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.” Clearly that language influences and gets picked up in sixth seal of the book of Revelation, but also one other text to read, Joel chapter 2.

In Joel chapter 2, again an anticipation of the coming Day of the Lord, we find similar language in verse 10, “Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.” So notice, what you have going on here, you almost have the prophets drawing on a stock series of images to describe the final Day of the Lord, the final end time judgment. That again suggests that this is probably not to be taken with strict literalness. Jesus himself in Matthew 24 seems to pick up on this language.

So John is simply taking rather common language to describe end time judgment. It might be like today we might say that “Someone turned the world upside down,” or we might say “All hell broke loose.” Not speaking literally but speaking of an event so cataclysmic or an event so earth shaking, which is another image or metaphor, an event that has such far reaching and significant effects it can be described in language that suggests the complete dismantling and dissolutionment of the universe.

#### Sixth Seal: Vision of the End

So clearly with this sixth seal, we are finally at the end, we are now at the time where God comes to bring history to a close and in fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic text. Now the Day of the Lord breaks loose and that means judgment for the people, especially the oppressors of those in seal five, who now cry out “How long....” Now we see that beginning to take place.

#### Final Comments on Rev 6

So the seal then ends with everyone all from every socio-economic class where God does not recognize distinctions between those who have refused him and who have oppressed his people and who have followed the beast in the throne in their lot with

pagan idolaters. Now finally, the day of God's wrath has arrived, again, bringing us to the very end of history. Now, two things before we move on to chapter 7. First of all, as a reminder, seal 7 has not yet been opened, yet. We said that this will be true of the trumpets, which is the next series of seven. Six and seven get broken off or separated and there's intervening material. So we'll see as we've said couple of times already, seal number 7 gets opened at the beginning of chapter 8. So there's an intervening section in all of chapter 7 which we'll look at next.

But the other thing to recognize is chapter 6 ends with an important question that is voiced by those who are subject to the Day of God's Wrath. This imagery of hiding in the rocks just demonstrates the horror and terror of God's wrath to try to flee from, and run from it. Again, this is Old Testament imagery. But the text in verse 17 ends with a question, they say, "For the great day of wrath has come upon us." That's why they want to hide from it and it ends: "Who can stand?" Now this "stand" then I take it will get answered in chapter 7. Chapter 7 is going to tell us who can stand in the Day of God's Wrath. Who can stand against these plagues that are narrated in chapter 6 that culminate with the Day of God's Wrath?" "Who is able to stand and resist that?" or "Who is able to survive that?" Chapter 7 will provide the answer to that.

#### Revelation 7

So let's look at chapter 7 of Revelation. As we've said, chapter 7 sort of functions as an interlude between seal 6 and seal 7 which finally gets opened in chapter 8. We'll look at that when we get there. We've said it functions in chapter 7 then plays a role not as a digression or as something that has indiscriminately inserted in between the seal sequence between sixth and seventh seal. But instead, but as we've seen, it answers clearly the question chapter 6 ends with "Who is able to stand?" Chapter 7 will tell us that. Who can persevere through the seals of chapter 6? Who can withstand the final Day of Judgment? And then we'll see after this interlude, the judgments will resume again in chapters 8 and 9, in the form of seven trumpet judgments.

But in answering the question "Who can stand?" in another words, chapter 7 is going to further interpret and describe the events of chapter 6. Again, chapter 7 does not



chronologically follow the events of chapter 6. Notice chapter 7, verse 1, begins with, “After this [or after these things].” This is a visionary sequence after John saw those things in chapter 6. Now he sees the events in chapter 7. But chapter 7 scene 2 goes back again and answers that question “Who can stand?” In another words, chapter 7 is not just a digression; it further interprets the events narrated in chapter 6. So I want to read chapter 7 and then we’ll again talk a little bit about broadly about what’s going on in it and then exam in couple of the details, especially the two central groups that are introduced in two sections of chapter 7.

#### Text of Revelation 7

Chapter 7 begins, “After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.’ Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel. From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: ‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’ Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes—who are they,

and where did they come from?’ I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’ And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, ‘They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; and he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”

### Two Groups of Rev 7

As I said, Chapter 7 revolves around, or at least most of the interesting revolves around the understanding of these two groups. We’re introduced to two separate groups and the question is: “What might be the relationship to each other? What is their identity? Who are they? Are these the same groups? Is this the same group being referred to? Are these two separate groups? And how are we to make sense of this?”

The two groups are: group number one, the 144,000 Israelites who are sealed—12,000 each from the twelve tribes that are numerated in this text. And then group number two is introduced in verse 9, which is a multitude that cannot be numbered. It is a multitude that is made of people from every tribe, language, and tongue. The question then is: How are we to identify each of these groups? and then again, What is their relationship? Are they the same or are they somewhat different?

It’s interesting too with chapter 7, John’s perspective, in a sense, still seems to be on earth. Though the beginning of chapter 7 could almost be a heavenly perspective where it says, “He sees four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds.” But clearly John seems to be seeing an event on earth. Then the sealing of the 144,000 would presumably take place from an earthly perspective. But then with the second group starting in verse 9, John’s perspective seems, again, to be a heavenly one. We’ve said Revelation keeps shifting back and forth between heaven and earth. So now in verse 9, it’s a heavenly one as he sees this great multitude surrounding, the heavenly throne, presumably the same one as back in chapters 4 and 5, in the heavenly

courts and in the heavenly throne room of God. Now the rest of chapter 7 is from a heavenly perspective. In Chapter 8, he'll shift back to an earthly perspective or an earthly scene.

But let's start by looking at the first group in verses 1 through 8 and that is the 144,000. The first thing to know is the vision begins, interestingly, before the author ever gets to describing the 144,000 Israelites sealed from each of the twelve tribes. He begins by describing a vision of an angel or four angels who are at the four corners of the earth. Again, notice the significance of the number four. Four is symbolic of the earth. Four indicating, we might say, the four corners of the earth, indicating the entirety of the globe, the entirety of the earth. So the four angels are holding back the four winds. The question that raises in my mind is: What in the world are the four winds and why are they holding them back? Most likely the four winds, probably, at least represent the four horses back in chapter 6. The winds probably here suggest destruction/judgment, as they could in apocalyptic literature, and also in the Old Testament I believe. So the four winds probably refer back to the first four horses, who come out and wreak havoc on the earth in the form of plagues. They may also perhaps anticipate some of the plagues, especially the trumpet plagues to come because those plagues harm the earth and the water and the sea. So the point is, these four winds are the plagues or at least the ones that chapter 6 and may also be anticipating the ones in chapter 8 that come out of the earth to harm the earth and to harm the sea. So the angels are told to hold back, to restrain the winds, that is the judgment from happening, and not allow them to happen until something else happens, and that is verse 2.

#### Revelation 7 and Ezekiel 9

Then John sees an angel that comes from the east, and he has an order to seal the 144,000. This event clearly refers back to Ezekiel chapter 9. Remember we've said, Revelation roughly follows the exact order of Ezekiel. Chapter 4 and 5 were dependent on Ezekiel chapters 1 and 2, Ezekiel's throne room vision. Now in chapter 9 of Ezekiel, we find the seal of God; God comes to seal his servants. So now we find an angel who comes down and seals his people before the plagues can be let out, before the four winds

can be loosed to wreak their havoc. They are sealed so that they will not be harmed. Now, just to again summarize, this does not mean that they're spared from all physical harm, as we see throughout Revelation, because of their suffering witness, John expects that his people will indeed suffer and will indeed be put to death. But as far as being recipients of God's judgments, as far as anything harming them spiritually, and thwarting their inheritance, they are now sealed and kept from these judgments.

144,000

The question then of these 144,000, and when you read this John is fairly specific, he doesn't just say 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, but he goes down in verses 5 through 8, he goes down the list of tribes and specifies the number from each tribe, which is 12,000. Now, at first off, let me just remind you, and we'll return to this, but remind you of the significance of the number 12. That we probably should not expect that these numbers here are to be taken with strict mathematical precision or literalness, but what is important is the number 12. And the number 12 signifies the people of God. In this case, the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament, and 12,000 being 12 times the number 1000 and then the 144 is simply 12 times 12. So again, John is working with 12 and multiples of 12 times 1000 to come up with this number, maybe we'll talk a little bit more about that. So, the first point is, whoever this group is we should not take this with too strict of a literal approach or mathematical precision as if John was sitting there with a calculator, counting all of these persons and came up with exactly 144,000. The numbers in Revelation are to be taken symbolically.

But who are these 144,000 who receive this sealing that protects them from God's judgment and probably also especially seal number 6, the Day of God's wrath? Who are the 144,000? Just a couple of suggestions, and there have been a number of them, but I'll highlight the most prominent suggestions that suggest what I think this might be.

First of all, many have maintained that this is literal Israel, that the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel and especially the precise specifying of the tribes, and 12,000 from each one, indicates that this is national, ethnic Israel in the end time. This is usually associated with a certain way of interpreting Revelation that we've mentioned a few

times, especially in very, very popular form communicated in the series like the *Left Behind* series. But the idea that once God has removed his church, the people of God before chapter 4, then God will usher in a period of time where there will be Tribulation in fulfillment of the Old Testament. He will restore his people, Israel, and restore the promises to them, but before that they will go through a period of Tribulation. Now, God is seen as sealing 144,000 from the nation of Israel who will be his people, who will be his faithful witness during that time of Tribulation. That is what is envisioned here. So we should take this fairly literally of God choosing people from ethnic Israel, who will be sealed and kept during this time of future Tribulation. So this is clearly referring to an event in the future.

A second possibility, some have understood this as a similar to the first view, but some have understood this along the lines of Romans chapter 11 in verses 24 through 26. Especially, where Paul in chapters 9 through 11, Paul is addressing the issue of the faith of God's people, and towards the end of chapter 11, he utters those words, "And then all Israel will be saved" which most take as Paul expecting that sometime in the future, perhaps at the Second Coming of Christ, many of God's people, Israel, will be saved. Although Paul doesn't tell us all the details and exactly how that takes place, but there are indications that he envisions a future event that occurs at the Second Coming of Christ and some would interpret chapter 7 of Revelation in light of that in Romans chapter 11, "All Israel will be saved" in the future. Here we see the author portraying that event, and again, most would agree in highly symbolic language. But like view number 1, it takes the reference to the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel as a reference to literal Israel, though, very different from view 1.

A third view that has a few subsets to it that I'm not going to go into any detail; a third view is that this mention of 144,000 from the tribes of Israel is to be taken symbolically for the complete people of God, consisting of both Jew and Gentile. In other words, this is to be seen along the similar lines to what Paul and even other New Testament authors do with Old Testament language referring to Israel, applying it to the new people of God, the church consisting of Jew and Gentile. We see Paul doing that at

times. Read Ephesians chapter 2, and especially 11 to 22, where Paul takes language of the covenants and of nearness to God, and participating in the promises of Isaiah's temple language and applied it to household of Israel, and now applies it to Gentiles as well. Or I think also 1 Peter chapter 2, where Peter, doing something similar that John does in Revelation, taking texts such as Exodus 19:6 temple language: they are a kingdom of priests, they are a royal nation, a priesthood. He takes that and now applies it to the church made up of Jew and Gentile. So then is it possible then that this is language from the Old Testament referring to ethnic, national Israel that like other New Testament authors, John now applies to the new people of God. Old Testament Israel now finds a fulfillment in and anticipates a people no longer restricted to just national Israel, but expanding that and including along with Israel, including Gentiles as well in the new people of God that New Testament authors now call "church." In fact, I would suggest that this is the way that we should understand that John has taken Old Testament language about Israel and now applies it to the church—the new people of God consisting of Jew and Gentile. He is following in the steps of other New Testament writers. In fact, John has already done this; I've already mentioned chapter 1 verses 5 and 6, and chapter 5 as well in the first seal song where the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, where John takes Exodus 19:6, the promise made to Israel back in Exodus that they would be "a kingdom of priests," they would represent God's rule and his presence. Now, John applies that to the international or transcultural people of God, including Israel but also including other tongues and tribes and languages and people from other nations that now, make up the new people of God. They fulfill the intention and destiny of God's people Israel; now embodied in the new people of God that centered around the person of Jesus Christ, centers around the Lamb. These are the people that now the Lamb has purchased and created to be his kingdom of priests, as his new people.

And so, I think that this is what probably John is doing here. Now before we look at: "Why then would he portray the church as the people of God, as a 144,000 from the tribes of Israel?" and "Why would he go to such lengths to number them and to single out each tribe and number them?" Before we do, just two, interesting and maybe significant

details of this list, there are number of things going on in this list that I don't want to go into a lot of detail about, but I do want to highlight two of them.

It's based on the fact that, when you compare this list with Old Testament list, when you go back to Old Testament, when the tribes of Israel are numerated as the twelve tribes, this is very different from those. In at least, in two respects, but I want to highlight two.

Number one is that fact that there is no mention of Dan or Ephraim, the tribes of Dan or Ephraim. The reason for that might be, and this would be very significant for Revelation, because at times Dan and Ephraim were both associated at times in other Jewish literature with idolatry. So, for that reason, in a context, perhaps where John is addressing readers tempted to engage in an idolatress, godless empire; for that reason, he may have left these two tribes out. It's possible because of the associations in some literature with Dan and Ephraim with idolatry, they've been left out of this list.

The second one I want to draw attention to is it's interesting that the tribe of Judah heads the list. When you read the texts of Revelation carefully, this probably has the easiest explanation and that is already back in chapter 5 verse 5. Were we not introduced to Jesus as the lion from the tribe of Judah? So this list has a Christological emphasis, beginning with the tribe of Judah, the author is probably saying something. Again, this list is unique, this group is unique, because now it centers around the person of Jesus Christ. Now it centers around the one from the tribe of Judah, who again is the slain Lamb, who has purchased people from every tribe and language and nation to become a kingdom of priests. Now here they are and so Judah heads the list. Also, clearly as in chapter 5, verse 5 probably the list here reflects Genesis chapter 49 verse 10, role that the tribe of Judah was to play where there was a ruler promised from the tribe of Judah. So, the emphasis again would be membership in the people of God as determined by their relationship to the one from the tribe of Judah. So probably Judah has been moved to the beginning of the list, because of the significance of Jesus Christ as the one from the tribe of Judah and as the one who comes as the slain Lamb that purchased people for himself.

So, in conclusion, it appears that the author has taken the imagery from the Old Testament of the twelve tribes of Israel and now he has utilized this imagery as a symbol for the new people of God. The church defined now by their relationship to the slain Lamb, the one from the tribe of Judah who is now creating a people to be his kingdom and priests. So, it is probably not referring to a literal twelve tribes of Judah, Israel, probably not referring to a literal restoration of people from each of the twelve tribes; and there's many that debate whether that could even be done or whether there's still people from twelve tribes of Israel. I don't want to get into all that, but simply just stress that John is probably using this symbolically as he does and as other New Testament authors do to take Old Testament to now refer to the New Testament people of God.

Again, we've said, the reason for using 144,000 is the 12 times 12; 12 being symbolical of the people of God, both the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles. Then 12 times 12 to get a 144,000, John is playing with the multiple of 12 to get 144 and times 1000; 1000 being a large and complete number. So what you have here is John envisioning the complete people of God in fulfillment of Old Testament. Now John sees the complete people of God in the form of the 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of Israel.

Now we still have to ask the question, why does John enumerate the 12 tribes? or Why does John go to the extent of going to the entire list of 12 tribes and drawing 12,000 from each of them? What is the purpose of that? Well, first of all, one thing to say, when John says, "from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the Judah 12,000, from the tribe of Levi," Again, I don't think that we should take that with strict literalness as if there are two groups here. You have a larger group of the tribes of Israel and you have a smaller group 12,000 from each tribe, so that what you end up with is 144,000 that is actually smaller group taken out of a much larger group of the tribes of Israel. I don't think that's what John is intending, that this is kind of a select group out a much larger group. Instead, I'll demonstrate, I think, instead of taking this with a level of literalness, I'll hopefully demonstrate there's another reason why John would say 12,000 from each tribe.

Key Books on Revelation



The solution to all this is then, has been effectively suggested and compellingly argued by Richard Bauckham, British scholar; we've mentioned him several times, and is sort of a literal excursus. One of the best books that you can get your hands on for helping you to understand Revelation is a little book that Richard Bauckham wrote called *The Theology of Revelation* published by Cambridge University Press. That's part of a whole series of a Theology of Matthew, Theology of Luke, Theology of Shorter Epistles, Later Epistles of Paul and a Theology of Hebrews etc. But *Theology of Revelation* is a short paper back written by Richard Bauckham. In my opinion, it is the single most valuable introductory to reading the book of Revelation. It introduces you to what kind of literature Revelation is, to its function, how to read it, and to its main theological themes. It doesn't give you commentary in every passage, but it introduces to main theological themes, has a section in applying it and reading it for the modern day. Just overall it is the most balanced and sane, and in my opinion the most helpful introduction to interpreting and reading the book of Revelation. I highly recommend that you purchase that. Another one, while I'm on books more recent, at least from American perspective is a book called *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by an author named Michael Gorman. Again, it's similar; it's more of an introduction to how to read Revelation in light of its background, in light of the kind of literature it is and how do we read it, how do we read the different sections. It's full of insights as to how we apply it to the modern day situation. So, outside of major commentaries those would be two very helpful works.

But back to Richard Bauckham who has suggested that when you go back to the Old Testament and you look at sections where the tribes of Israel are numbered, he says that predominately what is taking place when God is determining the military strength of Israel, to see basically, counting the number, finding men from each of the tribes and determining their military strength.

A good example of that is in Numbers chapter 1 that we'll look at in just a moment. You remember the story in 2 Samuel chapter 24, where God incites David to number the tribes of Israel, basically that is determining their military strength, and determining the number of eligible persons to enter into warfare. So, the census here of

the tribes is the census to determine the military strength, and for the purpose of determining eligible warriors from each of the tribes. In my opinion, this is probably why John uses that language “from each tribe.” So again, I don’t think we should push this too literally to suggest that 144,000 is just a smaller group from a larger group. I think the entire people of God; the entire church here is being portrayed as a mighty army.

The language “from each tribe” is just to recall; for example, Numbers chapter 1, in fact, if you go back to Numbers chapter 1, which is a census of Israel to determine the size of the army, in a sense. It begins in chapter 1 verse 1, “The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. He said: “Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You and Aaron are to determine or number by their divisions all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army.” And then notice, some of the language; for example in verse 20, “From the descendants of Reuben the firstborn son of Israel: All the men twenty years old or more who were able to serve in the army were listed by name, one by one, according to the records of their clans and families. The number from the tribe of Reuben was 46,500.” And again, John uses 12,000 because he’s working with symbolic numbers. Or verse 22, where again, when he counts the number of the descendants of Simeon, the number from the tribe of Simeon, is the very same language that John uses here. So, I think John is by using this language “12,000 from the tribes” he is deliberately eluding back to Numbers chapter 1 and other texts where Israel was counted as a census to determine the number of eligible fighting men, to determine the military strength of the nation.

#### Army as to War

So here, John applies that language to the people of God to say something about them. The people of God in chapter 7 are depicted as those who are sealed who are able to stand in the Day of the Lord, those who are sealed and protected from the plagues are now depicted as a mighty army that goes out and does battle. In fact, to further

substantiate that; interestingly, when the 144,000 appear later on in Revelation in chapter 14 in the verses 1 through 4, notice how they're described, "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." Probably the seal they get from chapter 7. "And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder..." Verse 3 "And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure [remained virgins]." It's interesting that in chapter 14, they're described basically as male virgins, who do not engage in sexual relationships with women, which was exactly one of the requirements during war under the Old Testament. You remember the story of the David and Bathsheba, when he got Uriah to go home, he tried to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba to cover up what David had done, in fact, he had gotten Bathsheba pregnant. But he refused to sleep with her that was part of the requirement for war: abstinence from sexual relationships. So adding chapters 7 and 14 you come up with this picture of 144,000 as an army, as a military enclave, that goes out to do battle.

However, while the churches are portrayed as the mighty army that goes out to do battle, having read chapter 5 especially and reading the rest of the book of Revelation, it makes clear that how they do battle. Ironically, the church as the mighty army will go out and do battle, but they will conquer and they will overcome and they will be victorious in the same way the Lamb was, through their suffering witness for the person of Jesus Christ. So this is sort of an ironic vision, this is not an army that goes out with swords and weapons and kills like Rome does in chapter 6 in the first two seals. Instead, here you have a mighty army that goes out to do battle, yet they do so ironically through their faithful suffering witness even to the point of death.

So, I take it then, the first group consists of the entire church as God's people, who are now portrayed as a mighty army along the lines of, and using imagery of Old Testament. Now they go out as the mighty army as Israel did to do battle, yet they do so

not by weapons but through their faithful witness even to the point of death.

Now, in the next section we'll look at: Who are the multitude that cannot be numbered in the rest of the section? And, what is their relationship to the first group the 144,000 in the first 8 verses of chapter 7?

Transcribed by Mi Song Jung  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 13

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 7--the Multitude and Chapter 8--the Final Seal

### 144,000 and the Innumerable Multitude

In Revelation 7, and starting with verse 9 that we read earlier, we are introduced to a second group. We saw the first group being a 144,000. This is probably military imagery from the Old Testament, imagery of taking a census to determine the number of eligible fighting members of each of the tribes of Israel. Now that language applies to the new people of God, the church, portraying them as a mighty army that goes out and does battle in the midst of the events in chapter 6 in answer to the question: who can stand? This mighty army that has been sealed and protected for God's purpose go out as a mighty army to do battle, but ironically they do so through their suffering faithful witness.

Now in contrast to that in verse 9, we are introduced to another group, a great multitude that was so great that no one could number it. Again we have to ask the same questions; who is this group and what is their relationship to the first group? First of all, usually the two groups are kept fairly distinct if not completely separate because note the contrast in the way they're described. The first group is clearly numbered, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes ending up with 144,000, so the first group is clearly and explicitly numbered. The second group is explicitly said to be "unnumbered," that is no one could possibly number it. So, because of that the two could not possibly be the same, one is numbered, the other could not be numbered. One of them is limited to the nation of Israel, the other is people from every tribe and language and tongue, so for those reasons most would keep them fairly, if not completely, distinct from one another as two separate groups. The other thing to say, notice the 144,000, as we said the scene shifts, the 144,000 now stand before the Lamb and before God's throne and before the Lamb, evoking the throne room scene, from back in chapters 4 and 5. Now this innumerable multitude stands in the presence of God, stands in the throne room, from Revelation 4 and 5 so that now they are basically portrayed as having received the reward. They are

portrayed as receiving their final salvation; they stand rewarded; they stand vindicated in God's presence. So that in a sense again chapter 7 is beginning to answer the question of the saints, the souls under the altar who have been beheaded because of their faithfulness who cry out: "How long, O Lord?" Now in a sense we see the final vindication of God's people. In this part of chapter 7, they now seem to reach their final destiny. They seem to enter into the reward, outstanding, vindicated before God and before his throne and before the Lamb in the heavenly court, and in the heavenly throne room. We'll talk a little bit more about that and what that might be referring to and what that might entail a little bit later on. But again the question who are these, are these completely distinct from the group in chapter 7. Again at first initial reading it seems that that indeed is the case. One is numbered, one isn't; one is related to the tribe of Israel, the others are people from every tribe and tongue of language; one is found on earth apparently, the other, this is a heavenly group standing before the throne.

#### Support for the Two Groups Being the Same

However I think there are reasons for taking these as the same group, looked at from different perspectives. The first reason is this, the first thing to draw attention to is this; that would seem to suggest identity, and I think this is the most significant one is: notice the contrast you find in this text between what John hears and what John sees. It is the same contrast that we were introduced to back in chapter 5. Now remember back, and what we said is often the case, we'll see this a couple times throughout Revelation, John will see something or John will hear something and then he'll turn around and see something and what he sees further interprets what it was he heard. And often what he sees and hears are the same things but just looked at from different perspectives. Z

Go back to chapter 5 again. What is it that John hears? When John is going to the heavenly throne room, he sees God seated on the throne. He sees then in chapter 5 God in his throne, with a scroll in his right hand, he goes all throughout the universe looking for someone, but can't find anyone worthy so he begins to weep. An angel interrupts the weeping and says to him that the lion of the tribe of Judah has overcome. So John hears that there has been someone found worthy, the lion of the tribe of Judah. But what

happens when John looks and sees: what does he see? He doesn't see a lion from the tribe of Judah, he sees a lamb as slain. Two very different figures and images, a lion and a slain lamb; yet clearly John is not seeing two different persons, two different Messiahs. It's clear in the context he's seeing the same thing, it's just that what he sees and hears interpret each other. What he sees is a lion who overcomes, or what he hears is a lion who overcomes, but what he sees is a slain lamb that helps interpret and helps us to understand how he overcomes. As the lion of the tribe of Judah, how does Christ overcome? He overcomes ironically like a slain lamb, which again is the same as the mighty army in the beginning of chapter 7 overcomes. So what, so the point is what John hears and sees refers to the exact same thing yet in different images that mutually interpret each other. And I would suggest that that is exactly what is going on here. In chapter 7:1-8, this is what John hears. John says, "I heard the number," verse 4, "I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000." Now notice in verse 9, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude." Now this is what John saw. So John hears about 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel that is portraying the people of God as a mighty army. Especially if we take this as John using imagery from the Old Testament and now sort of typologically to refer to the new people of God. Then what John hears, a mighty army of 144,000, is now interpreted further by what he sees; an innumerable multitude, standing before God's throne, victorious.

So the same group of people but looked at from different perspectives. In the first case they're looked at from an earthly perspective as a mighty army that does battle ironically through their faithful witness even to the point of suffering and death, just as the Lamb did. And then in verse 9 and following, looking at the same group from a heavenly perspective, now from the perspective of an innumerable multitude who now stands victorious before God. They have won their battle, and now they receive their reward as now they stand victorious before God. So the same group is looked at from different perspectives.

And given the nature of the apocalyptic symbolism there's no need to see a contradiction between a group that can be counted and a group that can't, because again

John's using different imagery to portray the same group from different perspectives. A mighty army on earth, who goes out and does battle even in the face of hostility, even to the point of suffering and death, and now he envisions the same group using different imagery. He views the same group as standing victorious before God's throne and now receiving their heavenly reward.

The second thing that would support this, as well, is note that this innumerable multitude in verse 9 also ends up standing before the throne wearing white robes and holding palm branches. We said the white robes can suggest purity and righteousness and probably also victory. One of the things that palm branches could also signify was victory. So given the fact that they wear white robes and hold palm branches, this then would add to the fact that now they stand victorious. The mighty army from 1 through 8 now has won the victory through their suffering faithful witness. They now stand victorious in God's presence. So I would suggest to you that rather than two separate groups, we have the same group of people that is God's people made up of Jew and Gentile people from every tribe and language and tongue portrayed from two different perspectives.

#### Why does John Describe them as Innumerable?

Now one question is why does John describe, in verse 9, this group as an innumerable multitude, as a group of people from every tribe? And notice there's that phrase again that occurs seven times throughout Revelation: every nation, tribe, people, and language. Some version or variation of that occurs seven times throughout the book of Revelation. Why does he describe them as an innumerable multitude, which again now stands victorious in heaven. Probably, one reason might be is for, you can imagine almost psychologically, for a group of people in the 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3, for a group of people trying to live out their faith in the Roman Empire, especially the two churches that are faithful for their suffering, often in situations of suffering and persecution, one can be tempted to think that they are simply an insignificant minority. Now by portraying them as an innumerable multitude, the author wants to demonstrate that, no, they are not an insignificant minority; they are not just a tiny conclave that are simply at the whim of



the Roman Empire but now he says actually you belong to a great multitude that cannot be numbered. That could be one function of the innumerable multitude.

#### Abrahamic Covenant Connection

But I think there's another more important one. In my opinion, this language of a great multitude that no one could number also resonates with Old Testament background. If you think a little bit about the background, about the Old Testament story, and again John assumes most of it, especially the prophetic literature. But John is not restricted to prophetic literature, he often goes all the way back to the Exodus, he assumes the Exodus story, he assumes the creation story, and when you think about the Old Testament story. Where do you find a group of people or a multitude of people that cannot be numbered? You find it several times in connection with the promises made to Abraham. Remember, over and over Abraham starting in chapter 12 when God promises that he will be a great nation, from him will come a great nation, and eventually all the nations of the earth will be blessed. When that promise gets repeated in the covenant made with Abraham throughout Genesis, we find this idea stated several times that Abraham's seed and his offspring would one day become so numerous that it would be more numerous than the stars of the sky. Or one day Abraham's offspring would become so numerous that it would be even more numerous than the sand on the seashore.

For example, back in Genesis chapter 13 and verse 16 is one of the first iterations of that idea. To read 15, God promises him: "all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." Verse 16, "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted." The idea is who in the world could ever count specks of dust? The idea is no one. That's how numerous Abraham's offspring is going to be.

Another example: chapter 15 and verse 5: God took Abraham outside and said, "'Look up at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them,' then he said to him, 'so shall your offspring be.'" That is Abraham's offspring would be uncountable. No one could possibly number the offspring of Abraham.

One final one in chapter 22 in a reiteration of the same theme. Chapter 22 and in

verse 17: “I will surely bless you, [God speaking to Abraham] and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.” So you have this theme throughout Genesis that God promises Abraham that his seed or his descendants would be innumerable. They would be so great that no one could count them. No more than you could count all the stars of the sky or the sand of the seashore or all the specks of dust. That’s how numerous Abraham’s offspring will be. I think that is the language that John is drawing on here.

So both images come out of the Old Testament; the imagery of the tribes of Israel and numbering them and also the multitude that no one could count. Those are both Old Testament images that apply to Israel. So it’s not like the first one is Israelite and the second one isn’t. Both of them come right out of the Old Testament and both apply to the nation of Israel. Here is the innumerable multitude.

I find it interesting that John does not pick up, at least in this image, he does not explicitly pick up on the theme in Genesis 12 that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations. Intriguingly instead, he picks up on the promise of Abraham’s own physical seed would be more numerous than the stars, it would be so great no one could number. But now John reinterprets, in a sense, the promise made to ethnic Israel, Abraham’s physical offspring, and now he applies it to a group made up of every nation, tribe, language, and people. So much like John did in the first eight verses, and took the language of the 12 tribes of Israel, and counting them to determine their military strength and applied that to the new people of God made of Jew and Gentile, now he does the same with this language of the great multitude that no one could number. In other words, in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham that Abraham’s physical seed would be more numerous than the stars of the sky and sand of the sea, so numerous that no one could count. John now takes that and finds his ultimate fulfillment in a great multitude that is not restricted only to physical Israel but is expanded to include people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation.

So again, my point is, I think this is important to understand, both of these images,

the 144,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel and the innumerable multitude, both draw an Old Testament language referring to Old Testament Israel, now applying it to the new people of God, the church. So in fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham of innumerable descendants, now those descendants stand victorious. Interestingly, notice a couple of the texts I read, especially the last one, connected it with the victory over their enemies, especially Genesis chapter 22. Now the innumerable multitude has been victorious over their enemies through their faithful suffering witness. Now in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, his descendants stand victorious over their enemies in God's presence and receive their reward. But again, the descendants consist of people from every language, tribe, and nation, including but not exclusively Israel.

There are two other features to draw your attention to. One of them we've already mentioned: the fact that they hold white robes and that they also hold palm branches. We suggested that that probably portrays military victory. Some have suggested that these also were features of the Feast of Tabernacles and what that is being portrayed in this scene is the ultimate fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles which we find celebrated in the book of Leviticus which demonstrated, for example, God's protection of his people when he led them out of Egypt. That's certainly possible here. Now the people have reached the goal of their Exodus and that is celebrating the Feast, now celebrating it in God's presence. That's possible; although again most of that is based simply on the white robes and the palm branches which it's not certain if that's enough to evoke the Feast of Tabernacles. It's possible but that's not certain so I'll drop that right there.

#### The Great Tribulation

The second is notice this reference to "the great tribulation," in verse 9. The first verse of the description of the great multitude, after this "I looked and before me was a great multitude no one could number standing there with white robes." Actually let's move down in the text where John begins to ask the angel who these persons were. The angel finally tells him these are those who have come out of the great tribulation, they've washed their robes, made them white in the blood of the Lamb, again signifying purity and righteousness and now perhaps also victory. But what is this "great tribulation"?

We'll look at this elsewhere, I think this idea gets unpacked throughout Revelation, but probably the great tribulation, though many Christian interpreters of Revelation are prone to see this as a specific period at the very end of history, some would associate it with an actual seven year period, but many would take this as the great tribulation is a specific period right at the very end of history as a prelude to the second coming of Christ. In my opinion however, when you put the rest of the book together, I think the great tribulation probably describes the entire period of the existence of God's people leading up until the second coming of Christ. It is a period described as one of tribulation, of trouble. It's a period, as we've already seen, of suffering and even persecution at the hands of dominant empires like Rome, at the hands of the beast, which awfully has its impetus in Satan's attempt to destroy God and his people in Revelation chapter 12.

So probably the great tribulation refers to the entire period of the existence of God's people, the entire period of the church's existence, until Christ comes back. So already the people in the first century were living in the period of the great tribulation. The tribulation had already been inaugurated. God's people had already begin to suffer tribulation at the hands of the Roman Empire, at the hands of those who would persecute them, and who would resist them. People like Antipas, for example, who suffered at the hands of Rome, and many more that John was convinced would suffer because of the faithful witness in the face of hostile Roman Empire.

So the great tribulation probably should not be limited one final period although one might want to hold that this period will continue to escalate into a final outpouring of tribulation then will be cut off when Christ returns at his second coming to bring judgment and salvation. At the same time the great tribulation probably spans the whole period starting with the first century, starting with the outbreak of persecution under the Roman Empire. Maybe even before Domitian, if this book is written under Domitian, maybe even beginning back with Nero, maybe even all the way back with the death of Jesus Christ under Roman rule. This whole period now starting with Jesus' death and the outbreak of persecution under Rome now inaugurates this period of tribulation that will only culminate at the second coming of Jesus Christ. This whole period is the period of

the great tribulation.

And now these people have emerged victorious out of this period of tribulation and they stand in heaven receiving their reward. Now one other question related to this chapter is when does this event occur? Interestingly two possibilities and maybe they're not exclusive but this could be a scene that occurs immediately upon the death of the faithful sufferers; those who suffer because of their faithful witnesses to the point of death that immediately enter into their inheritance they stand victorious before the throne and so you have a heavenly throne scene with all of God's faithful people dressed now in white robes as they have been promised back, for example, in the letters to the churches.

Now they stand before the heavenly throne but another possibility is notice at the very end, at the very last 2 or 3 verses, you have a song that is sung in a sense or at least you have a series of lines put in poetic or hymn-like form in most English translations. Let me read them again, "Therefore, they are before the throne of God [this innumerable multitude from every tribe, language, and tongue] and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits in the throne will spread his tent [or tabernacle] over them. Never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Now two things, first of all, it's interesting that it's described as an innumerable multitude which seems to suggest finality or seems to suggest the final complete group. But second, some of these texts I just read, intriguingly, when you get to Revelation 21, this is sort of a pastish of Old Testament texts. When you get to Revelation 21, these same texts occur again. As everyone remembers and recalls "God will wipe away the tears from their eyes." And the language of the lamb tenting or tabernacling over them recalls chapter 21 verse 3 where God will, in a new covenant relationship, will set up his dwelling or his dwelling will be with them. His tent and tabernacle and presence will be with his people. They will never hunger and thirst again. Leading them to springs of living water occurs in chapter 21. So I wonder if this is simply not sort of a glimpse or snapshot of the new creation in chapter 21 and 22. That already in anticipation of the

fuller description that takes place where heaven actually comes down to earth in chapter 21 and 22. Here we find kind of a snapshot, a glimpse of God's people entering into their final inheritance. This would not be primarily, if at all, a vision of what happens immediately upon their death and saints going to heaven, but this would be a consummated scene of all of God's people who have been faithful now receiving their reward standing before God. This innumerable multitude, now enter into their inheritance the new creation that will get picked up and described in more detail when we get to Revelation chapters 21 and 22. So it's kind of a fast forward glimpse of what gets unpacked in more detail then.

#### Summarizing Rev 7

So to summarize the point of chapter 7 then is to demonstrate that during the period of tribulation and during the period of God's judgment upon the earth, upon the wicked Roman Empire, and presumably then, any other empire that would play that role, leading up to the final judgment. Who is able to stand against that? John answers that question then in chapter 6, those who can stand are those who belong to the new people of God, the church, who is sealed and protected, who is portrayed as a mighty army in fulfillment of the imagery of Israel going out and defeating its enemies. Now God's people go out to engage in battle and warfare but they do so through their suffering witness, almost ironically, not through weapons, but through their suffering faithful witness. Then if they do so, they will stand victorious in God's presence. In fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the sky, sand of the sea, that they would defeat their enemies, now they stand victorious in God's presence. Then sort of a fast forward glimpse into the future, they now receive their inheritance, that is life in the new creation; life in God's presence, they stand rewarded and vindicated.

Now again, Revelation could stop here, you've had a scene of judgment and now you have a scene of final salvation. But as we have said this is a good example of how Revelation is cyclical. Now John is going to back up and narrate similar events and similar situations from simply using different images and from a different perspective. So

we have a long ways to go yet to get to the very end but John has already reached it now only to back up and kind of take another run at the end by describing God's judgment in the present on the Roman Empire, and on wicked humanity by describing what God's people are to be doing, by describing the nature of their suffering witness, leading up to God's vindication of his people, his reward of his people, and his judgment of their enemies.

#### Revelation 2 & 3 in Relation to Revelation 7

The other thing when you look at chapter 7, how does that relate to the churches in chapters 2 and 3? For at least two of the churches, but also some of the others who may have those who are wavering, remember some of the churches John, Jesus Christ speaking through John, did have something positive to say about them even though there were still areas that Christ was concerned about their spiritual status or their lack of witness. To those churches and to those persons, this chapter would be a source of encouragement to persevere, that even in the face of suffering, they actually are accomplishing the victory. This is God's means of them becoming victorious and establishing his kingdom through their faithful witness even to the point of suffering. It would also remind them that if they persevere, the result is they will one day stand rewarded and they will stand faithful, as a part of a great multitude, not an insignificant small minority. However, much that may appear in the eyes of the Roman Empire, they will actually emerge as a great multitude and stand victorious and receive their reward if they persevere. For many in the churches that John addressed, they may fall on the opposite side. They may find themselves as those who are subject to God's plagues, as those who do not stand victorious, as those who actually side with those who harm and persecute the people of God. The only option is to repent and to maintain their faithful witness in Christ, even if it means their suffering in death.

#### Chapter 7 as an Interlude

Chapter 8 then, following on this chapter 7 is sort of an interlude between seal number 6 and seal number 7. Chapter 8 now will resume the seal sequence. The other thing to mention, that an interlude might do is when you read the seals of all the evil

taking place and all the chaos and the visions of judgments, sometimes the seals almost function literarily as a brief reprieve and kind of slows the action down and is almost a way of helping you get your breath before the next onslaught of seals. Again, that's not the only thing that they do, we said that the interlude in chapter 7 functions as an important theological function to interpret the events and what's going on in chapter 6 to answer the question, who can stand, in the midst of what's going on in chapter 6. What is the relationship of the people of God to what's going on in chapter 6? So it has an important theological role but at the same time it sort of provides almost a reprieve or a brief break in the midst of the calamitous and evil plagues that are poured out upon the earth.

### Chapter 8 Seals Resumed

So that brings us chapter 8 where the seal sequence is resumed, and we said that chapter 7 answers the question: Who can stand? That may also apply to chapter 8 as well. Who is able to stand against what is going on in chapter 8? We'll see in chapter 8 particularly that the trumpet plagues narrated in chapter 8 and 9 as well, are aimed only at those who have not been sealed, who have not received the seal from chapter 7. Again, this section then will resume God's judgments upon the earth, having answered the question of what is the relationship of God's people to the plagues that are going on? Now we find that the plague sequence is going to be resumed but only after the seventh seal is opened in the first few verses of chapter 8.

### The Last Seal

So here's the last seal, the seventh seal, and again after this will lead into the sequence of seven trumpets, which we'll see likewise will get broken off between the sixth and the seventh, but we'll look at that later. But what is interesting about this seventh seal in chapter 8, as we'll see, is apparently nothing happens when the seal finally gets opened. But before we look at that I want to read chapters 8 and 9. We'll read chapter 8 first, and then we'll go on back and answer: what is the seventh seal? Because apparently nothing happens, it says there's a half hour of silence in heaven. That's very different from the other 6 seals that have been opened.



## Chapter 8 Text

But let's begin by reading chapter 8. "When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about a half an hour [This appears to be the content of the seventh seal.] And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunders, rumblings, flashes of lighting and an earthquake. Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet and there came hail and fire mixed with blood and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded his trumpet and a great star blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water--the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blast about to be sounded by the other three angels!" And I'll stop there but chapter 9 then probably we should not have a chapter break here because chapter 9 continues the trumpet sequence. But interestingly, as we'll see, the next three trumpets are set off from the first four, much like the first four seals were set off from the remaining three. We find that same pattern here.

So the first four trumpets in chapter 8, form a unit and then chapter 9 will narrate

the final three trumpets. As we've said before, much like the seals, the sixth and seventh trumpet will be separated by an interlude that again is not just a digression but we'll see actually functions to interpret further what's going on in chapters 8 and 9. It plays a very important theological role in the narration of the vision. But chapter 9 ends with the sixth trumpet. Trumpet 7 actually occurs later on in chapter 11, verses 15 through 19. We'll find that the seventh trumpet finally gets sounded.

#### Seventh Seal: Silence

But interestingly that seventh seal is finally unsealed at the very beginning of chapter 8, and as I said, what is strange about it is apparently nothing happens. The seventh seal is opened and all it says is there was silence in heaven for about a half an hour. Hopefully, as you've picked up by now, we probably shouldn't take that half an hour as a literal half an hour. If you had your watch on you could watch the minute hand go halfway around the face of the clock and then this time would be up. But half an hour probably is suggesting something significant but something limited as something that doesn't last forever.

Now the question is: why does silence last for a half an hour? This to me at first glance does not appear really to be the content of the seal. When you read the other 6 seals, something very specific happens, except for seal 5 which is a vision of the souls under the altar who cry out. All the others are active judgments of God upon the Roman Empire, and upon evil godless idolatrous humanity that refuses to acknowledge him and instead persecutes the saints. But now all of a sudden you have a seal that's open and there's simply silence and nothing really happens.

Because of that, many suggest that seal number 7 actually, like we said, like a telescope that you keep pulling out, each section contains the other sections inside of it. Some would suggest seal number 7 actually contains all the next 7 trumpets inside of it. That's entirely possible, however I wonder again if the silence doesn't play a different role and perhaps plays a role in light of its Old Testament background. There are three possible ways I think to look at the silence as part of the seal. The first one is, and commentaries have suggested these three, and there are others but I am simply focusing

on what might be the three most likely solutions or the three most common. One of them is the silence simply provides a dramatic pause in the action. Sort of like we said in the interlude, you go back to the seals. So in rapid fire there's just been one judgment after another and it ends with this cataclysmic scene of the dismantling of the universe as a symbolic portrayal of the final judgment of God and the seal of God's wrath and the wrath of the Lamb. Now the silence sort of provides a reprieve or a pause in the action, before the next round of judgments that are about to take place in chapters 8 and 9. So kind of a chance again to catch your breath and get ready for what's going to come next. That's entirely possible and certainly makes sense here.

However, there are two other possible functions: number one or number two. Number one is a dramatic pause in the action. Number two is the silence may be the silence so that the prayers of the saints can be heard, which is exactly what happens next. After the silence we're introduced to the angels who stand before God and have seven trumpets. But they don't blow the trumpets for a couple more verses. Instead, you have this image of an angel bringing up to the altar and filling his laver, his censer, with the incense from the altar, which also contains the prayers of the saints, which are offered up to God. We've seen that theme already but the idea is the judgments that are about to follow are to be seen as in response to the prayers of the saints. We read that; remember the text we read from 1 Enoch, and especially from 4 Ezra, that the prayers of the saints, the prayers are always being offered on behalf of the saints who are suffering. So here the prayers of the saints probably go back and recall chapter 6, the cry of the martyrs. How long, O Lord? So the silence may be so that the prayer of the saints can be heard, indicating that the rest of the judgments now in chapters 8 and 9 especially, are a response to the prayer of the saints.

A third possibility too is that in the Old Testament, silence is often a silence that is in anticipation of the soon judgment to come; the intervention of God to come in the form of judgment. Silence sort of being a response of awe in light of the imminent judgment that is to come. That would certainly make sense. The seventh seal then is silence because of the judgment that is to come, which could be then chapters 8 and 9, the

trumpet judgments. Also notice, it appears to me that we have another judgment already in chapter 8, which we said, each of the series of seals, trumpets, and bowls, bring you up to the very end. In chapter 6, the very last seal, we saw the image of the dissolution of the universe and people saying, “hide us because the great wrath of God is present.” In chapter 8, the seventh seal might now bring us into the very day of the Lord. Notice what happens in verse 5; then the angel, after he takes his censer and fills it with the incense, which is the prayer of the saints, and it goes up to God. Probably the cry of vindication, the prayer that the saints would be avenged, their blood would be avenged; they’d be vindicated. Now the angel goes to the altar and fills his censer with fire, and throws it on the earth, a symbolic act of judgment. Notice again the language of judgment that again the author picks up from the Old Testament. There came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. In other words, all of this together may be the content of the seventh seal. As the seventh seal is opened, there’s judgment. Yes, there is a break in the scene, but also so the saint’s prayers can be heard and also as an anticipation of God’s judgment. Then that judgment, that final judgment, comes in the form of fire hurled upon the earth and rumbling, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

So here again, we have a summary, here we’re brought to the very end. Here we are finally again brought to the day of the Lord and to the final judgment; to just mention a couple of other things about verses 3 and 4 of chapter 8.

Actually, there are two things that I want to emphasize. First for all, notice again all the temple imagery that the heavenly throne room is portrayed as a temple. Here apparently the scene shifts again. John is back up in heaven or perhaps John still in heaven from chapter 7. Chapter 7 ended the multitude before the throne of heaven. Now from his heavenly perspective he sees the angel in the context of heaven as a temple. Notice the altar, which seems here to reflect also the altar of incense in the Old Testament. The censer was one of the utensils in the temple, and the language of the fire and the coal. So here we clearly have a picture of heaven portrayed as a temple, and perhaps the angels functioning as priests. But the primary goal here is they were involved in not only mediating the prayers of the saints to God, the prayers that probably cry out

for justice and revenge, or vindication but also in the final judgment of the seventh seal that is poured out in verse 5. Again, along with the silence, verse 5 is the judgment of seal number 7. So you have this picture of a heavenly courtroom continued in verses 3 and 4.

The other thing is, notice, and this is what makes Revelation at times so tricky to outline if that's indeed what we're supposed to do. It's interesting when you look at outlines of the book of Revelation; they really struggle at these types of places. It's interesting that 8:1 through 5 actually ends up overlapping the seventh seal and the seven trumpets, because notice, if verse 5 is part of the content of the seventh seal, notice in verse 2 it was already introduced. "I saw seven angels who stand before God and they were given seven trumpets." But then, verses 3 through 5 seem to return to the content of seal number 7. Where the angel offers up the prayers of the saints and then prepares to pour out God's judgment in the form of the coals from the altar. So intriguingly, the seven angels are introduced in verse 2, yet they don't do anything. They do nothing until verse 6. So you kind of have this interlocking; scholars often call this an interlocking feature, and there are other things they call it, whatever the case. You have sections that interlock and overlap where one section ends while at the same time another one is just getting started that will continue. That makes it very difficult, including the interludes that interrupt seal six and seal seven and later on trumpet 6. These interludes, these interlocking features of Revelation make it very difficult to come up with an easy, precise outline of the book because things interlock, or there are interludes that interrupt sequences that we find with the seals and the trumpets.

So, starting in chapter 6 now that the seventh seal has been opened, the content is probably silence and also the judgment of verse 5. Now the author has brought us to the end with verse 5, the day of the Lord. Now he's going to back up and narrates another series of judgments in the form of trumpets. In chapter 8 starting with verse 6 through the end of the chapter, and then again into chapter 9, we are introduced to the 7 trumpets and as each trumpet is blown, something happens on the earth. Something happens on the earth or the sea and also something's going to happen in the heavens as well in one of these trumpets.

### Three Woes

We also said that chapter 9 continues the trumpet sequence, but we find 3 things going on. The first, chapter 8 introduces us to the four trumpets that are closely related to each other, like the first four seals were. Then the next 3 trumpets seem to be related to each other and seem to have a character of their own because they are introduced in verse 13 by a threefold “Woe!” uttered by an eagle. So in verse 13, we’re introduced to an eagle, and he issues a threefold woe, which he tells us corresponds to the next three trumpets. Two of those trumpets will get narrated in some detail in chapter 9 that would be trumpet 5 and 6. Then the seventh one, as we’ve already said, the seventh trumpet, presumably corresponds to the third woe. So if you’re following this, chapter 8 begins by introducing us to three woes, which correspond to the last 3 trumpets. So trumpet 5 and 6 should be woes one and two and then trumpet 7 will be woe 3. But again, trumpet number 7 is separated from 6 by an interlude consisting of chapter 10 and also much of chapter 11. Then in chapter 11: 15-19, we finally hear the blowing of trumpet number 7, which presumably then is the third woe that the eagle introduces us to here.

One of the most significant issues for understanding this, just as a general comment before we look at the trumpets in a little bit more detail, or as much detail as we can. I think when you read through this, it becomes a little bit tricky trying to figure out exactly, given the symbolic nature of what’s going on, and given the language that is used, it is a little tricky to determine precisely what these trumpets entail. But clearly they are God’s judgment on the earth. But an important point to bring out at the very beginning is, when you read these, as I just have, when you read these trumpet plagues carefully, you cannot help but note, as numerous commentaries have pointed out, and if you look at some commentaries, they’ll even set it out in chart forms so you can see it easily.

### Exodus Plagues Revisited

Once again we have to go back to the Old Testament in order to understand these, and that is by going back to the Exodus plagues. When you read these plagues, these trumpet plagues in chapters 8 and 9 as well, there are parallels with the Exodus, though

not in the same order as the 10 plagues in the Exodus. Again, John uses the number 7 to indicate completeness, fullness, perfection, the complete, perfect number of God's judgments at this time on the earth. Other than different number, again John is using the number 7, and different order, most of these resemble one of the plagues that was poured out on Egypt.

For example, when you read through the first plague is a plague of hail, corresponding to one of the Egyptian plagues. Another one is turning the water into blood and making it so it could not be suitable to drink, so that even some died from drinking it. Another one is darkening the constellations as a third of the day was dark, resembling one of the Egyptian plagues. Later on in chapter 9, we will be introduced to a plague of locusts. It has more than one Old Testament background but at least one of them is one of the Egyptian plagues. So John I think is carefully modeling and we'll also see that this is not new with John as other apocalypses often drew on Exodus plague imagery to portray end time judgments. But John is clearly drawing on the Exodus plagues from the book of Exodus to portray his own judgments.

So that what John wants to do is demonstrate, the theological significance of God's judgment. In other words, the main point of this is not so much to predict the precise series of judgments, and in fact, I think the fact that John draws on the Exodus he is using the plagues symbolically now to describe God's judgments on Rome and on a wicked world leading up to a second coming. That very fact makes it tricky to identify precisely what these are. Again, John's main concern is to use the Exodus plagues symbolically to describe God's judgment. So that's what is more important than identifying precisely what these are, and what will they look like, is to realize the theological point John is making, and that's not just to predict the series of specific future judgments, but theologically to say something about God's judgment. In the same way that God judged a wicked idolatrous oppressive nation that is the nation of Egypt in the past as a prelude to rescuing, redeeming his people and bringing them into the land; in the same way, God is judging the wicked, evil idolatrous nation of Rome. Any other nation that cares to follow in their steps in anticipation of and as a prelude for God, once again,

rescuing his people and leading them into their inheritance, which ends up being the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22.

So the main point of this is to evoke the Exodus motif, not to get us to speculate exactly what will they look like. Certainly not to add up all these thirds and say, “Well, we have this many people alive now, so exactly one third will be harmed or so much of the earth’s surface is covered by water and trees and here’s exactly how much...” that’s not John’s point. Again, his point is to evoke the Exodus, to say something about God’s judgment, to emphasize the theological significance by helping us recall the Exodus, by getting us to draw connections with and draw our attention back to the Exodus. In the same way God judged the oppressive evil empire in the past, so God again is judging an oppressive, idolatrous, wicked, godless empire now, as a prelude to and in anticipation of redeeming his people. We’ve already seen John using another Exodus theme, already God has created a people, a kingdom of priests, which is why God led us out of Egypt. Now once again God has created a kingdom of priests and is redeeming them out of this oppressive wicked empire and will bring them to their inheritance which again we said will be the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22.

Now next section, we will make a couple of other comments about the significance of the Exodus connection and then try to make sense of what these trumpet plagues might be suggesting in chapter 8 but also in chapter 9 as well.

Transcribed by Kym Van Heemst  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt



Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Lecture 14

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

### **Revelation 8 to 9: Seven Trumpets and Exodus Imagery**

We've seen that John draws on the exodus motif. Actually, a motif we've already seen play a role with John utilizing Exodus 19:6 and drawing on the Exodus stories in the sense the whole Exodus narrative. We'll see this whole book play a role elsewhere in Revelation as well. But not only that, John doesn't only go to the original Exodus story, he will also pick up, we'll see in numerous places, I'm mentioning that since this is the first place where he begins to draw at length on the Exodus motif. Later on, John is also going to rely on Isaiah's use of the Exodus motif where Isaiah uses it as an indication of a second or a new Exodus. Chapter 40 through 66 of Isaiah, is latent with Exodus imagery where the prophet Isaiah portrays the future deliverance of God's people as a new Exodus modeled after the first one. So John picks up on that and then John himself goes back to the original Exodus from the book of Exodus and draws on some of the historical Exodus features now to narrate this new Exodus that Christ has inaugurated in creating a people, redeeming a people from bondage, slavery, Rome, sin and evil and now is creating a kingdom of priests. Now we see God in anticipation of their deliverance and in anticipation of their final inheritance in the new creation of Revelation 21 and 22 like he did in the days of Exodus. God is once again pouring out his plagues of his judgment on a godless wicked empire. So in the same way God judges Egypt for its oppression, wickedness, and evil, now God is doing that again in a new Exodus of his people by pouring his judgments on this wicked empire.

#### **Apocalypse of Abraham and Exodus Plagues**

This actually is nothing new with John in one sense, to read from another apocalypse, this is an apocalypse called "The Apocalypse of Abraham" and someone actually writing in Abraham's name is recording a visionary experience and in the Apocalypse of Abraham chapter 30, notice the setting here, but I want you to notice the

numeration of plagues at the end of this, “and while he was still speaking I found myself on earth and I said, ‘Eternal mighty one, I am no longer in the glory which I was above and all that my soul desired understood in my heart, I do not understand,’ and he said to me, ‘I’ll explain to you the things you desired in your heart for you have sought to know the ten plagues which I prepared against the heathen. I prepared them beforehand in the passing of the twelve hours on earth. Hear what I tell you, it will be thus, the first plague, sorrow for much need: the second fiery conflagrations for the city, the third destruction by pestilence among the cattle; the fourth famine of the world of their generation; the fifth among the rulers destruction by earthquake and sword; the sixth increase of hail and snow; the seventh wild beasts will be in their grave; the eighth pestilence and hunger or famine will change their destruction; then ninth execution by the sword and frightened distress; and the tenth thunder voices and destroying earthquakes.’” So notice in the Apocalypse of Abraham, the ten plagues of Egypt are used as models for ten further judgments and plagues that affect more than Egypt, etc.

#### Exodus Plagues as Attacks on Egyptian Gods

So John now also uses the plague imagery in describing a new Exodus for a describing the plagues God now will pour upon the earth. Again I want to emphasize more important than just figuring out the details of exactly what these are and exactly what they will look like, instead is recognizing the significance as these interpret the nature and the meaning of God’s judgment by appealing to the Exodus. One further point to make that I think may be going on here as well and maybe important and that is in the same way that the Exodus plagues were at one level meant to judge the gods of Egypt, taking aim at the gods of Egypt. Many have demonstrated that behind most of the plagues was an attack on certain gods that were worshipped by the Egyptians. In the same way I wonder if the trumpet plagues here modeled on the plagues of Egypt are not also aimed at the idolatry resident in the Roman gods and things like emperor worship. It would be interesting maybe to do further work to see if certain gods could lie behind certain of these plagues. Certainly, having modeled them on the Egyptian plagues, I wonder if we’re not to see these at one level as an attack on, or judgment on, the gods of Rome on

the idolatrous worship of the Roman Empire their gods including emperor worship as well.

### Trumpet Judgments and Idolatry

So having said that, what I want to do is look briefly at each of the trumpets and perhaps make some comments as to what they might indicate, what they might entail, but at the end drawing them together and trying to come up with an overall picture of what might be going on with these trumpet plagues. Let me say at the very beginning I am convinced 8 and 9 together I think are primarily aimed at the idolatry of wicked godless people and perhaps again specially at the idolatry inherent in the Roman religion, Roman rule and the whole Roman system of doing things and looking at the world.

#### Trumpet #1: Hail

Trumpet number 1 is described as a fire or hail and fire mixed with blood. In my opinion clearly indicates that this is to be understood symbolically and not literally. You think about it though we might be able to think of some scientific explanation that I'm not sure first century readers would ever have caught onto. It would seem to me that to them hail mixed with fire would be contradiction in the sense and further one mixed with blood. The plague of hail here clearly resembles the seventh Egyptian plague from Exodus chapter 9. I won't go back and read that but sometime you could go back and read and recall the plague of hail brought upon the Egyptians.

The difference, though, between the two is twofold. Notice first of all that this is not limited to the land of Egypt like the Egyptian plague, but now it is a plague that is poured out on the entire earth. Yet, only one-third of the world is affected and you'll notice as in chapter 8, how many times one-third was repeated. One-third is to be understood as greater than the one-fourth associated with the seals in chapter 6. We said one-third also suggests limitation of judgment that is no matter how severe the judgment is, it's to be seen as only limited that is, there is a still greater judgment to follow. The indication here of only one-third as a limitation may suggest God's mercy but more primarily is to suggest the fact that these are preliminary judgments. These are only anticipatory of the greater judgment that is to follow. So this judgment does not affect all

of the earth, but only part of it because it's symbolic. We should probably not, as we repeated couple times, we should probably not determine the population this present earth and imagine on third of them literally being affected by this, but again one-third simply suggesting a limitation of this judgment. It doesn't affect all of the earth. But it's possible when you read this judgment that it points to a famine that is even more intense and severe than the third seal of Revelation chapter 6, but, other than that, again it's difficult to tell is this judgment by itself? Is this trumpet a physical plague or is it something spiritual or is it a combination of both? At the very end we'll gather these together and maybe suggest overall what might be going on with some of these trumpets.

#### Trumpet #2: Burning Mountain and the Sea

Trumpet number 2, has a mountain that is burning is now thrown into the sea. Probably these two parts of this image, both the burning and the mountain are significant. Burning would imply a judgment. The fact that it is a mountain probably suggests a kingdom. So what we have here is God's judgment on an evil kingdom. Judgment is pictured in terms of burning or fire.

The background from this is probably Jeremiah and chapter 51. So we're back to the Old Testament for an understanding of our imagery. In Jeremiah chapter 51, and especially verse 25, "I am against you, O destroying mountain," notice the imagery of a mountain, "you who destroyed the whole earth," declares the Lord, "I will stretch out my hand against you, roll you off the cliffs, and make you a burned-out mountain." So this imagery of a burning mountain probably comes out of text like Jeremiah chapter 51 where even there mountain seems to be reflective of a kingdom. So here the mountain probably represents an evil kingdom more specifically in the first century embodied in the Roman Empire.

Furthermore, though going back to the Exodus plague, the rest of this plague says, "a third of the sea turned to blood," which recalls the Exodus plague of turning the Nile River into blood. So a third of the sea is turned to blood. A third of the living creatures in it die and a third of all the ships, interestingly, were destroyed. So again that mention of the ships being destroyed is it possible again that this is to be seen as an attack on or a

judgment on Rome's commerce? Again, this is a judgment on Rome's way of doing things which will be signified in the ultimate overthrow of the empire itself, symbolized by this throwing down of the burning of mountain. And is it possible that it's also a judgment on the gods that lie behind Rome and the gods that lie behind the Roman commerce.

### Trumpet #3: Star and Water

Trumpet number 3 and as I said before, it's difficult to tell how physical we're to take this. Is it more physical in nature, or is the judgment more spiritual in nature since John is primarily interested in using the Exodus and the Old Testament to interpret and describe the nature and significance of God's judgment. But trumpet number three is very similar to trumpet number two. Here the third angel sounds the trumpet and now we find the plague that is characterized as a great star that is burning that now gets cast down from the sky and it now affects the water. So notice sort of the progression from the first one that affects the earth, the grass is affected, the third of the trees, the third of earth, the third of the grass; and then two and three, now the waters, the ocean is affected. So now here with the trumpet number 3, the third angel and the great star coming down which affects all the water.

A star in apocalyptic literature is often symbolic of an angelic being. Probably the great star here symbolizes some kind of an angelic being...perhaps an evil one who now comes to do harm and the result of this star is that all the water is turned bitter, again reflecting Exodus 7 and reflecting the harming of all the water in the Exodus plague. Now, that is repeated here. Interestingly, it said that the star is called "Wormwood" that was simply a Wormwood was a bitter plant and so that the picture here is of the water turning extremely bitter even poisonous so that it is unfit to drink and would cause harm or even death for those who actually drank it.

But it is very difficult to tell how physically we are to take this, certainly not literally. Is this referring to a physical type of judgment, a spiritual one, or a combination of both? Is this once again a judgment on Rome's economy? Is this a judgment on the Roman system of religion and the idolatry that lies behind it as well?

### Trumpet #4: Darkness

Trumpet number 4 results in an angel blowing his trumpet and now note that the constellations in the heavens are affected. Note the repetition again of the fraction one-third suggesting limitation. This is not God's final judgment but only a harbinger of more that is to come or the final judgment yet to come.

But with the blowing of the fourth trumpet all the constellations are affected this probably reflects the plague in Exodus 10 where there is darkness over all of Egypt except here it's limited to one-third due to John's purpose and his intention here. Not only the sky is darkened but all the constellations, the sun, the moon, the stars themselves a third of the day and a third of the night goes without light.

The question again is how physically are we to take this? Is it possible number one again that this is an attack or judgment on idolatry and perhaps these are to be taken as indication of God's judgment on the gods of Rome and religious system behind it? But is it possible also that perhaps the darkness here indicates the folly or the futility and the darkness into which idolatrous humanity has now plunged? So that I think Greg Beale and his commentary understands this plague primarily in terms of the spiritual darkness and the complete futility of worshipping gods, pagan gods, of pursuing idolatry primarily for first century readers being involved in the idolatrous practices of Rome.

### Trumpets 1-4 Collectively

So the first four, the first four trumpets then in chapter 8, seem to maybe a better way to approach them is to look at them collectively. Is it possible then, and I use the word "possible" because with the nature of the symbolism and the fact that John is drawing primarily on Exodus plagues, it's difficult to tell exactly what he has in mind with each of these. Instead, more important is to focus on the theological significance, the theological meaning of God's judgment that is in connection with the Exodus plague. Perhaps the first four trumpets are meant to demonstrate the complete futility of idolatry. Notice as I said that progression between the fact that the land is affected, the fact that the water is affected, and then in trumpet number four, the fact that all of the heavens and the constellations are affected. Is it possible then that the last one, particularly the language

and imagery of darkness, is meant symbolically to portray the futility and the darkness spiritually into which those who pursue idolatry are plunged and the futility of depending on the world's resources and the resources of Rome and its idolatrous practices? Now you have the picture of the complete futility of relying on that and the complete spiritual darkness into which those who rely on the world's resources and are involved in the idolatrous practices are now plunged. So now they suffer darkness, the suffering might be both spiritual and physical again it is very difficult to tell.

#### Trumpets in Revelation 19-20 and Revelation 2-3

One significant point with this one that I'll come back to later is, especially verse 12, the very last of these four trumpet plagues that result in darkness is most likely this verse functions as an anticipation of the ultimate darkness in judgment that takes place in Revelation 19 and 20. So this by only affecting a third, again this is a limited judgment that functions as sort of a harbinger or an anticipation of or a warning of what the final separation from God, what the final situation of darkness, what the final suffering and futility will be like at the final judgment that gets narrated in chapters 19 and 20, "for those who refuse to repent." I would emphasize like the seals as well, we should probably read this in light of this is not only God's judgment on Rome, but God's judgment on the churches who refuse to repent. Chapters 2 and 3, those churches that refuse to repent, those churches that are compromising their faithful witness, those churches that are engaged in the godless idolatrous evil system of Rome, for them they too will be recipients of these plagues.

So, the first four trumpets may collectively be a judgment on Rome's idolatry and those who participate in Rome's idolatry. By demonstrating the futility of relying on the earth's resources, on the world's resources by demonstrating the futility and spiritual darkness of relying on an idolatrous system and this spiritual darkness and the futility they're plunged into these judgments because of their idolatrous practices.

#### Rev 9: Three Woes

Now in chapter 9, which we said is prophesied by this interesting word from an eagle who utters three woes. These three woes then set up the final three trumpets.

We said two of them are introduced and enacted in chapter 9, and the third one will await chapter 11.

But chapter 9 now narrates two further judgments and what I want to say very briefly is something about the woes. The woes come out of prophetic literature and they are usually used in the context of judgment. They are a woe upon someone, a pronouncement of a woe because of the judgment that is about to come. So the woes here function as sort of a wake up to pay attention to the judgments that are about to come. The woe is pronounced because of the awfulness of the judgment. So I would expect then the further trumpets in chapter 9 will perhaps be of a more hideous nature than even the first four in chapter 8. Notice also how chapter 8 begins with a couple of plagues that would be of a very different character from chapter 4. Notice how verse 13 anticipates this not only with the repetition of the woes, but note the break that occurs in verse 13 of chapter 8 suggesting that chapter 9, the chapter division of chapter 9, is not well placed at all. If anywhere, it should be at chapter 8, verse 13. Not only are we introduced to these three woes, but note verse 13 where John says, "I looked and I heard," almost drawing attention to a new section and then as we said the final trumpets are identified with three woes. The next trumpet then, trumpet number five, or woe number one begins in chapter 9 and let me read chapter 9 which is the account of the next two trumpets or the first two woes and what you'll notice immediately is the disproportion amount of length given to these two trumpets over against the first four of chapter 8. Remember the first four trumpets don't even begin until verse 6 and so the first four trumpets are narrated in fairly quick succession. But now in chapter 9, the last two, the next two trumpets are expanded in quite a bit of detail perhaps suggesting their significance. In fact, I would suggest that these are to be seen as more significant and as two woes we are to understand that these are going to be horrific and significant plagues.

And so starting of verse...chapter 9 and verse 1, these are the trumpet five and six or woes one and two: "The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that has fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace.



The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads [from Revelation chapter 7 where God's servants, the 144,000 are sealed or the church God's people are sealed] They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it, they will long to die, but death will elude them [or escape them]. The locusts look like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they had something like crowns of gold and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair and their teeth were like a lion's teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come. The sixth angel, [or the second woe now] sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number. The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood--idols that cannot

see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.”

### Trumpets 5 & 6 Overall Impact

So that is the final two trumpets in the list of the six of the trumpet sequence. As you read that, to me it sounds more like something that might be found in *The Lord of the Rings* novel or the movie or something like that and I don't want to in a sense ruin this by simply going through and trying to deal with every detail and dissecting it. Again I want to at one level allow the text to stand and allow you to feel the effect of combining all these images of breastplates and human features and insect features and animal like features and warlike features, and beasts wearing breastplate into this one horrifying image. So that the readers would have hopefully been impacted by what they heard and John certainly would have been impacted by seeing this and now hopefully the readers share something of the effect, including us, by simply reading it as a whole. So we need to hear the vision as a whole. We need to see it as a whole. We need to visualize it as a whole and to get the effect before we simply go through and dissect its parts and try to figure out exactly what they're referring to. In fact, I'm not sure that all of the parts of the description of these locusts and all of the parts description of these horses and riders a bare dissection or necessarily are meant to indicate distinct separate ideas, but maybe again it's the combination of these and the effect that they have together and what they portray about these locusts and what they portray about these riders on the horses.

But I want to look at a handful of features in this description of these final two trumpets and that is the two groups, very large groups, the group of locusts and then the group of horses and the riders described in some detail in this text and look at just a handful of features and the significant features and then try to wrestle too with what might be the identity of these groups. And again are they similar? Are they the same? Are they separate features? What exactly are these things? What do they represent?

This is the text and I'll just raise that now because I think our response to such an interpretation should be obvious, but chapter 9 is one of the texts that has very famously been identified with various instruments of modern day warfare. Even to go back earlier,

the beginning of chapter 9 begins with smoke coming out of the Abyss and the language later on with the horses of sulfur and smoke coming out of their mouths. This is often evoked imagery of nuclear warfare taking place and some have thought that's exactly what John was predicting through the locusts indicating instruments of war in the form of certain helicopters, etc., the sound of their wings resembling the propeller blades on helicopter. So this has usually been one of those texts that we have tried to make sense of by reading it in light of modern day phenomena that is modern day military of weapons and instruments of war.

But again, we have to ask ourselves and go back to the type of literature in some of our principles of interpretation. One of them being number one that John is using imagery and language that is meant to communicate symbolically. It would be language and imagery that primarily comes out of Old Testament apocalyptic texts that many of his readers would have been very familiar with. But second, we said that one of the important principles is that for any interpretation of Revelation to be compelling, it must meet the criteria that it must be something that John could have intended and his first century readers living in a pre-technological, pre-modern military, pre-nuclear age could have understood and could have made sense of. So given that, there is no way John could have been seeing or intending modern methods of warfare and intending helicopters and nuclear war. John would not have seen nor could his readers have picked up on that. So such interpretations probably should be rejected. However, there may be a little bit of violence or something like that.

Looking at when we read this we're simply not used to locusts and things like that. What John does is to pick up, especially if you weren't raised on a ranch or farm I've been to situations where there has been a locust plague and seen the devastations they cause and stripping the land of crops. So someone in that context might resonate with locust. But some who don't have experience with locusts or have never seen something like this so it might not impact them the same way. But John is actually drawing on images that his readers would've understood and in a sense blowing them up into bigger than life scenarios to get his readers to understand and to respond and react appropriately.

He plays on their fears which a locust plague would've been a genuine fear and scorpions and vicious lions and animals and things like that and understanding what an Abyss symbolizes in the Old Testament or Jewish literature, Greco-Roman literature. John takes all that and blows them up into larger than life scenario. These are images that play on the fears and the hopes of his readers.

So we might be able to at least rescue some of what our modern day attempts do by saying what evokes fear in our mind? Well, it is a nuclear war or it is modern methods of war, the fear of possible world war that involves potential for nuclear destructions. Those kinds of things could function for us in the same way that the images do here. Not suggesting that's exactly what John was predicting, but when we think of plagues and judgment, when we think of God's judgment, sometimes it might be helpful to identify what things in our own modern day our things that we fear, things that indicate destruction, things that indicate widespread warfare, things that indicate chaos and evil and to look at those to help us to perhaps respond in the same way that the original readers would have responded to the images in Revelation chapter 9 without suggesting our modern day warfare and scenarios and images is what John was predicting. No, that's not the case, but those sorts of things might help us to understand the impact of and to evoke the fears and responses in us in the same way it would've in John's first readers.

The first thing John sees then in chapter 9 is another angel or another star that falls from the sky. We've said that especially in apocalyptic literature and elsewhere stars often indicate angelic beings and that's probably what is happening here. What is the primary function of this angel? This is a good indication of apocalyptic nature of Revelation where angelic beings play different roles, but the function of this angel is to hold the key to the Abyss and to actually go and to unlock it to let out four other angelic beings or demonic beings from the Abyss.

Now, the "Abyss" is a term that appears to have a fairly long history in apocalyptic literature, but even in the book of Revelation, the Abyss in much of apocalyptic literature is sort of the present or the home of demonic beings. In Revelation itself, in chapter 11 we'll see that the beast, an evil, chaotic, and demonic type of figure

comes out of the Abyss in chapter 11. In chapter 17 and verse 8, the beast is described as coming out of the Abyss which is appropriate. The Abyss is the home of or the present of evil, demonic, spiritually demonic, supernatural beings. Then in chapter 20 verses 1 and 3, Satan is locked in the Abyss and later let out of it. So that the abyss here immediately should conjure up in our minds the home of evil, demonic, satanic, supernatural beings.

#### Locusts and the Old Testament (Joel & Exodus)

What happens when the abyss is opened is smoke comes out and in this smoke we find basically a group of locusts, a whole cloud of locusts emerge from this smoke. The locusts are what get the attention in the rest of the description of the fifth trumpet. The locusts have at least as a symbol for judgment, as a symbol for God's judgment, have at least two Old Testament antecedents. One of them is the locust plague from Exodus 10 and 1 to 15. The other is a locust plague from Joel chapter 1 through 2 verse 11. Actually in Joel chapters 1 and 2, we read of an invading locust plague and I'll just read some of this, "Hear this you elders," this is Joel chapter 1, verse 2, "Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your forefathers? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation. What the locust swarm has left the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left other locusts have eaten. Wake up, you drunkards, and weep! Wail, all you drinkers of wine; wail because of the new wine, for it has been snatched from your lips. A nation has invaded my land, powerful and without number; it has the teeth of a lion, the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines and ruined my fig trees. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it away, leaving their branches white."

I'll stop right there but all the way...and I'll jump to chapter 2 just read a few of those verse but our section compares the devastation of foreign invasion with the invasion of a locust plague. Notice the connection with the trumpet now. "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand—a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains, [notice that language of

darkness and blackness which is what the smoke produces when it comes out of the Abyss in Revelation chapter 9] “a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come. Before them fire devours, behind them a flame blazes. Before them the land is like the Garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste-- nothing escapes them.” So the idea is before they get there the land is nice like the Garden of Eden. After they get through it there’s nothing but destruction, everything has been laid waste.

“They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle. At the sight of them, nations are in anguish; every face turns pale. They charge like warriors; they scale walls like soldiers. They all march in line, not swerving from their course. They do not jostle each other; each marches straight ahead.” Verse 9, “They rush upon the city; they run along the wall. They climb into the houses; like thieves they enter through the windows. Before them the earth shakes, the sky trembles, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine.”

There is an interesting connection with trumpet plague number 4. In other words, the plague number 4, the trumpet number 4 in Revelation 8 which is the stars in skies being dark and now seems to relate to the locust plague in chapter 9 and the connection is found already in Joel chapter 2. “The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it?”

So John has taken based on the Egyptian plagues beginning with Exodus 10 he has taken the locust plague but also drawn in another locust plague which clearly is used metaphorically in Joel chapter 1 and 2 now to portray the extreme and complete devastation and destruction that this locust plague will now produce in chapter 9.

Even today as I have said if anyone has ever seen a locust plague or you’re a farmer or a rancher or you’ve seen evidence of the locust plague, one can understand the horror of the destruction that a locust plague blown up into larger than life could produce

in the readers. But this clearly is no ordinary locust plague. It's a combination of insects, animal, scorpions, even human beings meant to evoke terror and horror in the readers.

Also, it's intriguing that this locust plague does not harm the vegetation which you would expect, but instead this locust plague is unique in that it harms humanity, those who do not have seal from Revelation chapter 7. Probably when we ask the question of what or who are these locust in Revelation chapter 9, obviously they're symbolic but symbolic of what and Greg Osborne and his commentary Revelation says this is probably the most bizarre description of anything found in the book of Revelation. How are we to identify these? Most likely, and I found that there's fairly widespread agreement on this in commentaries, we should probably identify the locust plague as demonic beings. I think that is clear immediately from the fact that they come out of the Abyss. Again apocalyptic literature, even in the book of Revelation the Abyss is the source of the beast. It's the source of satanic, demonic beings and supernatural beings. So we should take these locusts not as helicopters and airplanes, or not as literal physical locusts, but we should take these as symbolic of a demonic onslaught in the destruction that it causes.

#### Locusts Harming Humans

What then is the harm or the torment that the locust cause? A couple of times it said locusts are permitted to torment human beings. They do so by the tail that resembles a scorpion by that they have the authority to harm and torment and cause problem for human beings. Once more I think it's difficult to tell exactly is this physical torment. So what is it? Is it spiritual torment? Is it a combination of both? Perhaps we're to see it again in light of the fourth trumpet in chapter 8, verse 12 that is bringing darkness and causing futility so that we're to understand this as the locusts harm and torment people by further plunging them into despair and darkness and further demonstrating the futility of their idolatry. In other words, is it possible that they are causing spiritual harms so awful that the author can say they even seek death and even death flees from them?

#### Locusts' Features

But one feature I want to point to or two interesting further features about the description of the locust plague is first of all the fact that it is said that the locust were

allowed to operate for five months. Some have tried as with other numbers and time periods in Revelation to read this literally. Probably the best explanation is that five months was the typical life cycle of a locust. So we're not to take this literally. Maybe it does again indicate limitation that this is not the final judgment, but the five months should not be taken as indicating a short period of time, nor should it be taken as five literal months, but simply it indicates that the author simply is drawing on the language of the typical life cycle of locusts. They would basically be alive for five months. So now he symbolically portrays the locusts as doing their work for period of five months, the typical life cycle of a locust in that day.

A second interesting feature is that's unusual is that the locusts seem to have a leader in chapter 9 and verse 11. The leader is described with two words, the Hebrew word "Abaddon," and the Greek word "Apollyon." Both of these suggest destruction or destroyer as the name of the leader which is completely fitting for the leader of this group of locusts. So the leader probably being another angelic being, perhaps the one, the star, that falls down and opens the Abyss. The star symbolizes an angelic being. Is it possible that this is the leader of the locust. There are a couple of other possibilities for this leader who is called Abaddon or Apollyon in either Hebrew or Greek. One of them is that this may be an allusion picking up again on the Exodus plagues. This may be an allusion to the angel of death in the Exodus plagues. It may also be an allusion to an idea in the couple places in apocalyptic literature of an angel of death whom God has assigned to the underworld as responsible for the demonic beings. It could also be an allusion to this angel, to this leader, who is called "the destroyer," one who destroys, one who brings destruction, but in either case the imagery is clear it is to add to the destructive nature of what is going on. These locusts, much like the locusts described in Joel chapter 2, seem to have a leader that is they go on in order and they go out as an army and they seem to have a leader who is also bent on destruction.

Now, what is interesting about this plague then is it's as if the author is telling his readers, readers in the first century, that behind the pagan gods that they're tempted to worship, behind the gods of Rome and the idolatrous system of Rome and its activities



ultimately lies Satan and his demons. Ironically, the very gods that they would worship and the very idolatrous images that they would worship which become clear at the very end of verse 20 and 21 where it introduces, especially 20, to the idols that they worshipped that they refused to repent from worshipping. Those very idols actually ironically turn on them and seek to do them harm and destroy them. The very gods that they follow are the very gods that ironically torment them.

So the first plague of chapter 9 then seems to be identified with a plague of evil demonic beings and the function of that plague is once again an attack on their idolatry by demonstrating the demonic nature of the idolatry and in a sense the destructive nature of it. The very gods they worship, the very idolatrous system in Rome they participate in, now turns against them to destroy them, to demonstrate the futility, demonstrate the spiritual darkness that they're plunged in. It is something so horrid that death would be a viable alternative. This now constitutes God's judgment on idolatrous Rome, but also on anyone who would participate in that, including the members of the seven churches of Revelation chapter 2 and 3.

#### Trumpet #6: Woe #2

Trumpet number 6 or woe number 2 is in verse 13. This intriguingly, this trumpet plague is introduced in a way that's unique from the other ones although similar to the previous one. It also involves an angelic being apparently opening something up to allow something to take place. In verse 13 we're introduced to an angel who sounds his trumpet and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar. So note we have the altar again and here the horns of the golden altar are mentioned so we're in a sense back in the heavenly throne room and the heavenly scene and now an anonymous voice comes from the altar and here is what it says. It addresses a sixth angel who has the trumpet and what this angel is to do is this angel is to sound his trumpet and to release four angels who are bound in the river Euphrates. So now we have all kinds of angelic beings playing a role again suggesting once again that primarily this plague will be a supernatural one or this plague would involve angelic or demonic type of beings. But then what happens once these four angels that are bound in the Euphrates are released then a multitude of horses

or mounted troops, horses with their riders, now rush out and once again it's apparent that they are meant to do harm. They mean to destroy and they mean to defeat and conquer.

Now, the first question is, who in the world are these four angels bound at the Euphrates? Who are the four angels and what do they represent? Why four of them and why the Euphrates? It may be that these four angels here are the same four angels back in chapter 7 that hold back the four winds. That are the four winds of judgment? Back in chapter 7 and 1 and 2 remember that vision before God's throne where the four winds are allowed to blow the four plagues, God commands the angels to hold them back until he can seal his servants, those who are able to withstand this, those who will not be harmed. Now perhaps we see the four angels or the four winds released and now able to go out and cause harm. They are able to go out and wreak havoc that is the wind being symbolic of judgment. Now these four angels will be released and their judgment now will ensue.

#### Euphrates

The next question to ask is why the Euphrates River and many people have tried to take this literally and there's even been a lot of interest in what's going on in the Euphrates River in the modern day and how troops can cross it and things like that. Most likely, although is again John is drawing on symbolic imagery or language from the Old Testament and using it symbolically in his own vision to say something. The key is understanding, actually the Euphrates might play a twofold role once again it might be evocative of more than one background. The Euphrates River played a role in Old Testament prophetic texts in the expectation of an invasion from the north or invasion that would come across the Euphrates River. So there is Old Testament background where the Euphrates would be an appropriate place for an army to cross in light of Old Testament expectation. That's where you would expect invasion from. That's where you would expect an army to come from and invading army to come from the direction of the Euphrates River.

Also though, with the Greco-Roman Empire, the Euphrates was sort of the eastern most boundary of the Roman Empire. Another interesting thing is one of the Roman Empire's fiercest enemies, the so called Parthian warriors, would have resided in that

region. So for Greco-Roman backgrounds someone would have seen the Euphrates as the direction from which the Parthian army, the fierce enemies of Roman would come or from an Old Testament perspective of in light of Old Testament prophetic literature that is where you would expect an invading army as well. So the mention of the Euphrates River here is not meant to be taken literally, but its mention is evocative again of an invading army.

So they hear the word “Euphrates,” as, here comes an invading army in fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, but also playing on the fears of those living in the Roman Empire. We’ll talk next a little bit more about who are these four angels, what is it they do, what is this invading army that emerges on the scene, and how might it relate to the locust plague that the author describes in the first part of chapter 9.

Transcribed by Gi Su Kim  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 15

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Trumpets and the Interlude (Rev 10-11)

## The Apocalyptic Horsemen: A “Gazillion”

In the final plague, trumpet plague, which would be the sixth one mentioned in chapter 9. We've been introduced to four angels who may be the four angels holding the winds back in the beginning of chapter 7 now they are finally released and allowed to release their destructive judgment and to wreak havoc on the earth. They do so in the form of a multitude or a large group of riders on their horses and the four angels could be perceived as leaders of those riders on the horses. That's not clear but that is possible. Certainly they are responsible for releasing them. The number of the riders on the horses or the number of this cavalry is described in at least the English translation here in the New International Version that I'm reading from as two hundred million. Literally, it is two times ten thousand times ten thousand which is kind of where we get two hundred million. Probably in the Greek text it's meant to symbolize, it's meant to indicate, a number that was beyond comprehension. A modern day equivalent might be for someone to say there were at least a “gazillion.” That's not a number that anyone can count it's just a way of saying there is so many that you can't count it. So it's been common in the past to attempt to ask or where do we find a nation or a country that could have two hundred million people in an army and there have even been some suggestions as to who has that many. But that's beyond John's point because he's not interested in two hundred million literal members of a cavalry. He is using a number that suggests as I said something similar to our gazillion. It's so many that you can't count it. So we miss the point when we try and look around and find a nation or country that could conceivably have a military of two hundred million. John isn't thinking in terms of two hundred million he is thinking in terms of a number beyond their comprehension. The description of this army or cavalry actually overlaps very closely with the locust from the previous trumpet

plague. Notice they are described as having lion's teeth. They have animal and reptile features, and are associated with smoke and sulfur as well. So clearly this is to be understood not as a physical earthly army but once again using the symbolism of a multitude of troops using it symbolically to refer to a demonic onslaught, to refer to demonic supernatural beings, not a literal earthly army belonging to any nation.

### The Effects of the Apocalyptic Horsemen

Unlike the locust, they go beyond just harming and this may be the point of having a separate group. They go beyond just harming humanity. Now they are actually put at least a third of humanity to death. One-third being an image of limitations so this is not the final judgment but in some way they're allowed and permitted to put one-third of humanity to death. So it intensifies beyond the fifth trumpet. The question once again that's raised is: how do we conceive of this? Is this to be understood as physical, literal death? Is this spiritual death? Is this a combination of the two? I have to admit that I am uncertain exactly what that is. It could be physical death. If it is, how is that accomplished? Certainly spiritual death would fit. You do find at the very end of Revelation people suffering both physical death but also the second death which is the Lake of Fire and complete separation from God. Is it possible that their ability to put people physically to death here is symbolic of complete spiritual death and complete separation from God. That is certainly possible, but uncertain.

These beings are responsible for, at the end of the day, deceiving humanity which is the very thing that Satan does in chapter 12. The very thing the beast does in chapter 13. So perhaps you have this image of deception, these are demonic beings deceiving all of humanity in the idolatry and the idol worship accompanied by their spiritual death and perhaps even their physical death. Again, it's not clear how this would take place. John is more interested in exploring the theological meaning and significance of God's judgment, and not telling us at least in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reading, this not being certain exactly what this might look like we're we to witness it. Verses 20 and 21 play a significant role at the end of all this, and that is the plagues primarily seem to be for judgment. So adding this

all together, we might say that these plagues are poured out upon the idolatry, verse 20, of humanity those who would worship idols by demonstrating the futility, the despair, the spiritual darkness, ultimately the spiritual death perhaps physical death that results from that. To demonstrate that behind the idols they worship, behind the idolatry and the idolater system, lies this demonic onslaught that means to do them harm. So there especially we are to think about some of the readers in chapters 2 and 3 and the churches in Revelation and their temptation to want to compromise with idolatrous Rome. This now allows them to see that the temptation to compromise and worship and be involved in the idolatrous practices of Rome is not neutral it is not harmless but instead behind it lies the insidious attempt by Satan and his demons to destroy and harm God's people and indeed the entire earth.

#### The Hardening of Humanity's Hearts

So, primarily these are plagues of judgment as they were in the days of Egypt. These are to be understood as plagues upon wicked evil humanity and the world. But there's also a slight suggestion that one of the intentions was to bring about repentance because verse 20 says the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent. So in one sense these plagues were designed to bring about repentance, yet instead, they further harden humanity in judgment much like they did in the days of Egypt. So this verse is a repetition again of the theme of the hardening of Pharaoh. In response to the plagues, Pharaoh continued to harden his heart. So now we find the same effect of the plagues on humanity. Though one of their functions could be to bring about repentance, instead they brought about judgment and further brought hardness on humanity so that they refused to repent.

One important implication of this is we said these plagues in chapters 8 and 9 anticipate they are a harbinger of anticipation almost a warning of the final judgment that is yet to come. That's perhaps one of the reasons why it's only one-third. This is a limited judgment and anticipates a final judgment. A limited judgment that should have brought humanity to repentance yet they refused to.

This is to be seen as an indication of or an anticipation of a warning of the future final judgment that is to come in chapters 19 and 20. Now what is significant about that is when we conceive of the ungodly nations and the evil, wicked nations in chapters 19 and 20 as going into judgment and being thrown into the Lake of Fire, we'll look at those images when we get there, we should see that sometimes I think we conjure up the idea that they get thrown in there unfairly and they are taken away unwillingly. So that when people see and envision their final judgment they are dragged kicking and screaming and they didn't realize things were going to be so bad etc. I think a text like chapter 9 helps us put the language and images and understanding of theology of final judgment in perspective. That is what's going on in chapter 9 is even though humanity suffers judgment, they still refuse to repent.

So I take that at the final judgment humanity would still refuse to repent. They would still rather choose judgment, as awful and horrible as that would be, than choose life in God's presence. They would rather face judgment than repent and acknowledge God's lordship. So I think chapter 9 helps us to see the final judgment is not one where you have people facing judgment and not wanting to get out but instead you have people choosing judgment and eternally choosing judgment and refusing to repent because they would rather face an eternity of judgment in chapters 19 and 20 than repent and give God glory and acknowledge his sovereignty and lordship.

### The Chapter Ten Interlude

Now we said the seventh trumpet in the sequence in chapter 9 is delayed until chapter 11 in verses 15 through 19. This also then will apparently be the third woe but before the seventh trumpet arrives, or the third woe arrives, later on in chapter 11 we find another brief interlude. We might call it in chapter 10, first part of chapter 11. What this interlude does as we suggested with the other interlude in chapter 7 we should not understand this as a digression or an insertion of irrelevant material or an unrelated visionary piece of the sequence but instead this interlude plays a crucial role of interpreting the meaning and the function of what has happened in chapters 8 and 9. So,

chapters 10 and 11 further explore the basis for the trumpet judgments in chapters 8 and 9. In other words, I think chapters 10 and 11 are further going to unpack what's going on in chapters 8 and 9. Why they are and also raise the question what role do God's people play in this? What are God's people doing during this time? What is the situation in relationship to God's people in chapters 8 and 9? So that means that Revelation chapter 10 and 11 do not narrate different separate events or a different time period from chapters 8 and 9. It further interprets the events it further illuminates the events of chapters 8 and 9 by bringing in God's people and demonstrating their relationship to it.

### John Recommissioned

Now in chapter 10 of Revelation we find, intriguingly, a recommissioning of John to prophesy. We already saw that back in chapter 1 John prophesies about the churches in chapters 2 and 3 John is commissioned in chapter 1 by the risen Christ to prophesy to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 and he brings the message. But now John is recommissioned in chapter 10 to prophesy about the faithful witness of the church in chapter 11, and to prophesy about the fate of the nations, all peoples, tribes and tongues and languages as chapter 10 will tell us. Also this section, chapter 10, is about the judgment that will fall on those who persecute the faithful witnesses in chapter 11. So you kind of see what's happening.

The judgments of chapters 8 and 9 are precisely to be understood in light of God's judgment upon wicked humanity who persecute the two faithful witnesses in Revelation chapter 11. In Revelation chapter 11 we'll read the story of these two faithful witnesses who accomplish their witness but at the end they are put to death and the whole world gloats over their death. In other words, the author is again explaining and interpreting chapters 8 and 9. The basis for God's judgment on wicked humanity including the Roman Empire is their rejection and persecution and even murdering of his faithful witnesses in Revelations chapter 11. Chapter 10 then introduces that. 10 kind of functions as an introduction. The commissioning of John to now prophesy about that and how to interpret the nature of God's judgment and the function of the church's faithful witness is found in chapter 11.



## John's Vision

Now in chapter 10 the first two verses what I want to do is just work through chapter 10 briefly and highlight a number of intriguing, and I think significant/important features in chapter 10. Chapter 10 verses 1 and 2. Let me read that first and then we'll slow down and look at a handful of details in the text. John says "Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, his legs were like firry pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay upon his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot in the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voice of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down." Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! [or some translations might say, "and time will be no more.""] But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished [or fulfilled] just as he announced to his servants the prophets. Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings." And there is that fourfold description that we find seven times throughout Revelation.

Now, chapter 10 begins again with this recommissioning scene. Now John is going to be recommissioned to prophesy anew regarding the situation of the church in relation to the judgment, and to prophesy about the role of all the nations, tribes,

languages, and peoples from different tribes and tongues. Chapter 10 begins this commissioning with John's vision by another angel. So apocalypses are full of angelic beings. This angel now comes down from heaven so John still seems to be, from chapters 8 and 9, seeing things from an earthly perspective. As we've seen Revelation shifts back and forth from heaven to earth. Now John sees things from an earthly perspective as a mighty angel comes down from heaven apparently down to earth. In fact, he is described as standing on the earth and the sea with one foot on the sea and one foot on the land suggesting probably his sovereignty over all things, his sovereignty over all of creation.

### The "Angel"

But how this angel is described is rather unique. You really don't find any other angel in Revelation described in the way or to the extent that the angel here in Revelation 10 is described. Most likely when it comes to the identity of this, most likely we should probably understand this angel as Jesus Christ himself. Notice a number of things about him. For example, the fact that he was robed in a cloud perhaps recalling Christ coming up from the clouds or especially from Daniel chapter 7 the Son of Man imagery from chapter 1 in Revelation that John picks up on that. The fact that a rainbow is above his head recalling the rainbow back in Revelation chapter four and the throne room scene in connection with God. His legs as fiery pillars recalling his feet as pillars of bronze back in chapter 1 the description of Christ. Also, the fact that he now holds a scroll open in his hands, I'll talk about that in a moment. But putting this all together, this angelic being that John sees is probably unlike any other angelic being in Revelation and that is because probably we are to understand this mighty angel as none other than the person of Jesus Christ. Who is clothed in the cloud, who has the rainbow above his head, feet like pillars and now he comes holding a scroll.

### Significance of the Scroll

The significance of scroll is, I think, well first of all to back up the question arises because we've seen a number of books or scrolls we found that Revelation 2 and 3 which mentions the Book of Life. We were introduced to a scroll back in chapter 5 of Revelation. The scroll that was in the right hand of God contained his plan of

inaugurating his kingdom and establishing his kingdom on earth bringing salvation and judgment. Now we are introduced to another scroll. It's called the "little scroll" because the Greek word here is actually what is called the diminutive. In other words, it has an ending on it that suggests the translation to "a small" or "little scroll." Although later on it is simply called "a scroll." Later on in chapter 10 it is called a scroll using the exact same word John used back in chapter 5 to refer to the scroll.

But the question is what is this one? What is this scroll that John now sees? I would suggest to you two features point to the identity of this scroll. One of them is the fact that if it is true that that we are to identify this angel with Christ then it is Christ who is holding this scroll in chapter 10. Furthermore, it's interesting that this scroll is described as opened using a word in a similar grammatical form as the word used back in chapter 5 of the scroll as sealed. Now we find the Lamb, now we find Christ holding a scroll that is opened. So adding these two up, since if this angel is Jesus Christ, since he is holding the scroll, and since he now holds it open, we should probably identify this scroll as the same one from chapter 5. The scroll in chapter 5 was sealed and that got unsealed through chapters 6 and the seventh seal in chapter 8. Now finally in chapter 10 the Lamb who took the scroll the slain Lamb in chapter 5 who took the scroll from the right hand of God on the throne now as a mighty angel holds the scroll but now it stands opened no longer sealed like it was in chapter 5 now it stands opened. The other significant feature that suggest the identity is behind the scroll in chapter 5 and the scroll in chapter 10 lies the same Old Testament background Ezekiel chapter 2. Ezekiel 2 provides sort of the model or the intertext for the scroll in both chapter five and here in chapter 10. So that therefore, again we should see this scroll in chapter ten that the mighty angel who is Christ now holds open is the same scroll as the slain lamb was worthy to take the old scroll He was worthy to take in chapter 5. Now it has been unsealed; now it remains open. Now he will give this scroll to John himself. This probably then suggest to that the seals and trumpets are as I think the rest of Revelation will bear out, probably to be seen as preliminary judgments of more judgments to come, especially of the final judgment to come in the future.

## Views on John's Vision

Now having said this, what are we to make of this chapter? Richard Bauckham, I've referred to him several times, he understands chapter 10 like this: he says in chapter 11 together chapter 10 is sort of providing an introduction to 11. In light of chapters 6 through 9, chapter 6 through 9 have basically been characterized by judgment plagues upon the earth. And chapter 9 ends with that statement, "those who did not die by the plague still refused to repent." Bauckham understands 10 as sort of a new strategy for establishing God's kingdom and reclaiming the world. That is so far judgment hasn't done it. And Bauckham is not suggesting God tried something and it didn't work and now he is trying something else. It's more he is demonstrating that judgment is not enough. It's not judgment in the form of the seals and the trumpet plagues that will bring about repentance. People don't repent at the end of 9. But what will lead the nations to repentance. Bauckham says chapters 10 and 11 is the answer.

It's now that John is going to prophesy a fresh prophesy, a new strategy that now it's through the suffering faithful witness of the two witnesses in chapter 11 that God will win the world and that the world will be brought to repentance and become part of God's rule. Now there may be some truth to that.

However, it seems that to me still even into 10 and 11 the dominate emphasis in this section is still judgment. So I think that as opposed to seeing a shift in strategy, now here's the way that the nations will be won to repentance. Although repentance does take place at the end of chapter 11 after the witness of the two faithful witnesses although we will talk about that when we get there. At the same time, it appears that judgment is still the dominate theme. So that chapter 10 and 11 are not a new strategy for bringing the nations to repentance but instead demonstrating why the judgment of the world occurs and how God's judgment upon the world comes. It comes as a result of his faithful witness. It comes as a result of the faithful witness whom the world rejects and whom the world persecutes and eventually puts to death. So that's how I will peruse and continue. That's how I understand chapters 10 and 11 is John is recommissioned to prophesy but

now he is going to explain in more detail the nature of God's judgment, how God's kingdom is going to be established in terms of his judgment on the world and that is because the world as a result of the faithful witnesses of his two witnesses in chapter 11 the world rejects and persecutes and puts to death and that becomes his basis of judgment upon them which ends up happening in trumpet number seven which occurs in chapter 11.

### The Seven Thunders

Now in verses 3 and 4 then in chapter 10, another interesting feature is we find in verses 3 and 4 another voice. Actually we find seven thunders at the end of verse 3, "he gave a loud shout... When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke." So now we are introduced to the sound or the voices of seven thunders. What is intriguing is that doesn't seem to tell us much there but the next verse suggests that apparently these voices said something that John understood and could have written down yet he is told not to. Instead he is told to seal them up. The rest of the book of Revelation is unsealed. At the very end of the book a text we looked at already, John is told not to seal the contents because sealing was meant to hide and cover. That is to suggest something is not going to take place or this is not for the present time. So John is told not to seal this book but in this one place he is told to seal up these seven thunders.

The question is what might these seven thunders have been and why is John told to seal them up. A couple of possible explanations and by the way note the number seven again suggesting not just the seven literal thunders but seven being the image and symbol of perfection, fullness, and completion. One possibility that some have suggested is the fact that John is not allowed to divulge the content of these seven thunders whatever they may be we don't know because he sealed them up. The fact that John is not allowed to divulge the content suggests that God has not revealed everything. This suggests that God's plans at some level still remain hidden. The way God is going to fulfill his purposes still remains a mystery to some degree and we don't know everything. That's one possibility.

Another possibility that's been suggested is and this is true of the next two. I'll just look at three, but the next two and that is the number seven in relationship to thunders places this in the context of the seven seals and the seven trumpets. So the seven thunders would be seven further judgments. So you would have the seven seals the seven trumpets and then the seven thunders as well. The second view suggests that by sealing them, that is, not allowing them to take place, God is graciously cutting short his judgment. So there are more judgments that could have taken place but out of his grace and mercy God has cut short his judgment on humanity.

A third approach to this is that like the second one, the third approach says this is another series of plagues like the seven seals, seven trumpets, and now seven thunders plagues. This is another series of plagues that God could send but that he won't do like he did with the trumpets and bowls. God will not send them. Instead, John is told to seal them up so that they won't take place because humanity has refused to repent and that's how chapter 9 ends. So God is not going to send any more preliminary judgments like the trumpets and bowls. Instead, things are going to march straight ahead to judgment. God is going to pour out his wrath and his judgment. No more preliminary judgments like the seals and the trumpets. Now the seven thunders, which could be representative of further judgments, are now going to be sealed up or suspended. They will not take place because God is no longer going to simply deal with humanity through preliminary judgments. But that now He will consummate his purposes for history including the final judgment. There also may be some truth to chapter 1 that maybe one of the effects if not the primary intention one of the effects of doing this is to suggest that there is some information that we do not know that God has not divulged his full plan and so that's a further warning against anyone with too much confidence or even arrogance claiming to know exactly how Revelation is going to be fulfilled in the future.

### A Look at Future Judgments

But in verses 5 through 7 we find the angel's words now. The angel was identified most likely with the person of Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. Now we have a

different image. Jesus on the one hand was seen as the exalted Son of Man in chapter 1. He was also a lion from the tribe of Judah and then he was the slaughtered slain lamb. Now he appears as a mighty angel and the author is working with the apocalyptic imagery seeing Christ from different perspectives. Now he is the Sovereign Lord who stands over all of creation one foot in the land and one foot on the sea which is emphasized a couple of times. And in verses 5 and 7 this is what he says, “then the angel that I had seen standing on the sea. First of all he raises his hand to the heavens and swears an oath. Then he says this: “there will be no more delay” or literally time will be no more.” But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet the mystery of God will be accomplished just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

“Time will be no more” and Dan 12

Again, John links his vision back to the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic text. He stands at the climax the fulfillment of the prophet tradition. Now I want to look a little bit at this language in 5 through 7 this language of “time will be no more” or “there will be no more delay.” Before we do that one more important thing to realize is much of what is going on here with this angel and the speech takes us back to the Old Testament again and that is to the book of Daniel. This time in chapter 12 verse 7 particularly, I’m going to start with verse one of chapter 12 the very last chapter of Daniel which is apparently one of the prophetic texts that John is clearly indicating will find its fulfillment. The final fulfillment and consummation of the promises of his servants the prophets including Daniel now finally is realized. So Daniel 12 begins “At that time Michael, the great prince who protects his people will arise. There will be a time of distress such as not happened since the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people--everyone who is found written in the book--will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge. Then I, Daniel looked, and there before me

stood two others, one on this bank of the river and the other one on the opposite bank. One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters on the river, ‘How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?’ [Verse 7] The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand” which is alluded to in chapter 10 an angel lifting his hand to heaven, “lifted his right hand and his left hand towards heaven and I heard him swear by him,” the same thing that the angel does in Revelation chapter 10, “by him who lives forever, saying, ‘It will be for a time, times and half a time.’” Now it is interesting Daniel uses that language for time, times and half a time but John says, “time will be no more.” Why, because what Daniel and the other prophets are anticipating now will finally find its fulfillment. So there is no more need of historical sequence. There is no more need for a time in which God will inaugurate these things.

Now the consummation will finally come. What the prophets promised will now finally come. There will be no more delay. So when John says “time will be no more” he is not saying time ceases to exist or just in some odd temporal existence. He is saying instead God’s progress of history finally reaches its culmination and its consummation. The end will finally come and there will be no more need for a God working in history to bring about his purposes but the consummation will come. The way to understand this is to put this all in a broader context. I think this is again partially a response back to chapter 6 verse 7 where the souls of those under the altar are told they wonder “How long, O Lord” and they are told to wait a little while longer until their number gets accomplished. Literally they are told to wait a little time or a short time.

Now in chapter 10:6 through 7 we find that time is now no more. It has now reached its culmination it has now reached its fulfillment. So that when the seventh trumpet, as the angel goes on and says, is sounded the complete judgment and the complete defeat of the kingdom of this world will result in the emergence and the complete consummation and the arrival of God’s kingdom which again takes place in chapter 11, verses 15 through 20. So putting this together then Revelation 6:10 ask, “How long, O Lord.” God tells them wait a little while longer a short time a little time until the



number of your persecuted is accomplished and completed.

Now in response to that cry the angel finally comes and says “time will be no more.” That is the consummation is now about to arrive. No more thunders; no more judgment. Now the final culmination the final answer to the saints cry is about to take place. The delay is now over.

So in chapter 11 the author makes clear this will actually take place through the suffering witness of the church. So it is as if the author backs up a little bit. How will this eventually arrive? How will this final judgment in answer to the saints cry arrive? It will come about by the faithful witnesses of the church. God’s kingdom is being established ironically through his kings and priests who even suffer persecution and death because of their faithful witness and that is what will bring about the end time kingdom. That is what will bring about the final judgment.

So that now the angel looks forward to that and says, “the time is up, there is no more delay.” The cry of the saints is about to be answered and God is about to judge in response to the faithful witness of his church. In chapters 11 this will issue in God’s judgment of his people and the final vindication of his saints. The promises and messages of the Old Testament prophets is now about to reach their final culmination and time will no longer be necessary. The historical process of bringing that about will reach its end and culmination.

### John Eats the Scroll

As a result of that in verses 8 through 11, “Then the voice I heard from heaven spoke to me once more:” and the voice tells him to go take the scroll. This scroll that is open in the hands of the mighty angel who is probably Jesus Christ. Now John is told to go take that scroll. So notice the chain, if this is the same scroll from chapter 5 notice the scroll is in God’s hand. Christ takes it as the one who is worthy to open the scroll. Now he has opened it, now Jesus gives the scroll to John. The first thing John is told to do is to take the scroll from the hand of the angel and then he is told to eat it. An interesting feature but something we certainly would expect in an apocalyptic type text. This

imagery of eating the scroll is elaborated by the fact that John goes on and says when you eat it will turn bitter in your stomach though in your mouth it is sweet. So John begins to eat it, clearly an apocalyptic image. It is actually sweet when he is eating it, but once it gets into his stomach and he begins to digest it, it becomes bitter and it becomes sour. This language comes once again out of the book of Ezekiel in chapter 22. A book that we said forms the basis for the scroll back in chapter 5 as well and now we find it playing a role in the description of the scroll and John's relationship to the scroll in two. Notice what happens, in chapter 2 of Ezekiel, I'll start with verse 3: "He said, 'Son of man, [addressing Ezekiel], I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, "This is what the sovereign Lord says." And whether they listen or fail to listen--for they are a rebellious house--they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions. Do not be afraid... You must speak words to them.' [Verse 8] But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." And here's what happens next. "Then I looked and I saw a hand stretched out to me in it was a scroll." Again, John draws on chapter 2 back in Revelation 5. "In it was a scroll which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and words of morning." Then chapter 3 of Ezekiel, "And he said to me, 'Son of man [addressing Ezekiel], eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he says to me, 'Son of man, eat the scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth." So this is the language John draws on in this scenario of him taking the scroll from this mighty angel who holds the open scroll. Much like Ezekiel took an open scroll out of the hand in Ezekiel chapter 2. Then John eats it in apocalyptic fashion modeled after Ezekiel 2 and 3. John eats it and it becomes sweet in his mouth but it becomes bitter in his stomach.

Probably this language of sweetness and bitterness is to be understood in terms of the character of John's message that is it's interesting that he begins with bitterness and sour in his stomach. You would think he would go the opposite direction. Starting with its sweet in his mouth but then it's bitter in his stomach. He begins with the sourness because number one it appears to me that the sweetness and sourness probably symbolize a message of salvation but also the sourness a message of judgment. By putting the sourness first perhaps is a way of emphasizing the message of judgment that now John is to begin to speak. So sweet and bitter are meant to describe probably not the effects of actually eating a scroll, though that certainly would give one a stomach ache, but symbolically describing the message that John is about to proclaim. It is a message of both salvation but primarily it will be a message of judgment.

#### Revelation 11 as the Scroll Message

Chapter 10 then this recommissioning scene provides the setting and provides the backdrop for chapter 11. Chapter 11 probably can be seen as the main part of the content of the scroll. There's a lot of speculation as far as what precise content of the scroll is. If the seals and the trumpets are sort of preliminary judgments. In chapter 10 John is recommissioned to prophesy primarily a message of judgment. Where do we find the contents of that scroll that John gets and that John eats in chapter 10. At the very least it encompasses chapter 11 and some have suggested it may go on all the way through chapter 19 which still is a judgment scene. Others have suggested that it may go all the way through the end of 22. And we'll return to that a little later but at the very least chapter 11 seems to be at the heart of John's message or the message of the scroll that John now eats. But at the same time I'm not sure we can limit it just to that. I think you can make a compelling case that maybe the rest of the book all the way to chapter 21 and 22 would comprise the content or the message of the scroll that John eats. It is a message consisting of both judgment but also salvation as well. Now chapter 11 following John's commission in chapter 10 this is the message or at least the beginning of the message that John is to deliver.

The question that it answers and raises is how is God going to bring about his purposes for establishing his kingdom particularly his purpose that we find in the seals and in the plagues. For example, it is his purpose of judging humanity as a response to the cries of his people. How is it that God will consummate his purposes in the world? Chapter 11 answers that by introducing us to the two faithful witnesses that God has established and appointed to be his witnesses. It's through his witnesses that God will consummate his purposes for establishing his kingdom. It's through his witnesses who are rejected and persecuted and even put to death that God is going to bring about his judgment on the entire world which then culminates in the seventh trumpet in chapter 11. So again chapter 11 is playing a crucial role in forming the basis. What role does the church play in the context of all these judgments? On what basis is God pouring out his judgments? How will that lead to God establishing his kingdom and judging wickedness answering the cry of the saints to avenge them. It's through the suffering witness of his people who are rejected and treated with hostility and eventually put to death in Revelation chapter 11.

#### Two Images: Temple and Two Witnesses

Now Revelation chapter 11 introduces us to two images that once again we have to deal with. We've seen John do this quite a bit. He introduces us to different images yet sometimes referring to the same thing sometimes referring to other things. But here in chapter 11 we are introduced to two different images. One of them is of a temple that gets measured in chapter 11. It begins by John being given a reed and told to measure a temple. The second image is one of two witnesses starting in verse 3 where God then gives his power and authority to his two witnesses to go out and prophesy. Now one of the questions we need to answer again as we have in many chapters is what are these two images? What are their background and meaning? What might they refer to? Who are the two witnesses? What or who is this temple that gets measured? How do these images relate to each other? What do they signify? How do they relate to what's going on in this broader section of chapter 10 and chapter 11? But before we go on then let me read the section and I will simply read the section up until verse 14 where starting with 15 we are

introduced to the trumpet.

#### Revelation 11:1-13

I will read that section later but I will stop at verse 13 and we will simply go that far. Chapter 11 verse 1, “I was given a reed like a measuring rod and I was told, ‘Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court, do not measure it, because it has been given over to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for forty-two months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire will come from their mouths and devour their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time that they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation, [there’s that fourfold phrase again] will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. But after these three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. At that very hour there was a great earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and they gave glory to the God of heaven.”

#### Question Prompted on Rev 11:1-13

Now in this section then we are introduced to a description of these two features. John is told to measure a temple and he is given a rod to do so. Intriguingly he only

measures part of it. The rest is thrown out to the Gentiles. How do we understand that? How do we understand this period of forty-two months that the part of the temple that is thrown out to the Gentiles would be trampled? And then, who are these two witnesses? How do we understand this period of 1,260 days that they are allowed to prophesy? How are we to understand their ministry of being able to devour enemies with fire that comes out of their mouths and shut the sky so that it doesn't rain? How are we to understand this beast coming out of the Abyss and putting them to death and lying in the streets so that all the world can see for three and a half days till finally they are raised at the very end of this before the whole world? So there are a number of issues that we need to wrestle with in figuring out: what is going on in chapter 11 and what is the relationship between these two images and what are they saying about this message that John is about to proclaim?

### Preview

So in the next section we'll take up the question of the identity of these two images and some of the other issues that we need to deal with in trying to make sense of Revelation chapter 11.

Transcribed by Zachary Medeiros  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 16  
© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 11: Temple and Two Witnesses

In Revelation 11 we said there are two different images that the author utilizes. The question is what those images portray and what they refer to and also the relationship between the two images. The first one that we introduced was the image of a temple that John was told to measure in the first two verses of chapter 11 and the rest of chapter 11 is dominated by an account of two witnesses who go out and witness and at the end of the day a beast rises out of the Abyss, puts them to death, and after that they are raised up and vindicated. Chapter 11 ends with the seventh trumpet finally being blown. That was broken off from the sixth trumpet back in chapter 9.

### Temple Imagery: Old Testament Parallels

Now what I want to do is look at those two images in a little bit more detail. In Revelation 11:1-2, we are introduced to the first image, which is the image or symbol of a temple. Again the first question to think about is: What this might signify? This is not a question but the first principle to realize but the starting point, to realize that this is probably symbolic of something as we see over and over again is the case of the book of Revelation. So the question is: What does the temple symbolize? What is it indicating? Is it referring to an actual temple or some kind of physical structure or what? There have been a number of options for understanding this, and the starting point from this is that John is probably drawing on Old Testament background in the image of measuring a temple. For example, in Ezekiel 40-48 which is an important text that will influence John's own vision later in Revelation 21 and 22 where John has a vision of the new Jerusalem/temple. The temple imagery gets applied to the city Jerusalem, as we will see. That city is measured and gets its influence from Ezekiel 43-48 where the author/seer Ezekiel is taken on a tour where he measured a temple. That would fit John now where he is given a reed and he is told to measure the temple of God.

The other text that probably influences what goes on here is Zechariah 2:1-5 where Zechariah also is given a measuring reed and he is told to measure Jerusalem. So John's vision draws on the apocalyptic visionary type of material from Ezekiel and Zechariah too, and now John is told to measure this temple. So the question becomes what is this temple?

### Temple Imagery: Three Approaches

There have been a number of suggestions but with different issues and interpretations interpreting Revelation and I don't want to survey all of them. But first of all, one common option has that it is a reference to a literal rebuilt end-time temple often associated with that view of Revelation that sees chapter 4-22 and the entirety of it all still future, referring to a future end-time scenario that will take place leading up to, at the very end history including the information of the second coming of Jesus Christ. So part of that would be to read chapter 11 as predicting an actual rebuilt temple as in the example of Ezekiel 43-48.

Another common understanding of this is that this refers to the temple, the literal first temple in the first century that was later on destroyed in 70AD. So this view is associated with Revelation where almost all of Revelation in chapter 4-22, all of the events are describing what was already going on in solely the first century. It is a view that is called the Preterit view, a view that we talked about earlier. So the temple is being described as the actual, literal, physical temple standing in the first century AD before it was destroyed in 70 AD. That view of Revelation was actually written back in the late 60's AD.

Another view of the temple is to take it more figuratively, that is the temple symbolizes the temple of God, which is in reference to a future people of God and taking the temple of God figuratively or symbolically referring to the people of God themselves.

Another view that I would subscribe to here is that the temple is the church of God, but probably not referring only to the first century AD, not exclusively referring to a



future temple, but probably refers to the church in its existence starting in the first century AD, but the church extending until the second coming of Christ that is going to consummate history, which is what happens at the seventh seal later in chapter 11. I take the temple here to be metaphorical of the people of God, or throughout Revelation that would be the new people of God, the church, consisting of both Jew and Gentile.

In other words, we have seen often times John using Old Testament imagery often referring to Israel, the new people of God, and the church. We have seen the New Testament authors have been able to take the Old Testament imagery of the Temple and now apply it to the people of God. So now Paul can say addressing his readers and 1 Corinthians 3, “as you are the Temple, do you not know you are the Temple of God.” In Ephesians 2:20-22 he describes the church built as a temple based upon the apostles and prophets, Jesus being the cornerstone of the temple and the temple is becoming a holy dwelling where God lives by his Holy Spirit using Old Testament temple language. Even back in chapter 3:12 of Revelation John promises if they overcome they will become a pillar in the temple of God.

So already in the New Testament, in Revelation, John has taken physical temple imagery from the Old Testament and now finds it fulfilled in the church or in the people of God themselves. So I take it that the Temple here in chapter 11:1-2 is not referring to a literal temple in the first century, a temple that would have been standing, or referring to some literal rebuilt temple in the future, but instead is to be understood symbolically as a reference to the people of God, as the temple, as the dwelling place of God. Here it probably refers to the temple and the people of God starting in the first century, referring to John’s own readers, but also the entire time leading up to the second coming of Christ whenever he comes to consummate history.

#### Temple Anticipation at Qumran

Interestingly, this is not new for John. For example, the Qumran community of the Dead Sea Scrolls often took Old Testament Temple imagery and applied it to their own

community. They saw their own community as the Temple of God. They saw their own individual members as the building stones of the temple. Yet, the main difference was the Qumran community seemed to see themselves, the community by the Dead Sea as the temple of God because they thought the Jerusalem temple was apostate, was evil, and was not the real temple. But even the Qumran community still anticipated a future rebuilding of the temple someday.

Where John seems to think or suggest that the reason the community thinks the temple is God is because Jesus Christ himself is the true temple, Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of the temple of God and therefore those who belong to Christ also constitute the temple. And so we'll see when we get to chapter 21, John does not see a temple, not because he thought the original one was evil, but John does not see a physical temple in the new Jerusalem because the Lamb itself was the temple and the entire people of God themselves are also the temple.

#### Trampling of the Temple by the Gentiles

So now John sees the people of God as a temple and he is told to measure them. Except, interestingly, here he is told only to measure part of the temple. The part he calls the outer court is not to be measured and instead is to be given over to the Gentiles to be trampled for a period of 42 months. The question is what is this measuring about, and why is he told to measure the temple? Then second, why is part of the temple not measured and thrown out to the Gentiles to be trampled on for 42 months?

First of all, the act of measuring here seems to suggest and imply ownership and protection. So the fact much like what one finds in Zechariah chapter 2, for example, the act of measuring. So the measuring of the temple, the temple symbolizing the people of God suggests the protection and the preservation of God's people. While all that is taking place with these seals and these trumpets, now God's people are protected and they are preserved. Note that he also measures not only the temple but the altar and those worshiping in it. Probably we should not take this too literally as if there are three different things. That there's a temple, and then there's an altar and then people

worshipping in it or that these are three different types of believers or people within the church. But again, the author is simply using detailed descriptions of the temple and the altar and those worshipping in it and altogether this is meant to not portray distinct elements within in the temple but altogether it symbolized the people of God as a temple. They now are measured signifying their preservation and their protection.

Now the question is why is the outer court of the temple excluded? It's not measured and protected apparently but now it is thrown out and subject to the nations to be trampled upon. There are two possible explanations. One of them is that the outer court that is not measured because it is meant to symbolize unfaithful members of the church. Remember back in chapters two and three, only two of the churches were faithful and suffering persecution because of that. Most of the churches were intent on compromising and one church was so complacent that many of them received a very negative evaluation. A couple of the churches had some who were faithful but others were not and were tolerating teachers who were saying it was okay to compromise. So, one possibility is the part of the temple that is measured and protected would be the faithful churches from chapter 2 and the faithful members of the churches from chapters 2 and 3. The part of the temple that is thrown outside then would represent the unfaithful, the compromising members of the churches.

One other possibility that I think may fit a little bit better with what we see in the rest of chapter 11 and what we've seen so far, is that this measuring of part of the temple but excluding the outer court would suggest that this is the church seen from two different perspectives. That is, the measuring of the temple, the heart of the temple, the holy of holies, the dwelling place of God where the altar is. This indicates the church as protected spiritually, as kept and preserved by God while still subject to persecution at the hands of the nations and at the hands of the Roman Empire. So the fact that part of the temple is preserved and protected indicates the church as it is preserved and spiritually protected by God. But the fact that part of it is thrown out to be trampled would be looking at the church from the perspective that it will still be persecuted, it will still be subject to suffering, and the persecution at the hands of the nation, and at the hands of the

Roman Empire some of them even to the point of death. Again in my mind this makes sense in light of the rest of Revelation where the saints are portrayed for example, back in chapter 7 as sealed and protected by God yet they are still persecuted. In chapter 12 and 13 that comes next. We will see the same imagery of the church being protected yet still subject to persecution at the hands of Satan, at the hands of the beast, at the hands of the Roman Empire.

#### Time of the Temple Trampling

Now, the amount of time in which the church is permitted to suffer persecution is symbolized again perhaps by the outer court not being measured and being subject to trampling by the nations over a period of 42 months. If you do the math, you realize that the 42 months is another way of saying three and a half years that time, times, and half of time that comes out of the book of Daniel that you found in Revelation chapter 12 and verse 14. You find that language of time, times, and half of time in Daniel.

For example, chapter 7 in verse 25, chapter 9 in verse 27 and chapter 12 in verse 7 of Daniel, and you can look those texts up on our own. That's probably where John gets the notion of the three and a half years or literally time, times, and then half of time, three and a half years. Hopefully by now, you have figured out that this 42 months like the other numbers we have seen in Revelation and the other temporal designations should not be taken with strict literalness. It's not a literal period time that is meant to be counted on a calendar so you can mark off each day until you get exactly 42 months. Like we said, 42 months equals roughly three and a half years. Instead, the author's use of the number 42 is not so much meant to be literal as to indicate and interpret the character and the meaning of the time during which the church will suffer persecution. I suggest to you that we'll see in just a moment that probably the 42 months is meant to span the entire existence of the church. So already in the first century, the churches were to understand themselves as in this 42-month period. But the idea is not that after 42 months then they're done, but the 42 is not literal but symbolic like the other numbers is meant to interpret and to explain and describe the character of the churches existence until Christ comes back.

Now where did John get the number 40? The number 40 plays a key role in the Old Testament, for example, Elijah's ministry. Later on we'll see that in the rest of chapter 11, Elijah appears to play a role as the identity of one of the two witnesses. So, for example, Elijah's ministry in 1 Kings 17 and 18 especially later on in the New Testament, read James 5:17, where Elijah's ministry is seen to be one of three and a half years. But also in Numbers 33 we find that Israel's wandering in the wilderness took place in 40 encampments in Numbers 33. That would suggest then that 40 would indicate the idea of both judgment and testing. So 42 months then would indicate the church now is being tested, it is in a time of testing.

But in chapter 12 verse 14 of Revelation, we will also see that the number 40 suggests preservation as well. So what the number 42 is saying is by recalling Old Testament texts especially, and the way Revelation uses it is 42 then instead of being a designation of a literal period of time is meant to interpret the character of the church's existence as one of preservation, yet one of testing even judgment on the people of God. So John has told us by this image of measuring the temple something about the nature of the church's existence as the temple of God, as the dwelling of God, as the place where God dwells with his people, and as a temple in the world. The church will be preserved yet at the same time it will suffer at the hands of Rome. At the hands of the world through persecution at the character of the church's existence is a time of preservation. Yet it is also one of testing and suffering.

### Two Witnesses

The next imagery starts in verse 3. The next image that John draws upon then is two witnesses. We want to again ask the question: who are these two witnesses? What is it that they do and when do they do this? First of all, in verse 3, we're told that they witness for 1260 days. This is probably based on or a version of Daniel's 1290 days in chapter 12, verse 11 of Daniel. John's number 1260 may reflect a more general rendering of 30-day months, but 1260 days again is roughly equivalent then to 42 months or three and a half years. So John uses these numbers I think interchangeably, three and a

half years, 42 months, or 1260 days depending on what he wants to say or depending on how he wants to characterize the period of the church's existence. In other words, I think the 1260 days, the 42 months, the three and a half years are all symbolic ways of referring to the exact same period of time the church's existence starting in the first century and leading up until the second coming of Christ. Of course, John had no inkling that it would go on for 2000 years, he simply understands the church's existence being one of testing and preservation until Christ comes back.

Now, in my opinion, too there is no indication that John intends us to add any of these numbers up to come up with a period of seven years of tribulation in some theological constructions of the book of Revelation. In some theological corners Revelation is read as portraying a seven year period of tribulation and that is arrived at, number one, by connection with Daniel back to his 70 weeks. I don't want to go into all that. Daniel's discussion of 70 weeks in chapter 9 I believe but also by adding up two of these periods of three and a half years or 42 months or 1260 days one arrives at seven years or a seven year tribulation. But again, I see no evidence anywhere that John intends us to add any of these time periods up to arrive at a period of seven years. Instead, John simply uses different time periods or goes back and fourth between 42 months, three and a half years, 1260 days in order to describe the same period of time. In other words, we said the period of time is the church's existence beginning in the first century and continuing until the return of Jesus Christ to bring it to an end which we will find in seal number 7. But depending on what John wants to say, how he wants to portray the church's struggle and its existence, John can use these different numbers.

So, for example, all of them are to be taken symbolically so the question is what is the meaning portrayed by using these symbols so John can describe the period of the church's existence with three and a half years. Three and a half years suggests something that is intense, something that indicates the persecution and the suffering of the church but it won't last. Three and a half years is half of seven, seven being the number of perfection and completeness. Three and a half falls far short of that so three and a half years would suggest the church is in for a bumpy ride so to speak. It's a time of trial, it is

intense persecution but it will be cut off, it won't last. And if you think about it, the idea of time, times, and half of time, time and then it increases to times but just as things get rolling, then only half a time, the time gets cut off. So the idea is that the church's existence will be one of intense persecution but it won't last. It will be cut off and it falls short of the complete perfect number seven. By using the term 42 months, then John can portray the church's existence in light of the Old Testament background as a time of testing but also a time of protection as it was for Israel in the wilderness. By using 1260 days, the author can recall the period of testing that Daniel himself anticipated and now is suggesting that the church has entered that period. The church again is fulfilling what it was that Daniel was prophesying.

So when does this event occur? Or when is this period of 42 months, or 1260 days or three and a half years? Those are simply different ways symbolically of describing the character of the church's entire period. Again, from our perspective, we look at it 2000 years later but John was more interested in describing the character of the church's struggle and it's existence that would lead up to the second coming of Christ whenever that would take place. When we look at Revelation though, I think we're going to see that John suggests that this period of tribulation, this three and a half year, 42 months, 1260 day period begins with the death of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ's own suffering and his own faithful witness to the point of death was the beginning of this period of tribulation. Now the church, now his followers participate in the same faithful witness in the face of suffering and death. In fact, to move beyond this if one wants to be convinced that this characterizes the rest of church history, one only needs to pick up something such as say *The Foxes Book of Martyrs* and a number of other descriptions of what happens in the church to third world countries to see the extent to which Christians continue to suffer and even be persecuted for their faith. That is something that is eye opening for those of us who live in places where we still enjoy a considerable amount of religious freedom without having to sacrifice our lives for that.

#### Two Witnesses: Invincible to Vulnerable

Now, in chapter 11, beginning with verse 3, this period of 42 months or 1260 days

or three and a half years is meant to describe the time of these two witnesses. In the rest of chapter 2 we said that the two witnesses careers sort of speak of this period of time has two phases. The first part of it is the two witnesses go out and engage in witnessing in the world and they seem to do so with a considerable amount of success. By that I mean, they do so without seeming to experience any harm or opposition. In fact, the text says anyone who tries to harm them will suffer serious consequences. So apparently, these two witnesses are allowed to perform their witness, yet at the end of the day we'll see it starting with verse 7, it says now when they have finished their witness, a beast is allowed to come out of the Abyss and put them to death. So in verses 3 through 6 they appear to be invincible and starting in verse 7 all of a sudden they appear to be vulnerable. A beast comes out of the Abyss, puts them to death, and all of the world basically throws a party because they're happy that these two witnesses have been put to death.

So I want to ask then how do we explain what seems to be going on in chapter 11 with the apparent invincibility but then the vulnerability of these two witnesses? Again who are these two witnesses?

#### Identity of the Two Witnesses

What I want to start with is the identity of these two witnesses. Who are they? Now the starting point is to realize that whatever or whoever these witnesses are, they should be taken symbolically as we've seen with all the other images that the two witnesses although they could refer to two actual individuals they don't necessarily have to refer to two witnesses. They could refer to much more. Much in the same way that in our political cartoons Uncle Sam, for example and this may not be the best example, but Uncle Sam represents the entire government. He represents an entire group of people not one solitary person. In the same way, these two witnesses could represent more than just two persons. The two witnesses most likely have their background in the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah and in much Jewish apocalyptic there is some expectation of Moses and Enoch. For example, there is expectation of Moses and Elijah returning. The expectation of the return of Elijah seems to lie behind not only a couple Old Testament



texts but also the understanding of John the Baptist in the Gospels. So the expectation of a prophet like Moses is to raise the expectation of the coming of Elijah. It's interesting in the Old Testament that both of them appear to be removed from this earth in very unusual ways. In verse 6 of chapter 11 notice it says these men, these two witnesses, have power to shut up the sky so it will not rain during the time they were prophesying causing it not to rain or shutting up the sky so it does not rain. This was one of the miracles performed by Elijah. But then, notice next it says and they have the power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. This is exactly what Moses did in the book of Exodus recalling the exodus plagues. So the primary model for this, these two witnesses, is probably the Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah.

But interestingly, note that it's not that one of them does the miracles of Elijah and the other does the miracles of Moses, both of them are Elijah and Moses. So John is not interested in saying one of them is Moses and one is Elijah. They both perform the miracle of shutting the sky up so it doesn't rain and they are both able to turn the water into blood and to strike the earth with plagues. So, both of them perform the works of Moses and Elijah. Not one or the other. It's interesting too that by calling them prophets both Elijah and Moses had prophetic functions and prophetic ministries in the Old Testament as these two witnesses do here.

#### Identifying the Two Witnesses

Now once again, we need to ask who are these witnesses? Some people have been convinced that this is actually Moses and Elijah come back to life during this time. Often this is associated with the time and the future right before the coming of Christ during this final period of tribulation. So some think it might be Moses and Elijah actually coming back to life on the earth for that period of time. Some have actually tried to associate the two witnesses with historical figures in the first century. A common one being that one was Paul and the other was Peter and this is describing their ministry. That's possible, but once again I think we should perhaps look at the two individuals as symbolic. Maybe not symbolic of two precise individuals or to be identified as two exact

individuals but following a number of commentaries I would agree that the two individuals are symbolic of the entire witnessing church. Looking at the entire church during this period of time beginning in the first century until Christ comes back, we will see at the end of chapter 11 with the seventh seal in chapter 11, as well that until Christ comes back, this is a symbolic image of the church in its faithful witness and its prophetic role in the world.

Some have suggested these two witnesses are part of the church. Probably the two witnesses symbolize the entire church in its prophetic function as it is meant to perform its faithful witness in the world in the face of persecution and opposition.

Now there are a couple of the reasons for concluding this, first of all by being called God's witnesses in verse 3, by going out into the world and witnessing, this is the exact same task that the church was expected to do back in chapters 2 and 3. So one of the issues back in chapters 2 and 3 was that the church, at least some of the churches, were compromising their faithful witness by compromising with pagan Roman rule. The two churches that were faithful were actually suffering because of their faithful witness because of their refusal to compromise. So the notion of witness is one that we were introduced to all the way back in chapter 1. That's what Jesus did. Jesus was "the faithful witness." Antipas was a faithful witness in chapter 3 who died for his faith. John is now witnessing to these things he saw and the church in chapters 2 and 3 are meant to carry out a faithful witness for Jesus Christ and the world in the face of opposition and persecution. But the problem was so many of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 had so compromised with the pagan world that they were in danger of completely losing their witness if they hadn't already.

The second thing to note is that these two witnesses in this text are identified in verse 4 as the two lampstands. The author is actually using the language from Zechariah chapter 4 by identifying them as two olive trees. But they're also identified with the two lampstands from Zechariah 4 and from the temple. Here is another indication of using temple imagery to apply to the church so there are two lampstands. But by indentifying them with two lampstands, one of the keys to understanding this is to go

back to chapter 1 and verse 20 where the lampstands that Christ walked in the midst the golden lampstands, were identified as the seven churches. So by identifying these two witnesses and we'll ask why two in just a moment, but by identifying these two witnesses as two lampstands given what we've seen so far all the way back in chapter 1 in verse 20 and the identification in chapters 2 and 3 of the churches as lampstands, we should then understand these two witnesses as symbolizing the entire church in its prophetic ministry but in its witness as well.

So the theme of witness as well as the fact that John has already identified the lampstands as churches back in chapter 1, I think leads us to the conclusion that these two witnesses symbolize the entire witnessing church. And again, when they do this, this is not referring to some period only in the future but is referring, I take it to John's understanding of what the church should be doing starting in his own day and until Christ comes back to consummate history and reward and vindicate his people. In the midst of that the church should function as a faithful witness even in the facing hostility and persecution.

Now if this is the case, the next question is why the number 2. Why only two witnesses? If John doesn't intend to be literal why not 7 or 10 or some number like that. There are at least two possibilities and they might not be exclusive. First of all, go back to the Old Testament according to the book of Deuteronomy in order for a case to stick in order for a testimony to stick in court, according to the book of Deuteronomy it required two or three witnesses. So, that would fit perfectly, the theme of the church being a witness. John goes back to the Old Testament and draws on this concept back in Deuteronomy. Now he envisions two witnesses based on the stipulation in Deuteronomy that there must be two or three witnesses. A second possibility is when you go back to chapters 2 and 3, only two churches were faithful in their witness. And we saw the other five were compromising to some extent only two of the churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia were commended for their faithful witness in the face of suffering. So, that may also provide the model for John. In other words, those two churches were the model for what the church was to be an uncompromising faithful witness in the world. So, both

of those together probably provide the reason for John portraying the witnesses as only two.

Furthermore, when we ask the question of what's the relationship between the two witnesses and the temple back in chapter 11 verses 1 and 2 with the temple that was measured? Probably as we've seen John do several times these are simply two different perspectives or two different ways of looking at the same thing. That is, the church as preserved but subject to persecution. The church as a temple is preserved by God as where God dwells but also subject to persecution.

Now, looking at the church from a different perspective, from the standpoint of its faithful witness, notice the other connection too, there is also a connection with a relationship to the temple. In verses 1 and 2 the church is clearly symbolized by a temple, but the fact that it's identified with a lampstand from Zechariah 4 which is a vision of God's temple. Zechariah 4 is one of the Old Testament passages that lie behind Revelation chapter 11. The two witnesses identifying them with olive trees and the two lampstands suggest a connection in terms of the temple. So temple imagery does not finish at verse 2 it continues into the description of the two witnesses by the use of the lampstand from Zechariah chapter 4.

#### Clothed in Sackcloth

So in verses 1 and 2, they are seen from the perspective of the temple of the churches. Now they're seen in verses 3 and following from the perspective of a faithful witnessing church. One indication of what they do is found in verse 3 already and before they ever do anything, John describes them as clothed in sackcloth. This could suggest the notion of repentance but could also suggest the idea of mourning because of judgment. Therefore, already indicating what it is and what the primary role, at least in chapter 11, that the two witnesses are going to undertake and that will be a message or a ministry that actually results in judgment. In fact, that's what one finds in verses 4 and 6. The two witnesses symbolizing the church then begins its ministry or is described as witnessing and intriguingly what happens in verses 5 and 6 is they don't appear to have success as far as evangelism. It's not that they don't but it's just not John's point. John's

point is to demonstrate, as we have said, how does the church relate to or what is the theological underpinning. How does the church and its suffering witnessing relate what takes place in chapter 8 and 9 and the trumpet judgments? These chapters describe that in more detail. So now the trumpet judgments in chapters 8 and 9 are related to the churches suffering witness that is the reason why God pours out his judgment on humanity in chapters 8 and 9 is because of their rejection of the faithful witnessing church and even their persecution of it.

They even put to death the faithful church. So note in verse 5 if anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouth and devours their enemies. Verse 6 as we've already looked at these men have the power to shut up the sky so it won't rain and they have the power to turn the water into the blood and strike the earth with any plague they want which seems to go back to chapters 8 and 9. So the idea here is not so much that we should interpret these literally and that there is going to be a period of time when there is no rain, but again the author is recalling Old Testament texts. He wants us to recall the ministry of Elijah and Moses and now see that the witnessing church in chapter 11 is now performing a similar function. So the judgment of chapters 8 and 9 is clearly a response to the rejection of the faithful witness of these two witnesses in verses 5 and 6 of chapter 11.

#### Witnesses Opposed by the Beast

Now, we said that apparently in verses 4 and 6 the witnesses are unhindered and unopposed in their witness. It says anyone who tries to harm them will actually be subject to the plagues of chapters 8 and 9. Yet, starting with verse 7, the scene abruptly changes. In verse 7 the witness appears to be over and a beast comes out of the Abyss and is able to oppose them and put them to death. Now there are a couple of things about this beast. We'll see that this scene of a beast coming out of the Abyss and putting them to death, this brief mention of the beast doing this will get unpacked in more detail in Revelation 12 and 13 where a beast comes out of the sea to persecute and harm the people of God. So chapter 12 and 13 will expand in more detail on verse 7.

A couple of things about the beast and the Abyss that we'll look at more detail in

chapters 12 and 13, the Abyss, or starting with the beast, the beast actually has a long history in Jewish apocalyptic literature but in the Old Testament itself the beast is a demonic figure, an evil figure often associated with oppression in the Old Testament and used to refer to oppressive rulers or oppressive nations that opposed God and are idolatrous and oppress and harm God's people. So God's use of this image of a beast is one that already comes to John with a history of use and interpretation and identification with evil rulers, and evil empires that oppress and harm God's people. Now John uses the beast again probably to refer to another oppressive godless idolatrous empire. For his day that would have been the Roman Empire.

The Abyss as well we've already been introduced to back in chapter 9 where these locust figures come out of the Abyss. The Abyss also has a history of meaning and use that it carries with it into the usage John gives it. That is, the Abyss was seen as the home or the prison of evil demonic beings. So by reading of a beast that comes out of the Abyss, the readers now recognize the true source of their persecution and that is it's nothing less than the same spirit, the same anti-God spirit, the same oppressive evil demonic spirit that inspired other governments and nations and people and rulers to harm God's people. To oppose God's people is now acting again to oppose God's people in the first century church in the form of the first century at least as the Roman Empire. We'll return to that in chapters 12 and 13, but intriguingly, then apparently the beast wins a victory in verses 4 and 6. The two witnesses appear to be invincible but the beast seems to win the victory; so the two witnesses seem to be vulnerable. The way to look at this I think is it's tempting to read this as a chronological account or a sequence story of these two witnesses that is first of all there will be a period of time when they will have success and they are invincible. Then there will be a period of time, a brief period of time where they are actually vulnerable. Instead, I think we should not take this with quite that strict literalness as far as a sequence of events or a temporal progression.

Instead, I like what Richard Bauckham said about this, a British scholar said that probably the best way to take chapter 11 is to see it as not as predicting a series of events

in the life of the church but more to read it as a parable about what the church is supposed to be doing. That is, instead of saying the church is having a period of success and then being vulnerable rather to read this as once again seeing the church from two different perceptions. On the one hand, the church will be protected and even invincible, but on the other hand, it will be subject to persecution at the hands of the world. On the one hand, it will be protected and invisible, on the other hand it is still vulnerable to the attack and persecution by the Roman Empire and by other ungodly nations. So I think Bauckham might be right. This functions like a parable of what is true of the church. How does the church maintain its faithful witnesses, how does it carry out its witnesses in the world? It will be both invincible, it will carry out its witnesses and at the same time it will also be vulnerable to persecution and death.

#### Response to the Two Witnesses

The response to the two witnesses then that get put to death is two fold. First of all, the text tells us they leave their bodies unburied. In the first century, this would have been a sign of extreme dishonor or shame to not bury the body so this is just kind of heaping up insult upon insult. So this would have been a great insult to leave their bodies out in the streets. Not so much a grotesque thing again as much as an insult.

The city in which they are left exposed and then buried is called “The Great City.” Actually, it’s called a number of things. First of all, it’s called “The Great City,” a term that elsewhere is applied to Babylon which when we get to that term elsewhere especially chapter 17 and 18 we will demonstrate that it is Babylon although in this case was probably a code for the city of Rome. But in chapter 16 verse 19 of Revelation in chapter 17, verse 18, in chapter 18, verses 10, 16, 18, 19, 20 and 21, we find the references to The Great City in reference to Babylon which probably is to be equated with Rome. However, the city here also appears to be the city of Jerusalem. Since in verse 8, it’s described as the place where our Lord was crucified. Furthermore, it’s identified as Sodom and Egypt. So what appears to be going on it’s as if the author is combining all of these cities into one great city in opposition to God and who opposes and oppresses God’s people. So that you almost have a trans-temporal city. One that now is embodied in Rome but was

embodied in other great cities such, as Egypt and Sodom. We know the story of Egypt as an oppressive godless idolatrous empire, Sodom being a city equivalent to evil and even Jerusalem, the place where Jesus Christ was put to death and was crucified for his faithful witness. So that now all of those are embodied and wrapped up in Rome. But this also allows it to apply to beyond Rome to any other city that exists until the second coming. Any other city that cares to embody rebellion and evil and idolatry and oppress God's people fits exactly what we find here. But now it is a symbol that finds its fulfillment particularly in Rome but wherever there is a rebellious idolatrous city that rejects God's people and rejects God and persecutes his people. One commentary labeled this "a world city." So the first is that in this city that has persecuted and put to death God's people, they leave the bodies unburied, a sign of insult and dishonor, a sign of shame.

#### Celebration at the Death of the Witnesses

The second thing they do is celebrate, they throw a party and rejoice because these two individuals have caused them torment and harm. The reference to the three and a half days that they lie dead before finally in verses 11 and 12 they are raised probably is meant to recall the three and a half years but probably as well roughly the period of time that Jesus Christ himself lay in the grave until his resurrection.

#### Two Witnesses Vindicated

Now these two witnesses lie dead in the street for three and a half days leading up then to verses 11 and 12 where they are raised up before the entire world and for everyone to see. The notion of resurrection here is one of vindication. So now in verses 11 and 12 this is where the saints are vindicated for their suffering witness. The world's evaluation of them in the previous verses in chapter 11 is one of rejection, one of persecution, putting to death, rejoicing because of their death, and now the verdict is reversed. These two witnesses are raised and they are vindicated before the eyes of the watching world. They are given the apocalyptic and symbolic nature of the symbolism here, there is no need to invent modern ways of how the whole world could see these three witnesses such as satellite TV or a webcam or something like that. All of these have been suggested but again the author is working with apocalyptic symbolism and we have



to remind ourselves what would the first readers have understood when they read this and they would have no notion of some of our modern day technology. So the whole point is simply meant to represent their vindication. And in fact, the text that lies behind this, when it says for three and a half days they lay in the streets and people gazed on them and they threw a party.

#### Resurrection of the Two Witnesses and Ezekiel 37

Then in verse 11, after three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them and they stood on their feet. This almost verbatim much of this verse comes right out of Ezekiel chapter 37 and verse 10 where Israel experienced death because of exile and God now promises a day when his breath will enter into them and they will stand up and the picture of the dry bones that all comes together and it stands up on its feet now. That language is utilized to apply to the witnesses who now are vindicated. The beast put them to death, the world gloated over them, the world's verdict was that now they have been defeated and their witness appeared to be in vain. Now God vindicates them by raising them up and giving them life showing that their faithful witness indeed was not in vain. Actually, I'll demonstrate later on that this text gets developed in more detail in Revelation 20:4-6 in the well-known millennial, the kingdom passage.

After they ascend to heaven in verse 13, we find verses 13 and 14, especially in verse 13 we find this interesting scene where following the resurrection there is an earthquake. A tenth of this great city collapses and intriguingly the response is that although a tenth of the city collapses and seven thousand people living in the city die from this earthquake, the rest of them are terrified or they fear and they give glory to God in heaven. Now there's been a lot of debate, exactly how are we to understand this response? Elsewhere this language is sometimes used in the context of a response of conversion. Someone has suggested those who were not put to death were actually converted and they give God glory and that is the very thing that people refuse to do earlier in response in chapters 8 and 9. In response, for example to the trumpet judgments, they refuse to repent; they refuse to give God glory. Now some do give God glory.

Others understand it as simply a forced acknowledgment of God's sovereignty such as one finds in Philippians 2:9-11, for example, where every knee will be forced to bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Some of them onto salvation but many understand that text as a forced homage. So, some would take this as simply an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty that is not a true repentance necessarily and a true turning.

Perhaps we should understand this though as both and that some of the response will be forced acknowledgment but that the some of these are to be understood as giving God glory in terms of actually repenting. Now Richard Bauckham has understood this that these individuals actually repent the giving God glory is actually an act of repentance but they do so in response to the faithful suffering witness of the church.

Richard Bauckham says chapters 8 and 9 did not bring about repentance. In other words, judgment does not bring about repentance what does, it's the faithful witnessing of the church that will finally bring about the repentance of the nations. The only difficulty here is that the response of giving God glory comes not in response to the faithful witness but it comes in response to the earthquake and the final judgment. So primarily what we have at the end here, is that even in the midst of God's judgment, some end up still responding in repentance.

Now what I want to look at next then is in beginning with verse 15 the final trumpet is finally going to be blown, and we'll begin the next section by looking at the seventh trumpet.

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 17

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

The Seventh Trumpet; The Woman, the Dragon, and the Son

### Seventh Trumpet: Third Woe Text

At the very end of chapter 11, beginning in verse 14, we are introduced to the seventh trumpet or the third woe, remember back at the end of chapter eight we were introduced to an eagle that uttered the three-fold “Woe, woe, woe” and connected those with the last three trumpets. Now verse 14 recalls that the second woe has passed which was back in chapter 9 and the third woe is coming soon which now I take it is accomplished in trumpet number 7 which begins in verse 15. So 15 through the end of chapter 11, “the seventh angel sounded his trumpet,” [which would be the third woe] and there were loud voices in heaven, which said, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.’ And the twenty-four elders who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and they worshiped God, saying: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great--and for destroying those who destroy the earth.’ Then God’s temple in heaven was open, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peels of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.” Those last verses, again, imagery of final judgments.

### Kingdom Transfer

With the seventh trumpet we are clearly at the very end. The seventh trumpet has brought us to the climax of history. Note verse 15 begins with, and to back up what we actually find here is we don’t have a vision. Interestingly, we don’t see anything happen, but instead we hear in the form of voices from an angelic being or loud voices in heaven. Then the twenty-four elders we hear in their hymns or speech the content of the seventh

trumpet. But the seventh trumpet clearly brings us to the very end of history. It begins with what I think is a very crucial theme in the book of Revelation, verse 15, that the kingdom of this world has now become the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is, the kingdom and rule has been transferred from Satan and the beast in this world and the Roman Empire now to the person of Jesus Christ. Christ's rule has now been consummated. What was true in heaven in chapters 4 and 5 is now a reality on earth. The Lord's prayer, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" has now reached its culmination. Unlike Rome's kingdom, this kingdom now will reign for ever and ever. The transfer of rulership, the transfer of the kingdom is one of the dominant themes in Revelation. How will God's kingdom and sovereignty in chapters 4 and 5 finally are realized on earth now finds its consummation as the transfer of the kingdom from this earth, the rulership of Satan and the beast now is in the hands of God and Jesus Christ.

One other point to mention the twenty-four elders in verses 16 and following provide a further interpretation of these events. Further content of the seal and I want to draw attention to simply two things. Number one, with these final verses in the speech of the twenty-four elders, notice how God is referred to in the language that we are familiar with from chapter 5. God is portrayed as the almighty and the sovereign one whose power extends throughout the entire world. His glory now has spread throughout the entire creation. But note that he is described also as the one who is and who was. It seems to me we're missing something and when you go back to verse chapter 1:4 and 1:8, and also in chapter 4:8 we find this version of the three-fold "the one who is and was and is to come." We're missing that "is to come." That is intentional, because there is no need for it, the kingdom has already arrived. What is to come is now already a reality with God's eternal kingdom now arriving where God and his Messiah and his people will rule for ever and ever. So there is no more need for the third part of that phrase "the one who is to come" his kingdom has already arrived and been consummated.

Seventh Trumpet Connection to the End

The rest of verse 15, also in verse 17 and 18, in a sense introduce us to what are the primary thematic strands that will be taken up in the rest of the book. The author says, especially in 18, the nations were angry and your wrath has come which we saw happening in the judgment scenes. “The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and all those who reverence your name both great and small and for destroying those who destroyed the earth.” This prepares for the scenes of judgments and the scenes of rewards and vindication that we will see in chapter 19 through 22. So in a sense this last part of the trumpet introduces in the form of the speech or songs of the twenty-four elders, introduces us to the main strands that will get developed in more detail in chapters 19 through 22 later on in the book.

Now that brings us then to the end of the seventh trumpet. In a sense then, we have reached the end of history. Starting with chapter 10 you sense that we have reached a climax in this language--time is no more. Another set of plagues, the seven thunders are sealed up. Time is going to be no more. Now we find the final climax, in the seventh trumpet: the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of God and his son Jesus Christ. It is time now to reward the saints, it is time now to judge the dead. You have a sense that this is a crucial climax in the book. In that way the book can almost end right here. We have been brought to the climax. The goal of chapters 4 and 5 has been reached. The goal of history has now been reached. Time is no more. The one is to come has now arrived. His kingdom has been established. Yet we are only about half way through the book.

### Introduction to Revelation 12-13

Chapter 12 and 13 in a sense seem to almost begin a new vision. And intriguingly David Aune in his commentary and a number of other works actually begin a new section with verse 19 of chapter 11 where in God’s temple in heaven was open. In the same way in chapter 4 we saw heaven open. Now once again we see heaven open. So some have actually begun to see a new section, extending to chapter 12 verse 13. Maybe a way to look at it is like this: Revelation tells the same story twice. This isn’t the only way to look

at it, but one way. It tells the story twice. One story is told in chapter 4 through 11. Now chapter 12-22 will tell the same story as chapters 4-11 but now using different imagery only now in a more detailed and a deeper way than chapters 1 through 11. But nevertheless chapter 12 and 13 has been often described as sort of the center point of Revelation or the fulcrum of the book. Whether that is the case or not, chapter 12 through 13 clearly plays a very significant and a very important role. In fact, we've already suggested chapter 12 and 13 will spell out in more detail the conflict that we saw in chapter 11, where the two witnesses but a beast came out of the Abyss and put them to death. We now will be introduced to the beast again. We will not be introduced to that conflict. But it is as if that conflict in chapter 11 is not going to be explored in a more detailed and a much deeper manner than it was explored in chapter 11.

#### Chapter 12: The True Source of the Church's Conflict

Chapter 12 introduces us to a section that I think has the primary function of exploring the true source of the church's conflict. So starting with chapter 2 and 3, especially the two churches they were suffering because they refused to compromise. Chapter 11 and elsewhere portray the church as a suffering and faithful witness. Chapter 12 and 13 is now going to explore in more detail the true source of the church's conflict, the true source of the conflict they now face. In other words, in true apocalyptic fashion chapter 12 and 13 is going to lift the curtain and lift the veil and show God's people in an expanded view, in a new perspective to show them when they look out at the world and they suffer at the hands of Rome and they are called upon to refuse to compromise and suffer because of that. Then one person Antipas has already lost his life and John thinks there is more to come. How are they to see that? Chapters 12 and 13 lifts the curtain to help the readers see more clearly from a new perspective the true source of the conflict and what they struggle with so that they can see it and respond to it in a new light.

In chapter 12 we are introduced to three major characters that kind of dominate the scene in chapter 12. We are going to be introduced to a woman who is described in rather interesting detail. We are going to be introduced to a dragon and then we are going

to be introduced to a son, the son of the woman.

#### Text of Revelation 12

But look at chapter 12, Revelation chapter 12 reads: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept the third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child will be snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. And there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven [Satan and his angels]. The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our throne before our God, day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as the strength from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and to the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.’ When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had been given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time [or 3 and half years] out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped

out the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and he went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus."

### Identity of the Woman

This is a very interesting story indeed. But what I want to do is try to untangle a little bit of the story of this interaction between a woman and a dragon and the son of the woman as well. We should ask the question again of some of the details as far as their background. But how does this function within the book of Revelation? How does it function for the first century readers in helping them with to come to grips with and understand the situation in which they find themselves? First of all is asking the question of identity. The first one being, who is this woman that we are introduce to in the beginning of chapter 12. The woman is described in very interesting terms, she is clothed with the sun. She has the moon under her feet. She has 12 stars on her head. Without reading all of the text starting with Genesis but also in some of the intertestamental apocalyptic literature this language of sun and moon and having stars on one's head is often associated with a description of the patriarchs and their wives. For example, in Genesis chapter 37, and verse 9, reads: "Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. 'Listen,' he said, 'I have another dream, and this time the sun and the moon and the eleven stars were bowing down to me.'" This is describing Joseph's dream. Notice the sun and moon and the stars in association with the 12 sons of Israel, with the patriarchs. We also find in, for example, a book like Testament of Abraham another apocalyptic work and elsewhere that the sun and moon the 12 stars around the head are often associated with patriarchs and even their wives. So that suggests that probably at least at this point the woman stands for the nation of Israel out of which the Messiah came, as we will see in a moment, the son she gives birth to is to be identified with. So probably at this point the woman stands for the nation of Israel but she gives birth to the Messiah, the son of God.



Interestingly, the woman still plays a role after the birth of the son. So that the woman probably stands for more than only the nation of Israel but demonstrates the continuity of the people of God that she is Israel but then she is also the new people of God. People of God can consist of both Jews and Gentile or the church in the later part of Revelation. So that woman is probably transcends anyone specific time period. She is Israel but clearly she represents and embodies the entire people of God. We see John do that already. He takes Old Testament language sets “the kingdom of priests” that applied to Israel and now applies it to the church. This new people expands Israel and includes people from every tribe and language and nation. I think that is how we should look at the woman here. Let me back up, the woman also could at least partially I would not primarily and exclusively make at least be suggested of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It says she does give birth to a son but probably that therefore the woman is more than just the nation of Israel but may suggest Mary as part of that and extends to include the church as the people of God as well. The fact that she suffers birth pains again is typical Old Testament apocalyptic notion of birth pains indicating suffering. The suffering of God’s people now leads up to the Messiah to the birth of the Messiah. So that is the first character. The woman who represents Israel but more broadly represents the people of God, that transcends Old Testament Israel but also includes the New Testament people of God, the church made of Jews and Gentiles.

A dragon is described as having seven horns and seven heads and ten horns. Seven suggests completion, perfection. Ten is a large number suggesting completion. So you get this picture of something that yields great power and authority and once more the dragon, as we saw with the beast back in chapter 11, the dragon is a figure or an image that comes down to John already with a history. It brings with it a history. It already brings with it a meaning that it has picked up through its use throughout Old Testament literature and throughout Old Testament history. Within the Old Testament we find a dragon or a sea monster type of figure playing an important role in the Old Testament. In many of the psalms and in the prophetic literature it is used to symbolize a kingdom or a ruler.

For example, we find a pharaoh often or Egypt portrayed as a sea monster or a dragon. In other Jewish works we often find a dragon or sea monster used to portray wicked godless oppressive empires that oppose God and persecute his people. For example, in Psalm chapter 74, and I am just providing a couple of examples. One from Psalms and one from prophetic literature. Psalm 74 verse 13 and 14, I'll back up and read 12. "But you, O God, are my king from of old; you bring salvation upon the earth. It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan." Leviathan was another sea monster that has association in the Old Testament; some would even say back going all the way back to Genesis. Apocalyptic literature has another similar beast. "You crush the heads of Leviathan and you gave him his food to the creatures in the desert." Clearly this is in the context of splitting open the sea, the sea monster or Leviathan. Notice the heads of Leviathan who is a seven-headed monster. Clearly this is representing here the pharaoh or the ruler over Egypt at the time when God split the sea and let Israelites through.

Another interesting text is Isaiah chapter 51 and verse 9, giving an example from Old Testament prophetic text. In Isaiah chapter 51, and verse 9 we read, "and this is in the context of the prophet anticipating a time when God will inaugurate a new exodus, where he will bring his people out of exile, he will redeem and restore his people from exile in a brand new exodus. And chapter 51 is a call for God to begin to act now and bring about a new exodus in the same way that he did at the first exodus. So verse 9 begins, "Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the days of gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab [the name of another sea monster]. Was it not you who pierced that monster through? Verse 10: "Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?" This is a clear allusion to Exodus. So again pharaoh is being portrayed as a sea monster as Rahab that God defeated when he led the Israelites when he rescued them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians and led them through the Red Sea. Now the author of Isaiah anticipates a rehearsal of that, a

repetition of that in a new exodus. It's interesting the Aramaic translation of Isaiah at this point, actually in verse 9 identifies Rahab as pharaoh in the text itself.

So the point is you have a history, and I could read other texts, in apocalyptic literature as well. You have a dragon or sea monster that carries associations of chaos, evil and oppression and satanic power. You have that sea monster over and over again in the Old Testament playing a role of representing human rulers and empires that are oppressive and oppose God and his people. So John is using the term he is picked up, the term that already brings a history of meaning with it. So that when John uses this imagery of a dragon or a sea monster he is using one that is already connotes something specific. More importantly it's interesting that if this is the case, then John is clearly telling us that in a sense the true power then is identifying this dragon as satan as he does in verse 9. Notice in verse 9 he tells us this "great dragon that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray." John clearly takes us back to Genesis 3. So it is as if John is saying this dragon that he sees in chapter 12 this is the same satanic power that inspired other oppressive, godless idolatrous evil empires and rulers such as Egypt in the past now is surfacing again John's own vision in chapter 12.

The fact this dragon is described back in verse 4 as having a tail that sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and flings them to earth. This imagery comes right out of Daniel chapter 8 and verse 10 where a similar occurrence takes place. Some have tried to link this to a specific historical event and perhaps this is an image of the primordial fall of Satan where he brings demonic beings down with him. The stars are standing, as we've seen now in Revelation for angelic beings. So the picture may be at his fall Satan drags and brings with him his demonic cohorts. That's possible although it may be here that this is simply an indication of the power of this draconic being. The power of the dragon John sees is now demonstrated by the fact that he can drag with his tail a third of the stars, clearly is an allusion back to Daniel chapter 8 and verse 10.

#### The Male Child

But what happens then to introduce the third figure is the dragon pursues this woman for the sole purpose of devouring her child. So the woman we've been told is

pregnant and she is about to give birth to a son. What makes it clear that this is the Messiah, that this is Jesus Christ himself, the lion from the tribe of Judah back in chapter 5, the Lamb that was slain in chapter 5? What it makes his identity clear is that he is described in verse 5 as a child, a son, a male child who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. This is a clear allusion to Psalm chapter 2 verse 8, which gets applied to Jesus Christ elsewhere in the book of Revelation. So the child, the son, that the woman is about to give birth to is nothing less than Jesus Christ the Messiah. I often like to tell people besides Luke, Matthew 1 and 2 and Luke chapter 2, this is the most detailed account of the Christmas story that one finds in the New Testament. Although here we have it in apocalyptic symbolic key we find the birth of Jesus Christ narrated. Now the author skips a lot by simply saying when the son is given birth to he is immediately taken up to heaven. So it's almost as if the life and the death and resurrection and exultation of Jesus are all collapsed in one event. But clearly John has already assumed the death of Jesus Christ in text like chapter 5 by portraying him as a slain lamb. Slain Lamb references the blood of Jesus Christ as the one who dies and now is alive. John assumes clearly that part of this is the death of Jesus Christ is to be included here as well.

### Battle in Heaven

But the story then revolves around this woman giving birth to a son and the dragon trying to devour the son but as soon as the son is given birth to by the woman. The dragon's intentions to devour and kill the son are thwarted and he is not able to do this. Immediately we read this account of the woman fleeing into the desert in verse 6 to be kept there for 1,260 days. I'll return to that because verse 13 is going to pick that back up again. But what I want to pay attention to is in 7 through 12, we find an intervening section. In other words, if you took 7-12 out, the story would flow fairly well. But I think we find this intervening section that further interprets this event that further interprets the forwarding of Satan or the devil or the dragon to devour this child. And verses 7 through 12 will further describe and interpret that.

As it begins it has a two-fold interpretation. The first part is a vision is of a battle

in heaven. We are told that Michael and his archangels battle against Satan and his angels. What is significant about this is one might expect that you would read this: God and his angels battle against Satan and his angels. Instead, you find Michael, the archangel, and his angels battling against Satan and his angels. In other words, here again is no dualism in the book of Revelation. I think this is intentional because it says something's about God's sovereignty over Satan. One might say God himself does not need to fight Satan. His archangels Michael one of his angels is sufficiently able to defeat Satan and his angels and cast him out of heaven. Behind all this lies God's sovereignty but far above any dualistic conflict between the powers of God and powers of gods and powers of Satan. God is not even involved in this battle but all it takes is Michael the archangel and his angels to be able to defeat Satan and cast them out of heaven.

Probably the author is again appealing to Daniel chapter 10. For example, in verse 21, of Daniel chapter 10. We find this reference to Michael the archangel so beginning with verse 13. I'll read verse 12 "Then he continued, 'Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help because I was detained there with the king of Persia.'"

In verse 21 also that text says, "But first I will tell you what is written in the book of truth. No one supports me against them [that is king of Persia, the prince of Persia] except Michael, your prince." So chapter 10 of Daniel provides this background of Michael doing battle and this case against the prince and the angel behind Persia. Now we find Michael, with John drawing an act now that he reconfigures that for his own purposes to show how Michael is once again battling but this time against the dragon, the sea monster, who is no one less than Satan himself.

Also these texts seem to reflect Jewish tradition regarding the expulsion of Satan from heaven, particularly the primordial expulsion of Satan from heaven that most point back to Isaiah chapter 14 and verses 12 through 15 actually Isaiah chapter 14. We read, "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast

down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascent to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of sacred mountain. I will ascend tops of clouds; I will make myself like the Most High. But you have brought down to the grave to depths of the pit.’” Often this text played a role in the speculation about the expulsion from Satan from heaven at the beginning of creation.

But what I want you to recognize John takes this notion Jewish literature of the expulsion of Satan from heaven and he gives it a very specific application. The question is: when does this happen? When does this battle and this expulsion of Satan from heaven happen? John gives it an explicit application by suggesting that it happens at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Notice in verse 11, in the hymnic part of this, the author says this is the second part of the interpretation. This is the hymn of the loud voice in heaven in verses 10 through 12 that interprets this event. The voice says, “They overcame him [that is, the devil, the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” So I take it that John is telling us that this battle in heaven was between Michael and his angels and Satan and his angels is an apocalyptic symbolic way of describing the defeat of heaven that happens as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the same way that Christ overcame back in chapter 5 and in chapter 1. Christ overcame because he was dead and now is alive. Christ as the lion of tribe of Judah he conquered and overcame. How did he do that because he is the Lamb who was slain. The hymns in chapter 5 celebrated Jesus was worthy to take the scroll because he overcame through his death on the cross to purchase people, from all of humanity to be his kings and priests.

So I take it that John maybe drawing on this idea of the expulsion of Satan from heaven but he gives it a specific application. He uses it as an image to demonstrate that Satan was ultimately defeated through the death and resurrection of the person of Jesus Christ. Again chapters 10 and 12 function to interpret this heavenly battle. So this battle in verses 7 through 9 get interpreted by this hymn in chapters 10 through 12. The battle was God’s victory over evil and the establishment of God’s kingdom that came about by

the death of Jesus Christ. So we are not to see here a reference to exclusively a future event nor is John referring to a primordial event in the past at creation or some other time. But John is using that imagery and giving us big application to refer to what happens because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It constituted and defeated Satan. In fact, verse 10 through 12 then interprets the heavenly battle demonstrating a result of this verse 10 now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God. So, with the death of Jesus Christ defeating the powers of evil, defeating Satan; now God's salvation and now his kingdom have begun to take place. His kingdom has begun to unseat the kingdom of Satan and the rule of Satan.

### Ironic Overcoming

So in chapter 12 then verse 11 further specifies the basis of verse 10. How has that salvation come? How has that reign come? How has the authority been established? How has the accuser been hurled down? Through verse 11, which says it was through the blood of the Lamb, through the death of Jesus Christ and on an ongoing basis, through the suffering and even death of his people. Because of their faithful witness that is how Satan has now been defeated. So we are introduced again to this concept of an ironic view of overcoming. How do God's people overcome? How did Christ overcome and win the victory? Not through military might like Rome, but through the faithful witness of his son Jesus Christ, through the death of Jesus Christ and through the suffering witness of his followers, even to the point of death.

This, in a sense, is what we find in the section reflected in Jesus own teaching. In the Gospels for example in Matthew chapter 12, where we find this notion of Jesus Christ now coming and casting out demons. In Matthew chapter 12, in response to the Pharisees accusation that you cast out demons in the name of Satan himself, Jesus says using power language, using kingdom language, he says, how can a kingdom stand if it is divided against itself. But he says unless one binds the strong man first only then can Christ's kingdom be established. Then he says, "If I cast out demons in the name of Jesus Christ, or with the power of the Holy Spirit, if I cast out demons then the kingdom has come, God's kingdom has arrived." Why? Because by defeating the powers of evil, which will

ultimately take place through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by defeating the power of evil, God's kingdom is already making inroads into the kingdom of Satan. We see that you are in chapter 12 and especially verses 10 through 12 the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the kingdom has already come. God's kingdom has already been inaugurated. The kingdom of Satan has already been unseated through the death of Christ and through the suffering faithful witness of God's people, even to the point of death. Satan's kingdom continues to be dealt a blow.

But verse 12 in preparation for the rest of chapter 12, verse 12 lets us in a crucial element and that is as a result of this defeat while this spells rejoicing in heaven, it spells woe for the earth and all who dwell in it. **And the reason at the end of verse 12, Satan now knows that his time is short he's already been defeated but sort of like a dragon that's been slain, but in his death throws he's allowed to flail about a little bit and kick about and cause problems and sufferings and even death for the people of God. So, what this then is suggesting for the church in chapters 2 and 3 for those who are suffering for their faithfulness, for those who are persecuted because of their faithfulness, even those who like Antipas have lost their lives because of their faithful witness for Jesus Christ, this is a reminder and a description of what's going on, what is actually happening is, Satan has already been defeated and he's simply allowed to flail about in his final death throws because he knows his time is short. So he will wreak as much havoc as he can, and cause as much problem as he can for the people of God because he's already been defeated. Because his time is short, he's unleashed a final flurry of activity of persecuting and putting to death God's people.**

**So this is meant to help them to see their situation in a new light and those who are suffering persecution at the hands of Rome, this is meant to function as an encouragement and again to help them to see their situation in true apocalyptic fashion from a new perspective that things aren't as they appear. Rome appears to be a huge colossal empire and it appears to be futile to try to withstand them and maintain a faithful witness and they appear to be able to put to death whoever they want. Now having read Revelation 12 they're able to see the curtain has been raised**



**and they can see behind the scenes what's really going on, the result of their physical conflict with Rome is nothing less than part of a broader conflict that has its origin in heaven with Satan being cast out, defeated by the blood of Jesus Christ, by the death of Christ, and now having been defeated and thrown out of heaven. He knows that his time is short; he is able to flail about a bit and that is the true source of the conflict that Christians face with the Roman Empire.**

Now, two other important features of this story is, first of all, the story then gets picked up in verse 13 having been provided a further commentary on Satan's being thwarted from devouring this child in the form of the battle between Michael and his archangels, then expelling Satan from heaven and further interpreting that through these hymns that indicate that the result of that is the establishment of God's kingdom through the death of Jesus Christ. The expulsion of Satan from heaven means that his time is short. He's unleashing a last ditch attempt to destroy God's people.

Now we resume the narrative, the story of Satan, the Son, and the woman. In verse 13, we are now introduced to the woman who, post-birth of Christ, and post-resurrection and ascension, we find the same woman which then probably indicates that now in continuity with the Scripture of her back in verses 2 or 3, now the same woman, representing the people of God, now including people from every tribe and language and tongue, representing the Church, I want you to notice how the story develops. First of all, the dragon decides to pursue her, having been thwarted from getting at the son, now he goes after the woman. But what happens is the dragon is apparently thwarted from getting at her as well, and here the author begins to draw on Old Testament exodus imagery by describing the woman as being pursued into the desert, and by being given wings of an eagle to fly into the desert. That language of being given wings like an eagle and going into the desert recalls the Exodus story again, and we've already been introduced to that, to the Exodus story in terms of the beast and the dragon, in association with Pharaoh. Here the Exodus imagery continues the woman, symbolizing the people of God, is now given, as the nation of Israel was given, wings like an eagle to go into the desert. Here the desert is clearly portrayed in verse 14 as a place of keeping, a place of

protection, and a place of preservation. In Exodus, chapter 19, and verse 4, we read God saying to the Israelites, “I took you up as on eagle’s wings.” So now we find the woman being given wings as an eagle--the Exodus motif continues.

Notice also the same temporal imagery, the 1260 days, earlier in verse 6, and now the time, times, and half a time from Daniel, and as we have said previously, these probably are referring to the exact same time period that is the entire period of the churches existence. Beginning in the first century with the churches in Asia Minor, this whole period is described as 1260 days, making clear the allusion back that Daniel, or time, times, and half a time. Another allusion to Daniel, but suggesting a period of time that is intense, but short, it won’t last forever. A time that falls short of the perfect number of 7, it’s only half of seven, so what that means is the events of chapter 12 are taking place roughly at the exact same time as the events of chapter 11. The image of the woman being preserved in the desert is taking place at the same time as the two witnesses in chapter 11.

In other words, another way to look at it is the author is describing the churches existence and the churches function from different perspective. The church can be described as a temple that is measured, showing its preservation, even though it is persecuted. The church can be described as two witnesses, describing their faithful witness even in the face of opposition and persecution, and even death. Now the church is described as a woman who flees into the desert and is preserved and is protected in the face of the opposition of Satan himself.

One other interesting feature in the story is the way the dragon tries to exterminate the woman, the way he tries to exterminate is through spewing out of his mouth a flood or a river, and clearly we’re in the realm of apocalyptic symbolism. Certainly one would not want to suggest literally a dragon arrived on the scene at some point in church history, and poured out, spewed out water out of its mouth. Clearly this is symbolism suggesting once again Satan’s attempt to oppose the people of God. He has not been able to get at the Son, so now he goes after the woman. Now, representing the people of God, the church made up of Jew and Gentile. Now symbolizing his opposition, he pours out a

flood. Often in the Old Testament, we see the flood language as figurative of the persecution of the people of God. This may also and in my opinion, I think it was probably correct to see this as sort of reflecting the image of the Red Sea, where the Red Sea was seen as a barrier, the Red Sea was seen as a threat to the people of God. Go back to Isaiah, chapter 51, verse 9 where the Red Sea was seen as the home of the sea monster, and God defeated the sea monster at the crossing of the Red Sea. So, once again, this spewing forth of water could be seen as almost a reenactment of the Exodus. In the same way that the Red Sea, according to Isaiah 51, was the home of the sea monster, was a threat to the people of God. In the same way that provided a barrier to the people of God, and threatened their security, threatened their livelihood, threatened their very lives, in the same way now, Satan is trying to thwart God's people by spewing forth a torrent of water that is meant to drown them and to harm them and to snuff out their lives and their existence.

Yet, in true symbolic fashion, we read that even that was thwarted. Even the earth opens up and swallows the water in symbolic type of imagery, all showing that Satan's attempt was to destroy this woman. Having been thwarted from being able to devour his prey in the early part of chapter 12, Satan now goes after the woman. He's also thwarted from being able to destroy her as well.

So what happens next is the dragon decides to go after her offspring and so that what we have here, I think the offspring also symbolizes the church, or the people of God. Notice how they're described at the end of verse 12, "her offspring are those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." That is exactly how the church is described elsewhere in Revelation and what it was supposed to do in chapters 3 and 4. So, clearly the offspring of the woman is meant to represent or symbolize the church as well. Yet, what is intriguing is apparently the dragon is able to get at them. We'll see that I think that's what going on in chapter 13. I'll introduce in just a moment. In other words, we have this rather strange picture, the woman seems to represent the people of God, the church, but she is preserved in the desert like Israel was at the exodus. Yet, at the same time, her children represents the people of God, and apparently, Satan is

able to get at them. So what's going on? I think once again we see John looking at the people of God, the Church from two different perspectives. On the one hand, like the woman, the church is preserved and kept and secure, though, on the other hand, like her children, the church is subject to persecution and even to death at the hands of Satan who is trying to destroy God and his people.

It is a little bit like, for example, the temple that we saw in chapter 11, the temple was measured showing its security, yet the outer courts were thrown to the Gentiles suggesting it was still subject to persecution. The two witnesses, on the one hand, were invincible suggesting their preservation and protection by God. Yet, on the other hand, they appear to be vulnerable at the end of the story where they were put to death by the beast, suggesting that they were still subject to persecution and death at the hand of the beast. So I think the same thing is going on here. Satan is ultimately not able to destroy the church. It is preserved and protected, although he is still able to persecute its people by putting them to death.

But again, ironically, in the context of Revelation, John is clear that this is the way the saints overcome. Ironically, this is the way they actually defeat Satan, through their death and because of their suffering faithful witness.

So the church is preserved, yet it's still persecuted. Satan is allowed to wreak havoc and persecute its members, yet he is not ultimately able to destroy it. So, once again, note how Revelation 12 is unveiling and uncovering the true source, the nature of the church's conflict, and the true struggle. They look out at the Roman Empire and they are confronted with its claims. Many of them are suffering because of their refusal to compromise. One person has been put to death, and others now are going to be in the wake of that. So they look out and wonder if it is really worth it and try to take a stand against such a monstrosity and what Revelation 12 does is lift the curtain, allow them to see behind the scenes to show them the true source of their conflict is Satan himself. Satan tried to kill God's son, Jesus Christ, but was thwarted, and Satan now who is going after the people of God. Yes, he can wreak havoc and he will be able to persecute them and put them to death, but ultimately the church will be protected. Ultimately, God's

people will be preserved.

#### Relationship to the Churches of Rev 2-3

So, now, with that new perspective, they will be able to understand and see their situation in a new light. For those who are suffering persecution because of their faithful witness, especially two of the churches in chapters 2 and 3, this will be a source of encouragement to maintain their faithful witness and be steadfast, but for the other churches, it will be a wakeup call to stop compromising and to instead, take a stand and to maintain their faithful witness even if it means death and despite the consequences that that might bring.

In Chapter 12, beside the fact that Satan has already been defeated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Satan has been defeated and what he is allowed to do to the people of God is simply his last ditch effort in his death throws, his last ditch effort to flail about and cause harm for the people of God.

Now, in the next section I want to back up. We've looked at several details of the text, but I want to back up and look at the story again in all of chapter 2, from two different perspectives, and I'm going to suggest that chapter 12, the main plot line of chapter 12 of the story of the son, and the woman, and the dragon, that the story that takes place throughout this section and probably into chapter 13 as well, this entire story, the main plot of it, probably owes its existence to stories. One of them coming out of the Old Testament, and one of them coming out of the Greco-Roman world, and probably the author has constructed this story that would resonate, as we have seen with some of the other visions John uses. John has constructed a story in chapter 12 that resonates with these two stories, one from the Old Testament, and one from the Greco-Roman world.

In our next section we will look at what those stories are, and how they help us make sense of some of the details of the text and how they help make a difference by actually reading and interpreting and shedding new light, additional light on Revelation, chapters 12 and 13 as well.

Transcribed by Marirose Brown and Daniel Perez  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 18

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Rev 12-13: The Dragon and Two Beasts

We've looked at chapter 12 of Revelation and I've suggested that the primary function overall is to demonstrate or to show the true nature of the church's struggle that is behind in true apocalyptic fashion which lifts the veil or the curtain so that the reader can see behind imperial reality to see another reality that is their reality expanded to include the heavenly reality. Now chapter 12 lifts the veil so the people can see behind their earthly conflict with the Roman Empire and to see the true nature of that behind their struggle lies Satan's attempt to not only destroy the Messiah but now also to destroy the Messiah's people. Chapter 12 clearly indicates that Satan has already been defeated and Christ's kingdom has already invaded the kingdom of Satan. Satan now only has a short time to flail about and to wreak havoc on God's people. So now they are able to see their situation in a new light and in a new perspective and respond accordingly.

## Greco-Roman Backgrounds

But what I also want chapter 12 look at the chapter as a whole look at two more important features in understanding Revelation chapter 12. As far as what John may have some of the ideas and some of the notions he may have been drawing upon as he recorded this vision of the woman who is pregnant with a son and the son who is pursued. The woman is pursued by a dragon, a serpent figure that tries to devour the son and is frustrated or warded off from doing so. Intriguingly, this story in Revelation chapter 12 seems to reflect a number of common Greek or Roman myths about a woman who is with child and who is pursued by a dragon or a serpent type figure that tries to devour the child and the child is then usually rescued from the threat of the serpent figure. Often in the story what happens, in some versions of these stories, is the son then grows up and comes back and actually slays the dragon or slays the serpent type figure. For example, there's one story called Leto and Apollo and Python. It begins with Python who described or depicted in the story as a dragon who pursues Leto who was the goddess and Python

pursues her in order to kill her. Leto then gives birth to a son which is the god Apollo. Apollo then later on comes back and defeats Python. There are a number of stories like that and John's does not seem to resemble precisely any of them suggesting John may not necessarily be thinking of one specific story that he or his readers would have known about or would have been common in the Greek or Roman world. John's story is very different in that his imagery indicates or represents something that happened historically the actual birth of Christ whereas these other stories are stories about the gods and not necessarily referring to specific historical events. But John does not appear to be drawing on any particular one of these stories but may have simply been aware of this type of story and a number of versions of the story that his readers would have been familiar with.

Now John seems to draw on these as if to demonstrate the true embodiment of the stories that people recognize or held to or knew of in the Greek or Roman Empire. John draws on that to say, let me show you the true version of that. Now he uses that to depict historically of what happened in the person of Jesus Christ and also what is happening with the persecution of the churches that he is addressing. So again John is not necessarily agreeing with these stories or subscribing to them he is just using stories because they are fitting to describe what's going on but also for him to demonstrate the true version or the true account of these stories that they may have known about. But, in any case, John is probably drawn on some common motifs or ideas from these stories and again most of them concern a woman who is about to give birth to a son and pursued by a dragon or a serpent type figure and that certainly fits exactly what John is depicting.

#### Old Testament Backgrounds

But there seems to me to be another important, maybe even more important, background than that that John has drawn upon and that is an important Old Testament background. We've already seen that John is aware of Old Testament depictions of a dragon or serpent type figure, such as the sea monster to represent nations or evil rulers that have oppressed God's people and that oppose God and that God is depicted as defeating them or slaying these dragon type figures. We see that in Psalm 74, Isaiah



chapter 51 in verse 9 and there are other texts as well that portray a ruler or kingdom and a dragon type or serpent type language. God defeats those dragons as symbolic of the defeat of the nation or the oppressive ruler. But a more specific story I think lies behind this so that this may be another example of John drawing this time on a story that resonates both with the Greco-Roman background such as the late Apollo python and other Greco roman stories. John is drawing on a story, constructs a story that resembles that Greco-Roman background but at the same time also resonates with the Old Testament story or Old Testament text.

### Genesis 3 Background

The primary text that I have in mind goes all the way back to the beginning of the Old Testament and that is the book of Genesis and primarily Genesis chapter 3 and verses 15 and 16. The so called “proto-evangelium” as some have called it. But following the creation of humanity and placing Adam and Eve in a garden, they are warned against the consequences of disobeying God’s command to them not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A serpent deceives Eve and then Adam into eating the fruit of that tree, bringing a curse upon them just as God promised would happen. Then God addresses the situation starting in verse 15. God begins to address the serpent first of all which is Satan and then God addresses Eve. Beginning in verse 15, God addressing the serpent says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike [or bruise] his heel.” To the woman he said in verse 16, “I will greatly increase your pains in child bearing, with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.” Now what I want you to notice is how the key features of these two verses in Genesis 3:15-16 emerge in this story back in Revelation chapter 12 and in fact we’ll find that going on in several places throughout Revelation that this principle: just as it was in the beginning so it will be in the end as well. So we’ll see John often drawing a motif from Genesis to show just as it was true in the first creation in the very beginning that will be repeated again in the sense in the end. Just as it was in the beginning so it will be in the end. So for example, notice in chapter 12 and especially

verses 3-9 we find the story of the enmity between the woman and the dragon as we find them both described in the story of how the dragon pursues the woman and even after that starting in verse 10 and following after that we find the dragon still pursuing the woman, although she is taken off into the desert in exodus language and preserved and protected there. But the section of Genesis 3:15 that promises enmity between the serpent and the woman now emerges here.

By the way John himself seems to draw us back to Genesis 3. When in Revelation 12:9 makes a point he makes a rather clear point to identify this dragon as the ancient serpent called the Devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray. Deception or leading astray is exactly what Satan did back in Genesis 3 in relationship to Eve and Adam. But notice the identification of this dragon as the ancient serpent or the serpent from of old, clearly linking back to Genesis chapter 3. So the serpent and the woman a conflict or enmity between the serpent of the woman from Genesis 3:15, lies behind the story of the dragon pursuing the woman in Revelation chapter 12.

The serpent bruises his heel we find again in chapter 12:3-9 the dragon figure, which is Satan, pursues the son and tries to devour him and later on especially in verse 17 of chapter 12 the dragon will go after the woman's offspring; her seed to wreak havoc so that the part where the serpent bruises his head or the head of the woman's offspring is clearly present in Revelation chapter 12.

Notice too that in chapter 3 verse 16 in Genesis it is said that the woman would give birth through birth pains its through pain that she would produce offspring. Notice how the woman is described in chapter 12 verse 2 of revelation. She was pregnant and she cried out with pain. Again this reflects that motif back in Genesis chapter 3 and 16.

The reference to the women's offspring, we've already noticed occurs in numerous times not only in the form of the son but after that section in verses 10-12 starting especially in verse 14 the dragon now pursues the woman into the desert. He's frustrated from pursuing her and then at the end of chapter 12 the dragon goes after the offspring or the seed of the woman. So the promise that there would be enmity between her offspring the dragon's or the serpent's in Genesis 3 and her offspring is also

represented in the dragon going after her offspring at the end of chapter 12 of Revelation.

### Dragon's Offspring

Now part of the promise in Genesis 3 was that there would be enmity not only between the serpent or Satan and the dragon but also between his offspring and her offspring. We've seen clear mentions of the woman's offspring in chapter 12 that the dragon pursues at the end of the chapter and her offspring the son that he pursued but was thwarted from being able to devour he was deprived of his prey. Where does the dragon's offspring or the serpent's offspring from Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15 occur because again Genesis 3 promises there will be conflict between his, the dragon's offspring or the serpent's offspring, and her offspring. Where does the serpent's offspring occur? I would suggest that this is where chapter 3 comes in. In the form of two beasts who resemble and are even described as and received authority from the dragon. In other words in chapter 13 we will be introduced to two dragon-like figures in the form of two beasts who are described just like the dragon. The first one is described as having seven heads and ten horns just like the dragon does. He even speaks like a dragon in verse 11. He exercises the authority of the dragon and the first beast, so I would propose that the two beasts in chapter 13 are the offspring of the dragon from Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15. The seed of the dragon, and now we see the dragon seed in chapter 13 of Revelation and as we'll demonstrate when we get there, I think it becomes clear that these two beastly figures, the offspring of the dragon are the means by which the dragon goes after the offspring of the woman. So chapter 12 ends with the dragon going after the woman's offspring in fulfillment of Genesis 3, but now chapter 13 will show how he attacks the offspring. How is there enmity between the dragon and the woman's offspring? It's through his offspring, in chapter 13, these two beastly figures.

There's one more intriguing part of sort of the story encapsulated in Genesis chapter 3, and actually when one reads the rest of the Old Testament, one can begin to see how Genesis 3:15 and 16 begin to work out, through the emphasis on the seed even through Abraham and into David's line. The emphasis on seed and offspring but I think even in the text that we've seen like the Psalms and the book of Isaiah and where you

have this beast, this sea-monster or dragon type figure lying behind the different nations and oppressive rulers. So ultimately you find this conflict between the dragon and his offspring and the woman's offspring continuing right through the Old Testament.

### Crushed Head

Now, the other feature of this story is encapsulated in Genesis 3:15 and 16 is the son would apparently crush his head. Interestingly, when we ask the question where do we see that, not that John has to pick up every last feature of the story, but where do we see this notion of the crushed head? I would suggest to you again when you look over at chapter 13. In chapter 13 and verse 3, the first beast, which is the offspring of the dragon, the first beast, is described this way: one of the heads, the seven headed beast, one of the heads seemed to have had a fatal wound, but that fatal wound was healed. We'll talk a little more about that when we get to chapter 13, but this idea of the head having a fatal wound, probably does a couple of things, but also linking back to Genesis, chapter 3 and the promise that the serpent's head would be crushed. Now we find the serpent's head crushed in the form of the beast, one of the head's of the beast being dealt a fatal blow or a fatal wound, but the beast has recovered from that. So I would suggest to you then, that John is also drawing on it explicitly, because in chapter 10, verse 9, John clearly points us back to Genesis by describing the dragon as the ancient serpent of old. John is probably then meaning for us to read this text in light of the story in Genesis chapter 3, and perhaps all the rest of the Old Testament as well, the struggle that goes on in the rest of the Old Testament, but particularly back in Genesis 3:15 and 16 provides the subtext or the backdrop for reading this struggle as well. So what John has done then is, I think, constructed what he saw or his vision in a way that is once again is evocative of more than one background. It is evocative of some of Greco-Roman stories that readers would have been familiar with, in terms of a struggle between a female goddess giving birth to a son and a dragon type figure pursuing them, but also clearly resonating with Genesis chapter 3:15 through 19, with Jewish Old Testament background.

So the point of this then, the point of alluding particularly to the Genesis 3 background would simply again be to help the readers put their situation in a new

perspective, to see that their struggle with Rome, this struggle that the church faces in the first century with the Roman empire and the struggle they face in any other century until Christ comes back, this struggle is nothing new. It's simply part of an age old conflict that goes all the way back to creation, all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. Now this struggle in the beginning of Genesis 3 is simply resurfacing again in the form of the physical struggle they face with the Roman Empire. That struggle had surfaced at numerous points in the Old Testament and now is simply surfacing again in the struggle they face with Rome. So, once more, they can see their situation in a new light when they look out and see what's going on in the empire. All they see is what goes on, from an empirical perspective, but now, by lifting the curtain, they see. No, this is not new. This is simply part of an age old struggle that goes all the way back to creation. It's simply part of the age old temptation of Satan to destroy the woman's seed and to destroy the woman and to destroy her offspring as well.

The point of chapter 12 of Revelation is a resolution has already been reached in the struggle. The death blow has already been dealt; the crushing wound has already been administered. Satan has already been defeated because of the death and resurrection of Christ, Satan has already been defeated and cast out of heaven and now knows his time is short.

So what have the people to fear? What do the readers, those especially who are suffering because of their faithful witness, what have they to fear? Now they can see their situation in a new light. Those who are tempted to compromise must now realize what is really at stake, and whose side of the battle they want to be on.

#### Relation to Ephesians 6

One other issue relating to chapter 12 that might help us to understand what's going on in light of what has just been said: Revelation chapters 12 and 13 as well, but particularly Revelation 12 could be seen in a sense as, I'm not saying John intended this, but for our perspective it might be helpful to draw the connection, but Revelation chapter 12 from our perspective could in a sense be seen as an expanded commentary on what Paul said back in the book of Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12 where at the end of the book

of Ephesians, that famous spiritual warfare passage, where Paul describes the Christian life as a battle against the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms. He depicts the Christian response to that in terms of pieces of armor that are identified with certain virtues. There's an interesting phrase in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12, where Paul says, "your battle is not with flesh and blood, but with the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realms." First of all, I think that reference to the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realm is a reference to demonic spiritual beings, as I think Paul uses that term all throughout Ephesians. But second, when Paul says that your battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realm--I don't think he's talking about two different things so that he's demeaning any physical conflict that we face. Paul's not saying your battles are not against flesh and blood, so don't focus on, or don't worry about any physical battles or physical conflicts that you face. Again, especially for Christians trying to live out their life in the context of the Greco-Roman world, Paul's not demeaning that saying that those are not significant battles but you need to instead pay attention to a different battle and that is a battle with the heavenly world.

I don't think that's what Paul is saying at all, I think Paul is saying something very similar to what John is doing in Revelation 12. When Paul says your battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and authorities, I think Paul is speaking apocalyptically in demonstrating, as important and as true as those battles are on the earthly plain, behind them lies a more significant battle that is going on, that influences those battles. So you see Paul's not saying, ignore those and focus on this. He's trying to help them, in true apocalyptic fashion, come to grips with the true conflict and the true nature of the physical conflicts that they face with the Roman Empire. Behind those lies a greater conflict. Your battle is not with flesh and blood, your primary battle is not just what you face in the physical realm, as true and important significant as that is, but more significant is to help his readers of Ephesians understand the nature of, that is, to see, in true apocalyptic fashion that there is a battle behind that, that is being waged.

That's exactly what Revelation 12 is doing. He's saying your battle is not with flesh and blood, your battle is not just with the Roman Empire and the Caesar, and the

Emperor over Rome, and all the local authorities and the cities of Asia Minor that are putting pressure on you to conform, that's not your true battle. Behind that lies a battle that now John depicts in chapter 12 in Revelation, that is, the battle of Satan; that is, the attempt of Satan to defeat the Messiah, the battle that has now cast Satan out of heaven, and his attempt to destroy the woman and her seed.

So there's a heavenly spiritual battle, the battle with the forces of evil that lies behind the true conflict that the churches in Revelation in 2 and 3 now face. So that makes Revelation 12 again, a text that functions to unveil and uncover the true nature of the struggle--to show the churches their battle is not just with flesh and blood, with the Roman government, but your battle is with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, primarily Satan himself. His attempt that goes all the way back to Creation, to try destroy God's people, and God's kingdom. Now with that new knowledge and perspective, the readers are able to see their situation in new light and to respond accordingly.

### Chapter 13

Now that brings us to chapter 13. Chapter 12 actually ends, or depending on how different versions divide chapter 13 begins or chapter 12 ends, in the NIV, the paragraph division is actually chapter 13, verse 1. I'm not interested in exactly where we divide chapters 12 and 13, but chapter 13;1 begins with "And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea." What is going on here I think is, the dragon then stands on the shore of the sea to summon two helpers. So the dragon is going to summon two persons to help him, in pursuing the woman's offspring. So notice, chapter 12 ends with the dragon's failed attempt to get at the woman, he's already failed at the son, Jesus Christ. Now he goes after the woman; now he goes after her offspring. We said both the woman and her offspring, both probably represent the church and the people of God from two different perspectives. On the one hand, they're preserved and kept, and the other they're still subject to suffering and persecution and the hands of Satan in form, in the first century at least, of the Roman government. Now the dragon stands on the seashore and his sole

intention is to summon two helpers who will help him in his task of going after the woman's offspring. I would suggest to you also that, probably we should not read chapter 13 of Revelation as chronologically following chapter 12. I think chapter 13 is simply a further way of describing in more detail how it is that Satan goes after the woman's offspring. How is it that Satan wreaks havoc on the woman's offspring even though she is preserved? Her offspring then is persecuted and Satan's allowed to wreak havoc. How does he do that? He does it through the help of these two beastly figures in chapter 13. So chapter 13 and 12, especially the second half of chapter 12, the first half, we said, actually most of that refers to past events, especially the birth of Jesus Christ. The rest of chapter 12 seems to bring us up until the present. So chapter 13, I think is simply another way of describing the exact same events of the rest of chapter 12.

It is not that chapter 12 happens first, and then after that chronologically chapter 13 happened. Chapter 13 is describing just in more detail, how does Satan accomplish what he does in chapter 12:14 through 17? How is it that he is allowed to persecute the woman's offspring? He accomplishes this through two agents. In chapter 13, one of them is a monster or beast that comes out of the sea; another is a monster or beast that comes out of the land.

We'll look at that and explain that in just a moment, but before we do, I want to read chapter 13. First of all, chapter 13, verse 1, "And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea." So now, he's prepared to summon two other beastly figures, his two offspring from Genesis 3:15 to help and, "I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and the mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound but the fatal wound but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed after the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he gave authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, 'Who is like the beast?' 'Who can make war against him?' The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise



his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb that was slain [a reference back to chapter 5]. He who has an ear, let him hear. 'If anyone is to go into captivity, in captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.' This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and he made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. When he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of man. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all those who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast, or the number of its name. This caused for wisdom. If anyone has insight let him calculate the number of beast, for it is man's number, his number is 666."

Now let me make two observations about this passage before we look a little bit more in detail at the two beastly figures relating to the two beasts together. These two beasts are the focal points of this chapter. First of all, we've already noticed earlier in chapter 12 in reference to the dragon but also back in chapter 11 where a beast comes out of the Abyss and is able to slay the two witnesses who probably symbolized the entire witnessing church. So at one level chapters 12 and 13, especially 13, will be a further unpacking of that brief reference back in chapter 11 where after the witness of the two

witnesses after their time of witness starting in verse 7 things begin to take a turn and a beast comes out of the Abyss and he's able to slay the two witnesses.

Now we have a beast coming out of the sea in chapter 13 and there's probably connections between the sea and the Abyss as sort of referring to the same place. So that probably this beast coming out of the sea is a reference of the same thing that happened back in chapter 11 only now you have more detail. Now the author is going to unpack in even more detail the events that took place back in chapter 11. We saw there and in chapter 12 that a beastly figure or a monster type figure especially in association with the sea usually refers to or evokes the notion of evil, complete chaos and disorder and that which is evil and oppressive.

We saw also that throughout the Old Testament the authors have used a beast type figure or a sea monster type figure to refer to oppressive nations and governments or rulers who oppose God and who were idolatrous and who also oppressed God's people. A classic example is Egypt and how Egypt or Pharaoh is often portrayed as a dragon type or serpent type figure, a sea monster figure emblematic again of chaos and evil and oppressing God's people. Interestingly, though several apocalypses mention more than one beast. There are several apocalypses that mention two separate beasts or two separate monsters. One that comes out of the earth and one that comes out of the sea. The one that comes out of the sea is often labeled "Leviathan." The one that comes out of the earth or land is often called the "Behemoth."

#### Jewish Apocalyptic Backgrounds

For example, to turn back to some of the Jewish apocalyptic texts that John no doubt was familiar with and we've already seen that some of the images such as the number of saints that must be put to death and persecuted must be completed before the end, John may be drawing upon apocalyptic literature for that. But in 1 Enoch chapter 60 and verses 7-10 notice the text says on that day two monsters will be parted one monster a female named Leviathan in order to dwell in the Abyss of the ocean over the fountains of water. Notice the connection between the Abyss and the water. Another one a male called Behemoth which holds his chest in an invisible desert or on the land. So note in

this 1 Enoch text the reference to the two monsters Leviathan and Behemoth, one that has its home in the Abyss and in the sea, the other that has its home in the desert on the land.

We read something similar in 4 Ezra, another important and common apocalypse of 4 Ezra chapter 6. 4 Ezra chapter 6 beginning with verse 48, in one of Ezra's visions starting with verse 49, "Then you kept in existence two living creatures. The name of one you called you called Behemoth, and the name of the other Leviathan. You separated one from the other [presumably at creation]. You separated one from the other for the seventh part where the water has been gathered together cannot hold them both. And you gave Behemoth, one part which had been dried up on the third day [referring back to Creation], that is, to live on it, where there are a thousand mounds. Behemoth belongs to the land. But the Leviathan you give the seventh part, the watery part, and you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish." So you have this imagery in the context of describing creation, you have this notion that the creation, God created these two sea creatures or sea monsters, one of them living in the water or the Abyss, the other two reside on the land. This might provide the model for John's own description of these two sea creatures in addition to Old Testament text that he has been drawing on. John may be drawing on these apocalyptic texts and this notion of these two beastly figures or two monsters, one from the sea and one from the land. Although we're going to see, John gives a very specific application. John is not just enslaved to sources, but he gives them a very specific application. It is also possible--let me back up and say, the mention of the first beast coming out of the sea, as well as the second beast coming from the land recall apocalyptic texts, but by having the beast come out of the sea, where earlier the beast came out of the Abyss, John clearly identifies this as a Satanic, demonic type figure.

Another possible connection to with the sea and land, is, by saying that this first beast comes out of the sea, and this next comment presupposes that if you are a Christian reading, living in the first century, I find it impossible that you would identify this beast with anything else but the Roman Empire. Once again because of the history this beast has in the Old Testament, in identification with pagan oppressive rulers and regimes, it's

almost impossible to think that the first century Christian reading this would not identify this with the oppressive regime, and even the Emperor, that was in control during the first century. In their own lifetime that was the Roman Empire and its Emperor.

But the other thing, by having one come from the sea and the other from the land, it's also possible that John had in mind along with the Old Testament and the apocalyptic background from books like Enoch and Ezra, like beasts Leviathan and Behemoth. The beast coming out of the sea would have recalled something that would have come from, been separated by the sea, or come to them from across the sea--that is Rome itself, and the emperor, whereas the beast from the land may have recalled something on their own soil so to speak.

In the provinces of Asia minor, and we'll discuss what possibly, the second beast from the land could have indicated, but I'm convinced the first beast, like the figure of a beast associated with the sea and the Abyss did in the Old Testament, now symbolizes an oppressive pagan empire and its ruler, and that is the Roman Empire. It's difficult to tell if John had both in mind, is it both the Emperor and Rome? Or is it referring to one or the other? In any case, I think the first beast is meant to identify, or be identified with the Roman Empire.

#### Evil Trinity: Dragon, Beast and Second Beast

The second thing to say about this text, is as many have noted, John may also be constructing an unholy trinity that functions as a parody to the true trinity. Though the roles of all three are not neatly separated, but at the same time, notice in chapter 1 and chapters 4 and 5, we were introduced to the trinity, that is, we saw trinitarian references behind John's thinking. Even in the very beginning of chapter 1--the epistolary introduction, where John brings greetings from both God himself, the one who is and is to come, and from Jesus Christ who has redeemed all humanity to the kingdom, and from the Holy Spirit as well. We see in chapters 4 and 5, God seated on his throne, and we also see the seven spirits, seven being the Spirit of God, but we're also introduced to the land who was slain in chapter 5.

So Revelation is latent with trinitarian references so that, is it possible then that

when we get to chapters 12 and 13, we're meant to see an unholy trinity in a sense. We'll see later on in chapter 14, the three are mentioned together, the dragon and the beast and the second beast which often is also called the false prophet, as well, in Revelation. So is it possible that John is constructing a parody of the true trinity in the form now of an unholy trinity?

So Satan then, clearly represents himself as God. Satan is the one who has the primary authority over the world, and over the other two beasts, then beasts number one, would be the one who, because he appeared to be slain and have a crushing wound, just like the Messiah did just like Jesus Christ who was slain back in chapter 5. Now beast number one is meant to be a parody of Jesus Christ. Then beast number two is a parody of the Holy Spirit, in that his main job, we'll see, in the second part of chapter 13, is to get people to worship the first beast.

So it is possible that we have an unholy trinity--a perverted parody of the true trinity who now perverts their power and illegitimately claims the worship and authority that belongs only to God and his Messiah and the Holy Spirit.

#### Two Beasts

So, what I want to do now, is to begin to examine in a little more detail, the two beasts and some of the language that lies behind it, and how they might be functioning. We've already noted that the first beast comes out of the sea, which is just another name for the Abyss, back in chapter 11, verse 7, where the beast comes out of the Abyss. Later on in chapter 17, verse 8, the beast will come out of the Abyss again. I don't think this is a different beast, nor should we make too much out of the sea distinction to the Abyss, unless we want to take the sea as also suggesting distance between the readers in Asia Minor and across the sea where they would find Rome. But other than that, the sea here symbolizes the notion of evil, it's the home of the sea monster that we saw in Psalm 74, Isaiah chapter 51, both of those in the context of describing Pharaoh and the situation of the first Exodus. We've also seen too that in Revelation chapter 9, the locust come out the Abyss--but also, Daniel chapter 7, where the beasts come out the sea. So Daniel 7 is also playing an influence here in chapter 13.

What you're beginning to see is John likes to juggle several Old Testament texts at the same time. Often texts that have some kind of connection, verbally or thematically or contextually, John constructs sort of a mosaic where he takes a number of Old Testament texts and a little bit like a juggler trying to keep several balls going at the same time, or someone who is a circus performer trying to keep several plates spinning at once, John is juggling several Old Testament texts at the same time that bring with them meaning that helps say something and helps explain, and helps reveal and interpret what it was that John saw. Daniel chapter 7, as well as a number of Old Testament texts are part of that mosaic that now John constructs.

The fact that this first beast also has blasphemous names may clearly indicate that this beast is usurping the authority and the worship that only belongs to God and the Lamb in Revelation chapters 4 and 5. The emphasis here is on the idolatrous nature of this beast, and the Roman Empire, it may even more specifically reflect some of the claims of deity by Emperors. Domitian, for example, was known for accepting claims of deity and worship and honor that now John perhaps is drawing upon to demonstrate the idolatrous claims, the perverted claims of Rome in contrast to what should only be true of God and the Lamb in Revelation chapters 4 and 5.

We've already noted two, but I want to draw your attention again to the fact that this beast is described just like the dragon in chapter 12. He has seven heads and ten horns, both of them suggesting great power and great authority and great strength.

But what I want to draw your attention to is one unique thing that John does with this beast is John is clearly drawing on Daniel chapter 7 as we've already mentioned. When you go back to Daniel, in the Son of Man vision, before the Son of Man emerges, John actually sees four beastly figures all symbolizing and representing four empires, or four emperors or rulers that lead up to and whose kingdom is eclipsed by the Son of Man who now receives authority and receives a kingdom. Let me back up and turn back to chapter 13 of Revelation. Notice the beast is described in terms of not only his beastly character, in verse 2, "the beast I saw," so John sees a beast, but then he describes him as resembling a leopard, a bear and also a lion. That roughly corresponds to the four images

or to the four beastly figures, the four animal figures from Daniel's vision in Daniel 7. The difference is Daniel saw four separate beasts representing four separate kingdoms leading up to the Son of Man, where now John combines all four of them into one beastly figure. It's as if all past and all the kingdoms of the past have been combined and wrapped up into this final expression that has now emerged in the form of the first century Roman Empire. So it's as if what John now sees happening, gathers up and even eclipses all the kingdoms and rulers of the past.

So what Christians face, what God's people face now, is something more evil, more oppressive but what John then is doing is simply suggesting Rome is not all it appears to be. Again in true apocalyptic fashion he's unveiling the true nature and character of Rome. Rome is not all it's cracked up to be. Rome is not all it claims to be. It claims to be this wonderful colossal empire that has brought peace and prosperity and security to the people, but now John wants to demonstrate, that behind that is just the facade for the demonic Satanic beastly character of the an empire that is idolatrous, that opposes God, that opposes and oppresses God's people. It maintains its empire through violence and bloodshed. So now John is unveiling the true nature of the Roman Empire-- it is a hideous beast, and behind this beast lies Satan himself. Chapter 12, he's described like Satan, seven heads and ten horns--this is Satan's offspring from Genesis chapter 3, verse 15. So Rome is a hideous beast.

In chapter 13, in verse 2, it acts with the authority of the dragon. It's appointed by the dragon to carry out his authority on earth, and though defeated, we saw Satan has already been defeated, because his time was short, he now acts in fury and anger and now this is how he does it through oppressive, deceptive authority, and through the Roman Empire.

We also saw that one of the features of this beast is one of his heads appeared to be wounded and this gets repeated twice more in chapter 13. If you notice, the beast's head appears to be wounded. We've already mentioned that this goes back to Genesis, chapter 3. But a couple of other texts, for example in Isaiah, chapter 27, verse 1, a text we've read, "In that day, the Lord will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and

powerful sword, Leviathan, the gliding serpent, he will slay the monster of the sea.” It’s interesting later on in chapter 13, the beast is described as one who received wound by a sword. This may reflect texts like Isaiah 27, also Psalm 74 that we’ve read a couple times. The idea is God slaying or piercing the monster. Isaiah 27:1 where clearly he slays the monster with the sword, that might lie behind Genesis chapter 3 as well. John may be thinking of this motif of slaying the monster and now the monster’s head appears to be slain in Revelation chapter 13, but also going back to chapter 3. What is important to demonstrate and understand is how John sees this wound or blow taking place. I think within the context, especially in light of chapter 5, and particularly in light of what we have said in chapter 12, as far as what is the historical context for Satan being defeated in heaven and cast down, it was the blood of Christ, or the death of Jesus Christ, Christ’s death and resurrection is the means by which Satan is defeated in chapter 12. I take it as that the context suggests that at the death and resurrection that the beast receives this death blow in fulfillment of Genesis 3, Isaiah 27, etc. The death and resurrection of Christ is what administered the death blow--the wound was fatal, but now the beast apparently has recovered from that wound. This is what causes all of creation now to worship him.

One other thing, and we’ll talk a little bit about that but before we do, is to recognize some have seen in addition to this notion perhaps of Old Testament of God piercing the dragon with the sword and the defeat of Satan at his, at the death and resurrection of Christ. Now being responsible for the fatal wound of the beast, and the Genesis chapter 3 is a possible background.

In addition to that, some have suggested that this notion of the beast appearing to be dead, but now appearing to have recovered is a reflection of Nero’s death in 68 AD. As tradition has it, in 68 AD Nero fled and apparently committed suicide and that actually plunged the Roman Empire into civil war. It plunged it into conflict and chaos, but Rome apparently recovered from that and was apparently restored. Some have suggested then because of that, now the empire appeared to be invincible, it appeared to recover from a so-called death blow. Now, the empire appears to be invincible. That may be the case and we’ll look at a couple of other examples where John may be aware of this



tradition surrounding Nero, especially the tradition surrounding his own death and suicide. We'll look at a couple examples of that, might come into play.

But I want to be clear, although John may be drawing on that as a fear and understanding on the part, a connection with his readers, it's important to understand that story does not dominate presentation. It appears to me that it is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is the controlling feature that deals the death blow. But John may be drawing on not only the Old Testament but stories surrounding Nero, to portray the Roman Empire as something that has been dealt a death blow but now has apparently recovered and apparently is invincible therefore causing the rest of the world to go after the beast, to worship the beast.

In the next session then we'll look at a little bit more detail in terms of how does that work out? Particularly in relationship to the second beast, what does John think or how might this relate to the specific situation of the first century readers from Revelation chapters 2 and 3?

Transcribed by Ryan Paulsen  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 19

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 13: The Two Beasts

After describing the first beast as an agent of Satan in chapter 13 and drawing a number of connections to that, the author now, in verses 3-8, we begin to see the author describing what the beast does and how the people respond and if we are to link the beast with the Roman empire, and/or the emperor, now we see what the emperor does throughout the Roman empire and we see how people respond to that.

First of all, note that the beast claims, as we mentioned a couple times already, universal worship and allegiance. Because of its apparent invincibility, the whole world now follows the beast and they worship both the dragon and the beast. It's possible that at least at one level, this is, although at a broader level, this could just be representative of people's understanding of Rome and their view of Rome and the allegiance they give to Rome, but more specifically this could represent the form that would take, in the form of the emperor cult. So what is portrayed here is a nation that has absolutized its power and now in arrogance and pride, demands the worship and allegiance that only belongs to God and the Lamb.

## Who is like the Beast?

Note intriguingly the question that verse 4 ends with, people responding by saying, "Who is like the beast?" and "Who can make war against him?" This question, this language, not necessarily that any one person literally verbalized this, but it is simply capturing the attitude towards Rome and the way Rome is portrayed and the way people view Rome. This language comes again right out of the Old Testament. For example, back in Exodus chapter 15, the song of Moses, which we'll see will play a key role a little bit later on in a text in Revelation, in Exodus chapter 15 in verse 11, after the Israelites are rescued from Egypt, they cross the Red Sea. Now they sing the song of Moses. Verse 11, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you--majestic in holiness,

awesome in glory, working wonders?” Isaiah chapter 44 in verse 7 is another interesting one. Sometime you might also look Psalm chapter 89 in verse 10. Isaiah chapter 44 in verse 7, and what is significant about Isaiah 44, this is one of those texts that has the statement “you are the first and the last.” And what is important is that it is in the context of idolatry that God alone is worthy of worship. It’s idolatry to render worship and allegiance to anyone or anything other than God alone. So in chapter 44 in verse 7 of Isaiah, we read, “Who then is like me? [God says]. Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and layout before me what has happened since I established my ancient people.”

So this theme, who is like me or who is like God, now in a perverted parody is attributed to the beast and people saying, “Who is like the beast” and “Who can possibly make war against him?” So the beast is to be understood in the context of satanic imitation of God and adding to this idea of an unholy trinity, a perverted parody of the true trinity and now describing the blasphemy and the idolatry that takes place because of the claims that Rome itself is making. They are like any other empire in the Old Testament who usurped the authority that belongs only to God, that absolutizes power, that claimed absolute power and divinity and oppressed God’s people in a way that was ungodly and idolatrous.

The second thing is that note the beast blasphemes God and slanders his name and his dwelling. This is probably alluding back to Daniel chapter 7 in verses 6-8 where we see the beast doing something similar. This once more may be a reference to the emperor cult, it may also be a view of Rome as a whole. But this may more specifically reflect the emperor cult and even reflect the claims of deity that Domitian. For example, if this is the empire ruling when Revelation was written, the deity claimed by Domitian himself, and the allegiance and acclamations and even worship was often given to Domitian, particularly in association with emperor cult, at a local level in the seven cities in Asia Minor as well as other cities.

#### Beast’s Activity in 42 Months

Third, note that the beast is active for 42 months and we've already looked at the fact that 40 suggests a time of testing, though also a time of preservation. So this mention of 42 months links the activity of the beast with what was going on in chapter 11, but also Satan's activity in chapter 12. So this is another reason for not seeing the events of chapter 13 taking place in chronological sequence after chapter 12. But if we're to take the three and half years or time, times, and half time, the 42 months and 1260 days as different ways of referring to the same period, then the 42 months clearly links this back with the casting out of the outer court back at the beginning of chapter 11 which represented the church at the time of tribulation and testing, also the time, times, and half the time of the two witnesses back in chapter 11. The time, times, and half the time is a period of Satan's activity and the preservation of the woman and the persecution of her children in chapter 12. All of these events now are further being described with the mention of the 42 months. So the beast's activity of 42 months is to be seen as covering the same period as all those other time references in earlier chapters.

#### Beast Making War with the Saints

The fourth thing to note is the fact that the beast makes war with the saints also connecting us back with earlier chapters. For example in chapter 11 verse 17, that's exactly what the beast that came out of the Abyss did, he made war with the two witnesses. In chapter 12, verse 17, that's exactly what the dragon does, then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring. So now we see specifically how the dragon makes war with the woman's offspring, through the beast making war with the people and with the saints. So John is again unveiling the true nature of their situation to allow them to see the true source of their struggle and their persecution. Their persecution is at the hands of a demonically inspired beast.

#### Beast's Claims of Sovereignty

Fifth, the beast claims sovereignty over the entire earth. Two things about this, note that, we'll return to this, the universal language, the almost hyperbolic language of Rome has authority over the entire earth. One of the reasons for this is, that one of the dominant themes of Revelation is that we've already seen back in the seventh seal of Revelation chapter 11, is how the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of God and his Messiah. In other words, how does the kingdom of the earth get transferred from Satan and the beast to God and the Lamb. So by emphasizing Rome's dominion over the entire earth, this contributes to this theme of how the transfer of the kingdom of the earth, of the world, in Revelation chapter 11, now comes into the hands and how it is transferred to the sovereignty of God and the Lamb. This explains how the sovereignty, the complete sovereignty, of God and the Lamb recognized and worshipped in chapter 4 and 5, how it eventually works out on earth. So for that reason we find the beast [Rome] claiming an authority over the entire earth.

But I want to make two observations about this. First of all, Rome's authority being seen as universal is almost hyperbolic and perhaps that's intentional in apocalyptic type of literature. This is the author's way of showing the complete domination and authority that Rome wields in the present earth. But there also may be a sense that John is thinking of something more, that is, that Rome's rule is simply part of a broader picture. Rome's rule is simply a harbinger of and part of and anticipation of the rulership of all of the earth that has yet then to be turned over to God and his Messiah. John is drawing on a theme or a principle of the beast ruling over the entire world and now John envisions that as having its application in or manifesting itself in the first century Roman empire. So Rome, then, is simply the first century expression of this principle or this worldwide rule and empire that Christ will one day come and defeat. He has already, in his first coming, defeated, but will one day he will bring it to an end, when the kingdom of this earth will be transferred from Satan and his dominion and now be transferred to God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. So the hyperbole may be intentional and may reflect that John sees Rome as only the first century expression, not that John saw successive empires or a period of time

as we do today, but simply that Rome was the first century manifestation of this empire that would rule over the entire world that one day Christ would come to finally defeat.

Second, note that repeated refrain in chapter 13, the beast was given authority; the beast was given this, probably suggesting once more God's sovereignty over these events. God is the one who is in control of Satan and the beast's activity. He is only permitted to act this way; he is only given the ability to act this way. So as we've seen elsewhere in Revelation, Revelation does not have a dualism where there are two powers at odds with each other, until finally God's power overcomes the power of evil. But already God's power is seen as usurping or over everything else. He has no rivals. Who is like God? He has no rivals! As powerful as this beast appears, there is no true dualism. God himself still remains sovereign over these events and Satan is only permitted to do what God allows him to do in his sovereignty.

So to summarize the point of the first beast, then, is to demonstrate the true cause of the saints trouble, the true source of their persecution and their difficulty caused by the Roman empire in the cities, the region of Asia Minor. The true source is that it comes from a demonically inspired beast that is the agent of Satan. It comes from the same demonically inspired beastly power that lies behind the beastly empires in Daniel chapter 7 and other rulers and empires that were idolatrous and godless and oppressed God's people and opposed God's rule and set itself up as the absolute power in the world. It is that same demonically inspired power that now lies behind the claims of Rome and its emperor and the attempts of Rome to oppress and destroy God's people in the first century.

But for those who are tempted to compromise, this chapter will demonstrate what is at stake and what it is they are compromising with. Compromising with Roman rule is not a neutral thing, but compromising with Roman rule is now to be seen as ultimately giving allegiance to Satan himself. Chapters 12 and 13 are to be read together. The beast representing Rome is nothing less than the agent of Satan. So for those Christians that are tempted to compromise and become complacent in their lifestyle within the Roman

empire, Revelation is a wake-up call to see exactly what it is they are doing and exactly who it is they are giving allegiance to. Behind their allegiance to Rome and even explicit involvement in the emperor cult, behind that lies the worship and allegiance that they are actually giving to the dragon, to Satan himself, from chapter 10. So, behind all of this lies chapter 12, that is, Satan's attempt to destroy the person of Jesus Christ and to destroy his people. But the kicker is Satan has already been defeated, reminding the Christians your battle is not against flesh and blood, but it's against the rulers and authorities of the heavenly realm. Now with that new perspective and knowledge, they're able to face their situation in perseverance but also in maintaining their faithful witness, and refusing to conform, and refusing to conform to the claims of the pagan Roman Empire.

#### Call for Discernment and Obedience

Now very, very briefly, verses 9 and 10 are of a different character. They're sort of an insertion between the first beast and the second beast. Although breaking the narrative, if you took these verses out, the narrative would flow very naturally from the first beast to the second beast. But in breaking the narrative, actually what these texts are is a call for discernment and obedience. Notice it begins "for the one who has an ear, let him hear." In other words, this is not meant primarily, as we've already seen, John is not primarily saying these things just to satisfy the curiosity of his readers as to what is going to happen in the future or what's going on now. This is not meant to fuel our obsession with end time events and figuring out when things happen in relationship to each other. This little insertion reminds us that John is calling on his churches, in light of this, to respond in obedience and to respond in perseverance. "The one who has ears" is repeated from chapters 2 and 3. It is another indication that this is meant to describe the church's situation in chapters 2 and 3. They're told, the one who has ears, let that person hear. Now that same language is repeated here as well.

This language, if anyone is to go into the captivity and into the captivity they will go, if they are to be killed with the sword, they will be killed with the sword, reflects language out of the Old Testament again. Jeremiah chapter 15 in verse 2, and Jeremiah

43 in verse 11. The point of all this though is to say God's people will indeed suffer persecution at the hands of the Roman Empire, but the response should be one of endurance. In other words, in view of the fact that chapters 13:1-8 and the rest of 13 has now provided an apocalyptic perspective on the situation. This now embodies the response of God's people. It is one of endurance and persecution now that they have gained spiritual insight in the situation.

So chapter 13, much like Jesus' parables, which were meant as symbolic ways or metaphorical ways of describing the situation of his readers, and much like Jesus' call on them to have ears to hear, much like that, chapter 13, for those who have ears to hear, provides the spiritual insight into the situation necessary so that God's people can respond in unhindered obedience, endurance and perseverance. But they can only do that because now they have discerned the true nature of Rome and the true nature of their struggle.

### The Second Beast

That brings us to beast number two. I would once more suggest to you that beast number two in verses 11-17 is not the describing a series of events that temporally happen after verses 1-8 and beast number one, but beast number two refers to and covers the same time period and the same events as the events surrounding beast number one in verses 1-8. So that is how is the activity of beast number one gets carried out, it's through beast number two. So, to put all this together, chapter 13 seems to be describing the same events as the end of chapter 12, with the dragon going after the woman and her offspring. How does he do that? Through beast number one. But how does beast number one carry out his activity? It is through beast number two. And notice all the connections how the first beast now apparently gives beast number two the authority to speak on his behalf. Verse 12, he exercises the authority of the first beast on his behalf. So how does the first beast exercise his authority over all the earth? Through beast number two.

We'll talk a little bit about who might this be, who is beast number two? How does he carry out his idolatrous persecuting authority through this beast? There are two



important features of this beast. Number one note that he speaks like a dragon. This clearly connects him back to the dragon in chapter 12. He's also been, as we've seen, connected with the beast because the second point to note is he exercises the authority of the first beast and works on his behalf. Now the question is, who is beast number two? If beast number one, is the Roman Empire, and perhaps the emperor himself, represented in the first beast who rules over all the earth and who makes war on the saints, then who is beast number two?

I would suggest to you that beast number two is the specific means by which the readers of Revelation living in the provinces of Rome, living in Asia Minor, will experience the authority and persecution of beast number one, of Rome or the emperor. That is, how do readers living in Asia Minor and in the seven cities introduced to you in chapters 2 and 3, how do they experience the persecuting authority of Satan and the first beast? It is through beast number two.

So I would suggest to you that beast number two may represent, without being too specific, beast number two probably represents the leaders and officials in the provinces of Asia Minor who are responsible for enforcing things like emperor worship and emperor cult and enforcing allegiance to Rome and to the emperor and for administering the consequences from failing to do so. Actually, one of the intriguing things in this text, those of you that know Greek or read Greek, in this section in verses 11 and following, we find the author choosing a tense form of verbs that you don't find in the first part of chapter 13. He chooses a present tense, that is meant to be highly descriptive or foregrounding. The reason he does that is, I think, is this is where chapters 12 and 13 will impact and influence the readers living in Asia Minor. This is how the authority of Satan, this is how the authority of the first beast, will reach the readers in Asia Minor, through those the leaders and officials and those in the provinces of Asia Minor and the cities who are responsible for enforcing allegiance and worship of Rome and the emperor. They are the ones actually doling out the consequences of failing to do so, without necessarily linking them into any one specific people or group of people.

Elsewhere this person is going to be called the false prophet. For example, later on

in chapter 14, in chapter 20 in verse 12, this second beast, the third member of the unholy trinity, will be called the false prophet. I want to return to that. But what is intriguing here is there's little by way of description. He is simply said to talk like a dragon and have two horns like a lamb. But what is more important is what this beast does. So, for example, he gets people to worship the first beast, which as we said may be an indication of the emperor worship in the cities of Asia Minor, which most of them had images, or most of them had temples not only to foreign gods, but most of them had temples in the honor of the emperor, imperial temples where emperor worship took place. Many of them had people, wardens over the temple, who were responsible for ensuring that temple worship was observed and maintained. But another important feature is that in verses 13-15, this beast is able to deceive people to worship the first beast through various means that we'll look at.

This beast is able to deceive people to worship beast number one. For example, fire comes down from heaven, and to back up, notice this language of deceiving people and getting people to worship the beast. Number one goes back not only to the first part of chapter 13 but back to chapter 12. Note that Satan was described in verse 9 of chapter 12, as the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, who leads the whole world astray, or who deceives the entire world. Now Satan's deceptive activity is carried out by beast number one, but now specifically, among the readers by beast number two, who is able to deceive people to follow and worship the first beast, Rome and perhaps its emperor as well.

### Signs of Beast Two

There are two interesting signs that he performs, one is fire coming down from heaven. The other is he's able to give life to an image that is created. I'm a little bit reticent to try to get too specific and literal in identifying certain events that this resembles. For example, is this a reference to magicians in first century Rome that actually do something like this? Is this an example of ventriloquism, that some would suggest that the ability to make an image appear as it could speak. It's possible that lies behind it, but I think that these two images of fire coming down from heaven and giving

the image ability to speak are once more just ways of emphasizing the deceptive power of the Roman Empire.

They probably draw on two Old Testament texts. For example, the fire coming down from heaven might call Elijah calling down fire from heaven in his conflict with Baal. Is it possible that this refers to actual signs in the Roman empire? That's conceivable, if you remember in Exodus, the magicians were able to replicate most of the signs, miraculous plagues that Moses poured out on Egypt. But other than that, I think it's primarily drawing on Old Testament language of fire coming down from heaven is simply meant to symbolize the ability of the Roman Empire to deceive through its power.

What about the image that can speak? More than likely the image, as we saw, the image probably goes back to another Old Testament text, to Daniel chapter 3, where Nebuchadnezzar sets up an image of himself. The image was meant to represent Nebuchadnezzar and his rule and authority over the entire kingdom. So the image here may represent the images and statues and temples that you find in most of the cities in Asia Minor as representing and reflecting the rule of Rome and the empire and the emperor throughout the empire such as in the cities of Asia Minor. But being able to give the image power to speak maybe should not be taken too literally, but once more a symbol of the power of Rome to deceive its citizens, its inhabitants into giving allegiance and worship to Rome itself.

One other thing to note about the deceptive activity of the beast as we've already noted the fact that beast number two is able to deceive, recalls Satan's deceptive activity going all the way back to creation, chapter 3 of Genesis, where he deceives Adam and Eve, and now in chapter 12 in verse 9 of Revelation, he leads the world astray or deceives the entire world. So the beast is clearly the way that Satan continues and acts out his deceptive activity in his offspring, beast number two.

### The Second Beast and Chapters 2-3

However, I wonder if another important feature of the deceptive activity of the beast and this may also be one of the reasons why he is called a false prophet. When you go back to chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, the messages to the seven churches, you note

that there are false teachers in a number of the churches or false prophets, prophetic figures with whom John seems to be in conflict and disagreement. These prophetic figures or false teachers whose task seems to be to deceive Christians into compromising with the Roman empire, with ungodly, oppressive, idolatrous Rome. For example, back in chapter 2, in verse 14, in the message to the church at Pergamum, he says nevertheless I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who enticed the Israelites or deceived the Israelites to sin by eating food offered/sacrificed to idols, and by committing sexual immorality. In 15 he says, “likewise you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans,” which probably are also teaching people to compromise with pagan rule. Chapter 2, in verse 20, the message to the church Thyatira says, “Nevertheless I have this against you, you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet.” Interesting connection to the false prophet now, she calls herself a prophet and here’s what she does. “By her teaching, she misleads or deceives my servants in the sexual immorality.” So I wonder if this is a further factor in identifying beast number two. Not only is this the source of deception behind the Roman Empire and the emperor cult and things like this, but notice it’s important to understand the beast is able to deceive the entire world, not just Christians. The entire world is deceived but on the other hand, I wonder if there is not some connection here between the beast and those in the churches such as this woman that he calls Jezebel. Note the Nicolaitans and those who hold the teaching of Balaam who are deceiving the church, and Jezebel the prophet who is now deceiving the church in the compromising with pagan Rome and giving Rome allegiance and worship. So the false teacher, the false prophet, is going affect the readers of chapters 2 and 3 in a different way, depending on whether they are resisting or whether they are in danger of giving in to and following these false teachers. John now is showing us the true source behind this deceptive teaching and prophecy and false teaching in the church, as well as in the deceptive activity in the broader world.

#### Economic Sanctions and the Second Beast

Now the last thing that the beast does is, in verses 16 and 17, the beast is able to level economic sanctions, especially on God's people, but on the entire world for refusal to give allegiance to and worship to the beast, that is Rome and its emperor. In order to engage in commerce, apparently according to these verses, it requires that they receive a mark. Now within a broader context of Revelation, the mark here that they receive on their forehead is clearly a parody to the mark or seal that the 144,000, symbolizing the entire church, the people of God, the mark that they receive on the forehead as well. So probably, the mark is meant to represent identity in belonging, whose mark you have. For example, the mark could have, literally in the first century, represented a brand or mark on a slave showing identity in belonging. In Revelation 7, the mark also seems to indicate preservation or protection as well. But whether this is an identity in belonging so that rather than this being a literally mark that these people must actually have, or some kind of literal brand that could have happened, I don't know.

But at least in Revelation's discourse, rather than taking this too literally, it's probably a symbol of identity in belonging. Those who associate with Rome, those that demonstrate their allegiance to Rome and to the emperor, are now the ones permitted to engage in commerce, permitted to buy and sell. Which we saw back in chapter 6, was not necessarily a good thing, we saw a picture of the commercial and economic life of Rome kind of turned upside down and in chaos and unbalance and even oppressive and unjust as part of God's judgment on them. But here, they are belonging to Rome, through demonstrating their allegiance to Rome, perhaps through being involved in the emperor cult. Now this is the mark that they receive allowing them to participate in commerce. What John may have in mind in the first century would have been those who, remember in connection with a couple of the churches we talked about in Revelation chapter 2 and 3, there were those who would have been, as part of their work, would have been required to be involved in trade guilds. Often those trade guilds had patron deities, but also you would belong to them, in order to ensure success in your business, you would belong to these trade guilds. Part of belonging to them would have meant that on certain occasions you would have been required to be involved in activities that not only would

have demonstrated worship and allegiance and gratitude to the god but also to the emperor. That is, by being in the trade guilds and commerce you would have been closely intertwined with the emperor cult. We've said numerous times that in first century Rome it was impossible to unravel the connection between commerce, politics and religion as well. So part of commerce, part of belonging to the trade guilds, part of engaging in commerce and trade and work in the first century Roman Empire and in the churches in seven cities in Asia Minor, would have meant being involved in the worship of pagan gods and also in the idolatrous emperor cult as well. So the picture here would be pressure to conform or suffer the economic consequences. Probably that's why, for example, Smyrna is described as poor, and why Laodicea is described as wealthy. Smyrna refused to compromise with the pagan Roman Empire through their religious system of emperor worship, they refused to compromise and now are suffering the consequences. So they are described as poor and of little reputation. Whereas Laodicea is a very wealthy city, probably indicating their willingness to compromise because of that they have become complacent as a result of that.

So the point being so far that John is unveiling is the true struggle that the churches in Asia Minor face, and that is the satanic inspired attempt of Rome to deceive God's people by getting them to compromise by worshipping and giving allegiance to the beast and even being compromised within the context of commerce and carrying out their business and in connection with the trade guilds. Now they are being tempted to compromise by being involved in opportunities and being forced to conform to opportunities and times to show allegiance to Rome and to the beast, to the Roman Empire. Now John reminds them that behind all of this, although back to chapter 12, is Satan's attempt to oppress and destroy God's people. Now chapter 13 has provided them spiritual insight into the situation so that now they have the strength necessary to persevere and to endure and to resist compromising with the pagan Roman Empire.

Mark of the Beast: 666

Now we can't leave Revelation 13 without saying something about the mark of the beast at the very end. The point especially in verse 18, this calls for wisdom. "If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, the beast number is 666, six hundred and sixty-six. But first of all, it is important to put this in broader context. Chapter 13 ends with verse 18, which is another call for discernment and insight. So this is not a call primarily for trying calculate who the beast might be or who the end time antichrist might be or how close we are to the end, that's not the point. This language of having wisdom is in the context of the one who has an ear, let that person hear. That is, it's a call for wisdom so that they can have true discernment and insight into their situation. Here they are called to have wisdom as to the number of this beast, which apparently is connected with his name. That's interesting. In verse 17, the mark, is the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Now in verse 18, it's called the number of man, or a human number that they are to calculate, which is the number 666. But first of all we need to understand, it's a call for discernment and wisdom into the situation so that they can respond, so that they can resist the idolatrous system of worship that they're being forced to conform to.

First of all, we need to recognize that this reference to the name by saying that this mark that they're going to receive is the name of the beast. This is meant intentionally to contrast with the mention of the name of God or the name that is to be written on Christians elsewhere in the book of Revelation. So for example, back in chapter 2 in verse 17 and chapter 3 in verse 12, part of the promise to the overcomers in those texts is that they will have the name of the Father or the name of the new Jerusalem written on them. Chapter 14 verse 1, "Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him, 144,000 who had his name and the Father's name written on their foreheads." And chapter 22 in verse 4, in the final section of the New Jerusalem vision, at the very end of the book in verse 4, describing God's people, "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." So the name of the beast written on those who are allowed to engage in commerce is meant as a direct contrast to other places in

Revelation where a name, the name of Christ or the name of the Father, is written on the foreheads of God's people. So that probably this should be taken symbolically again and indicating identity in belonging or allegiance and association with, depending on whose name one bears.

But what is this 666 that the name is identified with? Part of the difficulty, part of the reason why they are called to discern this situation, I wonder if it doesn't have to do with because the beast acts deceptively, because of the deceptive nature of the beast's activity, it calls for insight and discernment on the part of the readers. So now they are called upon to have wisdom, that is, because of the deceptive nature of idolatry, because of what is at stake. It requires that they have wisdom and insight and discernment into the situation in order to resist it and in order not to be sucked into it and to conform.

But what is this number 666? There's a number of things we could say about this text, but I want to focus on what seems to occupy most people's attentions and that is, the number 666. Probably, according to most people, this reflects the common notion in the first century of what is called *gematria*. That was an ancient practice that associated the letters of the alphabet with numbers. What would happen is you would take a person's name or the name of something, take the numerical value of each of the letters that would have been understood and assumed, and add all of them up to come up with a number. Therefore the number would be sort of a code or indication of the name. And there are plenty of examples of this. For example, the name Jesus in Greek, Ἰησοῦς, in Greek if you take the numerical, the assumed numerical values of each of the letters of Jesus, Ἰησοῦς in Greek, it adds up to 888 or eight hundred and eighty-eight. Some have even said that provides what's going on here. The beast, 666, is meant to be sort of a parody of Jesus' name, 888. That's possible. But it's intriguing that the author's call for wisdom has usually been ignored here and so that 666 has been subject to all kinds of speculation. Sometimes the number 666 has been associated with historical individuals. For example, in the United States of America, the number 666 has often been associated with presidents themselves. Outside of the United States, the number 666 has been associated with other evil rulers such as Saddam Hussein or Adolf Hitler or even the pope at times,



in the Reformation. 666 has been used to associate with certain popes in the Roman Catholic Church.

But other attempts have been made to associate 666 with modern day technology. I've seen personally, since I've been paying attention to it, and there could be other examples of it, but personally I've seen examples of 666 go from indicating barcodes on items that you purchase two credit cards to computer chips that people think will one day be embedded in our forearms or our skulls to keep track of us and things like that.

Also, you frequently see the number 666 motivating the way people act, almost sometimes rashly. For example, I know of people who have intentionally return license plates, even though it's cost them more money, they've returned license plates because it had the number 666 on them. Or they've had their phone number changed because it had 666. I know of one person who refused to pay a bill because it came back as \$6.66. And so the number 666 influences and plays a role in the way we look at things, and how we even interpret reality.

But I want you to remember two important principles. First of all, from our discussion of the literary genre of Revelation and the hermeneutical principles that flow from that. First of all, is would John's readers have been able to make sense of this? I'm convinced that John's readers, for them, this was not a mystery, it was a call for wisdom, and this call to calculate the number is something they could have done. So, the problem is 2000 years later, we are the ones in the dark and we try to scramble to make sense of this. But first of all, John's readers would have and could have made sense of this.

And second, related to that, is one of the most important hermeneutical principles that we saw, that for any interpretation of Revelation to be plausible and compelling, must be something that John could have understood and that his readers could have understood, or John could have intended and his readers living in the first century Greco-Roman Empire, in a pre-technological, pre-consumer age, pre-modern day warfare age, pre-nuclear age, something that they could have understood and would have made sense of. In my mind that rules out a lot of the possible explanations of 666 that have been proposed down through the centuries. Especially today, particularly those that associate

with modern technological features of our day, our modern methods of warfare, and things like barcodes and computers and things like that. That principle rules those kinds of explanations out immediately.

It's interesting that this is described as the number of a man, there's a little bit of difficulty here. Does this mean a human number? Even then I'm not sure what that would mean, what would be a human number as opposed to an angelic number or something like that. We could take it as the number of a man, that is in reference to a person. Verse 17 could certainly lend itself to that, when he says, no one can buy and sell unless he received the mark, which is the name of the beast, or the number of his name. So verse 17 almost suggests or requires that the number have some reference or relationship to the beast itself.

#### 666 as Nero

Because of this, it simply raises the question, what person might that be? Because of this, by far the most common explanation is that the beast number is to be associated with the name of Nero, that's the most common explanation. And this would certainly make sense, this is not suggesting that Revelation was written back then in the time of Nero. It may simply mean that given the nature of Nero's reign and the evil that is often associated with him, even outside of Christians' attitude toward him in the first century, Nero would have become almost a model for or almost a type of evil and the evil emperor to come, or any other emperor. So that by using 666 as reference to Nero, the idea is not that the author is referring literally to Nero, but that almost the spirit, the evil of Nero, is now once again embodied in the Roman emperor that now the first century Christians face at the time John is writing. So the same godless, evil spirit that embodied Nero and this emperor, Nero being a model for evil, now is resident in and surfaces in the present emperor, which would be Domitian if the most common view of the date of Revelation is accepted.

The problem though, comes with linking Nero's name exactly with 666, and as most realize, it really can't be done with Greek. But so that most have attempted to associate Nero's name with the way it would have been spelled in Hebrew. But even

there, there's a problem because Nero's name, even in Hebrew, can only add up to 666 if it is spelled in a rather rare way, if it's not spelled in the common way. That is, do you see where I'm going? The only way to connect Nero in Greek with 666 is to assume that it's reflecting the spelling of Nero and not just Nero, Nero Caesar in Hebrew and then a rather rare spelling at that. So the problem is you'd have to assume, that's the only way you'd get to 666 then. So that problem is you'd have to assume two things. Number one, that the readers, many of them, would have understood Hebrew. Number two, that they would've been familiar with a rather rare spelling of the name of Nero Caesar in Hebrew. Because of that, many have looked for other explanations, but I would suggest, it's still possible, particularly because the link between the mark and the number and the name of the emperor in verse 17. So it is possible that John is alluding to Nero's name, again, as a model of evil that now is surfacing again in the Roman empire ruling as he writes.

Another possibility is to see the number 666, as the number of a human, that is a human number, or one short of the perfect number 7. So 666 would be one short of the perfect number 777. So this would be the number of sinful, fallen, godless, idolatrous humanity, now embodied in the human ruler Domitian, who is now portrayed as an imperfect, evil, idolatrous and deceptive human being that falls short of the perfect number 7. So that then this is the author's way of trying to get the readers to discern the true nature of Rome and its emperor by seeing it as a godless, idolatrous, another way of emphasizing the godless, idolatrous nature of the Roman Empire and its emperor by perhaps linking him with Nero but now portraying him as his name falls short of the perfect number 7. He instead embodies imperfection and evil and idolatry and by discerning who it is that embodies this. Now Christians will be better able to resist and to not be deceived by the godless, idolatrous practices of the Roman empire.

#### Conclusion on Rev 12 and 13

So chapters 12 and 13 bring us to the end of the very important section that, in true apocalyptic fashion, is unveiling not only the true nature of Rome, Rome is this hideous beast that is satanically inspired, and embodies evil, idolatry, oppression and godlessness from previous generations and empires, now malfeasant in Rome. It also spells out for

Christians, the true source of their struggle. In Pauline language, their struggle is not just with flesh and blood, but their struggle is with the authority and the ruler of the heavenly realms, who is Satan himself. Now armed with this new perspective and knowledge, God's people are now able to perceive in see their situation in a new light. To get those Christians that are compromising to wake up and resist, to realize what it is they are in danger of doing, but to get those Christians who are suffering and even being persecuted, to get them to persevere and to endure and to remain and to retain their faithful witness, no matter what the consequences.

Transcribed by Charlie Mitchell  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 20

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Revelation 14: Salvation of Saints/Judgment on Wicked

Introduction and Chapter 14 Organization:

In chapter 12 and 13 we looked at the uncovering or unveiling of the true nature of the church's conflict at the hand of Satan, and the beasts who deceived the entire world into worshipping them, and the call for the church to persevere and endure in the midst of this by refusing to compromise. Now, in chapters 14 and 15, we approach a series of images that describe both the victory of saints and the reward of the saints who were faithful and who persevered through chapters 12 and 13. But there is also then the judgment that comes upon the unbelieving world, and the beast and his followers—those who followed the beast and gave him allegiance. Now we find their judgment. So we find reward in chapter 14 and into 15, which appears to be rather disjointed. We find the reward of the saints and the punishment of the wicked and unbelievers alternate throughout this section.

This section once more explores the meaning of final judgment and the meaning of salvation as the author will alternate in his vision between judgment and salvation. This section, chapter 14 all the way through the first four verses of chapter 15, can be divided into a series of sections that are introduced by John saying “I looked” or “I saw.” That little phrase “I looked” or “I saw” in your English translations often functions to mark off distinct units or sections. “I looked” or “I saw” marks off at least four different sections in chapter 14 and into 15.

First of all, the first section is found in chapter 14 and verses 1-5 where we see a vision of the lamb and the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion celebrating their victory. The second section is found in chapter 14 and verse 6-13 and this is the image of three angels who proclaim a gospel and end time salvation or end time judgment. Then third is we

find a vision in chapter 14 verses 14-20 of the Son of Man coming to harvest the earth. We actually find there two images of harvest; one a grain harvest and one a harvest of grapes. Then finally, in chapter 15 verses 1-4 we find the saints standing victorious by the sea and singing a song of victory demonstrating they have overcome.

### Reading through Chapter 14

So those are the four main sections that we'll sort of follow, but let me read chapter 14 and I want you to note those three sections divided by, "Then I looked" or "then I saw."

Chapter 14, "**Then I looked**, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. [In direct contrast to chapter 13] And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. <sup>3</sup> And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. <sup>4</sup> These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first fruits to God and the Lamb. <sup>5</sup> No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

<sup>6</sup> **Then I saw** another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. <sup>7</sup> He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the springs of water." <sup>8</sup> A second angel also followed and said, 'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great,' which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.'

<sup>9</sup> A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on their forehead or on their hand, <sup>10</sup> He, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured out full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and

of the Lamb. <sup>11</sup> And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. There is no rest for them day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.’ <sup>12</sup> This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. <sup>13</sup> Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’ <sup>14</sup> **Then I looked**, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. <sup>15</sup> Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to the one seated on the cloud, ‘Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.’ <sup>16</sup> So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. <sup>17</sup> Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. <sup>18</sup> Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, ‘Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.’ <sup>19</sup> The angel swung his sickle on earth; he gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath. <sup>20</sup> They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

#### Parallels between Chapter 13 and Chapter 14

This sections begins, to back up, what is going on in chapter 14. As we’ve noted it’s a series of alternating scenes between salvations and judgment. What it does it portrays the salvation and reward of the faithful who endured in chapters 12 and 13. But now, it portrays the judgment of those who worshipped the beast and his image, who received the mark of the beast, and those who compromised and refused to resist and instead engaged in the entire ideology of Rome and its claims. So, chapter 14 now will portray scenes of salvation and judgment depicting the two different responses of the people in chapters 12 and 13.

So chapter 14 begins with a picture of the lamb, which is to be an intentional

contrast to the beast in chapter 13. Beast number one, who like the lamb, was slain now appears to have risen. Jesus is portrayed as the one who died and who was slain but now is alive. Now the beast also imitates that by appearing to have died and he in fact did die because of the death and resurrection of Christ, but now appears to be alive. So the first beast is a parody of Jesus Christ, but the second beast also, is described in chapter 13 and verse 11 is described as having two horns like a lamb. So the lamb here is meant to be in direct contrast to the two beasts from chapter 13.

Now, what we find in chapter 14 then is Jesus Christ and his followers. In other words, in chapter 13 we found the two beasts and their followers, and then those who refused to follow were persecuted. But now those who refused to follow in chapter 13, who have followed the lamb, now stand with the lamb victorious on Zion. The 144,000 we've already been introduced to in chapter 7. We said there they represented a mighty army, that is, the church in fulfillment of Old Testament images of Israel as an army. Now the church, as an army, went out to do battle, yet they did so through their suffering witness. In chapters 12 and 13 we see that the beast did battle. It waged war with the saints, but the saints emerged victorious because of their suffering witness. Now they stand with their leader Jesus Christ they are celebrating their victory on Mount Zion.

#### The 144,000

We already noted that the fact that they are called virgins, or those who did not defile themselves with women probably have a two-fold emphasis. Number one, it probably reflects from Deuteronomy, for example, the stipulation in the Old Testament, that during times of battle, the male warriors would abstain sexual relationships, but also it's probably simply a symbol of purity that they have not defiled themselves with the idolatrous practices of Rome in chapter 12 and especially chapter 13. Instead, now they stand victorious because they resisted. They refused to defile themselves. So this may not be a literal reference to sexual purity; although that could be included, but I think it's more reference to the idolatrous practices and the allegiance and worship of Rome back in chapter 13 that was being enforced, that they refused to participate in and suffered the consequences of. Now, they stand victorious because they resisted and refused to



compromise.

I also want you to notice in these verses in chapter 14, further confirmation that this 144,000 probably represent the people of God more broadly. They're not just ethnic Israelites. They're not just a segment of the broader people of God, but note how they're described. They're described as purchased from among men, as redeemed from the earth. That is language that comes out of Revelation 1 and 5 of Jesus redeeming people from the earth people from every tribe and language and nation purchasing them to make them a kingdom of priests. So I take it the 144,000, again is an image for those who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, the lamb, who have been redeemed from all the earth to now constitute his people, and those are the people of the Lamb. So this is the international people of God both Jew and Gentile. The true people of God now portrayed as an army. The 144,000, stand victorious with the Lamb, their leader, on Mount Zion and this probably contrasts too with chapter 11, 12, and 13 from the standpoint there, although in chapter 11 the two witnesses end up vindicated at the end. In chapter 11 the two witnesses appeared to suffer defeat and in chapters 12 and 13 they also appear to suffer defeat, and that the dragon and his two offspring the beasts are allowed to wage war on the people of God. They have apparently suffered defeat at the hands of the beasts-the two beasts and the dragon himself. But now, they are shown in chapter 14 to be a mighty army that stands victorious. They have won the victory of the war in chapters 12 and 13, and now they stand victorious with their leader Jesus Christ.

Verse 4 of chapter 14 is probably my favorite verse in the entirety of the book of Revelation, and I think it encapsulates the most important theme, in Revelation and that is the 144,000 are described as those who "follow the Lamb wherever he goes." The main theme of the book is that God's people are those "who follow the lamb wherever he goes" even if it means following him to the point of death. God's people are those who refuse to compromise. They refuse to conform to this world; instead, they follow the Lamb wherever he goes; and here they follow him to victory. Here they are portrayed as remaining unpolluted from the world. Notice this verse, "they follow the Lamb wherever

they go,” occurs right at the end of the description of them as those who did not defile themselves through idolatrous practices. So “following the Lamb wherever he goes” means following by being pure, by refusing to compromise with the idolatrous evil world, but also clearly in the broader context of Revelation means to do so even in the face of suffering and death, just as Jesus Christ did.

### Mount Zion Imagery

Two further important images in this section to draw your attention to is note the image of Mount Zion. Without going into a lot of detail Mount Zion also has an Old Testament background. Mount Zion is the image for the place where God rules--a place of protection and security. We find in the Old Testament prophetic texts Zion is the place where God would deliver his people. Psalm chapter 2, Isaiah chapter 2, verse 2, Psalm chapter 48 all texts that refer to God’s deliverance of his people and them coming to Mount Zion. For example, and I’ll just read one of those in Isaiah chapter 2 at the very beginning of the book in a scene that anticipates the final judgment of God and his people, the final salvation of God that he will bring, the judgment of God and his enemies. Now the final salvation that God will bring to his people, that interestingly will also include the nations. Isaiah says this:

“This is what Isaiah the son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the last days. The mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised among the hills and all the nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘come let us go up to the mountain of Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.’”

So Zion here seems to signify the entire city of Jerusalem, the place where God’s throne is, the place where the temple is, the place where God rules, the place of protection, and the place where now God brings salvation to his people. Probably Zion here is to be identified with end time New Jerusalem in Revelation chapter 21 and 22. So in one sense this scene is another scene that is simply preparing for a further exposition, and further unpacking, and further divulging that occurs in Revelation 21 and 22. So now

God's people stand on Zion the place of God's presence, the place of protection, and the place of salvation.

#### Meaning of 144,000 Described as First Fruits

The other interesting piece of terminology here is in verse 4; they are also described as offered as first fruits. Now the first fruit was in the Old Testament although, we also find it used this way in the New Testament. "First fruits" was literally an agricultural term or a term of harvest referring to the first part of a harvest that was a guarantee of more to come. In fact, it wasn't just separate from everything else to come, it was actually part of the harvest itself. It was the initial part of the fuller harvest that had yet to come, and we find this in the New Testament usage. Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15 and elsewhere. In Colossians chapter 1, Paul refers to Jesus' resurrection as a first fruit. That is, Christ's resurrection is first installment of the more resurrections to come. That is, it's not that Christ's resurrection is one thing, and it provides a model for more. Christ's resurrection is actually the inauguration of the end time resurrection that his people will also experience. Jesus' own physical resurrection is the first fruits of or, that is, the first installment of the rest of the resurrections that are yet to come.

Now here the understanding should possibly be that the 144,000 are a group that anticipate more to come. That would certainly be consistent with the imagery the first fruit. So some have understood the 144,000 here as a special group, but they are the first fruits of a larger group that is yet to come. The difficulty with that is when you look at the text here it seems that here, as back in chapter 7, the 144,000 sort of morph into, in symbolic language, an innumerable multitude that stood in God's presence before the throne and enjoying their inheritance. It appears to me that here in chapter 14, standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb victorious especially anticipates Revelations 21 and 22.

Here you have not an anticipatory scene of more to come. You have the final salvation, the final outcome, of the battle and the final salvation of the people. The complete number of God's people at the end of the age following the battle. So here you have the final people at the end of history. Not a group indicating more to come. Yet intriguingly in the Old Testament, we do find first fruits utilized in terms of the entire

nation of Israel being the first fruit, not in terms of more to come, but the entire nation themselves being viewed as an offering or as first fruits. For example, we find this language of harvest or first fruits in Jeremiah chapter 2, verses 2 and 3 where Israel is called the first of the harvest. The entire nation of Israel is called the first of the harvest. So, Jeremiah chapter 2 and at the very beginning of the book, in verses 2 and 3 Jeremiah uses first fruits language to refer to the entire nation of Israel not part of them. You see similar language in Ezekiel chapter 20 verses 40 through 41 of Israel, interestingly on the mount, being associated with first fruits. In the New testament in James chapter 1 verse 18 you find the people of God, the entirety of the people of God, described as first fruits not of more to come, but the entire people of God in Revelation 14 along with the Old Testament, in a couple of these Old Testament uses of the first fruits.

The “first fruits” here present the 144,000 not as a group anticipating more to come, but the word “first fruit” here is portraying the entire end time people of God at the end of history. It is now being portrayed as a first fruit as an offering to God. So in contrast to chapter 13 then, and by the way I want to return to that, I think that concept of these 144,000 here emblematic of the entire end time people of God as a first fruit. This will be important for helping us understand another image that comes later on in chapter 14, but at this point it is in contrast to chapter 13 where the beast deceives the entire world. Here he deludes them into giving him allegiance. Giving the beast the allegiance that he demands and requires and also he makes war with the people of God. Now you find God’s faithful people standing victorious having engaged in battle with the dragon and with the beast of chapter 12 and 13. Now they stand with their leader, the lamb, and with the mark of God on their forehead, not the mark of the beast from chapter 13. Now they stand as pure having abstained from the world, they sing a song celebrating their victory with the lamb on Mount Zion.

#### The Three Angels

The first part of the vision is clearly meant to be an interpretation or a demonstration of the outcome of the conflict narrated in chapters 12 and 13. But now in the next section verses 6-13 demonstrate what happens to those who side with the beast.

What happens to those who were bought into the deceptive activity of the beast who took upon themselves the mark of the beast, that is, the symbol identifying with, showing their allegiance, showing their worship of the beast. Perhaps it was to avoid persecution or to avoid economic sanctions at the end of chapter 13. What happened to those that took upon themselves the mark of the beast, identified with the beast, gave him lordship and allegiance? Chapter 6 and 13 narrate the failure of those who resist, those who refused to resist, and those who compromised. It's structured around the speech of three different angels.

Angel number one comes to proclaim an eternal gospel. Now it's interesting the content that he proclaims is: "Fear God and give him glory." Interestingly, this is the same language we saw back in chapter 11 and 13 and 14-where some of the survivors of the judgment feared God and gave him glory. That suggests that both here and there in chapter 11, you may have a reference to repentance, so what you have here then is this angel calls for repentance. The implication is not for those who refuse but instead for those who choose to follow the beast, now they will receive judgment. This would include also those in the church who were compromising, and chose to throw their lot in with Rome and its idolatrous, godless system of worship. So angel number one proclaims a gospel and those who refuse will find themselves facing final judgment in the speech of the first angel.

### Second Angel

The next the two, and probably we should not see these three separate, maybe the next two describe more clearly what's going to happen to those who refuse the message of angel number one. Those who refuse to fear God and give glory will face judgment. Now here's exactly what it is they face: in verses 8 and following in the form of the next two angels. Angel number two declares judgment upon Babylon. This probably has its background again in the Old Testament, Daniel chapter 4 and verse 30 and other Old Testament texts that portray the judgment of Babylon itself, but what we have here is the first anticipation in 14:8, "Fallen! Fallen! is Babylon the great, which make all the nations drink the maddening of wine of her adulteries." Here we see the first anticipation of

something that will get developed in more detail in chapter 17 and 18 where we find a description of Babylon and then a detailed description of its downfall and of its judgment and destruction.

Probably here we're to take Babylon as a code for Rome. That is Babylon going all the way back to the Old Testament, Babylon is almost becoming--we'll talk more about this in chapters 17 and 18, but Babylon is almost becoming an image or a symbol for an antigodly, arrogant, idolatrous, oppressive nation or empire. Babylon almost becomes a symbol for that. Now that label applies appropriately to the Roman Empire, who is now another godless, arrogant, violent, oppressive, an idolatrous empire. So Babylon is a fitting designation. So you have the same speeches embodied in ancient Babylon now surfacing and emerging again and are embodied in the first century city of Rome in the first century Roman Empire that John is addressing. We'll find this repeated in a moment in chapter 16 in verse 19, a couple chapters later, and then as we said it gets narrated in more detail in chapters 17 and 18. So the idea here if Babylon is to fall, then those who belong to her and compromise with her will fall also. So it's not just a destruction of a physical city, but those who belong to her will suffer the same fate if they do not fear God and repent which was the message of angel in chapter 1. If they refuse to resist and if they compromise, they will suffer the fate of Babylon, which now the angel pronounces is about to fall in judgment.

### The Third Angel

The third angel also proclaims a message and this message clearly indicates the consequences for allegiance to the beast back in chapter 13. Here the judgment is proclaimed on those from chapter 13, notice those in verse 10 who worshipped his image, those who received verse 9, "Those who received the mark on the forehead or on their hand." Those two descriptions go right back to chapter 13. So those in chapter 13 that received the mark of the beast, that worshipped that image, that gave their allegiance to idolatrous godless Rome, now this is the judgment that will befall him. What we find in this description is actually language that anticipates the final judgment that one will find in chapters 18 through 20. So already this is a kind of a fast forward glimpse and

anticipation of the final judgment that will get more fully developed in latter chapters though much of that language already occurs here in describing the fate of those who have thrown their lot with Babylon Rome, who have given their allegiance and worship to the beast, to the idolatrous godless oppressive empire.

Notice the language that is used first of all it's described as drinking the cup of God's wrath. In the Old Testament God's wrath as a cup of wine was a common metaphor for God's judgment as was mixing that wine in a way that was undiluted with water but instead was of full strength. So God's wrath then will be given in full strength. In Jeremiah chapter 25, which may provide the backdrop for this language, among other Old Testament texts, but this one seems to be an important one in Jeremiah chapter five in verses 15 through 18. We read this,

“This is what the LORD the God of Israel, said to me: ‘Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword that I will send among them.’ So I took the cup from the Lord's hand and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it: Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing, as they are today, Pharaoh king of Egypt, his attendants,” et cetera.

So Jeremiah chapter 25 is one of the most important texts that provides the background for the notion of a cup of unmixed wine and of wine of full strength, undiluted wine, signifying God's wrath and causing the nations to drink of it and become drunk and become symbolic of God pouring out his judgment on wicked humanity. So the nations are portrayed as intoxicated with, interestingly, the wrath of God. Later on we'll see this back up in verse 8 again that shows these messages are connected in verse 8 to Babylon has fallen. Why? Because it has made all the nations drink the wine of her adulteries.

So all the nations are drunk because of the immorality because of the idolatry, because of the oppressive nation and the evil and wickedness of the Roman Empire that's why it's going to be destroyed because it has made the nations drink of that. The nations

have become intoxicated with Rome's rule. Now, the author seems to invoke the notion of the punishment will fit the crime. That is, Babylon/Rome, has made the nations drunk with its wine; now God is going to make them drunk with his wine, that is, the wine of God's wrath. So the punishment will fit the crime not only Babylon but for all those who associate with Babylon. All those who participate in Babylon, Rome's, idolatrous evil practices, will now become drunk on the wrath of God, on the wine of his wrath.

The second thing is to note the language of eternal judgment where you have this language of smoke and sulfur going up forever and ever. This language of smoke and sulfur is another image or symbolism that comes of Old Testament and also apocalyptic language. It simply represents intense and severe suffering from the divine judgment that now comes upon the people, and the smoke is described as going up forever and ever. Interestingly, when you get to chapter 17 or chapter 18 of Revelation that is how Babylon's destruction is described: as smoke going up forever and ever. So already this text is giving you a glimpse of a fuller picture of judgment, not a separate or different judgment. It's the same judgment, but it will be developed more fully and in more detail in later chapters. This language again appears to reflect, for example, Isaiah chapter 34. If you go back to Isaiah chapter 34 and verses 9 and 10, I think you will find this similar language in the context of judgment 34 and 8 through 10.

“For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution to uphold Zion's cause [interestingly notice the name Zion in connection with Zion mentioned at the beginning of 14] Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch. It will not be quenched day and night; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.”

So note that language of fire and the language of sulfur in the context of judgment. Notice the language of smoke going up forever and ever as a sign of God's judgment that John seems draw on here. But again interestingly in Isaiah 34, it is in the context of the protection of Zion, which you also find in the beginning of Revelation chapter 14.

So John is simply gathering language from the Old Testament scenes of judgment,



to describe God's judgment on another wicked, evil, oppressive, idolatrous empire and those who belong to it. So that once more we should not take this language literally as describing some literal physical torment the people suffer because they are inhaling the smoke or because of the sulfur and certainly we should not take this as some reference to some end time nuclear war or anything like that, but John is drawing on rather stock symbolism from the Old Testament to portray the meaning and the certainty of God's judgment in the same way he judged wicked empires in the past. So God's people in the first century can be certain that he will judge Rome as well, and any other evil empire that would play that same role.

So the angelic proclamation in these three sections, in the entirety of these three sections, are meant probably to go together. It's a call for repentance to fear God and give him glory. A refusal to do so will involve them in the fate of Babylon, which is to fall. And also will make them recipients of God's wrath in terms of an eternal smoke or burning sulfur using Old Testament imagery, but also using imagery of being drunk with wine, the symbol or imagery of a bowl full of undiluted wine being a symbol of God's wrath.

So these verses that are meant to be the opposite of chapter 14:1-5. They indicate what happens to God's people who faithfully endure and resist in their conflict with Satan and the beast in chapter 12 and 13. Now the messages of these three angels indicate what happens to Rome and the beast and those who collude with them. Those who are deceived and render worship and allegiance take upon themselves the mark of the beast and worship the beast and his image in chapter 13. Verses 12 and 13 then of chapter 14 are meant to demonstrate that this judgment, verse 12, this calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints. In other words, this judgment is meant to motivate God's people to persevere. The confidence that God is indeed going to come back and judge and vindicate his people should encourage God's people to persevere.

Furthermore, it should also be a warning for them, for those who want to compromise, for those who have become complacent in the context of Roman rule, for

those who want to compromise and think it's alright to worship the beast, to worship Rome, and be involved in its idolatrous practices perhaps to avoid persecution or whatever. These texts remind us that if they fail to persevere they will find themselves as the recipients of the judgments spelled out in the message of these three angels.

So it's meant to motivate Christians to persevere, if God going to come and judge due to the gravity of that judgment and situation. Those who are tempted to compromise must realize that refusal to compromise or refusal to resist will involve them as recipients of these judgments, but also those who are being persecuted can now have a motivation to continue because as the souls cried out under the altar, "How long, O LORD until you avenge our blood?" Now we see in the messages of the first of the three angels God avenging the blood of his saints; God vindicating the faithful witness and suffering and death of his saints.

#### Introduction to the Grain and Grape Harvests

The next section in chapter 14 is an interesting one. Beginning with the "I looked" or "I saw" the author is marking off another segment, to make an initial comment. The way we should treat this section, the rest of chapter 14, these are not portraying events that take place after chapter 14:1-13. I think as we're going to see these events in chapter 14 verses 14 to the end, these two further scenes, one scene in the form of a grain harvest and the other scene in the form of a grape harvest. These further describe the events taking place in the earlier part of the chapter. So these are not two separate events. It's another set of images, another way of depicting or describing, what has happened in the first part of chapter 14. We've seen that all through Revelation. John is not primarily giving us chronological sequences of events leading up to the end. He's describing the present and future of his readers, but he explores the meaning of that by using different images and different language most of it drawn from Old Testament. Now John is going to draw language from Old Testament and from Jesus' teaching as well and apocalyptic literature to further describe the nature of God's judgment that he has already described in different language in chapter 14 verses 1 through 13.

Now the question about these two scenes, as we've said, the two scenes are

apparently judgment scenes. They're different though in that the first scene is a harvest grain. It is a grain harvest scene where you have the picture of the Son of Man with the sickle and he goes out and harvests the earth. The second scene is a scene of an angel who also holds a sickle, but this angel swings his sickle and gathers a grape harvest. He gathers the vine of grapes where he will tread them to make wine, is basically the literal depiction behind this. So you have two scenes a grain harvest and grape harvest.

The question in relationship to that is what are these two scenes specifically depicting and how do they relate to each other? How do they relate to back to chapter 14 verses 1-13? Unless you want to say this is just an indiscriminate collection of images. Might we be able to suggest how they relate back to the first 13 verses of chapter 14, and to emphasize again these are not to be seen as chronologically happening after the events of chapter 14:1-13. These are just further ways of depicting those events using the language of a grain and grape harvest.

So what does John see in the two scenes? What I want to do is take each of them and try to describe the background of what's happening and then raise the question of the relationship to each other, which I think will become clear as we begin to describe them.

#### Grain Harvest: Believers

The first scene is found in chapter 14 verses 14-17 and that is the grain harvest scene. It begins by recalling Daniel chapter 7 and verse 13. It begins with the Son of Man seated on the cloud, and by the way John seems here, perhaps intentionally but it is certainly consistent with other New Testament depictions of Christ coming on the clouds as in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 and verses 13 and following, Jesus own teaching in Matthew 24 and elsewhere, but all perhaps going back to Daniel chapter 7 and this language of the Son of Man seated, or coming on the clouds. Daniel 7 provides, the background for the language here of the Son of Man seated on a white cloud that John sees. What is interesting is unlike the vision of chapter 1 where John sees the Son of Man also in the language drawn from Daniel chapter 7 in the well-known Son of Man vision, unlike Revelation 1, where John sees the Son of Man but having a sword preceding from

his mouth, now John sees the Son of Man coming on the clouds, but now he has a sharp sickle in his hand. The sickle probably suggests the theme of judgment, and so we have this picture of the Son of Man now coming to judge.

It's intriguing that Son of Man, if this is to be identified with Christ, which I think it clearly is in light of chapter 1 and elsewhere. If this is the Son of Man, it's intriguing that an angel comes and commands him to swing his sickle and harvest the earth. Some have for that reason have suggested that the Son of Man here is not Jesus Christ but must be some other angelic being. How could you have another angel have authority over the Son of Man, over Jesus, and telling him what to do? But I think the key is to know where the angel comes from. The angel comes from the temple, the very dwelling of God. So I think the picture here is not that the angel has the authority to tell the Son of Man what to do, but the angel is bringing a message from the temple or angel is bringing a message from God telling the Son of Man it's time to reap the harvest. The harvest is ripe and it's time to reap the harvest.

There are two possible New Testament backgrounds. First of all, in Matthew chapter 13 and verses 24-30 we see Jesus using the image of a grain harvest to depict the final judgment and harvest that will happen at the end of history where the weeds are burned. The world is seen as a field of weeds and wheat grown together. The weeds are taken out and they're burned. The wheat is taken out and put in the storeroom for safe keeping because it's good. It's the positive crop that Jesus sees harvested in Matthew chapter 13.

Later on also in John chapter 4 verses 34-38 Jesus refers to a ripe harvest and calls on his disciples to reap a harvest for eternal life. So this maybe one example or one place where John seems to be in contact with the teaching of Jesus and the image of the grain harvest. But what I want you to note is if John is drawing on the teaching of Jesus it's interesting that in the first example in Matthew 13, it's the weeds that are burned up and destroyed, but the grain is preserved. In John 4 there is the language of the harvest being ripe, and time to reap because the harvest of the earth is ripe. Here in verse 15 of Revelation 14, in John chapter four where we find the harvest being ripe, like the harvest

they're told to reap is for eternal life. Now add to that, I think this scene of harvesting grain takes up the image of the 144,000 as first fruits. Language of the grain harvest is first fruits for God. So that what I think is going on here verses 14-16 is a positive harvest. It's not one of judgment of unbelievers. It's not the judgment of the wicked, this is a positive harvest. This is the harvest of the first fruits, the 144,000 symbolizing the people of God. Now the harvest on earth is ripe, that is God's people. So now the Son of Man comes to harvest people for their eternal reward to be a first fruit for God. So in my opinion verses 14-16 corresponds to chapter 14 1-5 with the 144,000, the first fruits to God, who stand victorious because they've refused to compromise.

#### Grape Harvest: Unbelievers

Now the second image, scene number two, is the grape harvest, and here you have another angel coming to be involved in the harvest, and this one I take is meant to be the language of the harvest of unbelievers. In other words, verses 17 through the end of the chapter correspond to verses 8 through 11. It is the command to God's people to persevere and to resist, but through verse 11. So 8-11, the message of the angels is judgment on unbelieving Babylon and unbelieving world. Now this corresponds to that.

So to put it together the grain harvest in 14-16 corresponds to the first part of chapter 14 the image of 144,000 as first fruits to God. Now they're being pictured as harvested at the end time judgment, and now 17 to the end of the chapter, through verse 20, will correspond to 8-11, that is the judgment of unbelievers. Now the judgment of unbelievers in 8 and following is depicted as a grape harvest in this second judgment in verses 14-20.

Intriguingly what might further suggest this, in the first section is it is the Son of Man who comes to harvest. Now it's another angel who comes to harvest, and in the same way an angel summoned the Son of Man to reap his harvest now another angel summons the first angel. The one that comes with a sickle, he also has a sickle. Another angel comes out of the temple from the altar and also calls on him to now swing his sickle and this time it will be for a grape harvest. Probably the fact too, that the angel

comes from the altar may suggest he was sent just like in chapter 8:1-5 where the saints are mingled, this prayer, the saints are mingled with the incense of the altar. So we should understand this as the response to the prayer of the saints. This is the vindication of the martyrs who cry out, “How long, O Lord.” But now the harvest happens and the angel gathers vines with grapes because they are now to be trampled in the winepress.

The image here is probably, you would have a vat full of grapes and the grapes would literally be trampled so that the juice is squeezed from them. The juice flows out into another vat and that vat will be used for the wine. The background for this imagery is probably Joel chapter 3 and verse 13 for example. Also, elsewhere we find grape harvest as a symbol for God’s end time judgment. For example, in Isaiah chapter 63 and verses 2 and 3 we find the language of trampling the grapes with the language of grapes as a symbol for harvest. Chapter 63 and the first couple verses, “Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered on my garments, and I stained all my clothing.” Notice the interesting connection with Zion again that you found that at the beginning at chapter 14. Isaiah 63:6 parallels Revelation saying, “I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground.”

Lamentations 1 verse 15 is the other one that uses the image of grapes as trampled upon as an image of end time harvest. So the picture is outside of the city of Zion, and it’s interesting that in the prophets you find and here you find the language of outside of the city. The judgment is taking place outside of the city, which probably refers back to Zion at the beginning of chapter 14. So now you find judgment portrayed in terms, Old Testament, terms taken from Joel, taken from Isaiah, taken from a book like Lamentations and elsewhere God’s final judgment is being pictured as God trampling a winepress, trampling grapes in a winepress.

But what is interesting in the judgment scene is the juice that comes out of the wine ends up being blood. That is, it ends up being the blood of the victims of the final

judgment and of the final battle, and in the next segment I want to look a little bit at concluding this section. I want to look at the image that the author uses of blood going up to the horses' bridles and extending over a length of section consisting of 600 stadia. I want to look a little bit at where John's image comes from and also what that image signifies.

Transcribed by Schuyler Pals  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 21

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## REVELATION 14-16

### Grain/Grapes and the Seven Bowl Judgments

#### *Judgment in the context of Apocalyptic Language*

We've been looking at two series of images that the author uses in chapter 14 to describe the final judgment as it relates to the people of God who persevered and endured in their battle with the beast in chapters 12 and 13. We also looked at the fate of those who gave in or the fate of those who followed and identified with and gave worship and allegiance to the beast.

Two texts that I misread in earlier sections I want to draw your attention back to, the language of the- we said that the 144,000 are called first fruits, but it seems that the first fruit imagery applies to the whole people of God, not a group in anticipation of more to come. I suggested that in the Old Testament we find that, and the place we find that most clearly is Jeremiah 2, 2-3. Jeremiah 2:1-3 is: "The word of the Lord came to me [Jeremiah the prophet]: Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem ... 'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the firstfruits of his harvest.'" So now you find imagery used in the same way in chapter 14. The 144,000 are a firstfruits devoted to the Lord referring to the entirety of God's people at the end of history, not a group in anticipation of a further group.

The other text to draw your attention to is to turn our attention back to verses 17 through 20 of Revelation 14 we said this: here the author uses the image of the grape harvest to describe and depict the judgment of unbelieving humanity, those who had followed the beast rather than the Lamb and the author uses the image of the grape harvest as a symbol of God's judgment. The text I wanted to draw your attention to was actually not Isaiah 62, but Isaiah chapter 63, in the context of end time judgment, in Isaiah chapter 63, verses 2 and 3. I'll back up to verse 1, and read part of verse 1: "Who is



this, robed in splendor, striding forth in the greatness of his strength? 'It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.' Why are your garments red like those of one treading the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, from the nations, no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.'"

#### Revelation 14

So here you clearly have the background for this language of the grape harvest in verses 17-20; that is, God is depicted as treading the winepress of his wrath. The nations are seen, in the wine press. Interestingly, and what results is the blood that comes from them. This text will crop up again in chapter 19 where the rider on the white horse comes with the robe stained with blood, stained with the blood from the winepress I take it. So this is kind of an anticipation of what gets divulged in more detail in chapter 19. So Isaiah chapter 63 and texts like Joel chapter 3, and elsewhere in the Old Testament provide the background for this imagery of a winepress and a harvest of grapes and trampling the winepress as an image or symbol of God's judgment on humanity. But as we said, what flows from the winepress in Isaiah 63 as well as here in Revelation 14 is not wine from the grapes, but instead, what flows from it is the blood of God's enemies. It's described very interestingly as "the blood reaching or going up as high as the horses' bridles." The horses are not just horses out there kind of cavorting in the pasture, but this is an image of a cavalry-horses that have gone out to do battle, so now the blood flows up as high as the bridles of the horses at the distance of 1600 stadia. We'll talk more about stadia when we get to Revelation 21 and 22. It's enough to know that this is a large and rather significant distance. So you kind of have this rather gruesome language of a complete bloodbath as the result of God's judgment. Now what I think though is going on is, again, John is simply drawing on stock language and imagery. This time it appears specifically from apocalyptic texts to describe the nature and meaning of God's judgment. So we probably should not take this literally as if at some point in future history, as if at some point in history one could actually find blood up to the horses bridle sometime in a future judgment. In fact, I couldn't even imagine that an army could choose to fight-

especially in the 21st century and beyond using horses anyway, so John is simply borrowing common imagery from the Old testament to depict God trampling the winepress and the blood of the enemies flowing, but now he's added apocalyptic imagery, images from apocalyptic literature, to further heighten the impression this makes on the reader of the severity and the extent and awesomeness of God's judgment upon those who have followed the beast.

For example, this text is from 1 Enoch, we've read from 1 Enoch a couple times, it is an important apocalypse, and also 4 Ezra. I want to read two more passages out of those apocalypses, one of them is first Enoch chapter 100, and an image of the final judgment of sinners, the final judgment of the ungodly, beginning with verse 1: "In those days the father will be beaten together with his sons in one place, and the brothers shall fall together with their friends in death, until a stream shall flow with their blood, for a man will not be able to withhold his hands from his sons, nor from his son's sons in order to kill them"

Let me skip down to verse three, so this image of death, judgment, and bloodshed- now verse 3: "the horse shall walk through the blood of the sinners in the blood of sinners up to his chest, and the chariots will sink down up to its top." Clearly the horses being horses of warfare.

So notice the imagery in 1 Enoch of the blood going all the way up here it's only to the chest of the horses. But, if you turn over also to 4 Ezra, another important apocalypse that we've seen, and one that John appears to draw motifs out of 4 Ezra, whether he read 4 Ezra or not he still seems to draw from motifs that can be found in that book. Chapter 15 of 4 Ezra, again in the context of end time judgment: "Behold clouds"- this is 4 Ezra verses 34 through 36. "Behold clouds from the east and from the north to the south, and their appearance is very threatening, full of wrath and storm, [so it is an image of end time judgment and God pouring out his wrath] They shall dash against one another and shall pour out a heavy tempest upon the earth, and their own tempest, and there shall be blood from the sword as high as the horses' belly, and a man's thigh, and a camel's back."

So notice although the language is a little bit different and John depicts the blood

going up to the bridle of the horses. You clearly have this notion in apocalyptic texts of the final judgment being so severe and so widespread and the bloodshed so great- it can be depicted as blood flowing up to the belly or the chest of the horse. Then John takes it up to the bridle of the horses. So what John is doing is simply drawing on a common apocalyptic motif from apocalyptic text such as 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, and others, not to depict a literal scene that- as if one were present at this time in history you'd actually see blood flowing to the bellies or the bridles of horses. He is using imagery, stock imagery from apocalyptic texts to try to play on the emotions and response of the readers to try to get them to see the horror and the awfulness and the extent and the severity of God's judgment at the end of time.

#### Harvest and Winepress

So the imagery then says something both from Isaiah 63 and the language of treading the winepress and the language from apocalyptic texts that John has brought together to depict the end time judgment. These images function to explore the meaning, extent and nature of God's judgment not necessarily literally, how it's going to take place; so in chapter 14 through 20, I've suggested to you that we see two scenes of end time judgment. One of them is positive, that is, the scene of the harvest of the grain is a positive scene of reaping the harvest of God's people as firstfruits, probably referring back to chapter 14 verse 4- and now chapter 17 through 20 using the harvest of grapes as a negative image of the judgment of the wicked, or judgment of evil. So verses 14 through 16 correspond to chapter 14:1 through 5, and the grain harvest corresponds to 14 1 through 5, the 144000 standing victorious in Zion with the Lamb, victorious in Zion with the Lamb, victorious in their battle against sin, evil, Satan and the beast. They are now presented as a firstfruit harvest to God, now that harvest is depicted in verses 14 through 16, and then the three messages of the angels, especially angels 2 and 3, proclaiming the message of judgment. Now for those who followed the beast, for those who had the mark of the beast and have worshiped his image, indicating allegiance, worship and identifying with the beast this idolatrous godless empire, now their situation of judgment is depicted in 17-20 in the form of a grape harvest.

So all in all then in chapter 14 rather than just being an unconnected, indiscriminate series of images, chapter 14 uses different images such as the 144,000 standing victorious on Mount Zion, the firstfruits, Babylon's fall, the language of judgment in the form of the cup of God's wrath being poured out, and smoke going up for ever and ever, smoke and sulfur, ascending for ever and ever, the scenes of harvest of wheat or grain, of grapes, John uses different imagery to explore the fate of those in chapters 12 and 13 then who refuse to compromise, who resisted even to the point of suffering and death, those who responded to the battle that Satan wages on the saints, those who refused to compromise who instead endured and maintained their faithful witness. Now they are described with the images of the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion, and also the grain harvest and the firstfruits.

There are those in chapters 12 and 13 who compromised, in the church, and in the world. So we're not to read this as exclusively the positive images of the church and negative images of the world. No, there are also the negative images are also for those in the church who compromise and refuse to maintain their faithful witness for those the images of God's wrath poured out in judgment, the destruction of Babylon, God's wrath poured out in the terms of the cup of wine, unmixed, the smoke and sulfur going up for ever, the treading of the winepress of God's wrath, all of those images now depict and portray the fate of those who compromise with the beast in chapters 12 and 13.

#### Chapter 15: Introducing the Bowl Judgments

So now, chapter 14 leads into one final vision of both judgment and salvation, and that is chapters 15 and 16. Chapter 15 introduces us to what will get unpacked in more detail in chapter 16, and that is the seven last plagues. We'll see how these images connect. But the seven last plagues will be the seven last judgments of God, but in the midst of that, in chapter 15: 1- 4 we find another vision of end time salvation, so we're going to find another mixture, another alternation of a vision of salvation followed by a vision of judgment. We'll talk about that, but chapter 15 seems to have a twofold function when we think about chapters 15 and 16. First of all, chapter 15 functions to introduce the seven the bowl sequence, the sequence of seven bowls of God's wrath that

get poured out in chapter 16.

So, on the one hand chapter 15 functions as an introduction to chapter 16. However, it also depicts God's people praising the Lamb because of the victory that he has given them in chapter 15:2-4. So, once more we find sort of this interlocking going on, note how verse 15 begins: "I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--last because with them God's wrath is completed." Now you could skip down to verse 5, "After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple--that is the tabernacle of testimony was open. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven last plagues."

So in verse 1 he sees the seven angels with the seven last plagues, now in verses 5 and following he describes the seven angels coming out with the seven last plagues in the form of bowls, about to pour them out on the earth. So you could remove verses 2-4, and the narrative would flow very nicely. But here we find another example of that interlocking that we've seen elsewhere in Revelation. Verse 1 begins the narrative of the seven angels with the seven last plagues, but then it's interrupted by a scene that seems to, in a sense, belong to chapter 14, another scene of final salvation but in different imagery; where once again, we find God's people standing and singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

So, verse, chapter 15 on one level seems to connect back to chapter 14, another image of salvation, but also it connects with, and provides an introduction for chapter 16 and following. So you have this interlocking feature, the seven angels and their plagues are introduced, it's cut off by a scene of God's people standing beside a sea, singing the song of Moses, singing by the Lamb, and it records that song, and then the scene in verse 1 is picked up again, with the angels coming out of the temple, about ready to pour out their bowls. Then chapter 16 narrates the pouring out of the each of the seven bowls.

Now let me read chapter 15 to you, which is a very short chapter. "I saw in heaven [and notice the word "I saw" again, marking off another segment of the vision] I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--last because with them God's wrath is now completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of

glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image” [Again connecting you back to chapter 13 and chapter 14. Now I think this is the same group, the 144,000, those who have been victorious over the beast and his image from chapters 13 and 14 “and over the number of his name” chapter 13 verse 18.] “They held harps given them by God, and sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and they sang the song of the Lamb: ‘Great and marvelous are your deeds Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. After this I looked, and I saw in heaven in the temple--that is, in the tabernacle of the testimony--it was open. Out of the temple came seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and they wore gold sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.’”

#### Verses 2-4 not an Interruption

Now just briefly, in chapter 15 what I think is going on is this: the author is about ready to narrate seven last plagues. This is the third cycle of plagues starting with the seven seals, then seven trumpets, now seven bowls are about ready to be poured out. But before he does that, the author gives us one more image connecting back to chapter 13 and 14. It is an image of those who are victorious. But now I want you to notice how the image of those people is portrayed in verses 2-4. This is the key to seeing that this is not just some indiscriminate insertion of verses 2 and 3, into this. Chapter 15 begins the seven last plagues, but you have in verses 2-4 this picture of the saints, standing by the sea, singing the song of the Lamb. This is not just an interruption. Instead, I think there is a purpose. As the author is about ready to link, to narrate the final judgments of God, before and leading up to the final outpouring of God’s judgment in chapter 17 and following, now before he begins to narrate the pouring out of God’s wrath in terms of the

final last seven judgments in the form of the bowl judgments, the author in one final image wants to depict the people of God standing before the sea, singing the song of Moses and Lamb connecting back to 13 and 14. Now he's looking at it from a different picture, he's using a different image, chapter 15 describes the same scenes we saw in 14, the 144,000 in Mount Zion, the harvest of the grain, and the grain harvest of the firstfruits.

Now we see the same scene in different imagery, but what is John doing? The key to connecting these is the language of the Exodus. John wants to portray the final judgment of God as an Exodus, that is, in terms of the Exodus plagues, which he will in chapter 16. Before he does that, he wants to remind us again that in the midst of this that God's people will emerge victorious.

So, verses 2 and 4 do not happen chronologically, in other words, chapter 15:2-4, the vision of the saints before the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and the Lamb does not happen first, and then the bowls get poured out. I think it's the opposite. But what John does is that before he narrates the pouring out of the final Exodus plagues, he wants to show you the outcome of the saints. In the same way that in the Old Testament the people of God went to the Red Sea, emerged victorious, and sang the song of Moses; that's what will happen after these plagues will be poured out. God's people will not be harmed; they will not suffer the wrath of God, but instead in Exodus language as part of this Exodus story in chapter 15 and 16 the author right up front, before he ever narrates the Exodus plague judgments in the form of the seven bowls in chapter 16 he wants to portray God's people, that after that time, they will emerge as victorious, standing by the sea, having crossed the Red Sea, standing by the sea and singing the song of Moses.

#### Glassy Sea

Now it's interesting that, in verses 2-4 the author draws on a number of images that refer to and clearly recall the Exodus. Two things are interesting about this account, number one, the sea is described as the sea of glass. This is apparently the same sea as back in Revelation chapter 4. The sea of glass that stood before the throne. Interestingly though, in some Jewish literature, the Red Sea is described as "the sea of glass," there are

a couple of Jewish texts outside of the Old Testament where the Red Sea was described in some rabbinic literature as a sea of glass.

Also we've already noted too that in a text like Isaiah 51 verse 9, the Red Sea was depicted as a sea of chaos, the home of the sea monster. So that what you might have here then is a picture of the sea of chaos, the home of the sea monster, that which threatens God's people starting with the first Exodus, that sea has now been calmed by God's sovereignty. Now we find that it is a sea of glass, God showing his sovereignty over the sea of chaos and evil, the Red Sea of chaos and evil, now God's people are described as having emerged through that, now they stand victorious. The sea of chaos and evil probably reflects the events of chapter 12 and 13. Satan's attempt to pour out his torrent of water on the woman, his attempt to kill her offspring, that sea has now been calmed with God's sovereignty. Now they have emerged through that period of tribulation, and they stand beside the sea like the ancient Israelites did, and they sing the song of Moses.

#### Song(s) of Moses

The other interesting thing about this psalm is the song of Moses was sung in Exodus chapter 15, after they emerged from the Red Sea but there's another Song of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy as well. This song doesn't resemble those, especially the song in Exodus chapter 15. What John has apparently done is in hearing this song, and also recording this song, he has drawn in a number of other Old Testament texts, from Isaiah chapter 60 and elsewhere. They all celebrate God's holiness, and his mighty just acts, on behalf of his people; in judging evil but also in providing his salvation for his people.

But the song of Moses here does not really closely resemble the song in Exodus 15 if you go back and compare it. That's because John, in a sense, by calling it also the song of the Lamb is constructing a new song. He hears a new song being sung, and so he brings in other Old Testament texts that celebrate God's victory in providing salvation for his people and also in judging the kings of the earth, and displaying his glory, and his name. So what this also does then is it indicates the reason for God's judgment. God's judgment is to vindicate not only his people, but also his name, and his holy character.



Interestingly, this psalm also anticipates what is going to get developed in more detail in chapter 21. We're seeing snapshots of the end that will lead up to a fuller disclosure in chapter 21. When this hymn ends and nations come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed. We'll see that nations will come to the New Jerusalem to worship, in chapter 21. So this is kind of looking forward to the fuller disclosure in chapter 21.

#### Bowl Judgments: Background

So, this scene then sets the scene for the further development of the plague sequence which the author returns to in verse 5. Here now instead of seals or trumpets, we did see that trumpets could be used as an anticipation of judgment in the Old Testament, a call to judgment; the bowls here primarily at one level indicate priestly service, the bowls are another feature of tabernacle or temple language. Let me back up. What is interesting is in verse 5 begins, "after this I looked and in heaven the temple that is the tabernacle of the testimony" that is intriguing because "the tabernacle of the testimony" was used especially in Exodus. In Exodus through Deuteronomy it refers to the tabernacle that was set up in the wilderness. So this reference to the temple as the "tabernacle of testimony" I think is the author's way of further continuing the Exodus motif by identifying the temple as "the tabernacle of the testimony," "the tent of the testimony," that accompanied Israel in the wilderness. Now the plagues that are about to be poured out in correspondence with the Exodus plagues are identified with bowls. In Isaiah chapter 51, I think we find the language of bowls in terms of the cup of God's wrath. So if that's part of the background, bowls being associated with the cup of God's wrath, pouring out the bowls as instruments of God's wrath, bowls would be a fitting instrument for pouring out God's wrath on the earth. Now this is associated with two other interesting terms: one of them is smoke filling the temple, and the other is the fact that no one could enter until the judgments were complete. Probably the language of smoke filling the temple not only recalls Exodus language, but also Isaiah chapter 6, and verses 1 and 4. Isaiah 6 is an important scene, a throne room vision that has influenced John's depiction of the throne room back in Revelation chapter 4. But in Isaiah chapter 6

we read, “In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Now skip down to verse 4: “At the sound of their voices, [the sound of the winged creatures from verses 2 and 3] At the sound of their voices the doorposts and threshold shook and the temple was filled with smoke.”

Most likely in view of Exodus 40 as well where this seems to indicate God’s presence filling the tabernacle. The image here is of God’s glorious presence and power filling the heavenly temple, now to issue judgments on the earth.

Why is it that no one can enter? Probably just a description of the fact that God’s presence is so all encompassing, so awesome and terrible in pouring out judgment that no one could withstand it, no one could enter until this act of judgment takes place.

#### Exodus Imagery Again

So now the people of God are seen as having, before the plagues are poured out in Exodus imagery, kind of jumping ahead after the time of the plagues. God’s people are first depicted as having crossed through the sea, the sea calmed by God’s sovereignty standing beside the sea, emerging victorious, singing the song of Moses, worshiping and praising God because of the salvation he has provided. This then prepared for the opening of the tabernacle in an Exodus-like event where smoke fills it. Now we are prepared to be introduced to the seven Exodus-like plagues that follow in chapter 16. Chapter 16 now is going to narrate those seven plagues and all of them even more so than back in chapters 8 and 9, where we saw that most of the plagues were modeled after the Exodus.

Now even more clearly all seven of these plagues that are narrated are modeled after one or more of the ten Exodus plagues from the original Exodus event. Once more we should read the number seven not as a series of seven exact plagues that will occur in this order, but seven indicating perfection, indicating completion, and the whole point of this is that the plagues here are meant to recall the Exodus. So once more we see that John is using language that is not so much meant to help us identify the precise nature of the plagues and what they look like, but more to help us explore the meaning and significance and certainty of God’s judgment. It’s as if John is saying in the same way

that God judged a wicked idolatrous oppressive people, certainly he will once again judge another, and any other idolatrous oppressive people that oppose him and set themselves up over God.

### Increasing Intensity

The other thing to recall is I think here we now get an even more close up perspective of the Day of the Lord. Remember I said that it appears what's going on, in each of the sequence—seals, trumpets, and bowls--each of them end with the Day of the Lord, or bringing you right up to it only to back up and narrate more material. But what I think is happening is that when you compare the seals, trumpets, and bowls, while there appears to be some overlap especially between the trumpets and bowls in reference to the Exodus plague imagery there's some overlap but there appears to be a progression, especially of intensity. The plagues become more severe; they become more intense. Seals affected a fourth of the earth with the seals, the trumpets affected a third, and now with the bowls there is no limit. They apparently are all encompassing and affect all people and affect the entire earth. So I take it that with the bowls you are now at a closer perspective, you are now looking at the judgments that will lead immediately into the final Day of the Lord and up to the final judgment. In fact, the author says, "These are the last judgments." These are the final judgments of God before unleashing his end time judgment that again gets narrated in chapter 17 through chapter 20 of Revelation. So here we're brought to the end.

### Revelation 16

Let me read chapter 16. "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying [and I want you to notice the connection with the Exodus plagues from the book of Exodus] to the seven angels, 'Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.' The first angel poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned to blood like that of a dead person, and every living thing in the sea died. The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel in charge of the water say: 'You

are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged: for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.’ And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’ Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given the power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by its intense heat, and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and give him glory.” [Just as pharaoh refused to repent in the original Exodus.] The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and they cursed the God in heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of a false prophet. [This is a very strange image indeed, only three frogs but somehow coming out of the three mouths at the same time, a clear indication of the symbolic nature of this.] They are the spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God almighty. ‘Behold, I come like a thief!’ Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.’ [Then they gathered the Kings together in the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.] The seventh angel then poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘It is finished, it is done!’ Then there came flashing of lightning, rumbling, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. No earthquake it has occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plagues of hail because the plague was so terrible.”

### Exodus Connections

And that brings us to the end of the bowl plague sequence. Hopefully you picked up some of the connections with Exodus. One interesting thing to mention before that – note that there is no interlude between seal six and seven. Again, this is the final outpouring of God’s judgment that will lead immediately into the Day of the Lord and into the end time judgment. But, for example, bowl number one, the bowl of sores, resembles the plague of sores in Exodus chapter 9. Bowls 2 and 3 resemble Exodus 7, turning the water into blood. In bowl number 4 the sun scorches people, Exodus chapter 9; bowl number 5 there is darkness over the kingdom of Egypt, Exodus chapter 10: that’s where there is darkness over the kingdom of Egypt. Here the beast’s kingdom is darkened, unlike in chapter 8 where there was partial darkness; now the entire kingdom of Satan is darkened. Bowl number 6 contains three frogs resembling the frog plague in Exodus chapter 8. Bowl number 7, thunder, lightning, hail, and earthquake resemble Exodus 9 verse 23. And like pharaoh, the people still refuse to repent in chapter 16:11. So clearly the author wants us to recall the Exodus plagues. To repeat, I’m not sure I can identify exactly what these plagues might look like, and exactly what John has in mind, once more as I’ve said John may be more interested that we explore the theological significance of the plagues and the meaning of God’s judgment by drawing us back to the Exodus. Altogether though over all, this chapter may, much like chapters 8 and 9, be God’s judgment upon idolatry, upon evil, upon a godless empire, the suffering could be both spiritual and physical, but here clearly this may be another way of demonstrating how complete the futility of relying on the world’s resources and the complete darkness into which humanity is plunged, when they give in to and follow the worship and the allegiance of a pagan godless idolatrous empire.

### Seventh Bowl Goes Until the End

But the point is now there is no more warning, this is the final pouring out of judgment, before the final judgment, the end time judgment, this is the final express of God’s wrath in this threefold seals, trumpets, and bowls, now there will be no more delay, now the end will come very quickly.

### Five Features of the Bowl Judgments

The seventh bowl brings us right to the end. Bowl number 7 is clearly the final judgment, and clearly brings us to the end. I want us to simply focus on a couple of unique features, instead of going through all of these bowls in detail, because we've mentioned some of them in connection with chapters 8 and 9, but what I want to focus on is a couple of interesting features, five interesting features of this plague sequence and the bowls.

Number one is, intriguingly you find a hymn situated and introduced into the third bowl. The third angel pours out his bowl, but before you get to the fourth one you have a hymn. We've seen in Revelation the hymns throughout the book often function to interpret the scenes that John sees in his vision. Now, this hymn includes a hymn sung in response to verse 5, and I think what it mainly does is affirms the justice the God. It affirms the justice of God in pouring out these plagues; maybe it's not only just this one, but all the plagues it's meant to encompass, in demonstrating that. Even the altar chimes in and responds, "Yes, O Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." It's interesting the altar chimes in, I don't know if this is maybe another reference to the two or three witnesses needed to establish a testimony, but not only does the angel say, "True and just are your judgments" but now a second witness, the altar, chimes in and says "Yes, Lord, true and just are your judgments" Whether that's intentional or not, drawing on that Old Testament theme of two or three witnesses, I'm not sure. But the function of this hymn is to draw attention to the justice of God's judgment. Note that particularly, the connection with the third plague, of water turning into blood, verse 6 says, "For they have shed the blood of saints now you give them blood to drink." Now this hymn is modeled specifically to vindicate God and demonstrate the justice and righteousness of the judgment, the blood judgment he is pouring out and here. Again we see the principle: the judgment fits the crime. The wicked evil empire, the beast, shed the blood of the saints, now in return; God gives them blood in the form of this bowl, this plague, of blood on the earth.

### Literary Function of the Euphrates

Another interesting feature is found in verses 12 and following in the sixth angel. The rest of my comments will relate to the sixth and seventh bowl. Once more the author finds or mentions the Euphrates River. We saw reference to that back earlier in chapter 9 in connection with the plagues of the locust, or the plagues of the end time army. So there might be a connection, John may be envisioning the same thing here. But the mention of the Euphrates we suggested recalls sort of the eastern boundary of Rome itself from which their attackers such as the Parthians would come. But also we find the Old Testament idea of the army from the north coming, that this, John is now drawing on that language to recall or to bring to mind an invading army. So we shouldn't take John suggesting there's a literal Euphrates river that's going to literally be dried up, in fact who wouldn't need that for today's modern army, you don't need to dry up a river to get across, you fly over it. But John is drawing on stock imagery from the Greco-Roman background but also the Old Testament to invoke the notion of an invading army. So when he says he pours out his bowl on the Euphrates the reader is going to think, "Here comes an invading army."

But what John sees though are the kings of the East. In other words, the waters dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. And I don't think we're to try to identify specifically who these armies are; it's simply invoking the notion of an invading army.

### Frogs

So now you have the kings of the earth who cross the Euphrates, but then you are also introduced to three evil spirits in the form of frogs. The reason they're identified with frogs (there may be a number of reasons) but one of them is to evoke the Exodus plague of frogs but now you have three frogs and the author could not be any more clear as to what these frogs signify. He calls them demonic beings, but he also says they come out of the mouth of the dragon, beast number one, and beast number two that he calls the false prophet. So it couldn't be any more clear that this is a scenario of a demonic onslaught. But interestingly, what these three frogs do is they are able to deceive the nations and gather them for battle. Now, that's interrupted by verse 15 that we'll look at

in a moment, and the battle is resumed in verse 16.

Now the question is what is the relationship between these kings of the earth and the nations, kings of the whole world? So you have the kings of the East, crossing the Euphrates, then the kings of the whole world, in the end of verse 14. What's the relationship between the two? Some conceive of them fighting together but I wonder if instead this is simply an image of an end time evoking the notion of all the kings of the earth, but also evoking the notion of the invading forces from the East. The author is constructing a picture of all the world gathered together for an end time battle. That is to do battle against God himself and his people as I think we see later. But the point is not to depict some battle between kings of the earth and kings of the East, but to draw on images, to depict the collaboration of the kings of the earth and the kings of the East and the all-out end time assault, end time battle, that the author calls the battle of Armageddon.

#### Nature of Armageddon

Before I mention that, let me say something about the term Armageddon, but also to say something about this battle. First of all, the difficulty with the term "Armageddon" is trying to identify precisely what John has in mind. Some have tried, as Grant Osborne in his commentary suggests, many commentaries have tried to identify this by dividing it up into two possible categories of explanation. Some have tried to interpret this geographically, often quite literally, as to suggest somewhere, and the problem is Armageddon comes from two Hebrew words, *har* for mountain, and *Megiddo*, that refers to a plain, an expanse or a plain that you find playing a key role in Old Testament battles, such as in Judges chapter 5, 1 Kings 18, 2 Kings 23, 2 Chronicles 35, also Zechariah chapter 12 mentions this end time battle. You find the plain of Megiddo, as a place of warfare in the Old Testament. So, some have literally tried to describe Armageddon, the mountain of Megiddo. The problem is that there doesn't appear to be a mountain, right there at the plain of Megiddo. So scholars have struggled to describe geographically where this might take place. So that's geographical explanation.

The second set of explanations that Osborne highlights are etymological



interpretations, such as seeing Armageddon, as “the mount of assembly,” and not referring to some geographical location in relationship to Megiddo. I wonder though if Armageddon, the mountain of Megiddo is John’s own construction using mountain imagery but also drawing on Megiddo from the Old Testament as a place of well-known battles. It would be a little like using the word “Waterloo” or “Vietnam” to refer to a struggle or a battle or a war. You might refer to someone’s personal Vietnam or something like that not referring to a battle or literal location, but taking a well-known battle as a symbol or image of a well-known conflict. So I wonder if John is not taking using Megiddo, a place of famous battles in the Old Testament, and now adding the term “mountain,” Mt. Megiddo, as now a place, a symbol for an end time battle. Now all the nations of the earth gather at Armageddon, at this symbolically, at the mountain of Megiddo, in preparation for an end time battle.

The problem here is there’s no battle narrated. We’re not told that any fighting takes place; we’re not told what happens. In my opinion this text prepares us for the end time battle that will be narrated later on in Revelation, Revelation chapter 19 and the rider on the white horse, and then also Revelation chapter 20, at the very end. In the very end of chapter 20, you find Satan being released from the Abyss, deceiving all the nations of the earth gathering together for battle. They surround the camp of the saints, and God himself destroys them with fire coming out of heaven. So you find references to several battles, you have an end time battle here called the battle of Armageddon, you have a battle in chapter 19, where the son of man comes out on the white horse to defeat the enemies and then you have another battle at the end of chapter 20 in Revelation where Satan gathers together the armies and they go out and od battle against the saints yet they are devoured. I would suggest to you that all of these battles probably refer to the same one. In other words, we do not have three separate battles, but instead we have the exact same battle. It’s interesting in all three of them you have the language of the armies being gathered for warfare. Also, chapter 20 and chapter 19 we’re going to see draw on the same imagery from Ezekiel chapter 38 and 39, God and Magog. But we’ll look at this in more detail when we get to the actual battles themselves in chapters 19 and 20. All three

of these battles are different ways of referring to the same one. So we don't have a battle narrated here, because we only see the preparation for it. The final battle is going to come, in chapter 19 and chapter 20, where Jesus Christ and God simply come and defeat their enemies. When we get there we need to ask, what is being portrayed in these battles? How are we to take those and understand them as some literal battle, some spiritual battle, or something else?

#### Parallels with the Letters to the Churches (Rev 2-3)

The last thing I want to say then, in verse 15, notice this, another kind of interruption into the plague sequence: "Behold, I come like a thief, blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."

What I think is going on here is once more this is an indication that chapter 16 is not for the purpose of trying to determine a sequence of events in the end time or charting the end times, or simply to satisfy our curiosity as to what's going to take place in the end. In the middle of all of this, John inserts a call for his readers to respond, his readers in chapters 2 and 3. I want you to notice that what I think is happening is because of the gravity of this situation in view of this final battle that's going to come upon the earth, John is calling his readers to vigilance, by drawing on chapters 3 and 4. Notice the language of "Behold, I come like a thief." So before the battle's going to break out, John wants to warn his readers to be prepared. I think the call here is to be faithful and refuse to compromise. That's how they prepare. But notice the language of coming like a thief. That comes right out of chapters 2 and 3, where Christ warned the church at Sardis that he would come like a thief if they did not repent in chapter 3 and verse 3. Also Sardis is told to stay awake, to stay vigilant. Do you remember the church that was told not to go about naked but to clothe themselves with true white clothes?--the church of Laodicea. So this language recalling the language from chapters 2 and 3 is simply John's way of saying, due to the significance and gravity of the battle, the end time judgment of God, that demands vigilance on the part of the people to refuse to compromise, to maintain their faithful witness, lest this battle ends up being like Christ coming as a thief, lest this

battle catches them unprepared, catches them unaware. Instead, they should be vigilant, faithful, and wake up, and they should clothe themselves so they should not find themselves naked and ashamed at the Day of Judgment. So verse 15 is an insertion that reminds us that chapter 16 has a hortatory function. To get the readers in chapters 2 and 3 to maintain faithfulness, to refuse to compromise, to resist compromise with pagan Rome, and to maintain a faithful witness, no matter what the cost.

### Babylon

Now the next section of Revelation is chapter 17 and 18, the detailed description of Babylon and its destruction. But what I simply want to note in ending chapter 16 is notice that it is already prepared for in the seventh and last bowl that brings you to the final Day of the Lord, the final judgment. Note the language of islands being removed. But note Babylon the great, God remembered Babylon the great and gave her a cup filled with the wine of his wrath. Chapters 17 and 18 will be a further expansion of that bowl, that final plague of God remembering Babylon the Great. Now chapters 17 and 18 are going to develop that in more detail with the further description of Babylon, her true nature, and a description of her final judgment.

Transcribed by Steffen Pollock  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

## Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 22

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Rev 17-19:5: Introduction to Babylon

## Bowl 7

Before looking at Revelation chapters 17 and 18, to go back and recap what happened in bowl number seven. We saw that with bowl number seven like in the other series of sevens, the seven seals and the seven trumpets, the seventh bowl brings us to the very end. Notice the language in bowl number seven of Revelation 16 and starting verse 17, the language of lightning and rumblings and thunder and a severe earthquake. That language drawing on the theophany in Exodus chapter 19 appears several times throughout Revelation, indicating or anticipating judgment. Now, the mention of an earthquake that has not occurred before or no one has seen an earthquake of this magnitude before indicates once more that we are at the end. So this is the final judgment; this is end time judgment at the very end of history in the form of God coming in his theophanic presence now to judge the entire earth.

Note also then, that at this point what is labeled the Great City, or Babylon, is now also subject to judgment. God pronounces judgment of Babylon, saying that God remembered Babylon, that is, remembering her crimes and he now judges Babylon. But, as you read the text that's all it says, that God remembers Babylon and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath, which is language coming out of the Old Testament again. We saw that this language of a cup filled with wine, a symbol of God's judgment on wicked humanity. Bowl number seven ends with not only a picture of end time judgment, also in the context of that, a mention of the judgment of Babylon itself. So seal number seven, then is going to get unpacked in more detail in chapters 17 and 18. And chapters 17 and 18 give us more detail as to the nature of Babylon and an account of its judgment according to bowl number seven.

So chapters 17 and 18, and actually, this is a section where we need to go beyond just chapter 18 and probably ignore the chapter division after 18 and include at least the first five verses of chapter 19. We'll see that chapter 19:1-5 is the response of the saints

to the judgment of Babylon in chapter 18. So this section is chapters 17 and 18, but also includes 19:1-5. Now we've already noted that the judgment on and the fall of Babylon has already been anticipated back in chapter 14:8 where we find the pronouncement, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon!" Then in bowl number seven that we just looked at in chapter 16 we saw another anticipation of and brief summary of God remembering Babylon in preparation for its judgment. Now chapters 17 and 18 will give us a more thorough exposition of that fall and now will divulge more detail of what those other two texts anticipated.

One of the things we've seen, and I've suggested that chapters 18 through 22 are now going to depict in more detail what has already been anticipated in numerous occasions throughout Revelation, actually all the way back in chapter 6 where the sixth seal brought us to the Day of the Lord. Chapter 7, for example, is a rather detailed and descriptive account of the 144,000 or an enumerable multitude standing before God's throne and now participating in their eternal inheritance. So we've seen anticipations of both judgment and salvation throughout all the book of Revelation. Now we find the author sort of opening up the floodgates, starting in chapter 17. He will pull out the stops and give us the full picture. So it's almost as if the author has been whetting your appetite for a fuller disclosure of final judgment and final salvation and the reader is scarcely disappointed when he or she gets to chapters 18 through 22.

So chapters 17 through 18 more specifically, and again I'll refer to chapters 17 through 18, but I'm also including the first five or six verses of chapter 19, which are a response and conclusion or sort of the culmination of chapters 17 through 18 and the destruction of Babylon. Chapter 17 actually provides us with a detailed description of the prostitute Babylon that is, the woman who is described as a prostitute is equated with or symbolizes the city of Babylon. We'll note in a moment what the city of Babylon indicates. But in chapter 17 we find a description of Babylon, and at the very end of the chapter, there is a brief description of its downfall.

Then chapter 18 will give us far more detail concerning the actual judgment and downfall of Babylon itself, which was anticipated back in chapter 14 and also chapter 16

as well in the seventh seal. In other words, another way to look at it is chapter 17 will tell us specifically why Babylon was judged. Then chapter 18 will describe its judgment as promised and anticipated earlier in the book.

### Babylon the Harlot Versus New Jerusalem the Bride

So chapters 17 and 18, before we look at it in detail, not only is it important to see it in light of the previous anticipations in chapter 14:8 and 16 in the seventh trumpet, but it's important also to see chapters 17 and 18 as part of a paired section, a section that consists of a pair. By that I mean, in chapters 17 and 18, we find a mention of the harlot Babylon or the prostitute Babylon, which stands in direct opposition to chapter 21:9 to 22:5, which is a description of the bride, New Jerusalem. So, in chapters 17 and 18 and again in the first few verses of chapter 19 as well, John is taken by an angel. What I want you to notice if you look at the two texts, you'll note those two paired sections have similarities at the very beginning of each section and at the very end. Also in between, the description of the prostitute of Babylon is supposed to parallel the description of the bride, New Jerusalem in 21:9 through 22:5.

So, for example, you'll notice at the beginning of chapter 17, John says, "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute.'" And then verse three, "Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into the desert. There I saw a woman." Now, notice chapter 21 in verse 9, notice the identical language, "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls," same angel or same type of reference as back in 17:1-3, "Seven bowls of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great mountain and I saw," and he describes the Jerusalem that he sees. So note that both sections begin with one of the angels holding one of the seven bowls. It doesn't tell us which one or whether they're the exact same, presumably it's the same one, but an angel comes to him and tells John, "I'm going to show you something," and then carries him away in the Spirit and he shows him a woman. In one case, it is the prostitute Babylon, in the other case it is the bride, New Jerusalem.

So they both have similar beginning points, but also note that they end the same way as well. Both sections end with a command to write and also an interesting account that we'll look at a little bit later on, but this interesting account of John bowing down to worship the angel and the angel says, "Don't do it, I am only a servant, worship God only." So, for example, in chapter 19:9-10, "Then the angel said to me, 'Write these things: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.'" And then verse ten, "At this I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'Do not do it, I am a fellow servant, worship God.'" You find that identical wording in chapter 22 verses 6 through 9 that comes at the very end of the New Jerusalem/bride image or vision.

So, these two sections form a contrasting pair that sort of, dominates the rest of the book. A number of interpreters have, incorrectly labeled these as an appendix, so the Babylon appendix and the New Jerusalem appendix. But they're anything but an appendix; they're the climax and heart of the entire end of the book of Revelation. So rather than being the appendix, they're the goal, a pairing of a final vision of judgment in terms of Babylon and now the final reward of God's people in terms of the bride New Jerusalem. So rather than appendix these are to be seen as the goal and climax of the entire book.

Now the other thing to notice about these latter chapters is note the movement that takes place from the prostitute Babylon to the bride New Jerusalem. Back in chapter 18 in verse 4 in the section that describes the destruction of Babylon, right at the beginning in verse 4, the author, utilizing Old Testament texts that we'll look at later, the author calls on his readers to come out of her, that is, to remove themselves or to come out of Babylon. So, in order not to participate in or share in her judgments, the implication seems to be that if they come out of her they must have somewhere to go. So those who come out of her now find themselves moving to and entering the New Jerusalem in chapter 21 and 22. This in fact, is the move that John is calling on his church to make in chapters 2 and 3. That is, they will inherit the blessings for overcoming; they will inherit the blessings of the new creation. And we'll see, we've seen already, we'll reiterate the

fact that every one of the seven churches ends with a promise to those who overcome and the promise is almost always linked to something in chapters 20 through 22.

So now John's calling the churches in chapter 17 and 18, this is this movement from the prostitute Babylon to the bride New Jerusalem, this is the movement for his churches to make. That is by coming out of her, by overcoming, by refusing to compromise, by remaining pure and retaining their faithful witness they will come out of her and instead they will enter into their inheritance, the New Jerusalem--if they overcome. This is all indicated by this vision of two contrasting women and two contrasting cities. In each one, both entities are described as both a woman and a city. A prostitute Babylon and a bride New Jerusalem and even in that language it's not hard to see the contrast that John sets up here at the end.

### Babylon

So let's begin by looking at chapter 17. Chapter 17 is full of all kinds of issues and we don't have time to look at every single last detail but I want to touch on the more significant details in the text and some of the sections that are seen as problematic and try to make some suggestions that make a little bit of sense out of them. In chapter 17 of Revelation John first describes the destruction and the removal of the prostitute Babylon, or begins to describe it in chapter 17. The question is why does John describe Babylon as being judged?

Babylon is one of those words that has a long history going all the way back to Genesis. Most scholars trace it all the way back to Genesis 11 and the tower of Babel as a sign of godless, arrogant, prideful humanity. Also in the Old Testament, Babylon is one of the places of the exile of God's people, Israel, and again Babylon, especially if you go back and read Daniel, Babylon is described as an idolatrous prideful and oppressive people. So, given this history, Babylon then becomes almost a symbol of, almost an indicator of, any nation or any people that is so characterized. It is a people that is idolatrous, who is prideful and arrogant, who usurps God's authority and demands the worship that only belongs to God, pridefully sets themselves over God, and who oppresses the people of God as well. So that's what is signaled by Babylon. Now



Babylon has become a model for any other city or people who would be characterized that way. So the question is, why does John use Babylon here, rather than what does Babylon signify? Babylon is a symbol indicating a prideful, arrogant, oppressive, idolatrous people.

Some have suggested that Babylon here indicates an end time city that is going to be set up. Some have even suggested that Babylon will literally and actually be rebuilt in the future in literal fulfillment of not only Old Testament texts, such as Jeremiah 50 and 51 we'll look at briefly as one of the key texts John draws on for his Babylon imagery, but also in light of Revelation chapters 17 and 18. Those approaches see Revelation as exclusively future, chapters 4-22 as only happening in the future. It hasn't happened yet and is yet to be fulfilled. They sometimes read this as an anticipation of a literal interpretation of a rebuilt Babylon. But if not a literal Babylon in its literal geographical location, many still anticipate a literal rebuilt city in the future.

#### Babylon as a Code Word for Rome

Now I hope to demonstrate, and I would side with those who argue that most likely Babylon is like a code for the city of Rome. This fits the context of Revelation very well. John is addressing seven churches living within the context of the Greco-Roman empire and under the pressure of, under the thumbprint of Roman imperial rule, then it would make sense for the first readers to read this and think in terms of Babylon or think in terms of Rome as Babylon. That is, Babylon as a symbol of a idolatrous, godless, oppressive people who persecute the people of God, a city that sets itself up over God and absolutizes its power and usurps God's authority, arrogates and claims authority that belongs only to God himself. Rome itself is characterized that way and Babylon becomes a perfect fit for Rome.

We see evidence of this already. It appears, at least by this time in the first century, Babylon could be used as sort of a code for Rome. For example, the very end of 1 Peter, the letter written by Peter in 1 Peter chapter 5 in verse 14 at the very end of the letter, actually verse 13, 1 Peter 5:13, "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings and so does my son Mark." Most people recognize, that 1 Peter

was written to Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire but within the wake of Roman rule. 1 Peter 5:13 I think provides compelling evidence of Peter's using Babylon that at least some Christians would have seen Babylon as sort of a code for the city of Rome. So I think John is kind of following suit here, although he's not using Babylon solely because it was a designation for Rome in the first century, he uses it because of its Old Testament background and because he finds now in Rome the ultimate expression of what Babylon embodied during that time in the Old Testament. Now he finds that resurfacing and reemerging in an even greater way in the city of Rome. So I find it difficult to think that John's readers would not have read this and thought that John was describing the judgment of Rome itself, on Rome and its empire.

Furthermore, later on in the text, in chapter 17 especially in verse 9, part of John's vision is, in the beginning section we'll see, he sees a woman riding on a beast and the beast has seven heads. Notice how he identifies the seven heads later on, in verse 9 he says, "This calls for a mind of wisdom, the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits." That notion of seven hills probably reflects a common understanding historically in some historical literature of Rome's association of seven hills. In fact, there are a number of coins and if you have access to David Aune's commentary, his third volume, on chapter 17 to 22, he actually has a picture of a coin where you have Rome portrayed as a goddess who is seated on seven hills. So once more the description of it, the seven hills, along with the common designation for Rome among Christians seems to suggest to me that John intends for Babylon here to be identified with the first century city of Rome. Indeed his readers would have made that connection. John himself drops clues in the text such as portraying the woman as sitting on seven hills to suggest that that's the identification we should make.

So now John is going to develop in more detail the description of the dominant empire under which Christians found themselves in the first century, not only the city of Rome but its empire and all the provinces it ruled over. Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 17 probably function as the setting for the entire vision. That is, chapter 17 verses 1 and 2 function as the setting or introduction for chapters 17 and 18 as well. The angel tells

John, “I’m going to show you the punishment of the harlot, the prostitute Babylon,” which we’ve suggested signifies the city of Rome. Then chapters 17 and 18 describe that. Chapter 17 will primarily demonstrate why it is that Babylon, Rome, is guilty and why it is subject to judgment and then chapter 18 will describe its judgment.

The other difference between the two chapters is that chapter 17 is largely visual. It’s largely a vision that John of that’s a woman riding this beast and then an interpretation of that vision. Chapter 18 does not contain nearly as much visionary material, it’s primarily auditory. Most of chapter 18 is a construction of laments, speeches or sayings that function to describe or interpret the downfall of Babylon. So again chapter 17 is more vision and its interpretation, chapter 18 is more auditory in the form of laments, songs and speeches and things like that.

#### Text of Revelation 17

Before we look at the text, at least a few details, let me read it, and starting in chapter 17:1, this introduces us to the climax of the book, beginning then with the judgment of Babylon/Rome. “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’ Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She had a golden cup in her hand, filled with the abominable things and the filth of adulteries. This title was written on her forehead: ‘Mystery, Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth.’ I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: ‘Why are you so astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not and will come up out of the Abyss and go into his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose

names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast because he once was, now is not, and yet will come. This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five of them have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is the eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction. The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not received a kingdom, but for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is the Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers. Then the angel said to me, 'The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'"

So verses 1 and 2 then sort of set the tone for and I think are an introduction to the entire vision. That is, even chapter 17 has to do with the destruction of Babylon and is setting you up for the ultimate downfall and destruction of Babylon which happens in 17, 18, and again we should include 19 in at least the first five or six verses as the clear response to the judgment upon Babylon. Just to point out again that most likely John is, as I've argued before although I hold to the fact that John actually had a vision and saw a vision, he interprets that vision by linking it, by describing it through Old Testament texts that resemble and further describe and fit exactly what he saw.

We'll see that one of the most important texts that John calls upon over and over again for his description of the downfall and judgment of Babylon is Jeremiah chapter 50 and especially Jeremiah chapter 51. And so, for example, when he describes Babylon as sitting on many waters, in Jeremiah chapter 51, in verse 13, we'll back up and read verse

12. “Lift up your banner against the walls of Babylon!” He’s describing the destruction of Babylon, “Reinforce the guard station and the watchmen, prepare an ambush. The Lord will carry out his purpose, his decree against the people of Babylon and addressing the people of Babylon” in verse 13. “You who live by many waters and are rich in treasure.” Now notice how John describes Babylon, Rome in chapter 17 as, “The great prostitute who sits on many waters.” Then later on he will describe her as decked out in treasure in verses 3 and 4, especially verse 4, and she’s glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls. So John is clearly drawing upon Old Testament depictions of Babylon, historical Babylon, and its judgment now to describe another Babylon-like city and its judgment as well.

### The Great Prostitute

The fact that she is called a prostitute in verse 2, right away John is told, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute,” already indicates the nature of Babylon-Rome, or the nature of this city, and by calling her a prostitute this anticipates one of the crimes that John is going to accuse Babylon of later on in chapter 17 and that is that she has caused the nations to commit adultery with her. So Rome is going to be pictured as a prostitute and other nations, and other people, are those that she will seduce into committing adultery with her. In the Old Testament we often find this language of prostitution or adultery, particularly depicting the Old Testament nation of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament Israel is portrayed as the wife or the bride of Yahweh and for Israel to go after idols, for Israel to break the covenant relationship to God then is seen as spiritual adultery. So when the nation of Israel goes after other idols, when they go after foreign gods, when they break the covenant, then that is often portrayed as they are adulterous; they play the role of a prostitute. Through adultery they have strayed from their covenant relationship with God and they have gone after idols; they’ve been unfaithful to their covenant.

But it’s interesting at least in two texts we find the language of a prostitute or committing adultery in relation to pagan foreign nations, not just the nation of Israel. For example, in the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 23:15-17 is one important text, chapter

23:15-17, “At that time Tyre,” and this is a lament over Tyre in anticipation of the judgment upon Tyre, “At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king’s life. But at the end of these seventy years it will happen to Tyre as the song of the prostitute: ‘Take up the harp, walk through the city, O prostitute forgotten; play the harp well, and sing many a song, so that you will be remembered.’ At the end of the seventy years, the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms of the earth.”

The other text that I won’t take time to read now, is Nahum, actually I have it right here, Nahum chapter three. In Nahum chapter 3:4, “All because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution.” So in both of these texts you have not the nation of Israel, but foreign nations compared to a prostitute who seduced or enticed or enslaved other nations to commit adultery with her, to participate in her prostitution.

So, with this background of pagan nations that could be described as prostitutes that could cause other nations to commit adultery and fornication by participating in their idolatrous practices. These texts have become a model for creating a fitting background for what’s going on in Rome. The author is drawing on these texts to describe Rome as a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery with her. So the emphasis here is not on Israel committing adultery, but it’s on Rome as a prostitute convincing other nations to commit adultery with her in reflecting texts like Nahum chapter 3 and also Isaiah the 23 text.

The other thing significant about the Nahum and the Isaiah texts that fits so well here is in both Nahum and Isaiah, the nature of the prostitute city’s activity in causing others to commit adultery is economic, that is, primarily getting other nations to commit adultery not so much by worshipping their gods, although that probably would have been included, but primarily by participating in their ill-gotten gained luxury. So, in chapter 17 of Revelation, and we’re going to see this even more clearly in chapter 18, one of the crimes of Rome is that she is a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery by basically living off, or making a living off of her wealth and off her excessive luxury.

That is the crime leveled against the foreign cities in Nahum and Isaiah and that is the crime now that is now leveled against the city of Babylon/Rome. She has caused other nations to commit adultery by entrapping them in her economic system by which they gain wealth and luxury and probably that would have been associated with idolatrous practices as well. Although the primary point is the luxurious lifestyle that they had that turned into by colluding with, by participating in the economic system of Rome. They've made a living and gained luxury and wealth because of that. The fact that Rome is also called a prostitute not only has Old Testament background, but certainly is fitting because it suggests seduction and control. By calling Rome a prostitute, not only does she seduce nations with her economic practices, but she also then exercises control over them by, again, getting other nations to participate in her idolatrous practices but especially her economic practices to gain wealth. So the nations are depicted as relying on Rome for their wealth and for their security and Revelation 18 will make this even more clear and spell out in detail how that happened and how that took place.

But, again, John is primarily dependent on Old Testament texts and Jeremiah chapter 51 for the language of the judgment of Babylon. But it's important to understand, John will draw on other Old Testament texts that also condemn or pronounce judgment on other godless cities such as Nineveh and particularly Tyre so that his picture is sort of a composite one. Though Jeremiah 50 and 51 play a dominant role in that it describes in detail specifically the judgment of Babylon which is the exact term used to refer to Rome here at the same time John will draw on other godless, idolatrous, luxurious cities that manifest a lust for luxury and wealth and in doing so, have set themselves up as God and as having divine authority. John will use other cities to portray Babylon/Rome as well, so he'll draw on another Old Testament text such as Isaiah and the portrayal of the downfall of Tyre.

We'll see too that one of the reasons he uses other texts is because Jeremiah 50 through 51 largely does not say much about Babylon's wealth. But Tyre we've seen part of the reason why John critiques Rome is because of its wealth, because of its excessive luxury, entrapping other countries to participate in that in their economic system and their

economic practices and seducing them to be involved in that, make a lot of and basically accumulate wealth in association with Rome. The only place John finds that, then is in other cities such as Tyre, and so the oracles against Tyre in the Old Testament also play a role in condemning the wealth and the commercial activity of Rome which Jeremiah doesn't explicitly do in relationship to Babylon.

So what we're going to see then is a composite picture from the Old Testament texts starting with the Babylon judgment in Jeremiah, but including other texts as well. Now, in the rest of this section, starting with verse three, we are introduced to the vision proper and it consists of two parts. Chapter 17:3 to the very end of the chapter is going to consist of two parts; verses 3 through 6 are a description of the vision that John had the vision of the prostitute Babylon and also verse 6 ending with John's response to that vision. Then starting with verse 7 to the end of the chapter we will find an interpretation of that vision by the angel, perhaps you picked that up when we read the text.

#### Angelic Tour

In other apocalypses, in other Jewish apocalypses, we often find this feature where an angel will take a seer on kind of a tour and show him different places of a vision and then sometimes the angel will interpret that vision. It's interesting that you find that rarely in John's apocalypse. The only place you find that to any extent is here, we saw briefly back in chapter 1:20 where the seven lampstands and the seven stars were interpreted for John. We saw this briefly back in chapter 7 where John asked, "Who are these people dressed in white robes?" and the angel said, "These are the ones that have come out of the great tribulation." Now here is the only place where in any detail, we find an angelic being interpreting the vision for John. However, what is intriguing is the angel's interpretation doesn't help us out all that much. It probably would have helped John and the first readers quite a bit, but for us it really has not resolved it in much more clarity.

In fact, the interpretation is almost as problematic to understand as the vision itself. So we need to spend a little bit of time talking about a possible, I certainly don't want to be dogmatic and say this is the way we have to read it, but a possible



understanding of the vision also an interpretation of the vision given to John by the angel, but first of all the description of the vision. When the angel, one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls came to John and told him he would show him the vision of the destruction of the prostitute, the first thing the angel does in verse 3 is show him a vision of the prostitute itself. We said one of the functions of this section, all of chapter 17 is to set the scene for chapter 18; that is, to demonstrate why it is the prostitute deserves judgment. So the angel takes John on sort of a visionary tour, not really a tour, other apocalypses often take a seer to different locations. John doesn't get that, but he is taken to one location here and he'll be taken to another location in chapter 21 when he's taken to a high mountain to see the bride New Jerusalem. Here he's taken to the desert, which becomes the setting for his vision. Probably this mention of the desert is once more dependent on the Old Testament and John might have in mind Isaiah chapter 21. Isaiah 21:10, is the background for this backdrop of John's vision in the desert. The main point is the background of a desert though elsewhere, John has used the desert with connotations of protection and preservation. For example, back in chapter 12:14, the desert was the place to which the woman was taken, where she was preserved and nourished and protected for a period of time. But here "desert" clearly has negative connotations; that is, the desert is a place of evil, it's a place inhabited by wild animals and demonic beings. So the desert clearly has negative connotations in this context. When John's taken into the desert, it's not for a place of testing, it's not to show preservation or protection; it's meant to indicate that this vision has foreboding connotations. It's meant to say something about Babylon. It will end up, in chapter 18, being the haunt of demons. It will end up being the dwelling place of all kinds of unclean animals. So already the desert suggests connotations of judgment that will get spelled out in more detail in chapter 18.

### Beast and the Woman

Now the vision centers around two figures, two dominant figures. One is a beast; the other is a woman who rides on the beast. Now, the beast that we've already been introduced to, in fact, the description of the beast makes it clear that it is the beast that

you have already encountered in chapter 11, but especially in chapter 13. The beast is described as dressed in scarlet, having blasphemous names on it, which we read in chapter 13 in the first beast and also seven heads and ten horns, resembling the first beast back in chapter 13. The woman however is described as characterized by great wealth; she's dressed in purple and scarlet, gold and precious stones indicating, at least here, not only the wealth and luxury that belongs to Rome, but also probably is meant to portray the dress of a prostitute. This simply affirms that Rome is now pictured as a prostitute as John was introduced to her back in chapter 1. He's about to see the prostitute, now here she is decked out in her garb, consisting of and reflecting her extreme wealth and excessive luxury by which she will seduce the nations in her economic practices. These two are the elements that John mentions, the woman riding the beast, the beast and his seven heads and ten horns; these are the elements that will get explained in more detail in the interpretation of the vision, starting in verse 7.

Now, one additional feature of the vision in verse 6 is she is also responsible for the persecution of the saints; that is, she is drunk with the blood of the saints. She is responsible for putting the people of God to death. Now, two further interesting features of the vision to draw your attention to and before I do that, just to back up, by the way, these verses have already introduced us to, even before the interpretation. John has already introduced us to the primary crimes of Babylon/Rome. That is, they've introduced us to the two or three main reasons why Babylon will be judged. One of them is simply because she has seduced nations; she has caused nations to commit adultery with her. She has caused nations to, through their economic association and entrapment, she has caused them to commit adultery by their becoming rich and wealthy off of Babylon/Rome. Second, she herself is portrayed as arrogant and extremely rich and extremely wealthy and with excessive luxury and now we just saw in verse 6 she's also responsible for violence, violently putting to death the people of God who are described as those who bore the testimony of Jesus. This is a common theme throughout Revelation for what the church is supposed to do, and a common reason why we find persecution of God's people, because of their faithful witness and testimony.

But these are two other features of this vision that are important. First of all, it appears now that the beast and the woman are separate, and maybe we shouldn't make too much of this. It's interesting that the woman rides on the beast, suggesting that perhaps the woman controls the beast or that the beast's authority underlies it and the beast is the true motivating factor for the woman who is identified as Babylon/Rome. Now the beast is the true power behind it that could be the picture as well. Although there could have been different suggestions, some say that the beast is more sort of the military power behind it, maybe the woman is more the economic and the religious part of Rome.

I wonder if another way to look at it is that perhaps this suggests that the beast, elsewhere in Revelation has been identified with Rome such as in chapter 13 and chapter 11 as well. Now I wonder if John is not telling us that while the beast can be identified with Rome, now John wants to say the beast is far more than just Rome. The beast is the same beast as the past that we saw in Old Testament texts. The same beastly figure, the same monster that underlies other empires such as Egypt and other godless foreign empires now supports Rome as well. Now it has manifested itself in Rome. So I wonder if this is simply not another way of suggesting that the beast is far more than just Rome, that is, it extends into the past and it could also extend into the future. But for John's purposes, he sees the beast that comes with a long history of the beast representing idolatry and satanically inspired nations that suppress God's people, that arrogates God's authority. Now that same beastly figure is surfacing again and manifesting itself in Rome as indicated by the beast supporting the woman. So, I'm not certain that that's the case, but I think it would be a valid explanation and seems to make good sense. The beast has roamed elsewhere but John wants to be clearer that the beast is more than Rome. Now he's portraying its true power and the source of authority behind the prostitute Babylon, the city of Rome.

Second is, in this vision the author is also making clear, I think, that it's the attractive and seductive nature of Rome that allows it to cover up its evil and violent nature. That is what enables it to seduce other nations. So they, the other nations are described as intoxicated with the adulteries of Rome that is due to the attractive and

seductive nature of Rome. Now the nations are blind to the true nature of Babylon/Rome. Rome covers up its evil hideous nature, its violent nature. Again, we may see a little bit of an unraveling of Roman myths such as Roma Eternal, eternal Rome, or Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, and what John wants to demonstrate now is in true apocalyptic fashion, Rome is not all it's cracked up to be. Rome is not all it appears. Behind its alluring, attractive, seductive nature lies a hideous beast, lies a violent, idolatrous, and hideous empire. Also, I wonder too if this imagery, at least in chapter 17 as a preparation for chapter 18, the attractive nature of Rome covers up that it is going to be judged. So this is what causes nations to be involved in it and this is what causes nations to be seduced.

Now, in other words, it's as if John is saying this is how sin works. I think if we look at this text in relationship today, this is a perfect picture of how sin works. Sometimes people say sin is awful and horrible and you don't want to do it. Certainly that's true, but the point is that sin does not come across as awful and horrible. Sin hides its consequences. Sin hides its hideous nature as a violation of God's character and it hides its dreadful and deadly consequences of judgment behind a façade of attraction and allurements. Sin comes to us as attractive and alluring, hiding its consequences, hiding its hideous nature and that's how sin works and that's how John sees Babylon/Rome working here. It hides its hideous nature as a godless, idolatrous being that is intent on destroying and causing harm. It hides its consequences, that is, the fact that it is going to bring judgment. That's how the nations are seduced, that's also how God's people are seduced too to participate in Babylon.

Two other features of this text, first of all, the fact that she is described as a woman dressed in expensive linen but also dressed in gold and precious stones, this is another description of New Jerusalem in chapters 21 and 22. The bride is all prepared and dressed and she's decked out in gold and precious stones as the rest of the New Jerusalem vision describes in more detail. So this is not only portraying her as a seductive harlot and a prostitute, not only portraying her wearing the luxury and wealth of Rome by which she will seduce other nations, but now also in direct contrast to the wedding garb and the gold

and precious stones of chapter 21, the prostitute Babylon is now also portrayed in similar light to further bring out the contrast between the two.

One further issue is note in chapter 17:5, "On her forehead she has something written which is 'Babylon the great, mother of all prostitutes,'" may also be the image of a prostitute having a band or something on her forehead. This is simply to reveal her true nature, her true character that she is a seductive, idolatrous prostitute who now comes. Furthermore, she is the mother of all prostitutes and also of all the abominations of the earth. By calling her a mother, that may suggest once more her control over all things but also the fact that she gets others to participate in her prostitution and to also participate in her idolatrous practices and in her abominations.

So up until this point Rome has been portrayed as a prostitute who seduces others, who seduces and entices the other nations to commit adultery with her by being involved in not just her idolatrous practices, although that is involved, but by being involved in her economic system that is built on a lust for wealth and built on excessive luxury. Furthermore, she is also portrayed as one who is guilty of violence; guilty of the blood of the saints, and so now we've seen Babylon in her true colors, Babylon/Rome. What John is going to do now is interpret this vision. So the vision has portrayed Babylon in its true colors and she is now ripe for judgment.

Now John has told us why it is Babylon is guilty of judgment. So, starting with verse 7 now, John will begin to interpret this vision in more detail for his readers.

## **Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 23**

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

### **Revelation 17:7-18:8: Interpreting the Beast and Fall of Babylon**

#### **Introduction into Chapter 17**

Before we move on, I want to return to one Old Testament text. It was Isaiah 21:1 that portrayed Babylon as in connection with a desert, so that may provide some of the background for the setting of John's vision here in chapter 17. Likewise, when Babylon is called the "mother of all prostitutes," the imagery may also convey that she produces these things and others in other nations and those that she seduces, as well as the abominations of the earth. Again, calling her responsibility for the idolatrous practices of the nations that now she reproduces in them.

Now, in verse 7 then, John respond with complete astonishment. There may be a couple notions involved in his response. One of them may be fear because of what he sees. Given the angel's response when he says, "Why are you astonished? I will explain this mystery." It's probably also one of perplexity and wondering what in the world that he saw and how to understand it. It may also be that John himself found the vision attractive and was, in a sense, startled by the beauty and attraction of what he saw. Now the angel is going to respond to his astonishment and amazement and perhaps attraction by, actually starting here with verse 7, he's going to describe exactly what it was John saw, not taking every single detail of the vision in the first six verses, but taking most of the features of the vision and now beginning to unpack them.

#### **Was, Is Not, and Is Coming**

The first intriguing thing to note about the vision is John describes the beast in very intriguing language. Three times in the section, here in this verse twice and then later on in verse 11, John will use the language of the beast "was, is not, and is coming." Probably this is meant as a direct contrast to and parody of the way that God is described

in chapter 1 in verse 8 and chapter 4 in verse 8 and also chapter 11 in verse 10 and in 14 too, where its only twofold. There it is only twofold; you don't have "is coming" in chapter 11 verse 14 because God has already come. But in 1:8 and 4:8, we find the one "who was, who is, and who is coming" and now, it's as if in contrast to that as a direct parody the beast is described as one who "was, is not, and who is coming." The fact that he "is not" probably refers back to Revelation 13, where one of his heads had a death blow because of the death and resurrection of Christ, that spelled out his defeat casting him out of heaven. So the fact that he "was and is not" suggests that his death blow and his judgment and defeat were because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we saw in chapter 13 the entire world was amazed because he apparently was able to overcome that and to survive that.

But the other feature, though, is that he "is coming," which probably contrasts to all the references throughout Revelation to Christ coming and to God's coming in the future. Now, Satan is coming but ironically, he comes up out of the Abyss, but in order to go into destruction. So unlike God and the Lamb's coming, which results in salvation and the establishment of God's Kingdom, the coming of the beast results in his destruction, which we will see later on in chapter 19. So this is meant to clearly contrast the beast's existence to that of God and the Lamb. This idea of the Lamb or of the beast, coming out of the Abyss and going into destruction, may also reflect the motif that you find in apocalyptic literature, especially the Enoch literature, 1 and 2 Enoch, of demonic beings who are locked in prison for a time only to be let out to go into their judgment. That would certainly fit here, that the purpose of the beast coming out of the Abyss, he's locked in the Abyss and then he comes out, in order to go to his destruction, in order to go into his judgment.

So I would take it then that in the next two mentions of this motif, of this title "the one who was and is not and is coming," the "is coming" would be understood as he is coming in order to go into destruction. It's because of his nature, because he "was but is not" and now apparently "is coming." It's for this reason that the nations are deceived.

Some have suggested this he “is not and is coming,” reflects the myth of Nero, that there were all kinds of uncertainty surrounding his death and some even thinking that he actually did not really die, that he was going to come back and reclaim his throne and some have suggested that that lies behind this title. It’s possible that could provide the backdrop but clearly John’s primary impetus is to draw a contrast with the divine name, the one “who was, who is and who is coming.” Now Satan’s, or the beast’s, existence is seen in similar terms, again he is a poor parody. Instead of “is,” he “is not,” showing his defeat and when he comes, it will be for the purpose of going into destruction. So, that’s how John describes the beast, or the angel describes to John the beast that he saw as a parody of the existence of God and the Lamb. For the beast number one that will result in his punishment and destruction, one that will get narrated in chapter 19.

### **The Seven Heads**

Now, perhaps the trickiest part of this is what the angel does with the seven heads of the beast. The beast is described as having seven heads and ten horns. The angel is now going to interpret those seven heads and the ten horns for us. This is where it gets a little bit tricky. The seven heads are interpreted in two ways and this would not be unusual in apocalyptic literature, that an image could have more than one meaning, so we don’t need to see inconsistency here or more than one source or something like that. It’s possible that an apocalyptic image could carry more than one connotation. So the angel says, “the seven heads are the seven hills,” identifying the beast here with Rome; the woman riding on, or sitting on the beast here identifying the woman as Rome.

But the seven heads are also seven kings, or seven rulers. The angel says out of these seven, five of them have already ruled and fallen, that is the rule is finished. One is currently ruling, he says five have fallen, one is, and one is to come. So five have already fallen, one currently is, and there is one yet to come. If we take these seven heads as seven kings and the seven kings being emperors, the seven kings of Rome, that is seven



emperors. Some have said these are seven kingdoms, but I think probably we should take these as seven rulers, or seven kings, that is, emperors over the Roman Empire.

The question then is: how are we to identify these? Some have used this text to try to date Rome. That is, if we can identify who “the one is,” when John says “five have fallen and one is,” that would give us a clue as to when the book of Revelation was written perhaps. The problem is when you begin to look at the list of emperors. Let’s assume for example that we hold to the view that Revelation probably was written under Domitian, the difficulty is that if you start with Julius Caesar, the first emperor, and work through the list, including Domitian, you have twelve emperors. So if you go through seven, then you fall short of Domitian. In fact, to arrive at any date, you sort of have to do gymnastics with or explain your way around the list of twelve. There’s more after Domitian. There have been a couple suggestions as to even a later date, but since Domitian is the most common date, I’m stopping there. But you have twelve emperors to work through. The question is, out of these seven, which of those twelve might this refer to? That might determine when we date it. Some have suggested we don’t start with Julius Caesar, but we, for different reasons, start a little bit later. We’ve already noted that in 68 and 69 AD, there were three emperors that ruled in quick succession. They were deposed from the throne and some have suggested we retain those in the list, some suggest we should skip that because of the short, brief time that John would not have thought of counting them as part of the seven. So there have been all kinds of suggestions as to where do we start counting the emperors and who do we include in this list of seven.

I think it’s better to take this list as symbolic. That is, we’ve already noted how often the number seven is used of completeness and perfection. Let’s assume it was written during the time of Domitian, I don’t think John is using seven to refer to any seven specific, literal emperors but seven suggests the complete number and the complete rule of Rome’s emperors, rather than seven literal, specific emperors out those that he has in mind. So looking at all of Rome’s emperors, perhaps even beyond, obviously beyond because there’s one still to come, if Domitian is, and I don’t want to place too much

weight on this, “the one who is,” then “the one who is yet to come,” again that is the seventh, John is looking at all of the emperors who would rule Rome, symbolizing their complete rule by the number seven.

Now the fact, what does he mean when he says “five have fallen, one is, and one is to come?” First of all, I think this is another ironic repetition of the formula applied to God, “the one who was, who is, and who is to come.” Now, “five have fallen, one is, and one is coming.” So he’s portrayed not only the beast, but he’s portrayed the entire existence and life of the Roman Empire and its emperors, once more, as a parody of, an imitation of, the moniker of God as “the one who was, who is, and who is coming.” So this language is partially meant to reflect that divine title and that not only the beast but Roman Empire, the life of Rome, the span of the Roman Empire, repeats and imitates and is a parody of the existence of Rome, or God’s existence reflected in “the one who was, who is, and who is coming.”

Furthermore, I think this language that “five have fallen, one is, and one is to come,” is meant simply to demonstrate that evil is running its course, that this will not last. The bulk of Rome’s rule is over and it’s reign is only going to be for a short time before God brings it to an end, before God comes and judges the Roman Empire. So when he says, “five have fallen, one is, one is to come,” it’s simply to show it won’t last forever. The Roman Empire will not last forever, but the last two, “the one who is and the one who is to come,” will fall just like the first five. So we’re not meant to add up and figure out seven literal rulers. By saying “five are already fallen,” the bulk of Rome’s evil rule has already taken place and is yet to last for a short time, but it too, the other rulers will fall just like the first five.

Now, what is intriguing is note how the beast is described in relationship to all this. You can kind of see the apocalyptic symbolism going on here, the rulers are actually the beast’s heads. But now note how the beast is described in verse 11. The beast who “once was and now is not,” he is an eighth king, he belongs to the seven and he is going

to his destruction. So it's interesting, the beast is associated with the seven heads, which are seven emperors or rulers, yet the beast seems to represent an eighth. What I think this is suggesting most likely is the future coming of the beast at the very end of history, the same beast that inspires the seven, in other words the whole span of the Roman Empire that will run its course, the beast functions then as an eighth that is yet to come at the end of history; but when he does, he will go to his destruction.

So the point of all this then is simply to demonstrate the nature of the beast's existence, as much as it is able to wield its authority through its emperors and even though it will come at the end of history as the eighth, the Roman rule simply won't last. It's headed for destruction and it's headed for judgment so what do the readers have to fear and now they can see Rome in a new light.

### **The Ten Horns**

The next feature then is the ten horns, which the angel interprets as ten kingdoms. So the seven heads represent the entire span of Roman rule and the emperors with the beast, after that, the beast coming as an eighth at the end of history, but he will go into destruction. So human kingdoms and human rule will not last; it's temporary, it will end in destruction. Now the ten horns, the angel identifies as ten kingdoms. Probably, like the number seven, we should not take these as ten literal kingdoms that we can identify on a map. Ten is symbolic of completeness, ten being symbolic of a full or complete number, now is meant to symbolize the nations of the world that will rule along with the beast, or along with Rome. Again, I don't think we are meant to try to identify ten specific ones as much as we are to see the fullness and completeness of all the nations who will be in collusion with the beast.

Probably, these are to be identified with the "kings of the earth" back in chapter 16, verse 14, that Satan and the beast and false prophet are through three frogs allowed to deceive into gathering for an end-time battle. And, in fact, that's exactly what happens here, the beast and the nations of the earth come together for one purpose, and that is as

allies in an all-out war against the Lamb. But, the result is what has already been depicted and predicted in the first several verses of this interpretation and that is, the beast is going to destruction and so will the nations that collude with the beast and with the Roman Empire. They all will collude and become allies in making war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will defeat them. So there's really no battle that takes place here at all.

So in a sense then this is another very brief reference to an end-time battle. Back in chapter 16 in verse 14, we were introduced to the Battle of Armageddon, which we saw there. The Battle of Armageddon is a symbol of end-time battle. The Battle is not described here. If we are to identify this with the battle in chapter 16, here the war is sort of described briefly, but it's really not a war at all. The Lamb simply destroys and defeats his enemies. Note the language of one hour, this happens in one hour. One hour, probably, being a reference to or symbolic of, simply, a short period of time.

### **The Woman, the Beast, and the Nations**

A couple of other interesting features of this interpretation, that leads us to the end of chapter 17. First, note that the angel interprets the waters, back from verse 1 and 2, the waters on which the harlot, the prostitute, Babylon sits. The waters are symbolic of peoples and nations and multitudes and languages. The fact that she sits on the waters probably indicates the beast's or woman's, Babylon, Rome's authority over all the nations. What is next, though, is rather astonishing, we've already seen the beast and the woman being separate, the woman riding the beast, which may suggest the beast as symbolic of evil and chaos and demonically-inspired, the beast and the woman being separate.

Now the beast and the ten nations seem to turn on the prostitute, Babylon, the Great City, and to destroy her. What I think this is simply suggesting is, ironically, those who depended on her and even colluded with her for their economic well-being and practices, now turn on her and destroy her. In my opinion, simply, at one level, indicating the self-destructive nature of the empire, the self-destructive nature of sin, that any

empire that sets itself up over God, that arrogates divine authority, that claims the exclusive worship and sovereignty that belongs only to God that maintains itself through violence that seduces others to belong, to participate in its self-seeking wealth. The result is self-destruction. So the beast that gave it the power and underlies its authority and power and now the ten nations that allied with it, now all turn in on it to destroy it, suggesting perhaps, as I said, the self-destructive nature of evil.

So the point of this section so far has been to demonstrate the true nature of, in true apocalyptic fashion, to unveil and demonstrate the true nature of Babylon/Rome. It is a prostitute that seduces other nations to be involved in its idolatrous economic practices. It seduces other nations to participate in its wealth and in its excessive luxury, in its lust for more. It also is guilty of violence in killing those who oppose it, especially the people of God who have maintained their faithful witness. It is guilty of arrogating divine power and divine authority and for all these reasons, its end is destruction. No matter how great the beast appears and no matter how significant a role its seven emperors, play, at the end of the day, it will bring about its destruction.

This demonstrates why Babylon/Rome is ripe for destruction. It demonstrates, “Why chapter 18? Why then the destruction?” Chapter 17 has spelled that out. But it also then shows the churches exactly what or who it is that they are facing by unveiling the true nature of Rome and what is at stake in resisting it or in participating in it. If they choose to participate, they are guilty along with the other nations of committing adultery with her. Churches such as Laodicea, that are complacent and are wealthy, or other churches that have compromised or are allowing those who have compromised with the idolatrous, godless, Roman economic system, now this chapter would remind them exactly what is at stake in colluding with Rome. Why is it that they should be so intent on maintaining their faithful witness and refusing to conform and compromise?

Now, chapter 17 has demonstrated, again, Rome in its true colors. It is a seductive prostitute that through its alluring appearance and through its attraction, covers up its

hideous sinful nature, covers up the fact that it is headed for judgment and causes nations to commit adultery with it. This is a call then for the Church to separate from that. Chapter 18, we'll begin in verse 4, "Come out of her." And why? Because she's this prostitute whose headed for destruction so, "Come out of her. Do not be involved in her sinful practices, so that you will not participate in her judgment."

### **Introduction to Chapter 18**

Now that brings us to chapter 18. Chapter 18, then, reveals in more detail the destruction of the prostitute, Babylon. In fact, this is what we would expect back in chapter 17:1, did not the angel tell John that he was going to show him the judgment of the prostitute, Babylon? And in fact that's what John narrates here but he's already introduced that at the very end of chapter 17. We've said chapter 17 shows the reason for Babylon's fall. But chapter 17 already ended with a brief hint of her destruction, that the nations and the beast would turn against her and turn on her and destroy her. So it was briefly referred to in chapter 17:16 at the end, but now chapter 18 gives us more details concerning the destruction of Babylon.

Chapter 18 ends up being sort of a pastiche of Old Testament texts; Old Testament texts taken usually from judgment oracles out of Jeremiah 50 and 51 as we've seen, and out of Isaiah in relationship to Tyre and other nations, and a couple of other Old Testament texts. All now come together to portray Babylon/Rome as sort of the embodiment of all these other nations who suffered judgment.

The other thing to mention about chapter 18 before we read it is that chapter 18 does not seem to follow into chronological order, or I should say, the events in chapter 18, the sections in chapter 18, do not seem to follow in chronological order. We'll look at that in more detail in a moment.

But the point is to demonstrate, or the point of this section is that, the saints will one day rejoice over the fall of Babylon because it demonstrates God's justice in avenging their blood and in vindicating them. So for that reason, they should separate

from it to avoid its judgment. So the saints are called upon to separate from Babylon/Rome, to avoid its judgment, and if they do, they will one day rejoice over Babylon's fall because the fall of Babylon demonstrates God's justice. It demonstrates that God is just in judging them but also in vindicating and avenging his people.

### **The Text of Chapter 18**

So chapter 18 continues the vision of chapter 17, but now you'll notice that as we read this there's very little by way of what John saw and what John sees are several groups. The main content of chapter 18 is auditory in the form of laments and the form of speech, almost all of them are taken right out of the Old Testament. So chapter 18, "After this," after John saw chapter 17, now he sees this...

"After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!

She has become a home for demons  
and a haunt for every evil spirit,  
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird,

For all the nations have drunk  
the maddening wine of her adulteries.  
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,  
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.'

Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

'Come out of her, my people,  
so that you will not share in her sins,  
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;  
for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.  
Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Mix her a double portion from her own cup.  
Give her as much torture and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.  
In her heart she boasts, [and here's what she boasts]  
'I sit as a queen;

I am not a widow;  
and I will never mourn.’  
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
death, mourning and famine.  
She will be consumed by fire,  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.’

When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
O Babylon, city of power!  
In one hour your doom has come!’

The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore— cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls [this is what the prostitute was dressed with in chapter 17]; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth [the dress of the prostitute too]; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men. They will say, ‘The fruit that you long for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,  
glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls [there they are again]!  
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’

Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning, they will cry out:

‘Woe! Woe, O great city,  
where all who had ships on the sea  
became rich through her wealth!  
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’



“Rejoice over her, O heaven!  
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!  
God has judged her for the way she has treated you.’

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and hurled it into the sea, and said:

“With such violence  
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,  
never to be found again.  
The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters,  
will never be heard in her again.  
No workmen of any trade  
will ever be found in you again.  
The sound of a millstone  
will never be heard in you again.  
The light of a lamp  
will never shine in you again.  
The voice of bridegroom and bride  
will never be heard in you again.  
Your merchants were the world’s great men.  
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.  
In her was found the blood of the prophets and of the saints,  
and of all who have been killed on the earth.”

### **Chronology and Focus of Chapter 18**

Starting with verse 4 then, the rest of the chapter becomes a series of speeches and laments that now stem from the voice in verse 4. What is important to understand is this section, as we already mentioned, is not primarily a vision. There are visionary elements; it begins, “after this, I saw another angel.” So John does see things, but what he sees is an angel and what he sees are different groups and persons who uttered the orations or who are responsible for the laments and the speeches.

Verse 4 then begins the voice from heaven that now will characterize the rest of the chapter. I’ve already mentioned and I want to demonstrate briefly, it appears to me that the audition, all these orations are not necessarily in chronological order. For example, in verses 1 through 3, these verses seem to assume that Babylon has already

fallen. To back up, the first thing I want to say, although the angel promises to show John the destruction of Babylon, there's really no narrative of the destruction at all. Chapter 18 really does not depict in any detail the destruction; it more demonstrates the results of the destruction and those who respond to it. So it more or less assumes the destruction. But verses 1-3, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons," verses 1-3 seem to assume that Babylon has already or just fallen.

But then with verse 4, when John hears another voice, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues." This seems to assume that Babylon has not yet fallen, that is, these events in 4-8 seem to take place before the fall of Babylon. Then verses 9-20, seem to refer to events following and in response to the fall of Babylon, in the form of persons who mourn because of her fall. So, chapter 18 is not intended to present a chronological order, but again is meant more to interpret the nature of Babylon's fall through the series of speeches and laments. It's interesting, as I've already mentioned, that chapter 18 assumes the fall of Babylon, yet it does not refer to it explicitly; it never actually narrates it.

### **Old Testament Backgrounds**

Chapter 18 then is constructed of Old Testament oracles of judgment against pagan cities such as Jeremiah 50-51 and Babylon. Also oracles against Nineveh or Tyre, are all now combined into this Babylon/Rome, this Great City, that is now going to be destroyed. The rest of the chapter and we'll move through it quickly, but the rest of the chapter can be divided according to the various voices.

So the first one is in chapter 18:1-3, which verses 1-3 is in the form of an Old Testament prophetic taunt song. For example, Isaiah chapter 21 in verse 9, which is a song against Babylon,

"Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses.  
And he gives back the answer:

'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! [Revelation's "fallen, fallen is Babylon"]

All the images of its gods  
lie shattered on the ground!””

So, given the background of Isaiah 21:9, idolatrous practices may still be in mind here. But as a result of Babylon’s fall, it becomes a place for demons and all kinds of unclean animals, again demonstrating the complete destruction and the complete overturning of the former glory of Babylon. In fact, another Old Testament text that plays a role in describing the downfall of the great city, now finally being laid waste, is another text out of Isaiah in chapter 34 and 11-14. Isaiah 34, in a series of judgments, oracles, against the nations in Isaiah 34: 11-14.

“The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;  
the great owl and the raven will nest there.  
God will stretch out over Edom  
the measuring line of chaos  
and the plumb line of desolation.  
Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom,  
all her princes will vanish away.  
Thorns will overrun her citadels,  
nettles and brambles her strongholds.  
She will become a haunt for jackals,  
a home for owls.  
Desert creatures will meet with hyenas,  
and wild goats will bleat with each other;  
there the night creatures will also repose  
and find for themselves places of rest.”

That’s the language in the text, I think, that John draws upon to describe the destruction of Babylon/Rome, the imagery of the city being laid completely waste. It’s been laid waste; it now is reduced to chaos. It’s now reduced to destruction, indicated by the fact that she’s now a desert wasteland inhabited by all kinds of unclean animals, let alone demonic beings as often demonic beings were associated with desert places.

So the Great City has now been laid waste and the reason is articulated in verse 3, which goes back to the description of the prostitute, or Rome as a prostitute. That is verse 3, “All the nations have been drunk with her wine, all the nations have committed adultery with her,” by being seduced and entrapped into her idolatrous economic

practices. That is, they have bought into Rome's economic system and now they have become wealthy on her excessive luxury.

So what you'll notice too with these speeches, not only are these speeches laments, or woes, that come out of the Old Testament portraying the downfall and judgment of a great city or people, but you also find alluding back to chapter 17, you also find the author rearticulating the reasons for Babylon's fall. Here we find that the reason for Rome's fall is she has caused other nations, again John has drawn on the language of prostitute and adultery, from Nahum chapter 3 and even Isaiah 23, applying the language of prostitution and adultery to foreign countries, foreign nations. So Rome is guilty of seducing other nations, to commit adultery with her; they are now complicit in her crimes. That is the reason why John, or why Babylon/Rome is now guilty of punishment. They've involved other nations in her commercial idolatrous practices.

But also on its own Rome is portrayed as having a lust for consuming wealth and having excessive luxury and wealth. We've already seen back in chapter 6 that Rome was guilty of, or part of the judgment on Rome in the form of I think seal 3, for example, Rome is guilty of exploiting even its own provinces, simply for its own benefit and for its own lust for wealth and for its own excessive luxury and did so at the expense and even exploiting the other provinces and the other nations as well.

### **Models of the Old Testament**

I've already mentioned that much of the model for Revelation chapter 18 is Jeremiah chapter 50, but also texts such as Ezekiel. Ezekiel 27, for example, that focuses on Tyre. I've already mentioned the reason for that is probably because Ezekiel chapter 27, which focuses on Tyre, is primarily an economic critique of Tyre while Jeremiah 51 does not seem to condemn wealth. Ezekiel 27 clearly condemns Tyre and focuses on Tyre for its economic exploitation, for its excessive luxury. So it provides a fitting model for John's critique of Babylon/Rome here in chapter 18. So Babylon is condemned then for its ostentatious display of wealth, its lust and thirst for excessive luxury, and

excessive consumption and then by seducing the nations to participate in that. That is what will bring God's wrath down on Babylon in the first three verses.

Verses 4-8 then are a call for God's people to come out of Babylon in order to avoid that judgment. Notice it's actually twofold. Number one, they are to come out of her so that they will not share in her sins, but second, so that they will not share in her plagues or her judgment. Now this call, if John is speaking to people in Asia Minor or even people living in Rome, it's hard to imagine that the readers were meant to carry this out literally. In fact, if I'm living in Asia Minor, how do you physically come out of Rome? Its empire is spread everywhere. So that probably we're to understand this coming out not as physical, but as we've seen, especially back in chapters 2 and 3, coming out would mean to overcome by refusing to compromise, by refusing to participate in her idolatrous, economic practices. This is how they would come out of her. So it's not a physical leaving the city of Rome, and many people were not in Rome, they were in the provinces it was almost impossible to come out of her physically. This is more of a call, another way of saying refuse to compromise, refuse to conform and be involved in her idolatrous, economic practices.

The Old Testament background for this is a number of texts that call for God's people to leave or come out of Babylon. One of those is found in the text that plays a dominant role is Jeremiah 50 verse 8 where we read, "Flee from Babylon; leave the land of the Babylonians." But another interesting text in Isaiah chapter 48 and verse 2, for example, in Isaiah chapter 48 and verse 20, I think is the text I'm looking for, "Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! And similar language to Jeremiah chapter 50. But then also, one other intriguing text in Isaiah and that is in chapter 52, verse 11, where he says, "Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing!" If this text also parallels Isaiah chapter 52 and verse 11, "Depart, depart, go out," and may also lie behind John's call to leave Babylon. As we've seen elsewhere John sometimes will combine a number of Old Testament texts, allude to several texts at once. Isaiah chapter 52, if you read the rest of the chapter, is in the context of a new exodus. So John then is calling on

his readers in a new exodus to leave Babylon, as the Israelites first left Egypt, and to touch no unclean thing. Now they are to leave Babylon/Rome, in a new exodus which will eventually lead them to their promised land which is Revelation 21 and 22 and the new creation. The other important feature about this call to leave Babylon the author says, is the reason that “your sins have piled up to the heavens and now God has remembered her crimes.”

### **God’s Relationship with the Fallen Babylon**

Note that theme of remembering that we saw back in chapter 16 as well in the seventh bowl; God remembered Babylon for the purpose of bringing about judgment. The idea is not that God had forgotten and all of a sudden it comes to his mind that he has something he needs to do, but the language of remembering again in that context of God is now faithful to keep his promises to bring about judgment on Babylon/Rome. But what is intriguing here is two things. Number one, note over and over this language that we’ve already seen elsewhere in Revelation that comes out the Old Testament of the judgment fitting the crime. Just as a nation did, God would repay them in turn. So you have this legal language of the judgment now fits the crime. And so in verse 6, “Give back to her as she has given.” So in the same way that Babylon/Rome has seduced other nations and involved them in her adultery, in the same way that she has put to death the saints and through violence shed the blood of God’s people, now she is to be given a judgment that fits the crime.

But the second thing to note is the author seems to at first contradict that when he says, “pay her back double for what she has done, mix her a double portion.” And so some will wonder how do we reconcile the fact that the author says, “Give her back according to what she has done,” but now he says, “let’s ratchet it up a little bit and give her double for what she has done.” Grant Osborne and his commentary, has interpreted this to say that actually what is going on here is this reflects Old Testament texts such as Exodus 22, where if you committed a crime, a person was expected to pay double at

times in restitution for the crime they committed. Others have suggested and the majority view is that this is not so much referring to double punishment, literally, as much as the complete or full punishment that God will give to Babylon/Rome for its crimes.

Another one that I'm attracted to is and I think makes good sense here is that the word "double" is better translated "equivalent." That is, the punishment produces a duplicate or it balances out, that is almost as if on a scale, the crime on one side then the duplicate, the duplicate punishment balances it out. So that it's just another way of saying the same thing, the punishment fits the crime, it's a duplicate of the crime, it balances it out. So I don't know if we should necessarily see the idea of a double portion here, that is that God says, "I'm going to punish Babylon according to the crime. No, I think I'm going to double it," is instead maybe we should see it more as in terms of equivalent or duplicate so that this is just another way of saying the punishment will match the crime. That certainly fits the punishment will fit the crime motif found within this section.

### **Revelation 18:7-8: Babylon Glorifies Herself**

Verses 7 and 8 then, once more and you'll find this in most of these speeches, is verses 7 and 8 further describe the reason for the punishment, why is it that God is going to give a punishment fitting the crime because, verses 7 and 8, especially the end of verse 7, "in her heart, she boasts, 'I sit as queen. I am not a widow.'" In other words, the author's now reminding us of the crime for which she will be punished and that is she glorifies herself rather than God. "'I sit as queen,' in her heart she boasts, 'I sit as queen,'" is probably meant to contrast with, elsewhere, calls to fear God and give him glory. In direct contradiction and opposition to that, now Rome has boasted by setting herself up as God, by claiming the glory and authority that belongs only to God by now saying, "I sit as queen, I am on my throne, now sitting as the queen over all things."

But furthermore, as the rest of the text will make clear, that she is also judged because she lives in excessive luxury and especially at the expense of the rest of the empire. So notice we're building a picture here; Rome lives in excessive luxury, its

selfishly accumulates wealth for itself and at the same time it is guilty of persecuting the saints, it is guilty of violently putting them to death. It is also guilty of causing the other nations to commit adultery with its idolatrous economic practices. Furthermore, now it is portrayed as exalting itself, as glorifying itself, as setting itself up over God, as arrogating divine power and authority. For all those reasons, now, God is going to bring about judgment upon Babylon.

### **Revelation 18:9-19 Lament of those Seduced**

Now what we find in the rest of the section, in verses 9-19, is the various people of the earth that benefitted from Rome's prosperity and from its economic practices, from its excessive wealth and luxury. Now we find those people, we find groups of those people now singing songs of lament, mourning the destruction and mourning the judgment and downfall of Rome. The reason is obvious because the demise of Rome also means their demise. The demise of Rome now means that they're now cut off from that by which they also grew wealthy and they also accumulated excessive luxury.

In other words, verses 9-19 are going to be the speech of those that the prostitute, Rome, caused to commit adultery with her by getting them to, again, be involved in its idolatrous, economic practices. Those who have grown wealthy off of the seductive wealth of the prostitute, Rome, now those groups stand around and in the form of a funeral dirge actually, in the form of sort of the funeral dirge, and based on Ezekiel 27, which is a lament over Tyre, now we find these groups who have benefitted from Rome mourning over its fall because, as I've said, this was the source of their luxury and their excessive wealth. Now that that has been cut off, we find an interesting picture, then, of them mourning, not over their own sin, but they mourn over the fall of Babylon because these are the ones that have been seduced into being involved in Babylon's excessive luxury and seduced into committing adultery with her.

Note Ezekiel 27, and just to read a handful of the passages, I'll start with verse 25,  
"The ships of Tarshish serve



as carriers for your wares.  
You are filled with heavy cargo  
in the heart of the sea.  
Your oarsmen take you out to the high seas.  
But the east wind will break you to pieces  
in the heart of the sea.  
Your wealth, merchandise and wares,  
your mariners, seamen and shipwrights,  
your merchants and all your soldiers,  
and everyone else on board  
will sink into the heart of the sea  
on the day of your shipwreck.

The shorelands will quake  
when your seamen cry out.  
All who handle the oars  
will abandon their ships;  
the mariners and all the seamen  
will stand on the shore.  
They will raise their voice  
and cry bitterly over you; (Over the fall of Tyre)  
they will sprinkle dust on their heads (We'll see, one of the groups does that)  
and roll in ashes.

They will shave their heads because of you  
and they will put on sackcloth.  
They will weep over you with anguish of soul  
and with bitter mourning.  
As they wail and mourn over you,  
they will take up a lament concerning you:  
'Who was ever silenced like Tyre,  
surrounded by the sea?  
When your merchandise went out on the seas,  
you satisfied many nations;  
with your great wealth and your wares  
you enriched the kings of the earth.  
Now you are shattered by the sea  
in the depths of the waters;  
your wares and all your company  
have gone down to the sea.  
All who live in the coastlands  
are appalled at you;  
their kings shudder with horror  
and their faces are distorted with fear.

The merchants among the nations hiss at you;  
you have come to a horrible end  
and will be no more.””

Now, we'll see that John will model the responses of those who have benefitted from Rome, he will model their responses on those who responded with mourning and lament to the downfall of Tyre because likewise with Tyre, the nations grew rich and wealthy off of Tyre's wealth and their excessive luxury. Now in the same way, John will describe the effects of Babylon/Rome's fall by depicting those who mourn because now they also have benefitted from the wealth of Rome and now that Rome was destroyed and its wealth is no more, their demise is now certain as well.

In the next section, we'll look more specifically at the three groups and their lament and mourning over the downfall and destruction of Rome.

Transcribed and edited by Haley Seward  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 24

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Lament and Joy over Babylon's Fall (Rev 18)

### Introduction

In verses 9 through 19 of chapter 18 we said that we find the lament and mourning much like in mourning and laments given in response to the fall of Tyre back in Ezekiel chapter 27. Now we find the mourning and lament of those who cooperated with Rome and those who shared in and participated in its wealth and economic system and now mourning because of the fall, meaning their demise and that their source of wealth has been cut off. They don't mourn because of their sin, but because of the downfall of Rome and how that affects them.

### Mourning: Three Groups

What we find is actually the mourning, the laments and mourning will be attributed to three different groups in chapter 18 verses 9 through 19. The first group will be the lament of the kings of the earth in verses 9 and 10. The second group will be the lament of the merchants in verses 11 through 17. And then finally, the group that kind of dominated the Tyre oracle in Ezekiel 27 is the group of ship persons or those who are ship owners and involved in commerce and trade through the shipping industry. We'll find their lament in verses 17 through 19 as the final group. You'll know too that it sort of reaches a climax in the final group in exactly how they respond.

### Kings' Lament

But starting in verses 9 and 10 the lament of the kings of the earth and two reasons why they lament. Two reasons why the lament in the section is: number one, they have committed adultery with Babylon/Rome and we've already seen that this is not physical adultery, though a couple of commentaries take it that way. This is probably not physical adultery, though it doesn't mean they didn't, but instead we are to understand this in terms of participating in her wealth and in her idolatry. We've seen that Rome as a prostitute caused other nations to commit adultery with her by involving them in her

economic practices where they became excessively wealthy and enjoyed their consumption of wealth and they enjoyed excessive wealth because of their association with Rome. This then is the second reason explaining that they have lived in luxury, they became rich off of Rome's wealth and now they mourn because that bountiful supply has been cut off, so to speak, because of God's judgment in Rome.

The fact that they stand far off probably suggests their desire to avoid the judgment that is now falling upon Rome. Note too that they respond in the form of woes, which we already saw with the trumpet judgments at the very end of chapter eight. In introducing the last three trumpet judgment they were called "Woes." The woes are uttered because of judgment is to come upon or is coming upon a nation. So the "woe" is a term of mourning because of judgment that has now come upon the city of Babylon/Rome.

So that is the kings of the earth. The kings of the earth are those who have become excessively wealthy off of the wealth of Rome. They are the ones who, picking up language from chapter 7, they have committed adultery with the prostitute and now they mourn in the face of her judgment.

#### Merchants' Lament

In verses 11 through 17 we're introduced to the second group: the lament of the merchants. Probably here the author is dependent on, especially on Ezekiel chapter 27 in verse 27, but also 30 through 32. We said that Ezekiel 27 is the lament over, especially focusing on those who carried out commerce and the shipping industry now mourning because of the downfall and the judgment upon the city of Tyre. But I want you to notice that in chapter 27 in verse 27 he describes, "Your wealth, merchandise, and wares, your mariners, seamen and shipwrights, your merchants and all your soldiers, and everyone else on board." Then also, 30 through 37: "They will raise their voice and bitterly cry out. They will shave their heads because of you. They will put on sackcloth and they will weep over you with anguish and with bitter mourning. As they wail and mourn over you they will take up a lament concerning you: 'Who was ever silenced like Tyre, surrounded by the sea?' When your merchandise went out on the seas, you satisfied many nations;

you with you great wealth and your wares you enriched the kings of the earth.”

So notice even there you have the three groups, although there not separated like they are in Revelation, but you have the kings of the earth, you also have the merchants, and then finally, you have the ship owners and those involved in the shipping industry. All those three provide the models for the groups now in Revelation 18 that mourn. And so now we're introduced based on Ezekiel 27 to the merchants and the reason for their mourning in verses 11 through 17 is similar and that is that they are self-seeking and their selfish lust for wealth has now been cut off because the source of their wealth which was trade in association with Rome has now ceased because of Rome's destruction.

#### List of Cargo

Note the list of cargoes, and it's interesting here, this is the only place where John composes an extensive list of luxury, which also has an Old Testament background. It seems to me that John has also tailored it to fit the precise merchandise and cargo that would have been imported into Rome. Now the picture is of merchants who have made themselves wealthy in participating in the importing of these luxurious items in Rome. Many of these things are luxurious items that would have only been available and could have been afforded only by the wealthy. Some of these, like wheat and grain would have been staples for the consumption of everyone, but back in chapter 6 we saw at many times in Rome's history even that would have been unaffordable to the normal person and even the poor people. At its inflated price it would have been affordable only to the wealthy.

But, this list of cargo is very interesting and I think this list of cargo in verses 12 and 13 is another indication that John sees Babylon primarily as the city of Rome. Because all of these, you can read in most commentaries, I don't want to go into detail as to exactly what these items are, but you can read in virtually any commentary a description of them and even the connection with Rome and the fact that these were all imported by Rome. Most of these were lucrative in the trading business. They are things that would have been lucrative for traders and would have been prized by the elite members of the city of Rome. So this list supports the portrayal of Rome as a city bent on

excessive wealth and excessive luxury and a city characterized by its thirst and its lust for material goods, which is exactly what John criticizes Rome for. But, the merchants now are portrayed as also getting rich off of these cargoes, but now that Rome has been destroyed and now that Babylon/Rome has been destroyed they are no longer able to live luxuriously off Rome's wealth.

There's one startling element, actually two elements, I want to draw your attention to in those lists, but one sort of startling. Notice for example the mention of gold, silver, and precious stones and also fine linen, purple and silk, as well as pearls. Number one: the picture of purple linen, and also gold and precious stones, goes back to the description of the prostitute. So this is the garb of the prostitute, but also even back in chapter 17 and verses 1 through 3 the description of the prostitute decked-out in purple garments and gold and precious stones was also reflective not only of Tyre, of a prostitute, but also of the ostentatious display of the wealth of Rome. Now we see that repeated here. But furthermore, we've already noted in connection with the description of the prostitute this also anticipates the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 which is decked out in precious gold and precious jewels, has gates of pearl, and also is portrayed as a bride adorned for her husband. So, all this wealth had anticipated that.

The thing that is rather interesting is the very last item, and notice how it moves from inanimate things like gold and silver and jewels to spices and wood products and also finally to cloth products and things like that and then on to food products like oil and wheat. Then it moves to living things such as cattle, sheep, horses and carriages and in the middle of that it also includes the bodies and souls of men. Most likely this added element reflects the slave trade that was a significant part of the economy of Rome and there have been all kinds of estimations as to the extent of slavery in Rome. One could become a slave through various means. One of the reasons someone might become a slave is to sell themselves into slavery because of debt. Another reason would be if when Rome conquers a territory the slaves would be imported. So this is not racial slavery, but intriguingly slavery perhaps even from the providences of Rome that they have now imported as slaves.

It's interesting that they are included within the group of sheep and cattle. It is as if human bodies are now treated as a commodity to be traded for luxury and financial benefit in the same way cattle and sheep would as well. But John adds "and human souls," perhaps to make clear exactly what's going on. These are not just, at the end of this list of things being traded bodies are not just a commodity, but John says they're actually human souls. But Rome now is treating them as simply another commodity to be traded or imported so that they can gain well by. So you're getting this picture, though it's not prominent, it's still an important part of Rome's economy that their economy is gained at the expense of the rest of the empire and the rest of the world. They are becoming wealthy and luxurious by exploiting other nations and by even exploiting their own provinces so that Rome can increase in wealth, so it can satisfy its lust and craving for excessive luxury.

Like the kings of the earth then, they mourn because their source of wealth, this list of cargo, has been removed. And note again the language in verse 14, "the fruit of your desires," so Rome being portrayed as lusting after, desiring, luxury and wealth. Now that has been removed and the self-serving economic system and wealth of Rome has been destroyed. Rome existed basically as we have seen to serve itself and even to the extent of exploiting and harming other nations even within their own provinces. Now this group also stands at a distance because like the kings of the earth, probably the picture is, they fear its judgment, they do not want to participate in its judgment. Now they pronounce woes on the city, much like the kings of the earth did.

So you'll notice what happens in all three of these is that all three of these groups will, and we've seen that in the first two groups will their lament and mourning over Rome because of what they have lost due to Rome's destruction. They will issue a woe for their destruction and then usually a depiction of them standing far off as to not be involved in its destruction and its judgment.

Verse 16 then of the response of the merchants or the kings of the earth, verse 16 says: "They cry out, 'Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stone, and pearls.'" Again, referring to the luxurious nature

of Rome. Referring back to 17 verse 4 and how the prostitute was depicted so clearly. The idea is these are the ones who have been seduced by Rome, who have been trapped and seduced into committing adultery with Rome by being involved in their godless idolatrous economic system that is tailored solely for the benefit of Rome, in its own thirst and lust for wealth and excessive luxury. Now these merchants here are those who have committed adultery with Rome by sharing in her wealth. Then in one hour the great wealth has been brought to ruin. So probably "one hour" again demonstrating here the sudden quickness and the sudden nature of the destruction of Babylon/Rome. Not a literal word suggesting it only took one hour to destroy it, but "one hour," the symbolic value of suggesting quickness and suddenness as characterized in the destruction of Babylon/Rome.

#### Ship Owners' Lament

The final group, the third and final group, is the lament of the ship owners in verses 17 through 19 and we've already noted and read twice, once in its entirety, but a couple of sections from Ezekiel 27, the oracles against Tyre in Ezekiel that play a significant role here. The mention of the ship owners and those involved in trade through the shipping industry now lies behind John's mention of the ship owners. Those involved in shipping, who have made their wealth off maritime business in association with Rome. Now they also stand and observe the devastating effect of the destruction of Babylon.

That, in fact, seems to be the main focus of the third one. As I said, this third one seems to be a little more intense because John picks up the language from Ezekiel 27 and verses 28 through 33 of certain persons who put on sackcloth and they throw dust on themselves and even roll in the dust in mourning for the downfall of Babylon. Therefore the primary theme of this section seems to be that the complete devastating effect that the downfall of Babylon now has on those who depend on it. This is demonstrated by the fact that they now throw dust on their heads, which probably is not a sign of repentance, but simply a sign of sorrow and mourning. These people are not to be pictured as repenting. Although putting dust and ashes on your head elsewhere is a sign of repentance here, as it is in Ezekiel 27, it's simply a sign of mourning and sorrow, not for one's sins, but for the



downfall of the city on which they became rich.

So this threefold repetition of mourners who lament over Rome's demise are mentioned here, and perhaps they've been divided into three because of the emphasis on the repetitive nature of three groups suggesting this. All of them have gotten rich off of Rome and now they have lost the source of their wealth. So they all sit or stand observing the judgment of Rome pouring out laments of sorrow and pronouncing woes upon the city as they stand far off. All of this is meant to heighten the judgment of Rome by demonstrating its effect on those who benefited from it, that is, those who committed adultery with the city of Rome, those whom Rome seduced into participating in its wealth and getting rich off of Rome and its commerce.

#### Saints Rejoice (Rev 18:20)

Although interestingly English translations don't make a break here so you sort of miss this, but there is a clear break that should take place in chapter 18 at verse 20 or some kind of break should take place because now you have a clear contrast between the woes and laments of the three groups that got rich off of Rome that now lament over its destruction and judgment. In verse 20, you are now introduced to a group of saints who by contrast, in verse 20, rejoice over the fall of Rome. So the three groups of kings of the earth, merchants, and ship builders are not the only groups that respond to Rome's downfall. They respond in mourning because they grew wealthy and they were the ones seduced into the Roman economy to be rich off of it. Now you have another group responding to the downfall of Rome, of Babylon/Rome and that is the saints in verse 20. It says, "Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she has treated you."

Interestingly too chapter 18 basically describes in third person the different groups: here's what the kings of the earth did; the merchants did this; and here's what the ship-owners did. Now in verse 20 it shifts to a second person where heaven and saints and apostles and prophets are addressed directly and commanded to rejoice because God has judged Babylon and has avenged them. So verse 20 is emphatic so that we should see a little bit of a shift between verses 19 and 20 with the saints' response being slightly

more significant and prominent, meant to stand out in sharper relief against the response of the merchants to the downfall of Rome.

It's intriguing though also, now in verse 20 the author appears to pick up Jeremiah 51 again. John begins with Jeremiah 51 at the very beginning of the chapter especially in verse 4 it probably lies behind the command to flee Babylon, but we've seen that John has departed from Jeremiah because he wants to critique Rome because of its economic practices, because of its idolatry, and particularly it's seductive practices of seducing nations to participate in its wealth. For that John has gone to another oracle, that is the oracle against Tyre, which condemn Tyre for its commerce and for its excessive luxury and wealth; the very thing that John wants to critique Rome for. So John then has gone to Ezekiel and particularly chapter 27 for his portrayal of Rome and his critique of it, but then in chapter 51 verse 48 of Jeremiah we read, "The heaven and earth and all that is in them will shout for joy over Babylon, for out of the north destroyers will attack her." So notice the mention of heaven and earth shouting over joy or rejoicing over Babylon in Jeremiah 51:48. That appears to lie behind verse 20 where heaven and all the saints and prophets are now rejoicing and are called upon to rejoice over the destruction of Babylon. So this is the saints' response to Babylon's judgment, in avenging their blood and now in calling for rejoicing. Now John has returned back to his primary model of Jeremiah chapter 51 which describes the judgment of Babylon.

So that brings us to the end of the various responses to Babylon's downfall, one of them negative by the response of those who have been seduced to be involved in Rome's illegitimate and ill-gotten gain through their economic practices. Now, in verse 20, the complete opposite, the response of the saints, that God has now acted to vindicate them, to avenge them by judging Babylon/Rome and so the saints rejoice.

#### Devastating Effects of Babylon

The chapter ends then in verses 21 through 24 with a final summary of the devastation and the devastating effects of Babylon. Once again in 21 and 24 we seem temporally to be out of order. That is 21 to 24 seem to be an anticipation of Babylon's fall. So temporally 21 through 24 may take place prior to verses 9 through 19 which

clearly assume Babylon has already fallen. Now you have all the people surrounding it lamenting and mourning its fall. Now verses 21 through 24 seem to temporally take you back before the fall of Babylon, but at the same time it plays a significant role of further interpreting the devastation of Babylon and its effects. Further it probably describes the basis for the saints rejoicing in verse 20. So, verses 21 through 24 further seem to describe the reason that the saints rejoice as they do in verse 20.

So it actually begins with a prophetic act. Sometimes in prophetic texts you see the prophets actually engaging in an act that has symbolic significance and one of those is found once again in Jeremiah chapter 51. In Jeremiah 51, the model John has been using to portray overall the downfall in judgment of historical Babylon. John has drawn on that several times, now in chapter 51 and verse 63 we find an interesting prophetic act or prophetic action that has symbolic significance and here it is in verse 63. I'll begin verse 62, "Then say, 'O Lord, you have said that you will destroy this place [Babylon], so that neither man nor animal will live in it; it will be desolate forever.' When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and throw it into the river Euphrates. Then say, 'So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring upon her. And her people will fall.'"

That provides a model for what happens here in verse 21. A mighty angel, you don't find a scroll tied to it, but an angel in kind of a symbolic act, a prophetic symbolic act, picks up a millstone, throws it in the sea, and then much like you found in Jeremiah 51 the angel interprets that and says, "With such violence the great city of Babylon will also be thrown down, never to be found again." So this symbolic act on the part of the angel from Jeremiah chapter 51 is meant as a symbolic activity or symbolic representation of the casting down of Babylon/Rome itself. So you can see what John is doing. He's demonstrating that the historical fall of Babylon sort of typologically now is portraying the fall of kind of a new Babylon and that is the city of Rome and the Roman Empire.

In verses 22 and 23 then, 22 and 23 further depict the result of this and that is, all signs of Babylon are going to be missing. This is a way of demonstrating once again that

all the common things of life that you would hear, the playing of flutes and harps and weddings, the grinding of a millstone, grinding grain, all those things, the light of a lamp that you would see in houses, all of those will be snuffed out; all of those will be gone as another indication of the extent and the complete nature of the destruction of Babylon.

#### Reasons for Babylon's Fall

But note that 23 and 24 end by recapitulating the reasons for Babylon's fall.

Number one, "your merchants were the world's great men and by your magic spell all the nations were led away, in her was found the blood of the prophets' and the saints' and all who have been killed on the earth." So, first of all, notice the mention of the great men probably suggests their arrogance and their self-glorification in direct opposition to the praise, worship and glory that only God deserves and the hymns, articulated in the hymns in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation. So once more the arrogance and self-glorification, arrogating divine authority and power, claiming for oneself what belongs only to God that is the first crime that Rome and the nations that participate in it are now guilty of.

The second one is that her magic or sorcery leads the nations astray and how literally were to take that or not, the main point is, repeating what John has already critiqued Rome for in chapter 17 and in 18 is that Rome has seduced other nations into committing adultery with her. She is guilty of deceiving them and entrapping them in her deceptive and alluring and seductive idolatries and economic practices.

Then finally, she is also responsible for the blood of God's people, that is, we have already seen that theme, she is guilty of violence, that is she is drunk with the blood of the saints, she is guilty of the blood of those that she has persecuted. Probably also reflecting Jeremiah 51 and 49. Notice how it ends though. It's not only the blood of the saints, but all people on the earth who have been killed because of her, again portraying Rome as an empire that spreads its rule through violence that maintains its peace, maintains its rule, maintains its economy through violence. Jeremiah chapter 51 and verse 49 is probably the text that John draws upon, "Babylon must fall because of all of Israel's slain, just as the slain in all the earth have fallen because of Babylon." So notice in Jeremiah 51:49 that Babylon is guilty for slaying God's people Israel as well as those in

the earth and now Revelation 18 ends with a mention of the blood of the prophets and the saints that Rome is guilty for, but also those who have been killed among the earth.

#### Reasons for the Fall of Babylon

So, to conclude, chapter 18 basically is a call for the saints to rejoice over the downfall of Babylon, over the judgment of Babylon, because the fall of Babylon demonstrates the justice of God's judgment in avenging the blood of the saints in vindicating them. But the author at the same time described the basis for Babylon's judgment and fall, which should cause the rejoicing of the saints, by giving us at least three reasons for Babylon's fall. This is articulated in chapter 17 and 18.

Number one is that Babylon glorifies herself. Babylon/Rome sets herself up as god. Babylon/Rome asserts the authority that belongs only to God and receives the worship and glory that only God deserves, chapter 4 and 5 of Revelation.

Second, Babylon/Rome is arrogant and excessive in its wealth even at the expense of other nations. Babylon/Rome is portrayed as lusting after wealth and luxury, as having a thirst for more and more material goods and doing so even if it means exploiting other nations and even their own provinces. In addition to that, this could be the third one, but in addition to the issue of wealth they are also then, along with their own desire to accumulate wealth and their own consumption of excessive luxury, they have also caused other nations to commit adultery with them in trapping them and enticing them into committing adultery, that is being involved in their godless economic system that is solely aimed for the selfish gain of Rome itself.

Then third, Babylon Rome is guilty of extreme violence. They have killed God's people. They are guilty of the blood of the saints, God's people primarily, but also guilty of those of other nations that they have put to death as well. In order to depict this, in order to describe Babylon/Rome's character and her judgment, the author has drawn on numerous Old Testament texts. Numerous Old Testament texts such as Jeremiah, but also Ezekiel and Isaiah, depict the judgment and downfall of other historical nations who were guilty of the same crime. So Rome then is seen as a combination of and a merging of all of these features now in the same way that God condemned and judged godless cities of

the past. Once again his people can be assured that he will judge another wicked godless idolatrous nation in the form of Rome. So John can be certain of this because the Old Testament has told him and provided a model for God judging other idolatrous wealthy violent empires. Historically Rome indeed was judged centuries later and at one level Revelation 17 and 18 was indeed fulfilled in the downfall of the Rome of John's day, that he was facing in his day. So, Rome, embodying all these other empires, now suffers the same fate. So John interoperates that through other Old Testament prophetic texts.

At the same time, I am convinced that probably, and just to make a brief comment on how we are to understand Babylon/Rome, John is clearly aiming his guns at the city of Rome and the empire of his day and the emperors. I don't think there's any doubt about that. We have seen this before and particularly when you get to 17 and 18 it becomes apparent also that John has placed the judgment on Rome against the backdrop of God's judgment on the larger world and on the larger, we might say, end time city, the city perhaps representing the entire world in opposition to God.

So it's not that John then perceives Rome and then predicts a succession of empires. It's not that John thinks that there might be a long gap between Rome and the final judgment, but the point is, John has to help his reader see the nature of the situation and in true apocalyptic fashion to uncover the true nature of Rome and give them a perspective on their situation. John not only sees and interprets their situation in first century Rome, but probably portrays its destruction against the broader backdrop of the ultimate destruction of God's enemies and the ultimate judgment of the earth and of the world which we will see John is going to move immediately to in chapter 19 for example in just a moment.

So we should probably see Rome and its destruction as historically fulfilled in first century Rome, but again by using an image, Babylon, that has a history in the Old Testament it's almost as if then John has used a symbol that it sort of ripple or sort of provides a model that will eventually encompass the entire the world which God in his Lamb, Jesus Christ, will bring to an end in a final judgment. So, first century Rome is now portrayed against the broader backdrop of God's final judgment on the entire world.

### Conclusion to the Downfall of Babylon/Rome

Now, the conclusion to this downfall of Babylon is found in chapters 19 and verses 1 through 6 and then in verses 6 through 10, 6 through 10 will sort of have a final hymn sung and a transition. Actually verse 6 could go with verses one through five because its a final hymn that is sung, but then 9 and 10 will provide a transition, a kind of a conclusion to the Babylon/Rome judgment scene and provide a transition into the next scene that begins in 19:11 which is the final judgment. But, chapter 19 verses 1 through 6, in 18:20 we just saw that the saints were told to rejoice at the downfall of Babylon. All of heaven the prophets and the apostles are now all to rejoice in the downfall of Babylon though it says nothing about that, but here I think their rejoicing gets expanded.

#### Revelation 19:1-6

So, let me read chapter 19 and verses 1 through 6: “After this,” that is after the events he saw in 18, “After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’ And again they shouted: ‘Hallelujah! The smoke of her goes up for ever and ever.’ The twenty-four elders and four living creatures then fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: ‘Amen, Hallelujah!’ Then a voice came from the throne, saying: ‘Praise our God, all you servants, you who fear him, both small and great!’ Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.’ Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”

Now, this seems to be the hymns that back in chapter 8 verse 20 all heaven was to cry out and rejoice with. Now we find all of heaven crying out and rejoicing in the form of the great multitude, in the form of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, in the form of the voice from the throne now crying out in praise. Note interestingly the

movement: it begins with a great multitude in the beginning of verse 19, what sounded like the roar of a great multitude, then it gets narrowed down in verse 4 to the twenty-four elders and four living creatures and then even more in verse 5 a voice that comes from the throne, then it broadens out again in verses 6 through 8 to another great multitude where in a climactic scene now you have a voice that sounds like the roar of rushing water and a loud peel of thunder. So note the movement from boarder to very narrow, the voice from the throne and back out to encompass a voice like a great multitude sounding like rushing water and thunder.

The primary function of this then, the primary theme of this from verse 18 as well is to further interpret the judgment that has taken place by now indicating the rejoicing and praise of the saints. Note, all I want to do is demonstrate how it picks up some of the major themes from chapter 18. For example, note that God's judgment is described as holy and just so that what happens in chapter 17 and 18 is to be described as a result of God's holy and righteous character that on that basis he now acts to judge a wicked and godless empire.

Second, note again the repetition of the reason for this judgment, that is, the crimes of Babylon or the sins of Babylon, they have corrupted the earth through their idolatrous practices and through their lust for wealth and they have lead others and seduced others into participating in that.

Third, note the emphasis on God avenging the blood of his saints. This probably links the text back not only to the prayer of the saints that we have seen several times particularly mixed with incense that the angel poured out back in chapter 8, but also back all the way back to the cry of the martyrs back in chapter 6 verse 10, 'How long, O Lord, until you avenge our blood? Until you vindicate us?' Now God vindicates his people by avenging their enemies by judging their enemies.

#### Vindication

It's interesting that so far we've primarily seen vindication in terms of God judging the enemies of his people, avenging their blood. Those who have persecuted God's people, those who have put them to death, those who have tried to destroy them



because of their faithful witness. Now God responds by vindicating them by bringing judgment upon them. That's been a dominant theme so far. However, one part of the process of vindication that we have not yet seen, clearly at least, is that God would respond to them positively. That is not that he would just negatively judge their enemies, but that God would vindicate them by rewarding them. We saw hints of that already. For example, back in chapter 7, a little bit in chapter 14 as well, and 15 where the saints stand victorious on the sea having refused to submit to the beast and worship his image. Now the saints stand victorious by the sea in a new axis.

So we've already seen visions of God vindicating his saints by not only judging and punishing their enemies who have persecuted them and put them to death, but now also by rewarding them. By vindicating them by reward by giving them their inheritance. We will see that the positive side of their vindication will then get articulated in more detail starting with chapter twenty and going into chapter 22 as well. So the cry of the saints, interpreting the events of chapters 17 and 18, the praise of the saints here in verses 1 through 6, actually 1 through 8. Verse 6 is the final cry leading to verses 7 and 8 are the content of that. God has now avenged the blood of his saints by punishing, by judging, those who have harmed them and who have put them to death.

#### Language of Judgment

Then finally notice the language of judgment as well. In chapter 18 and verses 8 and following and reflecting the Old Testament text from Isaiah chapter 34 and 9 and 10. This language of smoke going up, of burning, as a symbol of judgment and now that is further described as part of the eternal judgment as the basis again for the saints rejoicing. So all of the themes of God's character, his holiness and justice and righteousness are cited as the basis for his judgment. The sin of Babylon not only in their own excessive luxury, but causing and seducing nations was involved in that. God desires to avenge his people by punishing his enemies and then portraying judgment in terms of smoke coming up. All of those are simply a continuation of themes that we have already been introduced to in the narrative of Babylon's judgment and destruction in chapters 17 and 18.

### The Almighty Reigns

One other thing, a couple of other observations about this final hymn in verses 6 and 7 and 8 is note the reference to, “the Almighty has begun to reign,” this we said is a very significant theme. In fact this almost repeats verbatim what we found in the seventh seal, or seventh trumpet, in chapter 11 verse 17 which brought us to the very end which was sort of an anticipation of, or snapshot of the final day of the Lord where the kingdom of the world would now become the kingdom of God. Now we see that theme reiterated in verse 6. The Lord God Almighty reigns, that is, now finally God’s kingdom and his will in heaven has now finally encompassed earth. The kingdom of this world has now become the kingdom of God. God now reigns victorious over all things in fulfillment, we said, chapter 4 and 5 where God’s sovereignty is acknowledged in heaven and must be worked out on earth. Now we find that with the destruction of Babylon, the kingdom of Babylon has been removed, the kingdom of the earth no longer belongs to Babylon/Rome, but now it belongs to God who is the almighty sovereign king over the whole universe.

We said one of the questions Revelations answers, one of the major questions is: who is in control? Who is the sovereign ruler over all of the universe? Is it Babylon? Is it Rome or any other historical city? Or is it God only? And now God’s kingdom on earth, God’s Kingdom in heaven, has now come down to earth.

### Wedding Banquet Imagery

We also see another significant theme that will get picked up later is that the consummation of God’s promises to his people, and here we begin to see the positive aspect of the vindication. God’s promises to his people are now understood in terms of a wedding banquet. In verses 7 and 8 of chapter 19 the wedding of the Lamb has arrived and his bride has made herself ready and the fine linen, white bright linen was given to her. So now the author shifts to banquet imagery, wedding banquet imagery here in verses 7 and 8. What lies behind this is probably once more Old Testament imagery where Israel was portrayed as the bride of Yahweh and Yahweh was her husband and that provides the backdrop then for this portrayal, this eschatological portrayal of the end time

marriage between God and his people. Although now, in distinction from the Old Testament text, the people of God is no longer limited to Old Testament ethnic Israel, but now includes people from every tribe and tongue and nation and language centered around the messiah Jesus Christ and they now become his bride.

One of the texts that probably provides the background for this is a text that will occur later on in Revelation and that is Isaiah chapter 61. Isaiah is well known for using nuptial imagery, marriage language, for describing God's eschatological end time relationship to his people and one of those texts is in Isaiah chapter 61. And in verse 10, Isaiah chapter 61 and verse 10, "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garment of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels." So this language here of a bride adorning herself and now being portrayed as a bride prepared for the wedding and now presented to the bridegroom, which is Jesus Christ, now reaches its climax in fulfillment, as anticipated from Isaiah, but as we have suggested the difference is now the people of God is not just ethnic Israel, it includes Israel, but also includes people from other nations who now are the bride of the Lamb.

The white robes, the author interprets as the deeds of the saints. Probably the white robes here signify their purity. The fact that they have remained unstained from the Roman rule and participating in its idolatrous practices unlike the nations who were seduced into committing adultery with Rome. Now the people of God instead of being idolaters are now presented as the bride of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, and now they wear the clothing demonstrating their victory and their purity and their righteousness as they stand before Jesus Christ.

The language here too of a wedding banquet may reflect, this notion of a wedding banquet as symbolic of eschatological salvation, may also reflect Jesus's parables. Chapter 22 of Mathew, verses 1 through 14 is a parable of a wedding banquet and those who are invited to it. Mathew chapter 25 is the well-known parable of the ten virgins, five who are foolish, five who are wise, in the context of preparation for a wedding. So the banquet language, although it probably has background elsewhere as well, this may be

another example of John's contact with the Jesus tradition and with Jesus' own teaching and his teaching on the eschatological wedding banquet as a symbol of their final eschatological salvation.

Another similarity is, that John may be drawing on or at least aware of, is what Paul does with the metaphor also in Ephesians chapter 5 where the relationship between a husband and a wife becomes a model for the relation between Christ and his church as his bride which he will prepare, which he will present, holy and blameless before him. That may be the picture that we find here. The imagery of a bride and a wedding banquet clearly symbolizes the intimacy and close relationship and communion between the people of God and the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

#### Command to Write

Two final things to wrap this section up, note verse 9 the command to write. A similar command is found throughout Revelation. John is commanded to write. It's not clear whether he is actually writing as he sees these things or just later on after he's seen these things. It's to insure that he will write them. No matter what the case, the command to write is simply a way of affirming the importance of what John sees and what John hears.

#### John and the Angel: Worship?

Then finally in verse 10 we find that interesting scene where John is tempted to bow down and worship the angel who has led him on this visionary tour of the destruction of Babylon and what is intriguing is that angel's response: "don't worship me I'm just a servant, worship God." You see this scene occurring twice. It will occur again in chapter 22 and we've seen the significance of that is that in the context of chapter 5 where the Lamb is worshiped alongside God. How can that not contradict an environment that is exclusively monotheistic?

The angel says, as exalted as an angelic being as there may be, the angel still says don't worship me. So however exalted, an angelic being may be, nothing else is worth of worship except God alone. This breaths a strict monotheism. There's only one God who is worthy of worship. To worship anything, however exalted an angelic being may be, to

worship anything else is idolatry. But how can, in the context of statement like that, how can you have a scene like chapter 5? Where the Lamb is worshiped with the same language and the same worship as God was in chapter 4 and ends up sitting on the same throne unless in some way Jesus Christ the Lamb is God himself so that then the Lamb can be worshiped without violating the monotheism that still lies behind the book of Revelation.

So now this prepares us for one final battle scene in chapter 19 verses 11 through 21. In our next section we will look at those verses and look at a little bit overall, what's the function of the battle scene and in more detail look at some of the features of the final battle scene in chapter 19 verses 11 through 21.

Transcribed by Gabrielle Martin Honors  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 25

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## Revelation 19:11-21

### The Warrior and the Battle

#### Introduction

In chapter 19, and verses 11 to 21, we are introduced to the climax of chapters 17 and 18 and the first part of 19. Chapters 17 and 18 focused on the destruction of Babylon/Rome itself. Now it seems that chapter 19 verses 11 through 21, will be devoted to the judgment of its allies, to the judgment of the nations that committed adultery with it. So, first Babylon gets judgment in 17 and 18, and that becomes a model for now the judgment that will fall on the rest of the world, and particularly on those that were its allies, and that were seduced to commit adultery with it. So chapter 19 does not represent something that chronologically happens after chapters 17 and 18. As far as if we see chapters 17 and 18 as representing Rome against the backdrop of the end of the world and in that sense, chapter 19 followed the destruction of historical Rome, but on the other hand, if we understand the destruction of Rome also including the final destruction of Babylon at the end of the world then chapters 19 is a natural corollary to that. And so, again, chapters 17 and 18 are the destruction of Babylon/Rome, but then also the rest of the earth receives judgment to all long with it, and that's where chapter 19 comes in about in chapter 19, verses 11 through 21.

Structure: Two Sections 19:11-16; 17-21

In chapter 19, verses 11 through 21, all the forces of evil and all of humanity is in opposition to God and his people. They are all a rebellious, prideful, idolatrous humanity that opposes God and oppresses his people and are now the subjects of God's judgment in chapter 19 of this section. This chapter or the section of our chapter 19:11-21 can be

divided into two parts. The first part in verses 11 through 16 is the description of the main character and that is the warrior who is Jesus Christ that comes seated on a white horse, and he is described in detail. Then finally in verses 17 and following the battle itself is described which we're going to see in the moment is not really much of a battle. The battle will end before it really ever begins. So be aware of these sections, verses 11 to 16; the description of the warrior who comes out to do battle that is the rider on the white horse, and then second, verses 17 and following where the battle itself is described.

#### Focus on the Warrior: Jesus Christ

The way this section is set up, I would suggest to you that the focal point of this section is not the battle itself, in verses 17 and following, but the description of the warrior of Jesus Christ the rider on the white horse in verses 11 to 16. His description is the most prominent element and the focal point of chapter 19. Now, chapter 19, verse 11, then begins with an important feature and that is verse 11 says, "I saw heaven open." The other place we found that language was back in chapter 4 in verses 1 and 2 where John sees heaven open and he then summoned up to heaven to see a vision where he sees the divine throne room. This mention of heaven being open, I think, is a crucial feature and marks a crucial section and climax of the book of Revelation. That is, beginning with chapter 19, verse 11, in my opinion the rest of the book of Revelation is going to be about a series of images that portray the effects of the return of Christ at the end of history.

#### Second Coming

So I think verse 11 in chapter 19 is the introduction of that. By having heaven open, it marks a new significant scene like it did back in chapter 4. Yet now this scene with heaven open will not result in John going up and seeing a heavenly world. It now results in Christ returning to consummate God's plan for the end of history. God's redemptive plan for history, results in judgment and salvation. So, as I said, after chapter 19:11, everything from now on occurs at the second coming of Christ, and what we're going to find is a number of scenes that, once again, starting here lead up to chapter 21. There are a number of scenes that don't necessarily follow chronologically after each

other. In other words; there are a number of scenes that do not necessarily portray events that follow in chronological order, but instead it's as if the author draws on a number of images to interpret and explain what happens at the second coming of Christ, or what is the meaning of Christ's second coming. What does it accomplish? What are its results? The author will seek, through a number of scenes, to take different images to explore the meaning of the coming of Christ in bringing history to an end, to come to consummate God's redemptive plan. Chapter 19, verse 11, begins a significant section and actually could have its own chapter division, I think. But, what I want to do then is read chapter nineteen as we read other sections so that you get the flow of the text and you are sort of able to visualize and feel the effect of the text rather than just jumping in and try and analyze all its details. So chapter 19, starting with verse 11, and this is John's description of the final judgment scene.

#### Text of Revelation 19:11ff

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.”

So that's the description of the warrior of the main figure of Jesus Christ who comes to do battle. Then verse 17: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, [this section will be the description, the battle] who cries it out in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair. ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great. Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their



armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the white horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. [in Revelation 13] With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider [on the white horse], and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”

### Jesus as Warrior

Now, interestingly, those of us who are more prone to think of Jesus in terms of the image of the gospel, of the gentle lamb or someone who has children gathered around him and one who says “take upon you my yolk because it is light” were not prepared for the vision of the Son of Man or the vision of Jesus that we see now in chapter 19 because he is presented now anything but the gentle Shepherd or the kind Jesus who holds children and who says some of things he does in the Gospels. Although even as you read the Gospels there are places where Jesus warns of coming judgment, but there's really nothing to prepare us for the vision of Jesus that we see here. Seldom will you find this picture of Jesus on the stained-glass windows or portraits hanging in our churches. We would rather see Jesus holding the lamb or something like that. But now we see Jesus coming in all his glory at the end of history, riding a white horse, deliberately coming out to do battle against the rest of the world and against his enemies.

The fact that he is on a white horse is clearly suggestive of its connection elsewhere with Revelation. We've all already seen the role horses play in battle scenes. For example, in the first seal of chapter 6 of Revelation, the rider comes out on the horse and he's clearly dressed in a white robe and holds a bow and arrow. He's clearly bent on warfare and destruction. In chapter 9, we saw a demonic cavalry, horses and riders that clearly the author linked with demonic beings. So a rider on the horse in Revelation is clearly evocative of conquest and warfare and defeat. But now we see that, in contrast, to

the Roman Empire, in contrast to the demonic cavalry, now Jesus comes out on his horse, and he comes out to do battle and to defeat his enemies.

I suggested to you that verses 11 through 16 are probably the focus of the section. That is, the main focus is not going to be on the battle and the war. In fact, we will see that there's really not much of a battle, it's really not a war at all. I want to suggest you what this warfare imagery might be symbolizing and indicating; that the focus of this chapter is on the description of the warrior in verses 11 through 16, and the way Christ is described is through a number of Old Testament texts that particularly refer to God as a warrior.

### Second Coming Imagery

Also, the author draws on a couple images from chapter one of Revelation. Remember back in chapter 1? John sees a vision of the Son of Man, described with the sword coming out of his mouth. For example, described with the feet is burnished bronze, and eyes like fire, etc. You find this picked up in chapters 2 and 3. Now what's more, the author has provided a composite picture of Christ from the Old Testament text, but also his description of Christ back in chapter 1.

To describe Christ as the one who is both able to defeat his enemies, but is also completely just in doing so, that's important. Christ is not just portrayed here as this colossal warrior who is able to come and defeat his enemies. Yes, that's part of it to show that Christ is able and powerful enough and strong enough to defeat his enemies but the author will draw on language that shows that he is just in doing so. The language of being right and just that we saw that back in chapters 18 and 19, God was praised as being just and holy and righteous in his defeat or judgment on Babylon/Rome. Christ is both able but also just in defeating his enemies in a final all out war.

Again, here we are at the end of history, here we find the second coming, the consummation of history that the rest of revelation has pointed to, that we've seen snippets of, that are our appetite has been wetted to finally see and now we're not disappointed. We see a full disclosure of the final battle. In the form of other judgment

scenes, we've already seen this event anticipated, starting in the sixth seal about in chapter 6, in the Day of the Lord, in the defeat of the enemies. We saw this anticipated back in chapter 17, where all the nations gathered to defeat the Lamb, yet the Lamb defeats them without a struggle. Back in chapter 14, we see the Saints emerging victorious, standing with the Lamb, so we have seen this scene anticipated several times throughout Revelation, but now, finally, we find a fuller portrait that we have been waiting for.

I just want to draw attention to several of the ways that Jesus is described in demonstrating his ability but also his justice in the final battle scene. First of all, note that he is called faithful and true and also the one who judges and makes war in righteousness. This is language coming right out of the Old Testament from a number of Psalms indicating Jesus or indicating God as the one who now in righteousness is the one who is faithful now making war.

#### Isaiah Background

There is probably a specific allusion to Isaiah chapter 11, an Old Testament text that plays a crucial role all over the book of Revelation. Hopefully you're beginning to pick up on chapter 11, verse 4 of Isaiah. Interestingly, it begins with, in chapter 11 verse 1, “a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him.” Verse three, “And he will delight in the fear the Lord, he will not judge by what he sees with his eyes are decided by what he hears with his ears.” And here's verse 4 of Isaiah 11, “but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor in the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” In verse 5, “Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.” So notice here that the messianic figure from Isaiah chapter 11 is now portrayed in terms of one who judges righteously, one who judges with fairness, especially judging for the needy and the poor and slaying the wicked.

#### Background from Elsewhere in Revelation

So chapter 19, in similar language of faithfulness and righteousness and justice, now God is portrayed as coming to bring judgment; to vindicate his people, and now to punish his enemies. The fact that his eyes are like flames of fire is probably another judgment motif. We saw that back in chapter 2:18 through 23. Christ's coming with eyes like flames of fire was the main figure of speech and the main image used to address that church because of their situation, but it goes back to chapter 1 and verse 13, where John says, "among the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow and his eyes were like blazing fire." So now we see this portrait of the Son of Man coming as a mighty judge, and coming now as a warrior who in righteousness and justice will decide on behalf of his people, his saints, and will do so in a way that brings judgment upon the nations of the earth.

Note the fact that he's also described as having crowns on his head. We've seen elsewhere that different individuals had crowns. Note specifically the beast himself, who had seven heads, with crowns on them. Now Jesus is described as the one who has crowns on his head, so, probably, we're to see a parody between the beast who had seven crowns. He goes out and conquers. He makes war with the saints, and he claims divine status; but now Jesus Christ comes in direct contrast with crowns on his head, demonstrating his power and his sovereignty over all the nations, and that now he is able to judge it.

### The Unknown Name

One interesting feature is the fact that Christ described as having a name that no one knows. I don't want go into all of the details and suggestions of what that name might be, but intriguingly, we've seen already the significance of a name of throughout the book of Revelation. For example, there is the name on the foreheads of the people of God. Isaiah chapter 62 in verse 2, we find emphasis on a new name. Now the new name is applied to Christ, but it's a name that no one knows. The idea here might not be so much that this is a mysterious name that no one can possibly figure out. The background of this

is to know someone's name would be to have control over that person or authority over that person, and especially in the context of being able to name or naming a demon would be to have control over that demon or that god or something like that. So by saying that Christ has a name that no one knows, the emphasis is not so much on that it's mysterious and Christ has a name that no one is ever going to be able to figure out. The idea of naming, not knowing what that name means, is another way of saying of Jesus Christ that no one has authority over him. Jesus Christ has complete control. He is absolutely sovereign. The fact that no one can name his name signifies his complete and absolute sovereignty over all the nations of the earth and over all the powers of evil, including the dragon and the two beasts which we'll see he deals with in just a moment.

There are two other features to draw your attention to by way of images. One is Jesus Christ is described as having his robe dipped in blood. That's intriguing that Jesus Christ is described as having robe dipped in blood before he ever engages in warfare, before the battles is even described. Maybe this is a reference to other battles he's been involved in. One suggestion is that this blood is actually his own blood, and that's part of the debate. Whose blood is this, on Jesus' robe? One suggestion is that this is Jesus' own blood. So once more, we find that the ironic way in which Jesus conquers, he conquers through his own death, he conquers through his own blood on the cross, and so the blood here should be understood as Jesus own blood that he sheds at his death. Once more describing the ironic way in which he overcomes, and not like Rome, but now he will overcome through his own suffering and death.

#### Isaiah 63: Background: Blood on Robe

However, I think the key to understanding the blood on Christ's robe before he ever gets into battle, interestingly, and I'll return to that, is to pay attention to the Old Testament context. That is here Isaiah chapter 63, seems to be the background, verses 1 through 3 for the depiction of Jesus. We've already seen that chapter 63 of Isaiah has provided the background for the grape harvest back in the end of chapter 14, the vision of the grape harvest in the treading of the winepress of God's wrath, so that what comes out

is not the juice from the grapes, but what comes out is the blood of the enemies. This background seems, in Isaiah 63:1-3, seems to be reflected in this description of Christ's robe that is already dipped in blood. Let me read chapter 63 of Isaiah again, which anticipates a day of vengeance, a day of Judgment, when God will return to punish his enemy. "Who is this coming from them Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save. Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I have trampled them in my anger, and trod them down in my wrath; their blood has splattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing." So in other words, if we are to understand the judgment scene back in chapter 14 of the treading of the winepress and resulting in the blood of the enemy. Perhaps we should understand the blood on Jesus robe, his robe dipped in blood, here in chapter 19 in the same way. That the blood is not his own blood. It could be and you could make a good case for that, but the blood primarily is the blood of his enemies in fulfillment of Isaiah 63. The blood of his enemies is a result of God's wrath, of the God trampling the winepress of his wrath and bringing judgment on enemies. Now, this seems strange, how can you have Christ's garment dipped in blood, before he ever defeats his enemies? I would suggest this is just part of the apocalyptic symbolism that we don't need to be so literal in suggesting "how does he have the blood of his enemies before he ever fights them?" Remember John is describing the Jesus Christ here. John is not interested in giving us a precise, detailed a logical account where I know you can't have Christ with blood on his garments before he ever fights. John is simply interested in drawing on Old Testament texts to demonstrate, to describe the warrior, to demonstrate his ability and his justice in bringing about war, and, so, part of that is simply due to his allusion back to Isaiah 63. And John is now describing Jesus as the warrior in fulfillment of Isaiah 63, and to do that, he draws on an image of his garment dipped in blood, even before he has ever defeated his enemies. But already he is saying something about the nature of Christ as the one, in fulfillment of Isaiah 63, is about to come in and slay and judge God's enemies.

The other interesting feature to draw attention to is, and I think is crucial and important for understanding the background of this, and that is the fact that Christ is described as having a sword coming out of his mouth. We saw that this is part of the description of Jesus back in Revelation chapter 1, and also gets picked up in chapters 2 and 3 in relationship to one of the churches. But the image of the sword coming out of his mouth clearly depends upon Old Testament texts but also seems to portray this as primarily a judgment scene. We will pick that up in just a moment. But Isaiah, chapter 49, in verse 2 appears to be one of the text that John is drawing on. Isaiah, chapter 49 and verse 2. "He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me like a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver." But that first part he made my mouth like a sharpened sword, and back in the text that we just read, Isaiah chapter 11. Isaiah chapter 11 in verse 4, "but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked." So now Jesus is portrayed as having a sword coming out of his mouth as an image of the one who comes to execute justice.

So, as we've already seen it would be rather ludicrous to try to present or construct a literal picture of Christ. I'm not sure this is the Jesus I want to see with the sword coming out of his mouth. I mean how are we to understand this? Earlier on in chapter 5, isn't he a slain lamb? Doesn't he have the seven spirits and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits. So you have a slain lamb, now he's wearing seven crowns and he has a sword coming out of his mouth. Is Jesus able to morph into different forms, or how do we understand this? John is using symbolism, primarily from the Old Testament as well as other apocalyptic literature, to say something about the person of Jesus Christ, who he is and what he does. So John is borrowing language from the Old Testament portraying a picture of Christ as one who comes to execute justice and righteousness, comes to execute God's judgment upon the earth, and upon people who oppose him, and on a rebellious, wicked humanity. So now the sword is an image of judgment. Interestingly, the sword coming out of his mouth may also have led the author to the next text and that

is Psalm chapter 2 when the author says in verse 15 out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which he strikes down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter, a clear allusion to Psalm chapter 2 and verse 8.

So, John has described Jesus Christ, using Old Testament language that portrays him as a mighty warrior coming to execute justice. God's justice coming to execute, in the form of a battle, justice upon the earth by judging God's enemies and all these Old Testament texts which have been drawn from those sorts of contacts now cumulatively by describing Christ as a mighty warrior.

One other feature to draw attention to is a rather intriguing; rather two other features, interestingly, in verse 13: "His name is the Word of God." Besides the John's Gospel, this the only other place you find Jesus referred to as "the Word." John chapter 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Now you find the word of God appearing again or the Word, the *logos*, as now referring to Jesus Christ. This is the only place outside of John where this happens. The other interesting feature is that later on in the text, the rider on the white horse is described as, I'm trying to locate the exact verse, where he is described as having his army follow him. Jesus Christ comes riding a white horse and his army, the army of heaven follows after him.

### The "Armies"

Now there are two things to say about this. Interestingly, first of all, note that, and we'll pick this up later, note that the army apparently doesn't do anything. The army does not appear to actually be involved in any fighting or in battle. The army is described as following Christ, but it doesn't actually do anything. Verse 14 was the verse I was looking for. "The armies of heaven were following him." But notice the army is, despite what Grant Osborne says in his commentary, that apparently the army has a role in the defeat of the enemy. But the text is not clear on that, in fact, it almost says the opposite. It's Christ himself who defeats the enemies. And besides, after the way he's been described in verses 11 to 16, who needs an army to defeat the enemies. But it's intriguing that he's described, perhaps just adding to the battle scene in the battle imagery. He's



described as having the armies of heaven, following him, although they do nothing. They don't seem to play a role in the battle.

The second thing to say about these armies is there is debate as to whether this army should be understood as the people of God, the saints themselves, or whether they are angelic beings. It appears to me that, although some commentaries say it's a combination of both, the fact that they are described as being dressed, notice in verse 14, "in fine linen, white and pure" would suggest to me that this is a vision of the saints themselves. This would add to the scene of vindication. The saints themselves accompany Christ when he avenges their blood when he vindicates them by now judging their enemies. But as we said they really don't do anything at all. The warrior is completely sufficient for doing battle.

#### The Battle: Ezekiel 38-39 Background

Now at the end of verse 16, we are now prepared for a description of the battle. We now have the warrior described. We have been presented with the warrior, the one who is both able and just in executing God's judgment on the earth, and vindicating the saints who suffered at the hands of their enemies. Now God is described as the one who is perfectly capable as well as righteous and just to carry this out in fulfillment of the Old Testament. Now in verses 17 to the end of the chapter, we find the description of the battle itself.

Again, I simply want to make a handful of comments regarding the battle. First of all, the book of Ezekiel, we've seen, has played a crucial role throughout the book of Revelation to the extent that, unlike the way that John seemed to use Isaiah where he uses it more thematically, where he'll gather texts from different places in Isaiah at different places in Revelation to support thematically what John saw, and what John is trying to describe. Unlike that, Ezekiel has played a crucial role to the extent that John largely follows it in the order of the text of Ezekiel itself. We saw in chapter 4 and 5, John draws on Ezekiel 1 and 2 for a description of the throne room, and in Ezekiel 9, or in Revelation 7. John has drawn on Ezekiel 9 for the imagery of the sealing, of the 144,000 for

protection. We've seen that in chapters 17 and 18, John has drawn on the Ezekiel 27 for the description of the downfall of Babylon or the downfall of Tyre, the judgment of Tyre in economic terms. Now, John will draw on Ezekiel 38 and 39, which also describes a battle scene an end-time battle.

After chapter 37 in Ezekiel we read about the restoration of Israel in the term of raising up the dry bones and putting flesh on them and giving them life. Following that imagery in chapters 38 and 39, we find the language of an end-time battle, so Ezekiel 39 is the primary model behind Revelation chapters 19 and 17 through 21. For example, when you read Ezekiel 39, and I just want to read a handful of verses here and there that illustrate clearly I think the connection. Chapter 39 and starting with verse 4: "On the mountain of Israel you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds and to the wild animals." And dropping down to verse 17: "Son of man," actually, this is the title used to address Ezekiel. "Son of man [Ezekiel], this is what the sovereign Lord says: 'Call out to every kind of bird and all the wild animals assemble!' [Here is the callout.] 'Assemble and come together from all around to the sacrifice I am preparing for you, the great sacrifice on the mountains of Israel. There you will eat flesh and drink blood. You will eat the flesh of the mighty men, and drink the blood of all the princes of the earth as if they were rams and lambs, goats and bulls--all of them fattened animals from Bashan. At the sacrifice I am preparing for you, you will eat fat till you are gluttoned and drink blood until you're drunk. At my table, you will eat your fill of horses and riders, mighty men and soldiers of every kind, declares the sovereign Lord.'"

Hopefully you picked up the imagery here in chapter 19 verses 17, actually, 17 to 18 which is actually only a preparation for the battle, that is, in preparation for the onslaught and carnage in warfare about to take place. Now in verses 17 and 18, an angel, unlike Ezekiel during it in chapter 39, now an angel calls upon the birds to come and prepare for a feast that will now ensue, as a result of the end-time battle. It's difficult not to read this language of the feast or a great supper, in contrast to the supper or the feast of the Lamb back at the beginning of chapter 19. Now we find another feast or supper, but

now the guests that are invited are not the nations. They are the feast, and the birds are the ones invited, but John is clearly drawing on Ezekiel for this imagery. The language of carrion or birds gathering to feast themselves. It is simply part of the image of the symbol of the carnage and destruction that will take place as a result of the battle. But the verses 17 and 18 are only the preparation, 19 and 21 will narrate the battle. But the author wants to make clear he's drawing on Ezekiel 39 for this imagery of end-time battle.

The other thing to mention that is truly helpful. You begin to see that John here is using symbolic language, so we should not literally think of a time where there will literally be birds that come somewhere on the earth to somehow gorge on the corpses of the warriors and soldiers who have been put to death. But John is using language imagery and symbolism from another apocalyptic type book in Ezekiel 38 and 39. Specifically here, to simply depict the finality, the extent of and the complete destruction of the final judgment the rider on white horse will bring upon the people. So that's the first thing Ezekiel chapter 38 and 39 function as the primary models, as the primary text that John draws upon to construct his vision of the end-time battle.

### The Battle

The second thing that we have already mention is noticed that no fighting takes place. This is no normal battle. This is a very unusual battle. In most battles you have the armies lining up and there are casualties on both sides. There is a skirmishing in conflict until one side emerges victorious. That is not what takes place here at all. There's no fighting at all. Instead, the Lamb simply comes down, and with the sword that comes out his mouth he slays his enemies. In Ezekiel chapter thirty eight, actually the enemies are destroyed by fire, we'll see that will get picked up later on in chapter 20. But now John in his battle scene describes the defeat of the enemies, not by the armies that follow Christ. There's no fighting that takes place with casualties on both sides. It is simply the Lamb comes, and with the sword that comes out of his mouth, he defeats the enemy.

I think this is helpful in responding to attempts to wonder whether this or that war or threat of war might be Armageddon, might be the final war I like to tell people if the

war starts, and there's casualties in fighting, you can pretty much be sure. It's not an end-time battle because the entire battle does not have any fighting. Christ simply comes in, with a sword from his mouth, and slays his enemies. So when we see wars, when we see actual battles taking place or threats of battles, I think we can be pretty sure that that is not the last one because the last one is like no battle that history has ever seen. There is no fighting by your two armies. The Lamb simply returns and slays or judges his enemies with the sword that comes out of his mouth.

The third thing I want to observe, I want to make out about this end-time battle scene, is, in my view, in light of the Old Testament text used, and especially in light of the imagery of a sword, the way that Christ defeats his enemies is from the sword coming out of his mouth. In my opinion, then and in my judgment, this end-time battle is not referring to any literal battle at all, whether in heaven or on earth or for any kind of spiritual battle. This is not referring to a literal battle at all, but I think the author is using battle imagery to symbolize and depict the final judgment of Jesus Christ. That he simply speaks with a word of his mouth. So, this is to be seen, not primarily as a battle literally, but the author is using battle language to describe the complete judgment and the final judgment of God's enemies that Jesus brings about, that Jesus executes simply by speaking the word. So I think what we have here is primarily a judgment scene of Christ speaking the word of judgment on the world and that now is portrayed or symbolized by the language of a great battle. I think that's very important that we understand that the battle imagery is being used to symbolize something very specific and that is a judgment not a literal end-time conflagration or great work or conflict or battle, but this is simply a judgment that occurs when Christ speaks the word of judgment.

#### Judgment of the Beast and False Prophet

First of all, the first enemies that God disposes or judges in chapter nineteen, is the beast and the false prophet who appear to be the ones who have gathered the warriors together and now are prepared to mount a final war. Now, in verse 20, first of all, the beast is captured and then the false prophet from chapter 13. This would also suggest that

the beast and the false prophet from chapter 13, all though they are identified with Rome, and perhaps of those in the Roman provinces that are keen to enforce Emperor worship and to draw attention to the beasts of the Roman Empire. The beast number one symbolizes Rome, perhaps, and the Emperor. It is intriguing that now they actually are present at the final end-time judgment, suggesting once more that the beastly figures are more than just Rome. They are the same beast that inhabited and energized and inspired other nations in the past, in Israel's history, other godless, and idolatrous oppressive nations. Now, once again, they have surfaced in the form of the Roman government and Roman Empire, and now they are portrayed as being subject to the final judgment that now comes as result of Jesus Christ's second coming. So, first of all, the beast and the false prophet, other names for the two beasts in Revelation 13, are thrown into the lake of fire. We'll talk more about the lake of fire when we get to Revelation chapter 20, where it emerges again.

But at this point there are two observations to debate. Notice that, you may have wondered, what about the dragon? You have the two beasts being removed, but what about the dragon? While we have to wait for the dragon until the next chapter just a few verses later in chapter 20 the dragon will be deposed of. Interestingly, what you have John doing is almost literary, is the posing of the beast and the dragon in the opposite manner in which they were introduced, opposite order. In chapter 12, the dragon is introduced and then in chapter 13 the two beasts. Now in their removal, the beast are removed first in chapter 19. Then, the dragon will get removed and judged in chapter 20. So that's why you don't find the dragon appearing here because John is going to progressively see evil removed. It begins with Babylon being removed in chapter 17 and 18 and judged. Then it begins with the rest of the world being judged. It also entails the removal, first of all, of the two beasts. Then finally, Satan himself will get removed in chapter 20 in a progressive scene of the removal of evil in the form of judgment.

Removal of All Evil

A second, also, what is going on here is, this is simply, as I said before, I think symbolic of God's removal of all evil and God's judgment of all evil. So I don't think we should prepress the chronology as if literally the beast and false prophet will be judged first and then some time later, the dragon or sometime later the nations. But once more, the author is trying to demonstrate through a series of images what we find happening at the end of history, and that is, the complete judgment and the complete removal of all that is evil. Now he, as I said, anticipates that not through literal fighting or literal carnage, but that the language of judgment and the language of battle is used to demonstrate the swift and decisive nature of God's judgment, and, here, of defeating the powers of the beastly figures, the first and second beast, the beast and false prophet, who inspired it, and who actually laid behind the oppressive activities and the murderous attempts of the Roman Empire to destroy and defeat God's people. So naturally, they go into judgment first, and then following them in verse 20 the rest of them were killed with the sword that comes out of the mouth of the rider again, symbolizing judgment that Christ simply speaks the word of judgment and all of his enemies that have opposed God and his people, they are finally defeated.

So what is going on here is as I said the progressive removal of evil in the form of judgment scenes that will prepare the way for the emergence of the new creation in chapter 21. When you get to the end of chapter 20, all of evil has been removed. All of evil has been judged. There's nothing left of an oppressive, godless, idolatrous, and wicked Empire and the earth that it ruled over. That has all been removed and scenes of judgment, so that now the only thing left is for a new creative act of God to bring about the inheritance and the reward of his people who were faithful and who refused to give in to the beast and its demands.

### Conclusion

The last thing I want to say about chapter 19:11-21, especially 17 to 21 that narrates the battle which we said is really not a battle at all in the way it is narrated as well as what it symbolizes. It's meant to symbolize a final judgment and not a literal

battle. It is a question we raised back in the chapter 16. That is starting in chapter 16, and I would add chapter 17 as well, we saw that the kings of the earth colluded with the beast. They allied with the beast to make war with the Lamb. So I want to include that text as well. But starting in chapter 16 verse 14, if you remember, as part of the six bowl judgments, that out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet, the unholy Trinity came three frogs. They were able, in reflection of an exodus plague, they were able to deceive the nations into gathering for a battle that then the author describes in chapter 16 as the battle of Armageddon, probably borrowing an Old Testament concept of the famous place of battle now blown up in the apocalyptic proportions as the scene of a final battle. But we saw in verse 16, there was no battle described, it only mentioned the gathering of them for battle and you didn't see a description of the battle. Then in towards the end of chapter 17, we find a brief mention of the battle that I just mentioned. In verse twelve the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received the kingdom, but for one hour they will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb.

So the beast and these kings of the earth symbolized by the ten horns will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Which is similar to the name, and in fact, his exact name found on Jesus robe in verse 16 of chapter 19. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So we have two battles so far. First, chapter 16, the battle of Armageddon, where the nations are gathered, the kings are gathered for a war by the frogs that come from the dragon and the two beasts. Then in chapter 17, we have a battle between the beast, and his ten kingdoms and the Lamb where they are defeated. Now in chapter 19, we're introduced to another battle in verses 11 through 21, another battle where the one seated on the horse, that is, Jesus Christ himself, the Word of God comes to do battle and simply defeats the enemies who have been gathered against them. And, notice verse 19, "then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth." Probably the kings from chapter 17, those ten kings. "And their armies gathered together to make war against the rider." So that ten

kings just symbolizing all the kingdoms, the complete number of kings, and now you have this picture at the end of the world, with all the earth gathered to do battle.

Then in chapter 20 in verse 8, starting at verse 7. “When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released and he will go out and deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for the battle.” Then what happens is they go up to the city of the saints, and fire comes from heaven, and simply devours them.

So what is going on? How many battles are there? Are these four different battles? Are there series of battles leading up to the end-time? Are there two battles or are there three battles? Do some of these overlap as one battle? In my opinion, I think we should understand all these battles as referring to the same event. They all have the theme of Satan and or the beast, deceiving and gathering the nations in order to do battle, and then they are simply defeated without engaging in any warfare. So I think chapter 16, the battle of Armageddon, where the beast gathers them together, then, is further depicted in chapter 17, where the beast and the ten Kings wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb who is King of kings and Lord of lords defeats them. Now we see the battle narrated again, a third time in the same battle, but a fuller narrative. In chapter 19, now the King of kings and Lord of lords goes out where the beast and the ten kings have gathered as an army once again. Note that theme of gathering an army and that the beast and/or Satan is involved in that, and they are simply slain by the Lamb. And notice, in all of these there is no warfare taking place. Then finally, I would suggest you, that chapter 20 is the same end-time battle. Notice again, that Satan deceives the nations as he did in chapter 16, the battle of Armageddon. Satan deceives the nations to gather them for battle. Notice the theme of gathering them for battle, prepared for war, and they are simply defeated.

By the way, the other thing that links the battle in chapter 20 back to the one in chapter 19, is the fact that the same Old Testament text lies behind both of them, Ezekiel 38-39. So I take it that all of these refer to the exact same end-time battle looking at them from different perspectives.

We are going to have to ask why the author narrates the battle for a fourth time in Revelation 20. We’ll talk about that in our next discussion. Chapter 19, then ends with



the first result, again chapter 19, and verse 11 begins a new section on Revelation, a series of images. A series of scenes that depict what happens at the parousia or the coming of Jesus Christ. And the first scene here in nineteen, eleven through twenty one, portrays the final judgment that will be the result of Christ's coming. Now there is still quite some cleaning up to do. We'll see chapter twenty. We'll still have scenes of judgment in them, but already we find that the final judgment of all evil, the removal of all evil, beginning to prepare the way for the emergence of a new creation in chapters 21 and 22.

Transcribed by Lauren Park

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 26

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Revelation 20: Binding of Satan and Millennium

Understanding Revelation 20 in its Context

Revelation 20 contains probably the most well-known feature of the Book of Revelation. If you ask someone about what they associate the Book of Revelation with, sometime along the line, they will turn to Revelation 20 in their minds and think of the millennial text and the picture in chapter 20 of the thousand year reign. So what I want to do is talk a little bit about chapter 20 and not only focus on the millennial text and the idea of the Millennium itself, but again look at the chapter as a whole as far as how it functions within Revelation, but we will talk a little bit about the Millennium and a way to understand that that I think is consistent with the rest of the book and how it functions.

One of the most important principles for understanding this section I think, beginning with chapter 20, is that we saw that 19:11 begins a new section in the book, a section that spans from 19:11 all the way through 21:8, and we said chapters 17 and 18, and the first few verses of 19, and then 21:9-22:5 are two paired sections, comparing and especially contrasting to Babylon/Rome and the New Jerusalem. Then in between is section comprised of 19:11-21:8 that uses various images to portray and to interpret the meaning of the second coming of Christ. So with 19:11, I think we're at the very end of history. We're at the second coming of Christ, and that entire section portrays a variety of scenes that describe what will take place when Christ returns to earth at his second coming.

What is significant then is that chapter 20 should be seen in light of this broader series of events. I think what we'll see is chapter 20, as well as all the way from 19:11 through the end of chapter 20, probably once more conveys a series of events or scenes that roughly describe the same event. That is 19-20 should not necessarily be taken as a series of events that will occur in chronological order, remember John will preface his

vision with “Then I saw,” that indicates primarily the visionary sequence in which he saw it, not necessarily the sequence in which things will happen. So, the events in chapter 20 should not necessarily be seen as happening in the strict chronological order but should be seen in terms of a variety of perspectives or a variety of ways of looking at what happens when Jesus Christ returns, or to explore the meaning and the significance of what takes place when Christ returns to consummate God’s plan for history.

In chapter 19, in verses 11-21, we saw that Christ returns in the form of a battle that probably signifies a final judgment where all the people of the earth are judged but also including the two beasts, the beast and the false prophet from Revelation 13. Now in chapter 20, we find that chapter 20 being a further scene of judgment scenes primarily. So the main theme of chapter 20 is still one of judgment, in my opinion. In chapter 20, we’ll see now that Satan will also be judged and deposed much like the beasts were. So one important feature we’ve already suggested is, intriguingly, that chapter 19 and 20 judges or removes, the two beasts and the dragon in the reverse order they were introduced in chapters 12 and 13.

Chapter 20 combines three different scenes, all of them divided with an “I saw.” The first scene is found in the first three verses, and they’re all linked, and that is the binding of Satan in the Abyss for a thousand years. The second scene is in chapter 20:4-10, and that is the resurrection of the saints who were martyred and their thousand year reign, followed by a final battle by Satan. Satan is released and mounts a final war. Then the third and last scene in chapter 20 is in verses 11 through 15, and that is the Great White Throne judgment.

#### Text of Revelation 20

The first two scenes are bound together by the mention of the thousand year period that we’ll look at. What I want to do then, before examining each of these three scenes in chapter 20, is to read it, chapter 20, and start with verse 1.

*Verses 1-3*

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss and locked, and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.

*Verses 4-6*

[And after that, he must be set free for a short time.] I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

*Verses 7-10*

“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out and deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

*Verses 11-15*

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

## Revelation 20:1-3: Binding of Satan

So what I want to do is look at each of those three sections. The first one then being verses 1-3, the vision of Satan being bound and thrown into the Abyss for a period of a thousand years, after which he will be released for a short period of time. Now recall again that the two beasts have already been judged and thrown in to the lake of fire, the beast and the false prophet. Now Satan is introduced, and his judgment now is introduced, but in two stages. Part of the background for this is the dragon from chapter 12. You perhaps noted some of the connections back to chapters 12 and 13. The mention of a dragon which, just like he was described back in chapter 12:9, is called the “ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan”. So now that same dragon from chapter 12 is reintroduced here. Again, the figure of a dragon symbolizing chaos and evil and resembles or draws on the sea monsters from earlier Old Testament texts, for example. But now Satan’s demise is introduced, but in two separate stages. So, it’s interesting Satan isn’t simply thrown into the lake of fire. His judgment is introduced in two separate stages. First of all a binding in the pit, the Abyss. Then, second, he’s let out and finally thrown into the lake of fire towards the end of chapter 20.

Now, we've already been introduced to the Abyss. We've seen that the Abyss, or pit, throughout Revelation has played a role in indicating the house of the demons, the home of demoniac beings, the prison of the demoniac beings. The locusts come out of it in chapter 9, and the locusts clearly identify with demoniac figures. The beast comes out of the Abyss in chapter 11, and now Satan is thrown into the Abyss and it is locked. So, Satan is returned to the Abyss as a kind of the prison house of the demoniac beings. Now the text begins by an angel coming down with a chain ready to grab the dragon and bind him. Again, it's sort of interesting that God does not do this, or not even Jesus does this, but all that is required is for an angel to do this, again suggesting that there is no dualism in the book. God is portrayed as sovereign, so his angelic beings can do things like this, even binding Satan. It's possible that this is the same angel in chapter 9:1 that came down with the key to the Abyss to allow the locusts out.

### Locked Up

What I want to suggest is this: not only the idea of locking Satan in the Abyss but letting him back out so that he goes into judgment in the lake of fire in the final judgment. This two-fold, or two-stage judgment of Satan seems to reflect a common conception of how demoniac evil beings are judged from the Old Testament and also apocalyptic literature. So, for example, if you go back to Isaiah 24:21-22 – it's a section that deals with section 24-26 of Isaiah that's often labeled the little apocalypse – But in Isaiah 24:21-22: “In that day, the Lord will punish the powers in heavens above and the kings on earth below. They will be herded together like prisoners bound in the dungeon. They will be shut up in a prison and be punished after many days.”

Notice that it is two-fold. First, they will be bound in a prison and *then* sometime later they will be judged. You find similar language in some other apocalyptic texts. For example, in first Enoch chapter 10 and verses 4-6:

“And secondly the Lord said to Raphael: [which is an angelic being], ‘Bind Azazel hand and foot and throw him into the darkness.’ And so he made a hole in the desert, which

was in Dudael and cast him there. He threw on top of him rugged and sharp rocks. And he covered his face in order that he might not see light and in order that he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment.”

So notice again this Azazel, which may be some key demoniac leader, may be even Satan himself, thrown into a pit covered over with rocks until the day of judgment. You see the same scene in another apocalyptic text, Second Enoch. In chapter 7, we read, this is verses 1-2. “And there I perceive prisoners under guard, hanging up, waiting for the measureless judgment. And those angels have the appearance of darkness themselves.”

So now you have another picture of angelic beings in prison, locked up, waiting for the day of judgment. So, this is not their final judgment. They’re locked up until the final judgment.

You could also read II Peter 2:4 where we find Peter appealing to and relying on this same imagery and the same story. Perhaps also I Peter 3, “the spirits in prison” in that section as well. But, II Peter 2:4, “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but he sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment.” So note again this theme of demoniac angelic beings locked up in prison, awaiting the day of judgment. And the idea is that they be let out of prison to go into their judgment. I’ve already mentioned this may lie behind the description of the beast back in chapter 17, where he was described as the “one who was, who is not and who is coming,” but he goes into judgment. But here I think the author is drawing on that image from the Old Testament from apocalyptic literature the same image you find, for example, in II Peter 2:4 and probably Jude 6 as well. Now John draws on that to depict the final judgment of Satan himself. The archetypal evil, demoniac being, which is Satan himself. Now he is also judged in two stages: first of all, locking him in prison; second, letting him out to go into judgment. And so, I think that provides the model for why John depicts Satan’s judgment in two stages here.

Jesus also talks about the binding of Satan, for example, in Matthew 12:29, where he talks about the binding of the strong man. God's kingdom can only arrive if someone comes to bind the strong man, which is Satan himself. Luke 10:18 talks about Jesus saying, "I saw Satan fall like lightning." And some have suggested this is the imagery that John draws on, or that John is reflecting Jesus' teaching. That is certainly possible, but probably we should see it that Jesus' own teaching, the inauguration and arrival of the kingdom of God, was the initial binding. Now we see the final binding of Satan and the final judgment that takes place at the second coming of Christ. Again, I think it's an important principle to understand that from 19:11 through to chapter 21 we find the series of events that I think takes place at the second coming of Christ. So the binding of Satan, when Jesus' kingdom brought God's kingdom to earth at his first coming, was an initial binding that now finds its consummation in the final binding of Satan at the second coming of Christ. In other words, as Grant Osbourne says in his commentary, "Satan is completely bound in the Abyss, and he cannot escape." And the reason it said he's bound in the Abyss is so he's no longer able to deceive the nations. This was his primary role starting in Genesis 3 where he deceives Adam and Eve. In Revelation 12:9, he's described as deceiving the nations. Once again, notice the connection between chapter 20 and chapter 12 and we'll see a couple of other connections later. So, Satan is no longer able to deceive the nations but when he is, and we'll ask why that might be, but when he finally is released, he is able to find the nations receptive once more to his deceiving, then mounting a final assault or attack on the people of God later on in chapter 20.

But at this point, for this thousand years, he is not able to deceive the nations, although it's not exactly clear at this point why he's not permitted to deceive the nations, at least I don't think so. So now that Satan has been bound and again what I want to emphasize is I think the main theme of chapter 20 is still one of judgment, of the binding and the final judgment of Satan himself. It does end with a scene of final judgment, but the binding and judgment of Satan seems to be the primary point in chapter 20. Now that Satan has been bound for a thousand years, the next few verses, especially verses 4-6 tell



us what happens during that thousand years. In fact, you could remove verses 4-6 and 1-3 would flow naturally into 7-10. Verse 7 begins when the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison. Again, I think, reflecting those apocalyptic texts and Old Testament background of how the demons are dealt with and judged. But verses 4-6 are kind of, in a sense, an insertion, not a digression. It is the midst of this two stage binding and judgment of Satan you find verses 4-6 describing what happens during that thousand year period. The saints come to life and are raised and now they reign with Christ for a thousand years. Until that period of a thousand years is over, then Satan is let out again.

### Those Who Sit on the Thrones

But what I want to do is look at this text again from the standpoint of how it has often been looked at in church history, but I want to keep an eye on how it is actually functioning, in the broader context, and in the book of Revelation. The text begins with a vision of thrones in verse 4. The thrones clearly recall, this used from throughout the book, all the way back in chapters 4 and 5, the notion of kingship, and authority, and sovereignty. So now the author sees thrones, plural, but he doesn't tell us how many thrones. Some have speculated this is the twenty-four thrones of the elders from chapter 4 and 5. That's possible, but John doesn't say that it's the twenty-four elders; he just uses the plural thrones, and then he says, "On which were seated those who had been given authority to judge." It's also interesting that he doesn't tell us even who it is sitting in the thrones. Another way of putting it is, what is the relationship between those who sit on the thrones in the first half of verse 4 and now the second half of verse 4 where John says, "And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony"? Is this a separate group? So do you have one group seated on thrones, and now do you have a different group, those who have been beheaded because of their testimony? Or, I wonder if we should take this as referring to the same group again from different perspectives. John sees thrones and those seated on them, now he's going to describe in

more detail who those people are who are seated on the thrones. That's, I think, one way of looking at it.

### Those Sitting on the Thrones

Some have suggested those seated on the thrones in verse 4 are angelic beings, one of the reasons being because the background for this text seems to be Daniel 7. We've seen that Daniel 7, as well as the whole book of Daniel, throughout Revelation, that Daniel 7 has played a critical role at points. In Daniel 7, it seems to be the heavenly counsel that renders judgment in Daniel 7. Some have suggested those on the thrones in the first part of verse 4, would be the heavenly counsel, perhaps angelic beings, and they're the ones now that render judgment. Then the souls of those beheaded would be the saints; those who have suffered and who have died at the hands of the beast. However, I wonder though if first of all when you look at texts like back in 3:21, where one of the promises to the overcomer is, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne." I realize that's singular there, "just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne." So, is it possible that we should see these thrones as the ultimate fulfillment for the overcomers? These overcomers now occupy the throne. Furthermore, whatever the case those who are raised, the souls of those beheaded in the second part of chapter 4, because of their testimony, they are the ones in the rest of chapter 4 who reign. They come to life and they reign, which is exactly what the thrones are there for.

So, I wonder if the best way to look at it, again, is to see both halves of verse 4 as simply different ways of depicting the same group. So, John sees thrones and those seated on them. Then, second, he sees the same beings but now he describes them as the souls of those that were beheaded because of their testimony and those who do not worship the beast or his image. Now they came to life and they reigned on those thrones for a thousand years. So probably, 4a and 4b, the two groups, both introduced by "I saw," probably describe the same group.

Now, one other thing to draw attention to in verse 4, most translations translate the first part of verse 4 “I saw thrones on which were seated, those who were given authority to judge.” That is literally and wouldn’t lead the text as “judgment was given to them.” Another way to read this, and I think better way to read it is, “Judgment was given for them” or “judgment was given on their behalf.” That is a judgment is being rendered in their favor. So the picture, obviously and later on the text says, and they reigned, but the point of this then would be that judgment is given or rendered on their behalf or in their favor. That is going back to Daniel 7 and especially verse 22, the saints here are finally vindicated. This is the vindication of the saints. This is the ultimate answer to the cry of the martyrs. Now, they come to life and they reign for a thousand years. That is judgment is given and rendered on their behalf, and judgment is rendered in their favor.

Now, in fulfillment of Daniel 7, they are vindicated by being raised to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years, which is the exact period of Satan’s binding in verses 1-3. Now, why this is important? We said chapter 20, especially through verse 10, is primarily dealing with the judgment of Satan. But in the midst of that, we’ve already noted some connections with chapter 12, and that is that Satan is identified in the exact same way that he was in chapter 12. “He is the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the devil or Satan,” chapter 12:9. Notice also the description in verse 4 of the souls under the altar who have been beheaded, which actually goes back to chapter 6:9-11, “The souls under the altar who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus, because of the word of God.” But now notice also that it says that they had not worshiped the beast or his image and they had not received his mark on their forehead or hands, which takes you back to chapter 13 as well. So what I think is going on here as a part of the judgment of Satan is in chapter 20, now you have as part of that judgment the vindication of the saints who suffered at the hands of Satan and the beast. Thus, there are all those connections back to chapters 12 and 13 and also the fifth seal those who had been slain and who now were under the altar. So here is the vindication of the saints.

What I want you to notice is part of Satan's judgment, note the complete reversal that takes place. Satan ruled and put the saints to death; now you have a complete reversal. The saints come to life and now they reign, while Satan has been locked up in the Abyss. He's no longer able to do his deceptive work and he's no longer able to engage in any activity. Now everyone can perceive the complete vindication of the saints. That reversal is important. The exact reversal of chapters 12 and 13 where Satan's kingdom reigned supreme, and he was able to put to death saints. Remember pursuing the seed of the woman and the authority he gave to the two beasts. So Satan ruled. He put the saints to death. Now there is a complete reversal, Satan is bound, his kingdom is taken away, and now the saints reign. They come to life so that we find that they are vindicated.

#### Those Who Have Been Beheaded

Another question that arises is: "More specifically, who are these souls who have been beheaded?" Are they the same group as those who worshipped the beast or the image and had not received the image on the mark on the forehead. Some have perceived two different groups. Those who had actually been beheaded and then anyone else who refused to worship the beast, so that could be people who lived. So that the assumption is not everyone was martyred or killed for their faith and John is only aware of only one person so far, and that is Antipas, though he thinks others are coming. But some would suggest we have different groups here, those who have been martyred for their faith and another group that is a little broader than that, everyone who did not worship the beast and his image and who refused the mark back in chapter 13.

However, I wonder if we can really separate these two so easily. That is, when I read Revelation, I doubt that John would have perceived those who refused to worship the beast and this image and who refused to receive the mark would not have at least in the visionary narrative of John is those people would have suffered the ultimate consequences, and that is martyrdom, use as in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is somebody who

dies for their faith. So I doubt that John would have conceived of someone who refused to worship the beast and his image and refused the mark that that person would not have been slain or killed or martyred because of their refusal to conform and to submit. So I doubt that we should see two separate groups here. Instead I think probably this image of those who refused to worship the beast and those who refused to worship the beast and those who refused the mark on their forehead are those then who are slain and beheaded because of their testimony and faithful witness but probably this group, this is meant simply to represent the entirety of God's people. This is again according to the book of Revelation, John perceives that anyone who maintains a faithful witness and refuse to follow the beast, the end result is going to be suffering and death. So I think that this is simply John's way of depicting the entirety of God's people, not necessarily suggesting every last one of them, as we know is not the case. In John's historical context and also in his visionary narrative, to maintain a faithful witness and to refuse to follow the beast results in martyrdom or death because of one's faithful witness. So, I think then verse 4 should be understood as representing one group of people, those on the throne and then those who are beheaded because of their witness and refusal to follow the beast. That is a representation of the entire people of God, now at the end of history, being vindicated because of their suffering.

So, the beast then reigned and killed God's people and now as part of his judgment, concomitant to his judgment is also the vindication of the saints rendering a verdict despite the verdict of Satan and despite the verdict of the world and the saints. Go back to chapter 11, where the beast put the saints to death and the entire world gloated because this was a victory and the saint's testimony appeared to be in vain and the saint's witness appeared to be futile. Now they are vindicated. Satan is locked away and shut up, so now the saints can be vindicated and shown that their witness and their suffering was not in vain because as we've said it is an exact reversal to what happened in chapters 12 and 13 where Satan reigned and Satan put to death through the beast those who

opposed him, the people of God who maintained their faithful witness. Now in an exact reversal, the saints come to life, they receive life, and now they reign.

### Revelation 20:4-6, The Millennial Text

The period of a thousand years has probably engendered more speculation and also more confusion and more debate and discussion than perhaps any other issue in the book of Revelation. I'm going to show you why it's rather ironic that that is the case. But, chapter 20 of Revelation, verses 4 through 6, in disproportion to that brevity of these two verses in this section in relationship to the rest of the book, this section has almost emerged as the centerpiece of the entire book. I want to talk about a little about this thousand years, but this reference to a thousand year period, the coming to life and reigning of the saints, especially in the end part of verse 4, which is the only place where you find a reference to the saints coming to life and reigning for a thousand years. That's basically the only reference to the Millennium. But this text by itself has created or been responsible of the creation of entire theological systems. It's been responsible for creation of entire views of eschatology or end-time events. It's played a role in confessional statements of our churches and various groups and in doctrinal statements of our churches. It's also played a significant role in identifying theological approaches and hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation itself. So often you'll have people say, "Do you interpret Revelation pre-millennially or from an amillennial perspective or post-millennial perspective?" We'll look at those views in just a moment, but the point is these verses by themselves, these three short verses, seem to have emerged as the centerpiece of Revelation and not only responsible for creating entire theological and eschatological systems of how we understand the end times, but also are responsible for labeling different approaches to how we read the entire book of Revelation based solely on these verses.

### Three Approaches to the Millennium

Now what I want to focus on for the moment is this mention of the thousand years. This mention of the thousand years is responsible for, and it has resulted throughout church history in, the creation of eschatological systems, that is, ways of looking at the end times and the Millennium. This reference to a thousand years has played a crucial role throughout church history and throughout our theological thinking about end-times. Three general approaches have emerged, and hopefully I don't need to spend too much time in this, because you're familiar with these approaches and you can certainly read about them in numerous textbooks that introduce you to these different systems and ways of looking the Millennium and looking at the end-times. But there are three different views through the history of interpretation Revelation in the church and throughout the church's articulation of its beliefs about eschatology or end-times. They have been labeled: premillennial, post-millennial, or amillennial. These all come from this text. Again, this is the only place in the Bible that you explicitly find reference to a millennial reign or to a thousand year reign, and nowhere else do you find it. This doesn't mean that the Bible doesn't refer to it anywhere else. Many have found precursors to this in some Old Testament expectations of an earthly reign, an earthly kingdom, such as Daniel 7 and elsewhere in sections of Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Some have found references already in the Old Testament. Some have found references in, for example, I Corinthians 15 in Paul's discussion of Christ reigning until he subdues his enemies, then he hands the kingdom over to the Father. There seems to be a progression, and some have seen Paul in sort of nascent terms, referring to what John now refers to in more detail here in the Millennium. But the point here is that this is the only place in the Bible we find explicit reference to the Millennium. Again, that doesn't mean it's nowhere else or that it's not important at all because this is the only place, but it's important to state at the outset that the place we get the notion of the millennial kingdom is right here.

Now just very briefly, the three primary approaches to the Millennium and by the way there are probably sub-classifications within these approaches, but I don't want to go into a lot of detail on those. So these are not homogeneous. That is, when we talk about

pre-millennialism, that doesn't mean that everyone looks at the Millennium in the exact same way. There can be sub-classifications and subcategories that different views should fall into.

### *Pre-millennialism*

First of all, the view known as premillennialism, suggests two things. Number one, that there is a future millennial reign, there is a future period of time that has not yet taken place where Christ will reign over the earth with his saints in fulfillment of Revelation 20. Second, and this where the world "pre" comes in, the prefix "pre," Jesus Christ will come back before that event. So, we're anticipating the time when Jesus Christ returns in the future. When he returns, he will set up his millennial reign on earth. So that's what's known as pre-millennialism. "Pre-" Christ comes before the Millennium. He is the one who sets up the millennial kingdom. The kingdom does not arrive until Christ comes at his second coming so all these plagues and bowls and things happen and then, finally, Christ returns, he judges (chapter 19), and then he sets up his millennial kingdom on earth. So the Millennium is solely future, it has not taken place yet, and will not take place until Christ first comes back. Now there's variations within this. One that we've kind of referred to is an approach that interprets Revelation rather literally. It often sees Revelation 20, the Millennium, as the place where all of Israel's literal, physical, national promises get fulfilled. So all the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament of a Davidic king ruling on this throne over the nation, a rebuilt temple, the Israelites being restored to their land, many people see that, see the Millennium in chapter 20, as the place where that will occur. But not everyone thinks this way is a premillennialist. The main point with premillennialism is that it's future and that Christ comes back first to set it up and to inaugurate it.

### *Post-millennialism*



A second view is what is known as post-millennialism. This view is not nearly as common as the first one, although there is a strong minority that still holds to it. Basically post-millennialism, like pre-millennialism, post-millennialism thinks that the Millennium is still future and that it will occur on earth. So it agrees there is a future Millennium, a future reign that will take place on earth. However, where they differ is they think that the future Millennium on earth will be a result, just very basically and maybe too simplistically, that it will be a result of the church's mission, the church preaching and spreading the Gospel, and through the power of the Spirit, that will result eventually in a golden era being inaugurated, being called the Millennium. After the Millennium and after that reign on earth, and after that golden era, then Christ will come back, hence post-millennialism. So they agree the Millennium is future. Like the first view, premillennialism, the Millennium is a future period of time on earth, where, as a result of the preaching of the Gospel and the work of the Spirit, there will be a golden age where righteousness will reign supreme, but then Christ comes after that event, at the end, to set up the new heavens and the new earth, so it is called "post-millennialism."

### *Amillennialism*

The third view that also has a little bit of variation in it is the view known as amillennialism. Again, this is a very common approach, has been common from centuries in the early church. The word "a" unlike the other two prefixes which were temporal, "pre" and "post," the word "a" is sort of a-primitive construction which means no or not, so literally no Millennium. In a sense that's a misnomer because they're not saying there's no Millennium at all, they're saying there's not a future, physical, earthly Millennium. There's no future specific period of time. Instead, what amillennialism says is the entire church age is a Millennium. The period between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ, the whole period is a Millennium symbolized by a thousand years. This is a time during which the saints reign with Christ from heaven. There are all kinds of New Testament texts that demonstrate that Christ has been raised to heaven and seated in heaven at the right hand of God from which he rules over all

creation and that we reign with him. Some suggest that the Millennium is what happens at the death of the saints when we die and go to heaven, then we reign with Christ from heaven. But the point is the Millennium is not restricted to any one period of time, hence amillennialism. Instead, the millennial thousand years, symbolizes the entire sweep of the church age, the entire sweep of church history from which Christ rules from heaven and the saints rule with him.

### The Millennium Throughout Church History

What is important to recall, before I make a couple of observations related to the Millennium, is that Christians throughout church history have generally been tolerant of different views of the Millennium. It's interesting when you look at some of our early creedal statement in the early centuries of the church that they don't really have a millennial statement in them, but the church has been tolerant of different views of the Millennium and godly intelligent Christians throughout the centuries have held all three of these views, and some have even changed their mind at times on different views. So the point is, there's never been an official position of the church. There's never been an orthodox position. None of these views have been the orthodox official position of the church. Instead, they've tolerated various approaches to the Millennium and I think that should color the way we look at the Millennium today.

I was raised in an environment where unless you held one of these views, your whole view of the Bible was held in suspicion, your ability to interpret the rest of the Bible was held in suspicion. They questioned your whole spirituality and your whole relationship with Jesus Christ was held in suspicion. I think church history as well as some of the comments I want to make about his chapter should remind us that if ever here we need to approach the text in humility, here if ever we need to be tolerate of different views and approaches. I do not say that to mean your view of the Millennium is not important and it really doesn't matter and this text doesn't matter and you can kind of or should sweep it under the rug and just ignore it. No; it's important to read this text, it's important to decide what you think about it and to realize the implications of how you

read the text, but I think more importantly that what position you hold is how you hold it and what you do with it.

### Observations and Principles for Understanding Rev 20

So, before I state how I approach this text and how I look at it, I want to make a handful of observations that I think should guide whatever approach we take and however we read it. First of all is, I take it that the reference to a thousand years should be understood symbolically as we've seen all the other numbers and all the other time periods throughout the book of Revelation whether it's three and a half years or forty two months or 1,260 days or whatever -- half an hour, an hour, and the number 7, the number 12, etc. I think we should take the one thousand years in the same way we take other numbers and other references to the time periods, as symbolic. In other words, the thousand years does not necessarily refer to a specific period of time that lasts for a long time. It could. In other words, it could refer to almost any type of period of time. It could refer to a period of time of almost any length and duration. So the number "thousand" probably signifies as we've see the number 10 usually indicates fullness and completion, so now you have 10 times 100, which is a large number. What the thousand then, signifies is a period of time that represents or the thousand represents fullness and completeness and could refer to a period of time of virtually any duration, whether short or rather very long, but I doubt that John intends for us to take this as a reference to a literal period of one thousand years of 360 days. Instead, the importance of this is the symbolic value of 1,000. It's a large round number indicating fullness and completion that could refer to a period of time of virtually any duration.

Second is, but this is disputed, but I would suggest that in my view this is an important principle that goes back to our discussion of Revelation 19:11. I think we need to read chapter 20, this reference to a thousand year reign, however we understand it, we need to read it as referring to what happens at the second coming of Christ. That is, 19:11 all the way to the end of chapter 20 and end of 21:8 comprises a series of images or

scenes that refer to what happens at the second coming of Christ. So 19:11 with the heavens being opened, we said, introduces a new scene and therefore I think that the entirety of chapter 20 and this reference of a thousand year reign must be seen in the context of the broader series of images that are different scenes or different ways of interpreting the meaning and significance of the second coming of Christ. So, whatever we make of this thousand years, it seems to me that it is to be associated with and it happens at the coming of Christ, starting with chapter 11. One of the big issues is: how do we relate chapters 19 and 20? Chapter 19 is the final judgment scene, the rider on the white horse in verses 11-21. How do we relate that chronologically to chapter 20? A key feature in this in some or a key assumption, in some millennial schemes is that events of chapter 20 have to happen after chapter 19. That may indeed be true but again we have to demonstrate that; we can't simply assume that because as I've suggested I don't think, as we've seen this elsewhere in Revelation, John does not always present things in a way that indicates their chronological order. Instead, he's more interested in giving us the sequence in which he saw the thing. So sometimes John can refer to the same event or the same time period but look at it from different perspectives. So chapters 19 and 20 may relate chronologically, but it's possible through that chapter 20 could be another way of looking at the same event as chapter 19 but from a different perspective. But in any case, I want to make it clear that I'm proceeding with the assumption that I think I find in the text that starting at 19:11, everything through chapter 21:8 refers to what happens at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The third thing I've actually already mentioned, I related to point two and I already got into that that is chapters 19 and 20 should not necessarily be taken as a series of chronological sequence of events. So the rider and the white horse coming together to judge may not necessarily happen first and then Satan is bound and then after he's bound then the millennial reign and then after the millennial reign, Satan's released and then the final battle and then after that takes place the Great White Throne Judgment. That's possible, but we can't assume that John is presenting the exact chronological order in

which these events may take place. I've already said that it's possible and I would argue that it's more likely he's exploring the meaning and significance of what happens when Christ returns by using different images and different scenes to describe roughly the same events or same time period when Christ returns.

The last thing I want to say, the last observation I want make to say is we've already noted, this is the only place in the New Testament where you find the reference to the thousand year reign. I don't want to make a whole lot out of that because, for example, we don't find the word Trinity used in the Old and New Testaments, but that doesn't mean it's not important and it hasn't been important for the church. So I don't want to say because we don't find the explicit wording "one thousand year reign" or "millennial reign," "millennium" is not a Greek word. "Millennium" is the Latin word for "1,000 years" and we've brought that then over into English. But because we don't find the reference to one thousand year earthly reign elsewhere in Revelation that does not mean that it is not important, but it is interesting that when I read the text of Revelation 20:4-6, the reference to the Millennium is rather cryptic. In other words, it really does not tell us what happens except that the saints come to life and they reign. That's all that it says. It doesn't tell us who they reigned over and maybe that's not the point. Maybe the point is again is simply that they reigned in contrast to the beast and Satan who reigned previously. It does not explicitly even say where they are when they reign. It doesn't say whether they reign from heaven or from earth. I mean, look at the text; it simply doesn't say.

Now the assumption seems to be that in light of the emphasis in Revelation that the kingdom of the world must become the kingdom of our God and Savior, the assumption would seem to be -- and that the fact that Satan ruled over the saints on earth -- the assumption seems to be, and I think it is a valid one, that this reign takes place on earth. But it's interesting; John doesn't clearly say that. And also the fact that in chapter 1 and chapter 5 we find references to the saints reigning for ever and ever, that this now seems fulfilled, but intriguingly, it says very little about where the saints are, who they

reign over. It doesn't tell us anything else that happens during this thousand year period. Is this a time when Israel's promise is fulfilled, or is this a time where there is a lengthy reign where Christ comes and sets the political, economic, religious systems all in order? The text doesn't tell us that. I find it rather interesting that it's rather cryptic and unclear as to some of these questions we have. Instead, I think when you read the text, one of the reasons why this is so brief is because this is merely a prelude.

### The Main Point of the Millennial Text

Well, first of all, I think the main point is chapter 20 is about the judgment of Satan, not primarily about the millennial kingdom. Second, I think that the reason why this is so short is that the coming to life and reigning here is a prelude to Revelation 21 and 22. When you read 21 and 22, this is where all the fireworks go off. This is where the full disclosure of the reward of the saints, the vindication of the saints, the reign of the saints, Revelation 22:5 ends with the saints reigning for ever and ever. I think chapter 20 is simply an anticipation and a preparation for that. So, chapters 21 and 22, this is where all the fireworks take place. This is the climax. This is what we've been waiting for. Not chapter 20, the Millennium. It's 21 and 22. Interestingly too, in response to those that would say, "Well, the Millennium is necessary because that's where all the physical promises in the Old Testament get fulfilled." The problem is that all the Old Testament texts that refer to the physical promises in the Old Testament now occur in Revelation 21 and 22, as we'll see. So the main goal of the book is not Revelation 20; it's 21 and 22. And so I think that our interpretation should reflect Revelation's own emphasis. Our interpretation of the book of Revelation and our interpretation of chapter 20 should reflect should reflect Revelation's own emphasis that chapter 20, the Millennium, actually tells us very little. I'm going to suggest why and how that influences the way we interpret this. But that our focus should not be on that but our focus should be on chapters 21 and 22 because this is where the climax of God's intention for history, the

climax of God's vindication and reward for his people, the climax of God's redemptive history, is finally reached, not in chapter 20, but in 21 and 22. So our understanding of and our interpretation of the Millennium in Revelation 20 should reflect that.

So in the next section then, based on some of these observations, I want to suggest how I read chapter 20 and what I think it's doing as far as its meaning and as far as how it functions within the context of chapter 20 but also within the context of the book as a whole.

Transcribed by Rebekah Stancil;

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 27

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Rev 20 the Millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment

### Understanding the 1000 Years

So to turn to the issue of the millennium, I've discussed briefly several principles that I think are important, that I think should be in place when we interpret the millennium. Another principle is that we still need to keep one eye on church history, and what it's taught us, and how it's wrestled with the text, and what has been important and valuable from that aspect. But I highlighted four things just to very quickly recap: number one, the thousand years whatever we think it refers to temporally, should be taken as symbolically. It could refer to a period of virtually any length. 1000, like all the other numbers is symbolic. Second, chapter 20 however we want to understand it, refers to something that happens at the second coming of Christ. In the context of 19 through 21. Chapter 20, I think, still refers to what takes place at the second coming of Christ, at the end of history. Third, we said that we should not take this in a strict chronological sequence. Then finally, I think that our interpretation needs to reflect the role that chapter 20 plays within Revelation; that it is not the most significant feature. It is not the primary goal of Revelation, the new creation is.

So having said that, let me talk a little about the way that I read Revelation chapter 20, and especially verses 4 through 6 and the reference to the Millennium. In my opinion, the millennial reference in Revelation 20 is primarily to be taken simply as symbolic of the vindication of the saints. That is, that we already know what chapter 20 is meant to be, this reference at the end of verse 4 of coming to life and reigning with Christ. The primary function of that in Revelation is to be seen as a reversal of and a contrast to the career of Satan and the beasts. Satan, and the two beasts have been portrayed, and especially Satan, as kind of the spearhead behind all this. Satan has been



portrayed as the one who reigns and rules. The earth is his kingdom and his rule now expressed through the Roman Empire for John in the first century. His rule dominates everything, and as a result of that he has put Christians to death. So his verdict on Christians is to get rid of them and kill them, because they resist and refuse to cooperate with his kingdom. So he puts them to death. Now in a complete act of reversal, the verdict in opposition to what was true during the time that the beast reigned, in exact opposite, now the saints come to life. The saints who were put to death they come alive and now in contrast of Satan who ruled now the saints rule.

So I take it that the thousand years then is primarily to be viewed as symbolic of this event, the raising and coming to life and the reigning of the saints as their vindication. So I take it that the thousand years doesn't really refer to a specific period of time at all of substantial length. It is simply another way, a symbolic way of referring to what happens when Christ comes back. The saints will be raised and vindicated, and they will come to life and reign in direct contrast to how they were treated at the hand of the beast who reigned, and that event is symbolized by the thousand year period.

So I don't think that it necessarily refers to a literal time at all, as far as a long period of time extending since Christ came back. It may just be another way of describing what happens at the second coming of Christ. He raises his saints and they reign and they are vindicated in the context of the judgment of Satan. Now they reign, and that is symbolized by a thousand years, or the thousand years simply symbolizes the thousand being the number of completeness and fullness. We now see the complete full vindication of the saints, symbolized by these thousand years. Probably the number of a thousand years is to be read in light of other time of references that refer to the reign of the saints. In other words, we may ask why did he use 1000 years? Probably to draw a contrast of the time periods used to symbolize the reign of Satan, and his persecution of violent activity in putting the saints to death.

For example, elsewhere in Revelation, back in chapter 2 and 3, we saw the period of suffering referred to as ten days, a symbolic period of time probably taken from Daniel. We also saw the period of the dragon's activity referred to as three and a half years, or time, times, and a half of time. We saw it referred to as 42 months and 1260 days. Now, by contrast, the saints reign for 1000 years, so the point is to draw a contrast between the limited period of time, however intense the limited period of time that Satan reigned. Now the contrast with the period of time that the saints who reign 1000 years. But again the point is not to depict a literal period of time, or as I'm suggesting it is not really a period of time at all, in terms of some spread out period of the saints reign, but simply the value of number, of 1000 years, is to be seen in direct contrast to the 3 ½ years, 42 months, 1260 days, that Satan and the beast were allowed to wreak havoc on the people of God.

So once again the point of the number is the full complete vindication of God's people that shows that by using insignificant, or by smaller numbers, it shows that the reign of Satan and his persecuting activity is now seen to be insignificant by comparison. The saints now, are fully vindicated, and that is all symbolized by the thousand-year reign. So now the saints are compensated for their suffering in a way that exceeds anything that they suffered at the hands of the beast, which was only 10 days, 3 ½ years, now their compensation symbolized by the 1000 years, far exceeds anything that they had to suffer at the hands of the beast.

Probably, at least in my view, we shouldn't read too much more into the millennium than this, and we should be careful about reading anything else to it. That is the only role I see in Revelation 20 and the rest of Revelation. The only role that it plays or at least the primary role, that the thousand year rule plays, is to symbolize the victory and the vindication of the saints, and here we have seen references already to the vindication of the saints in a way. We have seen them standing victorious by the sea in chapter 15; we have seen them standing before Mount Zion in chapter 14, but now the author wants to portray the vindication of the saints in a different light. He wants to

portray the vindication of the saints specifically in contrast to how they were treated in the hands of Satan, by raising them, and now them reigning instead of Satan reigning. And now, by contrasting the period of time in which Satan ruled with the period of time, symbolically, the 1000 years refers to their own reign.

So to then put it back in perspective, you have that scene in chapter 20, so I still think that the primary purpose of chapter 20 is: this is the judgment of Satan, and this is to be seen as the final verdict and judgment on Satan. It also is interesting that we may need to bring in the idea that elsewhere in Revelation, like in chapter 12, Satan was seen as the accuser of the brothers of God's people, as the saints. So now we find Satan himself giving an account for what he did, in a sense, and now Satan is judged. But part of Satan's judgment is also to show the vindication of those that he has accused, and those that he has harmed and persecuted. So that is why I think you have verses 4 through 6; this is a reference to vindication of the saints in the context of Satan's judgment. The rendering of the verdict of Satan's judgment that he is guilty of the blood of the saints he is guilty of the way that he treated them. Part of his judgment also means that those that he has mistreated and harmed and put to death will be vindicated, and that their witness was validated, and they were right, and that their death was not in vain.

#### First Resurrection and the Second Death

Verse 5 then verse 6 refers to the rest of the dead who are raised at the end of the 1000 years and the question is: Who are these dead who are raised after the thousand years? And, Is this a further resurrection? In other words, this appears to be a second resurrection. The first resurrection is exactly what John calls it in verse 4. Verse 4 is a reference then to the resurrection of the saints and now verse 5 seems to anticipate a further resurrection, another resurrection. We'll put that together in a moment; just keep that in your mind. So verse 5 says, "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended," which seems to be that reference to coming to life; seems to anticipate another resurrection. We've already had that in verse 4, the saints coming to

life, now verse 5 seems to suggest the rest of the dead, there is more to be raised after the thousand years. Now the second part of verse 5 the last part of verse 5 says, “This is the first resurrection.” Verse 4 has, “The saints coming to life is the first resurrection.” But then notice that verse 6 says, “Blessed and holy are those who took part in the first resurrection,” which is in verse 4, where the saints come to life. “Blessed are those who have part in the first resurrection, the second death has no power over them.”

So interestingly, you have a reference to a first resurrection, that is verse 4, with the saints coming to life and reigning, and you have a reference to a second death. Later on we will see, John will tell us what the second death is. So you have a first resurrection and a second death, that implies a second resurrection and the first death does everyone follow that? The first resurrection in verse 4 and now in verse 6 John appeals to a second death. The first resurrection seems to suggest there is a second resurrection somewhere, otherwise why say “first” twice? Then the mention of a second death seems to assume there is a first death, but John doesn’t tell us what it is. He doesn’t talk about a first death, he doesn’t mention it and say what it is and use the words “first death” and he doesn’t use the words “second resurrection” either, those two elements seem to be missing, so you have the first resurrection, second death, where is the second resurrection that comes after the first and where is the first death? Neither of which John explicitly refers to.

Probably the way we should understand it is this: the first resurrection is clearly verse 4, the resurrection of the saints symbolized by the thousand years. Where is the second resurrection? Probably it is verse 5, the first part of verse 5. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. Where do we see that? I think that verses 11-15 is the second resurrection, where all of the dead, and notice particularly in verse 12, “I saw the dead, great and small standing before the throne and books were open, another book was open which is the book of life, the dead were judged according to what had been done.” Then verse 13, “The sea gave up the dead that was in it, and death and Hades also gave up their dead as well.” I think that that is the second resurrection,

though John does not label it that way, I think that that is implied, in verse 5. “The rest of the dead, did not come to life until after the first resurrection, after the thousand years. So that reference to coming to life would be your second resurrection, and then I think verses 11-15 describe that second resurrection. So there’s the first resurrection, verse 4, the saints coming to life and reigning, symbolized by a thousand years and then the second resurrection is verses 11 through 15 where all the dead are raised in the final act of judgment.

### The Second Death

Now, we also said that John mentions a second death, what is the second death? Actually, we find the second death clearly identified in verse 14 and 15 of chapter 20. It’s this Great White Throne Judgment seat when the dead are raised and judged, verse 14, then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire, the lake of fire is the second death. So the final judgment, being cast into the lake of fire where the beast had already been thrown in chapter 19, and where the dragon is thrown. We’ll see in verse 15 the lake of fire and we’ll look at what that is in a moment. That is the second death, and Christians are spared from that second death. John says, “Blessed are those who participate in the first resurrection,” that is those who are faithful to Christ. Who refuse to give in to the beast, they will experience the first resurrection to life. John says that they don’t need to worry about that second death, because that is being thrown into the lake of fire for those who participate in the second resurrection.

But where is the first death? There is a second death, which is being thrown into the lake of fire. But is there a first death? I think that John assumes the first death is physical death, the beheading and killing and slaying that Christians experienced as part of their faithful witness. So Christians suffer the first death; that is physical death and harm at the hands of Satan and the beast. But they will not experience the second death, which is being thrown into the lake of fire and the reason they won’t is because they will participate in the first resurrection. They will be raised and vindicated with Christ, they will experience a first resurrection. But there’s a second resurrection but that

resurrection will be of the dead and it will result in going into the second death. So hopefully we have helped you make a little bit a sense of this, that the saints experience the first death, physical death, but they will experience the first resurrection, raising them and vindicating them and reigning with Christ.

It seems to me that the second resurrection and the second death are reserved then for unbelievers, for those who oppose God and his people. But to reiterate what happens in verse 4 through 6, is I want to emphasize that the main theme of this is primarily the judgment of Satan. But along with the verdict now given to Satan also means showing that his treatment of the saints was wrong and unjust that his accusations of them were wrong and that means also that God must vindicate his people. So we find that happening in verses 4 through 6 where they are raised and they come to life and they reign for a thousand years. A thousand years simply symbolizing not a long period of time but a thousand years in my opinion is a symbol of their vindication, their reward and their victory. They were raised and now they reign in contrast to the way that Satan treated them.

#### Summary on the Millennium

So hopefully you can see that we need to understand the millennium in terms of chapter 20, in terms of the judgment of Satan. It is almost a necessary piece of the judgment of Satan, to also vindicate those that he has harmed. So those thousand years, however we understand, has to primarily play that role and all the other questions that we ask: 'Who's going to be there? And, how can there be people who have populated the millennium?' All those questions are probably unnecessary because John himself has a very specific role for the millennium in chapter 20.

The other thing that we noted is that the main goal of Revelation then is not the Millennium, but chapter 20 is simply preparing, for the grand finale and the climax of the book and the focus of the book and the main goal of the book which is chapters 21 and 22, that we will get to in a moment.

So the two final sections then in Revelation chapter 20; the first one is in verses 7-10 we read of Satan's final judgment where now he is actually let out of the Abyss. At this point he is let out of the abyss so that he is able to gather an army, and to deceive the nations once more in gathering an army, in order to surround the camp of the saints. Here is probably just symbolic of God's people as a whole and the idea here is once again that Satan and the entire world are now seen as in opposition to God and opposition to his people and a threat to his people.

But this war ends in the same way that chapter 19 did, and that is, Satan is simply defeated with no fighting actually taking place, we don't see a skirmish and casualties on both sides, but in this case fire simply comes out of heaven and devours Satan and all his enemies so no fighting really takes place at all. I would like to suggest to you too that I think that the battle in verses 7 through 10 is the same one as chapter 19 and verses 17 through 21, and the same one as 7:17, where Satan and the ten kingdoms wage war against the Lamb and the Lamb defeats them and also the battle of Armageddon, back in seal number six, back in Revelation in chapter 16. All are simply different ways of looking at the same end time battle, and I suggest to you that the end-time battle primarily is meant to symbolize judgment. It is primarily a judgment scene that happens at the end of history.

One other reason for thinking this that I already mentioned that thinking that this battle in verses 7 through 11 is the same one, as at the end of chapter 19 is the same Old Testament text lies behind it. That is John is drawing from the same text that is Ezekiel 38 and 39 as a model for portraying the battle. Ezekiel 38 and 39 seem to refer to an end time battle and now John has draws on, we saw him draw on it in chapter 19, the language of calling on the birds and beasts to gather and prepare to gorge themselves on the corpses that are a result of the battle, now we find John using that same language or using that same text. For example, the fact that fire comes down from heaven to destroy them, comes out of Ezekiel chapter 38. So for John this is not a contradiction to the chapter. In chapter 19 he destroys them with the sword coming out of his mouth, now

they're destroyed with fire. Does that mean it's a different battle? No. We have seen John can use different images to portray the same events. Now this draws on Ezekiel and Ezekiel's notions of fire coming out of heaven and the enemies being destroyed by fire. Now John depicts the enemies being destroyed by fire an allusion to Ezekiel.

### Gog and Magog

Note also the mention of Gog and Magog, chapter 38 and verse 1 of Ezekiel: "The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog." So John's reference to Gog and Magog is an indication that he is alluding back to Ezekiel chapter 38. Now who are Gog and Magog? There have been all types of attempts as with Ezekiel as well as with Revelation, but I don't want to go into them. But there's been all kinds of attempts to identify them with nations such as Russia or somebody else and by doing gymnastics with Gog and Magog and relating them to modern day phenomena. Often we find Gog and Magog being treated as John prophesying about modern day nations. Instead, I think that John himself tells us who Gog and Magog is in verse 8. "Satan will be released from prison and he will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth." "Four" being symbolic of the entire earth, I think that John is using Gog and Magog in allusion to the battle in Ezekiel 38. Now John sees Gog and Magog as a symbol for all the nations of the entire earth so this is the entire earth now is in final opposition to God and his people. It is the final earth with Satan lying behind their attempt to oppose God. In fact, in number they are like the sand of the seashore in verse 8, another indication that this can't just be two nations. This Gog and Magog are symbolic of an allusion of Ezekiel 38, symbolic of the entire earth, that Satan has now deceived, and now they are gathered for battle. They surround the saints, which I suggested to you that the camp of the saints was probably symbolic of the people of God themselves.

Although, one of the things that this text does, it is not so much suggesting that now the saints have to fear because they are surrounded by enemies and now there is a



battle, probably this is more symbolic of the absolute security of the saints that they can do nothing to reverse. It is also as if the function of this is to show that nothing can reverse that verdict back in chapter 20 of verses 4-6. Nothing can reverse that. There is no threat; no way that their vindication can be reversed. That is indicated by Satan's attempt, his failed attempt, to bring all the nations against God's people and they simply suffer the same fate as we saw back in chapter 19.

### Unholy Trinity Defeated/Judged

The other thing to say about this battle too, is even though only Satan is present, the two beasts were present back in chapter 19, and once more this does not indicate separate battles. I think that this is a literary technique that John has already seen he is deposing of the unholy Trinity, Satan and the two beasts, in the opposite order in which they were introduced in chapters 12 and 13. So I think that is just a literary device, again, this is not to be taken in strict chronological order, these are the same battles. The idea of Satan and notice in chapter 19 as the two beasts that gather the army but back in chapter 16 it was both the beasts and Satan who gathered the armies. All three of them from whom the frogs came out gathered the armies for battle in Armageddon. I think that we just find different perspectives or different ways of looking at the end time battle. In chapter 19 we saw the end-time battle in relationship to the beasts. Now we see the same end time battle in relationship to Satan himself.

But we have already noted too, that like chapter 19, no fighting takes place. There is no literal battle here probably because like chapter 19 this is mainly a judgment scene, where now Satan is judged in the same matter that the beast in the fall in chapter 19 in fact verse 10 makes it clear of chapter 20. "And the devil, who deceived them was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown, and they were tormented day and night for ever and ever." This is a clear allusion back to Revelation chapter 19. So in the context then of the judgment of Satan in chapter 20, this is the main point of chapter 20 as we have said. Now we find that the unholy trinity has finally removed and judged and all the nations and the kings of the earth with them.

## Satan's "Release"

Now we still have one final judgment left that we will look at in just a moment. But one other thing that I want to emphasize is, notice that in this battle scene in beginning of verse 7, you're introduced to Satan in a way that connects you back to verses 1 and 3 and we said that besides the mention of the number 1000 which connects all three of these scenes, you could actually remove verses 4 through 6 and 1 through 3 would flow naturally into verse 7. So in verses 1-3, Satan is bound for 1000 years. At the end of verse 3 it mentions the fact that he will be set free, and now we find in verse 7, after the 1000 years was over Satan now is released from his prison.

Now a couple of important things to say, first of all, if we try to read this in strict chronological succession it doesn't make a lot of sense to have the saints be vindicated and then "after the thousand years," in other words, when you read this it does appear that we are to take this in rather temporal way that this language of after a thousand years. So it does seem that the saints are raised first and they are vindicated for a thousand years then it's after that the judgment comes. But once more, I'm not certain that we are meant to take this too literally as far as chronological succession. Instead, the reason for this temporal language, that Satan would be bound to the abyss for a 1000 years and then released, and he is able to marshal the troops against the saints of God, this language as we have already noted of the binding of Satan in order to release him, comes out of the Old Testament books like Isaiah chapter 24 and apocalyptic texts like 1 Enoch. There are New Testament texts that pick that theme up like 2 Peter 2 and Jude 6. What then is going on here is in verse 3, "after that he must be set free for a short time." Anyone who reads this text in light of that apocalyptic motif would understand, Satan being set free is so that he can go into judgment. So in verse 7 of chapter 20 when it says, "When the thousand years are over Satan will be released."

Anyone thinking of 1 Enoch and the Old Testament texts, this concept of binding spirits in prison, and while they are in prison they are awaiting the day of judgment.

They would read this as, “Satan is waiting to be released to go into prison.” But John, as part of his narrative adds another feature, before he goes into judgment, which he does in verse 10. So Satan is thrown into the Abyss by judgment where he gets thrown into the lake of fire. But before he does that, Satan is able to deceive the nations and mount one final attack. But the reason John re-narrates the end-time battle again is simply to demonstrate, once more, that the verdict on God’s people, in chapter 20, through verse 6, the verdict of being vindicated and being raised and reigning with Christ can not be overturned, it cannot be harmed. Satan is powerless against God’s final verdict. Instead, Satan is in the end-time battle, he is once again defeated, like the two beasts were he is defeated and he goes into his destruction; in an allusion to and following this conception and other apocalyptic texts.

So verse 7 with verse 10 we finally reach the point where all, the two beasts and Satan, have been removed and judged and all the kings of the earth and all of humanity have been judged.

#### Great White Throne Judgment

What is left then is one final judgment in chapter 20 and verse 11 through 15, and this is the so-called ‘Great White Throne Judgment’ scene. Another way of putting it is this is also the second resurrection, the first resurrection taking place back in verses 4-6 in relationship to the saints. This now is the second resurrection, and those raised, go to the second death. Now how do we understand that? In my opinion, verses 11 through 15, as we have seen, this is the second resurrection, the resurrection of the dead who are judged. This is the judgment for the unbelieving dead, this is the judgment for unbelievers. The saint’s judgment has already taken place in verse 20:4-6. Their judgment is a judgment that has been rendered on their behalf. They have been raised and vindicated, especially the beheaded saints who are a representation of the entirety of God’s people. All of the saints have been raised and vindicated in verses 4 through 6. So who is left but the unbelievers, of the unbelieving dead who now are raised, and they are judged in 11-15, I don’t see verse 15 as the judgment of all people, some to eternal life, some to eternal judgment. I think that 11-15 is solely a judgment of unbelievers and now they are

judged. The saints have already been judged and the verdict was, they are vindicated, they are shown to be right. They are raised and they reign with Christ.

Now is the judgment of the unbelieving dead. They are raised and they end up in the lake of fire, along with the two beasts and the dragon himself. In other words, I think that probably verses 11-15 don't necessarily happen chronologically after the other events. Again, it may just be a further scene, or a further way of depicting, here is what happens at the second coming of Christ, and it may not be suggesting after everything in chapters 19 and 20. Then finally this happens, that this is simply another way of depicting the judgment of God, the unbelieving dead who are now judged. So the point of this is by the time that you get to the end of 20, there is nothing left. You have the two beasts who have been judged and thrown into the lake of fire, you have Satan the dragon who has been judged and thrown into the lake of fire, you have all of the unbelieving dead who have been judged, and thrown into the lake of fire, you have all the nations, and all the kings of the earth, judged and destroyed and punished in judgment.

So that by the end of chapter 20 there is nothing left, all evil has been removed, evil Satanic trinity has been removed, all of their followers, all of those who follow the beast and worshipped his image, all that refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty, all those who caused harm for God's faithful people, now have been removed in a series of judgment scenes, that don't necessarily follow chronologically, but simply depict what happens at the end when Christ comes, at the end of history to judge. So now you are prepared for chapter 21 and 22. Now the new creation can arrive, now to go back and look back at a couple of details of the section. The 'Great White Throne' probably, is not meant to indicate some different or separate throne, but probably the "Great White Throne," and note how it is described, "Then I saw a Great White Throne and him who was seated on it." It seems to me to recall chapter 4 and the one seated upon the throne. So I take it that this is the same throne as chapter 4. In fact, back in chapter 4, there are clear judgment motifs with the thunder and the lightning that rumbles in connection with the throne and the one seated on the throne. We have seen that as a judgment motif

throughout the book, so now the throne scene in chapter 4 is God seated on the throne. Now he begins to enact the final judgment, so the Great White Throne is probably the same throne back in chapter 4.

And now we find all of the dead, and I've suggested that this is probably the judgment of believers placed back in verses 4 and 6, they have been raised now, the unbelieving dead now are raised and they go into judgment, they go into the second death. The mention of books, a book's function in Revelation and you see this in other apocalyptic texts, is a metaphor, often a metaphor for recording works. But also a metaphor for belonging and who are the people of God, and here they function, the works function as a basis for judgment, probably the books here reflect another Old Testament text once more, Daniel chapter 7. We have seen Daniel 7 playing a crucial role through Revelation several times, but Daniel chapter 7 and verse 10, mentions a book. In Daniel 7 verse 10, "A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him," and this a description of the Ancient of Days. "Thousands upon thousands, attended him, ten thousands upon ten thousands, times ten thousand stood before him, the court was seated and the books were opened. Daniel 7 is a fitting kind of subtext for chapter 20 of Revelation because what we have been suggesting is that Revelation appears to be a court scene, just like Daniel chapter 7. So now books are opened in Daniel chapter 7 and later on in chapter 12 of Daniel, "At that time, Michael the great, prince who protects these people will arise, there will be a time of distress such that has not happened from the beginning of the nations until then, but at that time your people, everyone who's name is found written in the book will be delivered, multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt."

Here I take it, the Daniel section, those who will be raised to shame and everlasting contempt; that is what is portrayed here. "Those who are raised to life," was portrayed back in verses 4-6. Now the other half of that, those in the books who are now to be raised for contempt and punishment; that is what is portrayed in verses 11-15, so the books again contain their works. In other words, I think that this is a reference, the works

primarily being number one perhaps, those who have killed the saints, but also the fact that they have followed the beast. They have participated in the idolatrous, godless activity of the Roman Empire. They have followed the beast and they have killed God's people and now they are being judged for that. The book of life is here simply to emphasize that their names were not found in it. Back in chapter 3 in verse 5, John promised the Church in Smyrna that their names would never be blotted out of the book of life. Now the book of life appears here, to demonstrate that these people's names were not found in the book of life, so the books here simply form the basis for the judgment on the people of God.

Note, interestingly that to add this notion of the complete removal of all evil, the complete judgment of all evil and all of creation of verse 13, the sea gave up its dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up their dead, that is interesting how death gave up its dead. Death perhaps here could kind of be seen as a power that has authority over the people, and then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. So here we see the notion we find elsewhere, even in apocalyptic literature perhaps of the sea and also Hades as the place of the dead. Now they give up their dead, in the context of judgment. It is intriguing in this scene and as I said to emphasize the finality of judgment and the complete removal of all evil in this final judgment scene. Note how verse 11 begins, "Then I saw the Great White Throne and then one seated on it." Chapter 4 of Revelation, "Earth and sky fled from his presence," or the "Heavens and the earth fled from his presence," or in other words, they also flee from judgment, as it says, and there was no place found for them. So, even the heavens and the earth fled in judgment before the One seated upon the throne.

#### Removes Earth and Sky

Why is that so? Why the earth as well as the sky? We will return to this when we get to chapter 21 that introduces a new creation and ask: how are we to understand that? Are we to understand it as the complete destruction and obliteration of this creation? There is a brand new creation out of nothing in chapter 21? Or, should we understand it

in some other way? We will talk a little more about that later, but I think part of the reason for the removal of the earth and the sky as well is so far in Revelation, the earth and the sky have been ruled over by the beasts, and by Satan himself. Satan is the ruler of the world, Satan and the beast have ravaged the earth, they have brought it great harm. They have ruled over the earth and exploited it. So now in a comprehensive judgment scene John says the earth and the sky are removed as well. So this is not primarily a geographical comment, although it probably includes that. But it is meant ideologically to represent the earth as the sphere of Satan's rule, the earth as has been ravaged and destroyed and harmed by Satan and by the beast. The earth is the place where God's people were harmed, the earth that was ruled over by Rome that godless empire. That earth has now been removed and destroyed. So it is not so much a geographical statement as it is a theological and ideological one. So that even the sea, and the earth and the sky now are seen as subject to judgment because of this holistic picture of the earth is where the beasts and Satan have ruled and done their harm, elsewhere they are described as the destroyers of the earth.

### Lake of Fire

One other comment in this section is the reference to the lake of fire. As you've probably figured out now and you have guessed, you might be able to guess the way that I am going to handle this is the lake of fire also is not meant to be taken literally, as if we are to think in terms of somewhere a literal expanse of cauldron with flames coming out into which the people and the beast and the dragon and the people are literally thrown. No more than that the dragon is a literal dragon, as opposed to Satan himself. So the lake of fire is not so much a reference to a literal lake or cauldron spewing out fire that people are literally thrown into but probably simply, once more a symbol of judgment, that is a symbol of complete removal from God's presence. A symbol of humanity being removed from God's presence and basically allowing them to live life separated from God's presence, and under the control of Satan and the beasts, eternally. But John doesn't say much about where this is and what it's like. Again, the main point is, the vindication of

God's people means the judgment of those who have harmed them and the complete separation of all of humanity, from the presence of God, which we will see in chapter 21 and 22, where the blessing of reward that comes to God's people, is life and God's presence. So I take it then, the lake of fire is just the opposite of the New Jerusalem and the new creation in Revelation chapter 21. I do not want to say much more than that except that it's symbolic of the judgment that results in eternal separation from God's presence.

#### Revelation 20: Judgment and Removal of All Evil

So chapter 20 then, ends with all evil being removed in a comprehensive judgment scene. We should probably also though include chapter 19:11-21, all the way to the end of chapter 20 in a comprehensive judgment scene, where all evil has been removed and judged, as I have already mentioned. The two beasts have been removed and judged, all the nations of the earth have been removed and judged, Satan himself, the dragon has been removed and judged, all of the unbelieving dead have now been raised and removed and judged, even creation itself has been judged what is in heaven finally happens on the earth. Not just as geographically but as the place where Satan's dominion, the place where he has caused harm, the place where he and the beast have ravaged, all of that has been removed in a comprehensive judgment scene.

As part of that judgment scene, anticipating chapter 21 and 22, the judgment of unbelieving humanity and of the beast and of Satan, also requires that to demonstrate that the way they treated and harmed God's people was incorrect, and so part of the judgment means the vindication of God's people, symbolized by the thousand-year reign, being raised to life and resurrected and reigning for a thousand years, symbolizing their vindication. But even that only anticipates chapter 21 and 22 where we will see the saints will reign forever and forever so everything, all evil, every evil place, every evil person has now been removed in the comprehensive scene and in a comprehensive act of judgment, now paving the way for a new creative act which is the arrival of the new



creation in Revelation 21. So now all that is left now, after chapter 20 is for the saints to have been vindicated in chapter 20, 4-6. All that is left is for the saints to enter into their eternal inheritance, and that is exactly what we find beginning with chapter 21 and 22.

### Revelation 21-22: The Climax of the Revelation and the Bible

So, moving on then to chapter 21 and 22 as I've already said, this is not only the final visionary series, the visionary segment of Revelation, it is the climax of the entire book. One could even argue that it is the climax as we will see as we work towards it, of the entire Bible, beginning with Genesis chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 2 where humanity is created to live on earth with God dwelling in their presence, which was thwarted and ruined because of sin in Genesis chapter 3. The rest of the Bible can be seen, at one level as an attempt to restore that. How is God going to reclaim his creation and restore his people to a relationship with himself and how is he going to restore his people to a situation where they now reign on earth, where they live on earth with God dwelling in their presence. The rest of the Bible in a sense is how God does that through the person of Jesus Christ. Now we find the climax of God's story, his redemptive, historical story, now reaching its ultimate consummation, with humanity. In the same way that we had in Genesis 1 and 2, now God, dwelling with his people, on an earth, in a new creation. We will unpack that a little bit more. But the important point is that Revelation 21 is certainly the climax of the book of Revelation and could be understood as the climax of the entire Bible. It certainly stands out too, in stark contrast against the visions of judgment that we have seen especially in chapters 17 through 20. Now, this is in stark contrast that this vision of salvation and reward for the people of God on a new creation certainly stands out in bold relief. Now God's salvation for his people in the form of the new creation has arrived.

A couple of other comments on this text in general, chapter 21 and verses 1 through 8, we said actually belongs to a whole section including chapters 19 and 20. We said that the primary contrast that has clear structural features, such as an angel that holds

the seven bowls, taking John to see the prostitute Babylon, and then ending with John bowing down to worship the angel. Yet the angel says don't do it. You find those two book ends, now also prefacing a vision of the bride New Jerusalem, starting with 21:9, and going all the way through 22:6 and a couple verses following.

So that means that much of chapter 19, all the way through 21:8, is sort of a transition section between the prostitute Babylon and the arrival of the bride New Jerusalem. In between, you find a series of judgment scenes, where all of humanity and the beast and the dragon are dealt with, and everything is removed, in a comprehensive judgment.

Now chapter 28:1-8, belongs to that and now it provides a setting and introduction for the arrival of the bride New Jerusalem in 21:9. The setting it provides is one of a new creation and the emergence of a brand new order. So, now following God's judgment and following God's creation in 21 verses 1-8, now the bride, New Jerusalem, in contrast to the harlot prostitute Babylon will be introduced. Now it can emerge, and the wedding can be concluded that we will see in chapter 21, verse 9. Another way to look at this too, is that chapters 4 and 5, have now finally become a reality, in chapter 21 and 22. That is, chapters 4 and 5 introduce us to a scene where all of heaven acknowledges God's sovereignty, the one seated on the throne, and the rest of the book of can be scene as how it is God's will then in heaven, how is God's sovereignty and his knowledge in heaven, how does that knowledge get on the earth and tested? Now we see that the scene of chapter 4 and 5, now becomes a reality on earth, in the form a new creation.

### God's New Home

Another way of looking at it is that heaven and earth now merge in chapter 21 and 22, as heaven comes down to earth. God's throne and dwelling in heaven, in chapter 4 - 5, is now coextensive with the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. I saw a sermon title, I didn't hear the sermon, not long ago, on Revelation 21 and 22, and it was entitled "God's new home." I was puzzled for a few seconds but the more I thought about it, the

more accurate I think that is. We often think of chapter 21 and 22 as our new home, the main goal, the heavenly destiny, and the main reward of God's people, and that's certainly true, that is the way that it is presented, but did you ever stop to think that Revelation chapter 21 and 22 was also about God getting a new home? God comes down from heaven and now God's throne, and his dwelling is with his people on a new earth.

In other words, in chapters 21 and 22, God does something that he has not done since Genesis 1 and 2, dwell immediately and directly with his people on the earth. Something that he has not done since Genesis 1 and 2, something that was ruined, thwarted and disrupted because of sin, now becomes a reality once again. So chapters 21 and 22 is not just about us getting a new home, it is about God's new home as well. Here we find God doing something that he hasn't done since Genesis and that is dwell directly in the midst of his people, in a new creation, and on a new earth.

So now that all chapters 19 and 20, and everything has been judged, the only thing left, is for God's people to enter into their inheritance, to enjoy their inheritance, which is a new creation, living life in a new creation, on a new earth, with God and the Lamb, living in their midst.

In the next section we will look in a little more detail at the depiction of the new creation, the new Jerusalem, the depiction of the final order, the end time reality, in chapters 21 and 22, and look at its function in the context of all of Revelation. We will also look at some detailed parts of the depiction of the new creation, in chapters 21 and 22.

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 28

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

## **Revelation 21 New Creation, Bride New Jerusalem**

### Introduction: Rev 21:1-8

With 21:1 of Revelation we begin, in a sense, a new phase of the book of Revelation. The final climactic vision, that we said 21: 1-8 is sort of the setting at the end of the transition. It is the setting for the introduction of the bride new Jerusalem in verse 9. Chapter 21:1-8 introduce us to the most important themes and ideas that will get developed in the rest of 21:9 through 22:5. So the introduced themes provide the setting. Verse 1 then begins with a vision of a new creation. Now that everything has been removed in a comprehensive scene of judgment now the new creation arrives so that John begins.

### Text of Rev 21:1-8

I'll read the first 8 verses of chapter 21: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with humanity and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new.' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is finished. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all of this, and I will be his

God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murders, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters, and all liars--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

#### Old Testament Background of Rev 21:1-8

Now verse 1 then begins with an allusion back to the Old Testament. The primary text behind this phrase, “I saw a new heavens and a new earth” is Isaiah chapter 65:17 where in the context of anticipation of God restoring his people from exile but in a new creative act that even goes beyond their physical return from exile but anticipates a new creative act in chapter 65:16. “Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth, he who takes an oath on the Lamb will swear by the God of truth. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from your eyes.” Verse 17, “Behold, I will create and new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered nor will they come to mind.” But then it goes on to say, “be glad and rejoice forever in what I am to create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem.” So this Isaiah text provides the backdrop for the introduction of the new creation in Revelation chapter 21, verse 1 but also the holy city, new Jerusalem in verse 2. So clearly verse 1 is here is the final fulfillment of what Isaiah 65:17 prophesied and anticipated. Now John sees the new heaven and the new earth arrive.

However this probably also goes all the way back to Genesis 1:1 where, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” but we know from chapter 3 that this was ruined and harmed and thwarted and upset, where creation was plunged into sin. So that Isaiah chapter 65 probably anticipates a restoration of the original creative act. So now John sees the new creation emerge. God does not abandon his project after Genesis 3, when sin entered the world and brought death and destruction and sin and evil, God does not abandon his project but instead now God will restore it and God will transform it in a new creative act Isaiah chapter 65, which is what John now sees.

Note too that the first heaven and earth have passed away probably a reference back to the final judgment in chapter 20 where heaven, the sky and the earth flee from the

presence of the One seated on the throne. Once more we probably should not see this as strictly geographical and physical but the earth as under the dominion of Satan and the beasts, the earth as a place they have harmed and ravaged, a place where God's people have been put to death. That has now been removed and a new creation has emerged. But interestingly too, if you go back to Isaiah chapter 65 we find that the new creation is not just geographical, physical there either although that's true. But the rest of Isaiah chapter 65 will talk about a place that is fruitful, about a place where there is complete justice, where no one will any longer harm God's people, no longer take them into captivity, no one will destroy their crops, etc. So the new creation here that John sees is not only physical, geographical but is to be seen in contrast to the rule and dominion of Satan over the first creation. Now here is a new creation where justice will prevail, where righteousness will prevail, where peace will prevail, where all violence and bloodshed and oppression will now be removed.

#### Ex Nihilo New Creation?

Now one question that arises is are we to understand this as a brand new creation *ex nihilo*, that is a creation out of nothing, or is this a transformation and renewal. I would argue based on the rest of the New Testament and even perhaps based on Revelation that we should see that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the new creation and the former creation. That is, notice the word "new" that is used here. "New" stresses the qualitative newness of this creation and this creative act over against the original creation but we should probably see both continuity and discontinuity in that this is brand new it is distinctly different from the original creation. But at the same time, I wonder if we shouldn't see this as a transformation and renewal of the present creation as opposed to a destruction and starting over that this creation is completely revamped, is completely renewed, completely transformed and that is symbolized to be emphasized. But again, John wants to emphasize the continuity between the present earth under the dominion and the ravaging destructive influence of Satan, and a new earth that is qualitatively different. To emphasize that John uses the language of destruction, the first earth fled from the

throne, no place was found. The first heaven and earth now in chapter 21:1 have passed away. But this probably is meant to symbolize the renewal and transformation, and complete revamping of this present creation in a complete new creative act where it is stripped of all the destructive effects of sin and evil and death and the harm done by Satan and the beast under whose rule the earth labored. Now it has been released from that it's been transformed and renewed in a new creative act and John now sees that.

### On Heaven and Earth

I think also what this suggests, verses 21:1, what it suggests about our eschatology our understanding of our destination is important. In that 21:1 reminds us that the ultimate goal of God's people the ultimate destination of God's people is not heaven. We often talk about going to heaven and "I can't wait to go to heaven," or "one day we'll be in heaven" and it's certainly true to talk about that. In fact the New Testament seems to portray God's people in Revelation 15 and also 14 we seem to have a vision of God's people in heaven, but 21:1 unpacks that makes it clear that the final destination of God's people is not heaven but it is on earth.

I remember once, I was asked to talk to a group of high schoolers and the Sunday school teacher told me she was very distraught because none of them wanted to go to heaven, and she wanted me to talk about heaven. So I began to talk with them and I began to find out the problem was, when they thought out about heaven they thought about the proverbial image, and you've heard this before, the proverbial symbol being up in the clouds with harps and wearing white robes and they didn't want to go there and as I listened frankly I don't want to go there either. I can't think of a more boring existence for God's people then to float on a cloud, some ephemeral, disembodied existence, playing harps and floating around in white robes. What kind of existence is that? What kind of destiny is that?

It might seem crass to speak that way but I don't think it is because the whole sweep of Scripture ending up in Revelation 21 does not present God's people as somehow attaining to a heavenly disembodied spiritual type of existence, that was first,

second, third century Gnosticism. Instead, from the beginning Genesis 1 and 2 God has created us to be physical beings living on a physical earth and God does not now rescue us from that to some kind of ephemeral spiritual existence, but instead God's intention is to restore us to the way he has originally created us. So Revelation 21 ends a vision of the ultimate climax and goal of history and God's redemptive intention for his people ends with us not floating around in the sky with harps and clouds but instead it lands us on a new physical earth and having been raised in a physical resurrection in chapter 20. Now God's people emerge on a physical creation, a new earth.

I heard one person once say in response to the typical evangelistic tagline, someone once told them not knowing who they were talking to you asked them if you died tonight you do you know that you would go to heaven? His response was: "Yes, I do but I don't expect to stay there very long." His response was consistent with Revelation 21, the primary destiny is not to go to heaven at least if by heaven we mean some earth airy ephemeral disembodied existence. Instead, clearly our destiny is in line with God's original intention of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 and that is to bring us to the goal of a new creation.

### The Sea

One interesting feature is the fact that John says, "and the sea was no more." I find that interesting, why he would emphasize that the sea was no longer especially because it is not found in Isaiah chapter 65 and the dimension of heaven and earth seems to be comprehensive enough.

Why did he add that the sea was no more? Two things, first of all I think because the sea instead of just being a tri-part reference to the earth, heavens, and sea, is the sea is mention here because, first of all, the sea throughout Revelation has played a role of back in chapter 20 as a place of the dead. It is also the place from which the first demonic beast, the sea monster, the beastly figure in chapter 13 rises and the beast of the sea is also clearly associated with the Abyss. Throughout Revelation the beast comes out of the Abyss in chapter 11 but then he comes out of the sea. So the sea carries connotations of



evil and chaos and harm and death. It's the place of the sea monster back in the Old Testament. You find a serpent or a monster or a dragon associated with the sea as the place of evil and chaos. So the reason then that the sea is removed is because it is emblematic of all the evil and pain and the chaos and disorder and the evil of the first creation that was ruled over by the dragon and by the beasts who have come out of the Abyss who emerged from the sea. So the sea has clear associations with chaos and evil and death and it's the home of the sea monster that which is inimical to and hostile to God's purposes and his people. That's what is represented by the sea.

Notice the fact that the sea is no more. Later on in verse 4 John says that, "death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more because the old order has passed away." So the sea should also be seen as probably symbolic of the pain and the mourning and suffering in the first creation. So now the sea is going to be removed. Why? Because the sea provided a barrier to the people's enjoyment of their full inheritance, of their full reward and salvation. Now it has been removed, the sea symbolizes not a literal ocean or sea but instead symbolizes the evil and chaos. It's the home of the sea monster and it's emblematic of mourning and crying, the pain and suffering of the first creation. That's now been removed.

But second the removal of the sea here continues on the Exodus motif. That is we've seen both God's judgment on a wicked evil empire, the Roman Empire, as well as God's salvation being depicted as a new exodus. That the plagues that God poured out on Rome and on the evil empires are seen in terms of the Exodus plagues at in chapters 8 and 9 and chapter 16 but also the saints are seen as standing beside the sea of glass singing the song of Moses in chapter 15. I think this is a further reference to the allusion to the Exodus motif.

That is, the sea here is the Red Sea and if you go back to Isaiah 51:9. Remember that sea, the Red Sea, was described as the sea which was the home of the chaos monster, the sea monster, which interesting I said the Aramaic translation of that text actually identifies the monster in Isaiah 51:9 as pharaoh. So I think here the sea is symbolically

the Red Sea of chaos and evil just as the original Red Sea in Isaiah 51:9 is associated with the sea of evil. In fact, elsewhere in Isaiah 40-66 you see this theme of drying up water as part of the Exodus motif. In fact Isaiah 40-66 more than any other prophetic book portrays God's future deliverance of his people as a new Exodus and part of that is text like Isaiah 51:9 the removal of the sea, the Red Sea is emblematic of chaos and evil and harm. It's inimical to God's people, it provides as it did in the days of the Exodus, a barrier for God's people to get over and to get into the land, the promised land. Now once more in fulfillment of Isaiah and the original Exodus event, we find that God dries up the eschatological Red Sea that is symbolic of chaos, evil, harm, pain and suffering. That is now dried up as a barrier to God's people being able to cross over and enter their promised land. Now the eschatological Red Sea is dried up. John says that, "the sea is no more." So now the people can enter into their inheritance into their promise land, which is the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth. So I think the removal of the Red Sea is a further part of the Exodus motif.

Verse 2 then introduces us to the second feature of Isaiah chapter 65. Not only does Isaiah anticipate a new creation but also a new Jerusalem and we'll see what John does with that in a moment but the restoration of Jerusalem played a key feature in both apocalyptic texts but also in the Old Testament. We already saw that in Isaiah chapter 65. Isaiah chapter 54 also is an important text, we'll look at that later, but Isaiah chapter 54:11-12 anticipate the rebuilding or the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. So now John follows suit and he sees Jerusalem restored as part of the new creation. We'll see in a moment what John does with it.

But starting with verse 4 John shifts from a vision that is the new Jerusalem in the new creation which he describes as a bride adorned for her husband which goes back to chapter 19 and the wedding banquet imagery and the bride being prepared. It also anticipates 21:9, where we will be introduced to and find a description of the bride new Jerusalem. But here we find the bride new Jerusalem already mentioned in verse 2 the new Jerusalem coming out of heaven as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

We'll see that gets developed in more detail starting with 21:9.

But in verse 3 the author now shifts to an audition where he hears a voice and what the audition will do is basically interpret the first 2 verses. It will tell us more about how we're to understand this new creation and this new Jerusalem bride. It begins in verse 3 with a reference to the Old Testament covenant formula. Verse 3 the voice says, "now the dwelling of God is with men, he will live with them, they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." So this is sort of John's version of the Old Testament covenant formula that we find in Leviticus chapter 26:11-12 but also in Ezekiel chapter 37. Interestingly a text that he's followed in order now chapter 37 John alludes to Ezekiel once again and 37:27 in the context of the anticipation of the future return of Christ and the restoration of his people. Now at the end the author says. I'll start with verse 26, "I will make a covenant of peace with them, it will be an everlasting covenant, I will establish them and increase their numbers, I will put my sanctuary among them forever." Notice God's dwelling will be with them as in Revelation 21:3. "And then my dwelling place will be with them," again Revelation 21:3 "I will be their God and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I, the Lord, will make Israel holy." So John now envisions that the new covenant that Ezekiel anticipates has now been finally consummated and fulfilled in the new covenant relationship in Revelation 21:3.

The difference is in both Leviticus 26 and Ezekiel 37 the anticipation is God would make a covenant with his restored people Israel. Now the covenant is not with Israel alone but includes all the nations. So once more you have the people of God is no longer only national Israel but including Israel also expands to include people from every tribe and tongue and language. Now God makes a fulfillment of Ezekiel 37, God makes a new covenant with his people.

It's possible we should also understand this in the context of the marriage relationship. We understand that the marriage could be seen as a covenant. Verse 2 has introduced the bride beautifully adorned and now we could see this as the covenant or the

words of the marriage covenant relationship now spoken in verse 3. Another interesting feature though is, this is true of Leviticus 26 in relationship to the tabernacle, but Ezekiel 37, if you recall, the covenant relationship where God says, in Ezekiel, “I will make my dwelling with you.” Chapters 40-48 then describe that dwelling where Ezekiel has a vision of the end time restored temple that gets measured. That is the text that will play a role starting with 21:9 in Revelation. So again John follows the order of Revelation and the covenant formula, “my dwelling will be with them, I will be their God, they will be my people.” This anticipates the tabernacle/temple dwelling of God with his people that will be described in more detail in 21:9-22:5 where John describes in a vision the new Jerusalem temple. In which God now will dwell with his people, in fulfillment of Ezekiel 40-48.

Verse 4, just to summarize, then in further describing the significance of verses 1 and 2, describes it in terms of language that comes right out of the Old Testament again. He will wipe away every tear from their eye, no more death, no more mourning, that comes out of text from the book of Isaiah as well. So John is drawing heavily on Old Testament texts especially, at this point Isaiah, to depict the final consummation. In fact one commentary I read said, sort of tongue and cheek, but there was a large amount of accuracy and seriousness in what he said and that is, “If you took away every Old Testament allusion in Revelation 21 and 22 you’d have almost nothing left.” There’s a lot of truth in that. John is drawing on Old Testament texts to construct his end time vision to interpret what he saw. His end-time vision is to show that it is the consummation and the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to his people in the Old Testament. Now they reach their fulfillment in Revelation 21 and 22.

Now verse 4 using Old Testament text demonstrates the significance of the new creation, that is, everything that characterizes the old order is now striped away. In other words, can you imagine this world and this creation stripped of all the effects of sin and all the effects of evil and everything that harms us, everything that disappoints us,

everything that causes us pain and suffering, everything that causes us emotional stress is completely stripped away. That's what verse 4 envisions.

When the author says that, "every tear will be removed from their eyes and wiped away," a rather touching emotional part of the vision, sometimes has been interpreted to say this is sort of a final purging when we see all of our sinfulness. Now this is kind of a final catharsis. Now I don't think that is accurate at all, especially when you see it in light of its Old Testament background but also here the tears are the tears of the suffering and pain that were true of belonging to the first order. The first order was characterized by the suffering and tears of those who were subject to the rule of Satan and the beast, the tears of those who suffered persecution and even death at the hands of this present world. But now they have passed away so things that accompany that earth have also passed away, pain and crying and death will now be no more.

#### Rev 21:5

In verse 5 God finally speaks and in verse 5 God says, in summarizing 1-4, "I am making everything new." What is significant is this is another allusion to Isaiah. Isaiah 43:19, which intriguingly is also in the context of a new exodus, if you go back and read 43:19. So the new act is sort of a new exodus in bringing God's people to their inheritance, bringing God's people to their salvation.

So putting this all together God's people are seen as in bondage and slavery to the Roman Empire in Revelation to another godless idolatrous evil empire that oppresses them. In an act of Exodus like plague judgments in verses 8 and 9 in chapter 16 of Revelation, God begins to pour out his judgment on the oppressive Roman Empire and the oppressive godless world. Then in a new exodus God now delivers them and rescues them from that evil nation and evil empire. He also dries up the eschatological Red Sea of evil, chaos, pain and suffering that formed a barrier for the people. Now the people can cross over into their inheritance, their promise land which is the new creation.

So, one dominant way that John portrays our salvation is through the motif of a new exodus modeled on the first one. Starting in verse 6 the author is once more going to draw together a number of Old Testament texts that further describe and interpret the significance of verses 1 and 2, the new creation and the new Jerusalem bride that John sees.

#### Rev 21:6

Furthermore, he describes it by saying, first of all verse 6, “It is finished. I am the Alpha and the Omega the Beginning and End.” Now this is significant, this isn’t just John repeating titles for the sake of repeating titles, but we saw that alpha and omega, beginning and the end suggested that God stood at the beginning and the end of history. He existed before creation and at the end of creation so now you see these titles are significant because as the one who stands at the beginning and end of creation he is now able to bring his intention for creation to its final goal, to its consummation in a new creative act. The sovereign God over all creation in chapter 1 and chapter 4 the beginning and the end, first and last, alpha and omega stands at the beginning and end of creation. Now at the end of creation he brings it to its goal, brings it to its consummation. But notice also the rest of the language “to the one thirsts I will give him water without cost.” This comes right out of Isaiah chapter 55:1. By the way, it may be intentional the John emphasizes or maybe we should read without cost in light of the rest of the book. In contrast to the exorbitant cost of goods under the Roman Empire back in chapter 6, in contrast to the ostentatious wealth and privileging the elite/wealthy and the cargos in chapter 18, the mention of cargos that the merchants were rich off of, now by contrast you find, in contrast to the exploitative economy of Rome that often favored the rich, now you find salvation without cost, available to God’s people who enter the new creation.

#### Rev 21:7

In verse 7 then, the mention of overcoming takes you back to Revelation 2 and 3. In other words, chapter 21 and 22 is held out as the promise and the reward for those in chapters 2 and 3 who overcome. That is, by refusing to compromise, by maintaining their faithful witness, by refusing to follow the beast and worship his image, by refusing to be part of the godless idolatrous empire, if they overcome in that way then they will inherit chapters 21 and 22.

Note the language of inheritance; “if they overcome they will inherit all this.” That word “inherit,” was common word in the Old Testament, especially in association with the land promised to Abraham. So I take it chapter 21 is the final fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, that his people would inherit the land, now they inherit the land, which is the new creation. So all this, it says they will inherit all this. All what? Everything in 21:1 through these verses, that is, the new creation, the New Jerusalem bride. Now that they inherit this that is in fulfillment of the promises of inheriting the land in the Old Testament connected with Abraham, now God’s people, Jew and Gentile, participate in the promises to Abraham of inheriting the land, now it is the new creation.

The other thing they inherit in 2 Samuel 7:7 just to draw another interesting feature is, he will be their God and he will be my son or as God says, “I will be your God, you will be my son.” That comes out of 2 Samuel 7:14 the Davidic covenant formula. What is interesting here is it does not get applied to David or to Jesus but to everyone, to all the people who inherit the new creation. In other words, I think the way we should understand it is as the lion from the tribe of Judah, as the Messiah, the true son of David. We also share in the Davidic covenant formula, we also share in the promise made to David by virtue of belonging to Jesus Christ the son of David from the tribe of Judah, the lion from the tribe of Judah.

#### Rev 21:9: Bride New Jerusalem

So now we have been introduced to the major themes, especially the new creation, the new Jerusalem bride, its significance has been interpreted in light of Old Testament

texts and now finally in 21:9 we are introduced to the New Jerusalem bride, that we saw back in verse 2.

#### Text of Rev 21:9 and following

So starting with chapter 21:9 we read this, “One of the seven angels,” and this is where we should have a break, this is an introductory formula like we saw back in chapter 17 introducing the harlot Babylon and now we see the bride New Jerusalem. “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall and twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates, and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with a rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia, [which was about 1,500 miles] in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was one 144 cubits thick by man’s measurement, which is the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass.”

I’ll stop right there, we’ll continue reading that a little bit later on, John will continue to describe the makeup of the city, the architectural features of the city, in terms of stone imagery. But what is intriguing with 21:9-10, and I think this is significant for understanding how we read and understand the new Jerusalem, is we are introduced here to another example of John’s hearing and seeing contrast. Remember we saw back in chapter 5 John heard the lion from the tribe of Judah who had overcome. What he sees



though is a lamb, the same thing but using different images. We saw that in chapter 7 I think what John hears is 144,000, what he sees is an innumerable multitude. Now notice verse 9 what John hears is, “Come, I’m going to show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” What John sees in verse 10 is a new Jerusalem, the holy city. In other words, I think if we understand the bride of the Lamb being the people themselves, which we should, adding chapter 19 the wedding supper of the Lamb and those introduced as the bride is prepared herself, if we, and even in light of other New Testament texts like Ephesians chapter 5, for example, an Old Testament text that portrayed Israel as the bride of Yahweh, as a wife.

If we are to understand the bride of the Lamb as the people themselves, then here in verses 9 and 10 the bride seems to be equated with the new Jerusalem. John is going to see the bride of the Lamb, what he sees in 10 and what he will see in the rest of the section, and what he will measure is the new Jerusalem. So I take it that the new Jerusalem is meant as a symbol for the consummated perfected people of God themselves. The new Jerusalem is the people. Now that does not mean that there will not be a city itself in the new creation or John could not have intended a city, that may very well be the case and is likely, but primarily the city that John is about to describe is symbolic of the people of God themselves not an actual architectural description of the building of a literal physical city though that could happen and could be the case. But John’s point more is going to be to describe the nature of the people themselves, the consummated perfected people of God in the new creation themselves.

So throughout the rest of the text I’ll refer to it as the bride new Jerusalem. I’m going to have to add something else in a moment too as we’ll see and that is temple. So the bride new Jerusalem/temple as symbolic of the end-time people themselves seems to be John’s primary concern in chapter 21.

What I want to focus on just briefly is in verses 11-21 is John’s description of the new Jerusalem but in verses 11-21, we’ll to back up a little bit verses 9 and 10 of chapter

21 are kind of the introduction to the vision and then the rest of chapters 21 can be divided into two parts. One part starting with verse 11-21 is the architectural features of the new Jerusalem, the makeup of the new Jerusalem in terms of its measurement, its precious stones, and its building materials. Then starting with 22 through the rest of the section we find the description of the new Jerusalem in terms of its residents, in terms of who will be there. So we'll look at that section later, but I want to start with verse 11 and just draw your attention to several important features in the architectural description and makeup of the new Jerusalem.

First of all, and this sort of encompasses most of 11-21 but especially 11, is that the new Jerusalem is clearly portrayed as a place of divine presence, clearly the place of God's presence with his people. Notice how it begins in verse 11, "it shown with the glory of God. Its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal." Note the mention of the word jasper and clear as crystal. That is one of the stones we saw back in chapter 4, further indicating that heaven has now further merged with earth. This is the dwelling of God with his people; this is the place of God's presence with his people indicated by the jasper which had a connection back to Revelation chapter 4 in the description of the One seated on the throne. But the description now, actually starting with chapter 21, the book of Ezekiel in chapters 40-48 is going to play a dominant role because in chapters 40-48 Ezekiel sees the new temple, a restored temple and an angel measures it in detail, and gives the exact numerical measurements of the temple. Ezekiel 40-48 is going to provide a model for Revelation chapter 21 and 22.

### Old Testament Backgrounds

However, the thing lacking in Ezekiel 40-48 is a detailed description of the makeup of the city. Again, please recall the city and its makeup is symbolic of the people themselves, primarily in Revelation 21. But instead for this language of precious jewels and stones and the stones on the breast plate of the high priest, that is lacking in Ezekiel

40-48. Where does John get that then? Well, he finds in other Old Testament texts clear references to the restoration of Jerusalem in terms of precious stones and probably in apocalyptic texts as well. If you read some of the accounts of the apocalyptic texts like 1 Enoch and elsewhere the restoration of Jerusalem sometimes is described in terms of shining like a stone or precious stone or stones. But John finds plenty of references in the Old Testament itself. One of those texts is Isaiah chapter 54, that shouldn't surprise us because Isaiah's played such an important role. In Isaiah 54 is a text that anticipates a restoration of God's people and the restoration of Jerusalem. Notice how Isaiah begins, he says in verse 11, "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted." That would be a reference to Jerusalem in exile. He says, "O afflicted city, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires, I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones." Note how each part of the city, the battlements, the gates, the foundations, are equated with a certain precious stone.

My point isn't to describe exactly how those stones were used but simply to note that the restoration of Jerusalem described in terms of precious stones. I think that is the model that John is drawing on here in verses 11 and down through verse 21 in describing the stones that makeup the new Jerusalem. I think this is what were supposed to do with the stones on the breast plate of the high priest, on the foundations in 19-21. I wonder if the precious stones are not meant to literally or specifically represent members of the people of God themselves much like you find in Ephesians 2 or 1 Peter 2 where the people of God themselves are the building block of the temple or the dwelling place of God. Although we're going to see, the stones probably, as you often find in apocalyptic literature, the images do not always have one precise correspondence. They may evoke several ideas.

Clearly the stones suggest God's glory and reflecting God's glory but they also may represent the people themselves. That now are the building blocks that make up the new Jerusalem bride/temple which is meant to symbolize the people of God. But John

draws on this Isaiah 54 text which is in the context of the restoration of Jerusalem but it's interesting what he does with it. We know how John seems to combine the people of Israel with the church as the new people of God made up of people of every nation and tribe now into one people of God. So the twelve gates of the city in verse 12 and verse 13 have the names of the twelve tribes on them. But note that the foundations are to be identified with the twelve apostles. Now there's been speculation but John is not interested in telling us which apostle with which foundation or he doesn't tell us which tribes of Israel go with which gate, he's not interested in that. He's simply interested in the symbolic significance of that in that now John sees the perfected completed people of God that span God's redemptive historical plan to include both God's people Israel, the faithful Israel, and now his church, people from every tribe and language founded on the apostles now centered around the Lamb in the final new consummated people of God symbolized by a city consisting of foundations and gates.

So now Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church John sees as coming together in the consummated people of God. By equating the gates, and we've seen this with the stones as well, with the tribes of Israel we actually see that already taking place in Ezekiel 48 which John is probably drawing on here. In Ezekiel 48 we find the tribes associated with the gates, we also find in the New Testament people associated with certain parts of a building or city symbolizing the people of God.

Intriguingly, Ephesians chapter 2:20-22 John equates the foundation of the temple of God symbolizing the people of God. John equates the temple as built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets and then Jesus being the cornerstone and all the rest being built up as part of this dwelling place of God. So John once more has precedents in other New Testament writers of not only portraying the people as a building, as a city or temple, but also by portraying parts of the temple or other building symbolically with members of the people of God.

Dead Sea Scrolls Parallel

Another interesting text is in the Dead Sea scrolls, a group of scrolls found in caves above the Dead Sea, that most of them, scholars are convinced, were produced by or at least valued by or kept by the community on the Dead Sea that we call the Qumran community or the Dead Sea community and they are responsible for what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls are important because they shed light on, at least one branch of Judaism in the first century and one interesting scroll is one of the commentaries on the book of Isaiah which includes Isaiah chapter 54:11-12. It's interesting, when you read that text the Qumran community interpreted Isaiah 54:11-12, the mention of the gates and the foundations being equated with precious stones and the battlements and the walls from Isaiah 54:11-12, symbolically as founding members of their community, the council of the community and the chief priest, etc. They take each part of Isaiah 54, the gates, the foundations, the battlements, etc. and they equate those precious stones with founding members of their own community.

So it's interesting John whether he knew that text or not, John now is doing something similar, he finds in Isaiah chapter 54 in anticipation of an end-time restoration of Jerusalem but much like the Qumran community did with it, John interprets it to refer to founding members of the community. That is the gates are identified with the tribes of Israel, the foundation stones are equated with the twelve apostles who now function as the foundation of the community. So John isn't doing anything strange or unique with Isaiah chapter 54 but is doing something that others have done in finding Isaiah 54 being now fulfilled in the founding of the community itself and especially the founding members and those who are sort of the foundation of the city itself.

#### Ezekiel Parallels

Another interesting thing about John's reference here is notice that he says, although he doesn't tell us what tribe belongs to which gate, it's interesting in verse 13 he says something that doesn't appear to be overly necessarily at first. He says, "Three gates were on the east, three in the north, three in the south, and three in the west." I wonder

why does he go to the extent of suggesting what gates go in what direction he could have left that out perhaps. It's interesting though when you go back to Ezekiel chapter 40 and verses 30-35 when Ezekiel sees and measures the outer and inner court to the temple he begins in the east just as John does here and then he measures the entrance on the north and then on the south. So it appears that John is further alluding back to Ezekiel chapter 40 to demonstrate that this is nothing less than the dwelling of God. This is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's end time temple. So the direction of gates here, east, north, and south reflect the order in which Ezekiel measures the entrance into the court in Ezekiel chapter 40. Ezekiel 48:30-35, that's a text where Ezekiel measures the city but it follows a different order. But I think John's order here east, then north, and then south and finally west follows the order of Ezekiel measuring the inner and outer court in Ezekiel chapter 40 because once more John wants to establish the fact that this is nothing less than the very dwelling place of God. This is the end-time city/temple so John is not just seeing a new Jerusalem bride. The new Jerusalem bride now is also a temple. It is a dwelling place of God; it is a final fulfillment of the end-time temple anticipated in Ezekiel 40-48.

The other place where Isaiah 54 plays a role is down in verse 21 the twelve gates were twelve pearls. That seems to come out of Isaiah chapter 54. "And then the great sea of the city was pure gold like transparent glass." Why does John mention gold over and over again in the new Jerusalem? Because when you go back to texts like 1 Kings 5-7 gold played a crucial role in the construction of the temple. Almost everything was made of gold or overlaid with gold. So by having the streets of gold by having the city appearing as gold, even by the measuring rod of gold in verse 15, John wants to emphasize, once again, this is the temple of God, this is the temple dwelling place of God. That is the people themselves are now the temple where God finally takes up residence in a new creation.

The act of measuring in verse 15 follows once more Ezekiel, start back in Ezekiel 40 and read through the text and note how many times the act of measuring is mentioned by an angelic being. But whereas Ezekiel mentions the temple, which John clearly draws

on, interestingly John may have another text on mind. Zechariah 2 we find the measurement of not the temple but the city of Jerusalem. So John may have Zechariah 2 in mind here because it's the new Jerusalem that's measured in chapter 21. But John has merged Jerusalem and temple imagery into one grand image to show the new Jerusalem bride people is also now the temple where God dwells.

### Four Square

Let me say one more thing about two other features, we'll talk later about the measurements, but two other important features of the description of the makeup or the shape of the new Jerusalem. First of all, John tells us that the city lays four square, there may be some other allusions to this. Interestingly, Babylon was described by some early historians as laying four square so this may be part of the contrast with chapters 17 and 18, the harlot Babylon which now is replaced with the new Jerusalem. You also note that the idea of something that was four square or square is also used in Ezekiel 40-48 to describe the temple. For example, Ezekiel 42:15 and 20 and 45:2 describe the temple as a square. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Ezekiel 40-48, other features of the temple, the altar and the mercy seat are also described as square. So by describing the city as square this may be an example of John using an image that is evocative of more than one thing. He might want to describe Jerusalem as square because that was a way Babylon could be described to further draw out the contrast between Babylon Rome in chapters 17 and 18 and now the new Jerusalem bride.

But also by alluding to a feature of the square temple and the square, perhaps, altar and mercy seat of Ezekiel 40-48, this is another way of suggesting that the new Jerusalem bride is also the temple of God. This is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's end-time temple where God now dwells with his people.

The other aspect to draw attention to of the description is found in verse 16 where he says, "the city was laid out like a square," we've looked at that, "as long as it was wide he measured the city with the rod and found it to be twelve thousand stadia." We'll talk

about that measurement later, “in length and as wide and high as it was long.” That language of it being as wide and high as it was long, that reflects almost verbatim the language of 1 Kings 6:20. Let me read that quickly, 1 Kings 6:20 which is a description of Solomon’s temple. In 1 Kings 6:20 we read, “he prepared the inner sanctuary within the temple to set the ark of the covenant of the Lord there. The inner sanctuary was 20 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 20 cubits high.” So that language of it being the same in width, in height, and in length is a deliberate allusion back to 1 Kings 6:20 which describes the holy of holies in the temple in Solomon’s temple.

So that this is simply one more way that John wants to demonstrate that the new Jerusalem bride is nothing less than the temple of God, the very dwelling of God. It is the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s end-time temple; it’s the fulfillment of God’s dwelling with his people in the form of a temple. All history now reaches its climax and God dwelling in his temple people, in his new Jerusalem/ bride/ temple people. Now they are portrayed as the very dwelling place of God.

In our next segment then we’ll look at a couple of the other architectural features, some of the other stones, the stone imagery in verses 19 and 20, and then finishing up the description that takes us all the way through chapter 22:5, finish up the description of the new Jerusalem bride temple.

Transcribed by David Giordano

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt



Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 29

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Rev 21: The Bride New Jerusalem Continued

### Introduction

So we've been looking at the New Jerusalem as part of the final climactic section of John's vision and I suggested that there are two things to know: first of all, it's important to realize John sees, despite the descriptive detail of the city, it primarily as symbolic for the people themselves, not that there will not be a literal physical city in the new creation. That's not John's purpose or his point. He seems to use, like other New Testament authors use building or temple imagery to refer to the people themselves and I think that's what John is doing here.

The second thing is one way to divide chapter 21 starting at verse 9 is John seems to describe first of all the architectural features of the city such as its makeup and the different parts of it as far as foundations and gates and also the measurements of it as well. Then starting in verse 22 until the end of 21, we'll see that John focuses on who was there, or who inhabits the new Jerusalem. In one sense he's already telling us that it's the people of God who are the building stones who make up the temple, but more specifically, John will tell us starting in verse 22 who inhabits the new Jerusalem/temple. We have already noted too, that John seems to be merging a number of images to symbolically portray the end-time final consummated people of God. One of them is a bride language. The other is city language, but also temple language. We'll see that in more detail in preparation for something that becomes more clearly in 22:1-5.

John also portrays the new creation and the new Jerusalem/temple as the Garden of Eden and a return to paradise or the restoration and renewal of paradise from Genesis chapter 1 and 2, but to then return to full features regarding the new Jerusalem as far as its makeup is the measurement of the city which comes once more out of Ezekiel and

probably Zechariah 2, as well, because in Zechariah 2, the city is measured as we said before, whereas in Ezekiel 42 and 48 which is the primary model John uses the temple itself is measured, but that is John's point. He wants to portray the whole city as a temple and not have a separate temple in it as we'll see in a moment as well, but John draws on Ezekiel's measuring imagery. We saw that back in chapter 11 in the first two verses where John drew on Ezekiel 40 through 48 to describe the measuring of the temple which probably there, as well, the temple signified the people of God that were both preserved and protected. Yet part of the temple was not measured and thrown out to the Gentiles, indicating that the church would still suffer persecution.

### Measuring the Temple

Now John also sees the temple measured. The question is: what does the measuring signify here? There are probably two ideas that it signifies. One of them is, and this was the case back in chapter 11, the measuring there signified protection and preservation, and probably it does here as well, but it's not necessary to signify preservation in terms of protection from enemies or something like that, but simply to symbolically portray the eternal preservation and the eternal security of the people of God in the new creation. But second, the other feature of measuring is to demonstrate the extent and the magnitude of the people of the city/people, the magnitude of the consummated people of God themselves. So the measurement is not meant to portray an architectural blueprint that somehow we should imagine or think of a literal city and then be able to speculate as far as how many people might be there and how many people might actually live in the new Jerusalem in the future. The measurements are symbolically meant to portray both the security of God's people for eternity as well as the magnitude and extent of the end time people of God that enter the new creation.

Along with this, note the dimensions of the new Jerusalem, which once more, I would argue does not signify a literally architectural blueprint of what the city's supposed to look like. We've suggested already that the city probably symbolizes the people of

God. Back in verses 9 and 10, John heard that he was going to see the bride Jerusalem. What he saw and what he has shown here and describes is the city. So the city symbolizes the people of God. That is further supported by the measurements of the city. Notice that all of the measurements that you read here, the city itself, its breadth and length and width, which we said already alludes to the Holy of Holies. So the whole city is a giant cube shaped Holy of Holies.

### Numbers of the Measured City

It's square in the shape of the temple and other features in Ezekiel's chapter 40 through 48, Ezekiel's vision of the temple, but now John's measurements, note that they are first of all 12,000 stadia, so the length and the width and the breadth is 12,000 stadia, and then the wall is 144 cubits. It's not clear whether that's the height of the wall. Most translations translate it as the thickness of the wall. In either case, we'll see that it's rather interesting that the wall would seem to be out of proportion to the size of the city if you're trying to make visual sense of it. But what I want to focus on for the moment is the numbers. Note that both of these numbers, the only ones mentioned in the text are multiples of 12. So the first one is 12,000, would simply be 12 times 1,000, so that's 1,000 being a large round number. Now times 12, brings it to 12,000, 12 now being a symbol of the people themselves: the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles. So 12,000 is another way of saying here is the magnitude of the complete people of God in the eschatological consummation. Here are the consummated people of God, symbolized by the number 12, times 1,000 bringing about a large number.

But even 144 cubits, whether it's the thickness or height of the wall, 144 being 12 times 12, so the author's working with the number 12, not to designate some architectural dimensions of exactly what the city looked like, but the number 12 is signifying the people of God. Now he worked with that number to demonstrate the secure, the consummated people of God in all their glory and all their magnitude now entering the new creation.

By the way, note, too, the measurements in stadia and cubits. A stadia was roughly 200 yards or so, and so the city is, in literal, dimensions, 1500 miles high and wide, etc. Also a cubit, which is the measurement you find in Ezekiel 40 through 48 is the measurement being used for the temple. A cubit was about 18-20 inches long, so the author is simply using common measurements from his day, but the huge size of the city being roughly 1500 miles high and wide and long, etc. suggests, once more, the symbolic nature of this vision, that the author is not envisioning a literal city, but the perfected consummated people of God themselves who now enter the new creation, and that's symbolized by the huge number, and the huge dimension of the city. But also the number 12, and the fact that back in 9, he's already identified the bride, which is the people, with the city itself, so the whole city then, the entire city/people, one might say, is a holy temple where God dwells, and John has taken Ezekiel 40 through 47 and especially 48, Ezekiel does see the city, but in 40 through 47, his vision is occupied with the restored end-time temple. Now John takes all that temple imagery and applies it to the entire city to indicate that the city is a holy temple where God dwells. Another way of looking at it is even in Ezekiel 40 through 48, but also in the Exodus story, the very intention of God bringing his people out of Egypt through the Red Sea, through the wilderness was so that he could dwell with them in the tabernacle and eventually in a temple. So the whole idea of bringing them out of Egypt is that he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell in their midst in the tabernacle. So now we see the goal of the Exodus finally reached with God dwelling in his temple people in Revelation 21 and 22 as well.

### City of Gold

One other feature that we highlighted very briefly is the fact that the whole city is made of gold and even the measuring rod to measure is made of gold, which is fitting to measure a city that is primarily of gold. There are probably two ideas lying behind this. One of them I think is clear. The other one a little bit more subtle perhaps, although other places in chapters 21 and 22 make this connection more clear, especially 22:1-5. First of

all the clear indication is that by portraying the city as gold, the entire city made of gold, the author is portraying it as a temple or tabernacle from the Old Testament. When you go to Exodus and read the account of the building of the tabernacle or go to 1 Kings 5-7 and read the account of the building of Solomon's temple, gold was a significant metal that was used in the construction of the temple. Everything was made of gold or everything was overlaid with gold, so by portraying the temple as gold, once more, this is not a literal architectural feature. The author wants to portray the new Jerusalem as a temple, as a holy space, as a holy dwelling of God with his people.

Furthermore, more subtly, the gold here may also recall the gold that was found in the Garden of Eden. If you go back to Genesis chapter 2, and by the way, there are a couple of other Jewish texts, apocalyptic texts that make this connection between gold and the Garden of Eden. Back in chapter 2 where we find a description of the Garden, beginning with verse 8, "Now the Lord God had planted a Garden in the East, in Eden, and there he put man that he had formed and the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the Garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." We'll come back to that text a moment later. "A river watering the Garden flowed from Eden." We'll see that image, as well, in chapter 22 of Revelation. "From there, it separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah where there is gold. [And notice] (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) So Havilah in association with the river that comes out of the Garden is now associated with gold and other precious jewels, so at one level both the precious jewels but also the gold would be one way of John presenting, or one way of John portraying, the city/temple as also the restored Eden, as also the Garden of Eden.

#### Text of Rev 21:19-21

This will get developed in even more detail in the next section, but in 22:1-5, the connections with the Garden of Eden are unmistakable. But the next section I want to

look at, the final section of the description of the makeup of the construction of the city, its features, and its measurement is found in verses 19 through 20. Actually, at this point we stopped reading at verse 18, so I wanted to pick up at verse 19 and read through the end of 21. So beginning with verse 19, the foundations of the city walls, [which were mentioned back in verse 14,] were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, light transparent glass. I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

### Foundation Stones

Now here are the foundation stones that are enumerated and described and identified in detail. We were introduced to the foundations back in verse 14 where they were identified with the twelve apostles. Now the foundations/apostles are further identified with twelve stones, and I take that primarily the stones then to represent the apostles or symbolize the apostles who form the bedrock of the foundation of the new Jerusalem, again symbolizing that this is the consummated people of God built on the apostles of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. This is a city that centers around the person of Jesus Christ, a multinational city that is built on the apostles of the Lamb, that is, the church of Jesus Christ.

Now the question is: why does John go to such length to describe the foundation apostles? Why does he go to such length to enumerate the stones that belong to or make up the twelve foundations? What do the 12 stones represent or suggest? I would suggest to you that there are a handful of ideas that are plausible and there is really no need to think that John only intends one of these. It's possible that, and I think very likely, John is using an image that resonated with more than one idea. We'll see that John is using an image that carries with it a number of associations in it, including its use in the Old Testament and other Jewish literature and apocalyptic literature as well.

First of all, the most obvious one I think is the stone represent simply the beauty of the city. It portrays it as a place of splendor. It portrays it as a place of purity. It portrays it as a place of cost, something that was costly and valuable. It portrays it as a place that reflects God's glory. Notice that the first stone is jasper. The stones are meant simply at one level, and a rather obvious level, to represent the beauty and the splendor of the place where God dwells. It reflects God's glory.

A second function of these twelve stones, as well as some of the other stone imagery we saw a few verses earlier in the gold, is that the stones clearly function to draw out further the contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon. Babylon was a place which was described as the Babylon prostitute, back in chapter 13, was described as being decked out in her garb and that was gold and silver and all kinds of precious stones. Now you find the new Jerusalem decked out in stones and precious jewels and gold as well to draw a stark contrast. This probably also contrasts with chapter 18 in verse 12 where gold and silver and precious stones were part of the cargo that Rome valued and imported. So the contrast then would be that what Rome exploited and perverted for its own selfish use is now present in the new Jerusalem as a representation or as a reflection of God's glory, and to once more demonstrate, that the new Jerusalem then compensates for anything that the people of God sacrificed for failure to participate in Rome's economy and failure to participate in Rome's luxury by foregoing that, even to the point of suffering. We are reminded of the two churches Smyrna and Philadelphia that receive a positive evaluation

are hurt and they are suffering at the hands of Rome. They're of no reputation. Now the jewels, at one level here in the new Jerusalem, the same jewels that appeared in the Babylon prostitute vision now appear here to demonstrate that this far exceeds and compensates for anything that the saints sacrificed by refusing to participate in Roman luxury and refusing to participate in their idolatrous, godless practices and their commerce.

A third association is one that we've already seen, and that is with Isaiah chapter 54 in verses 11 and 12 portraying the restoration of a new Jerusalem. It doesn't use the word new Jerusalem, but it portrays the restoration of a new Jerusalem in the future in terms of precious jewels, where it was associated with the different parts of Jerusalem, the gates, the foundations. It associated the foundations with a particular jewel, and so by portraying the new Jerusalem as made up of all these precious stones, it's another way of John suggesting that this is the fulfillment of the end-time restoration of the new Jerusalem expected in the Old Testament prophets, so stones would suggest end-time eschatological restoration.

A fourth function that I think is just as significant as the others is that these stones further highlight the city as a temple and the people as priests who serve in the temple, and that is because the stones here, I think, evidently represent the twelve stones on the breastplate of the high priest, and so it continues the temple theme. It portrays the new Jerusalem as a temple, and it portrays God's people as priests. If you turn to Exodus chapter 28 in verses 15 through 21, you find a description of the breastplate that was to be worn by the high priest in the tabernacle and each of the twelve stones were meant to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Interestingly, here, they represent the twelve apostles, not because the apostles have replaced Israel but because again, the author wants to emphasize that it's not only Israel, but now all nations are included with Israel, centered around Jesus Christ as the new people of God. So now the stones in the breastplate, because their associated with the foundation, we saw the foundation was associated with the apostles. So it's not suggesting the apostles and forgetting the tribes



of Israel. The author wants to make clear that the church was founded on the apostles in the New Testament is the church which is a multinational, multicultural community made of people of every tribe and tongue and language. But Exodus 28 and the stones on the breastplate ultimately lie behind this with the stones representing each of the twelve tribes and now representing the foundational member, the apostles of the church of Jesus Christ, made of both Jew and Gentile, into one new people of God.

Notice also that according to Exodus 28, the breastplate was in the shape of a square, which is the shape of the city itself. The new Jerusalem was already described as a square in John's vision. So the entire city is a temple and God's people all function as priests who worship God.

### Connection with Tyre and Ezekiel 28

I want to draw your attention to another interesting text that also links the stones, and this could be an additional feature of treating it as under the breastplate of the high priest, but this could be an additional meaning or an additional association of the stones and back in Ezekiel chapter 28. In Ezekiel's oracles concerning Tyre that we've seen John utilize elsewhere to critique Rome's economy and its self-serving commerce and its lust for luxury and wealth. Now in chapter 28, starting with verse 12, actually I'll start with verse 13, the author seems to be comparing Tyre to the situation of Adam in Genesis chapter 1, 2 and 3, as well. Notice how he describes him in verse 13: "You were in Eden, the Garden of God. Every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz, and emerald, chrysolite, jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created, they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones."

So what I want you to note here is that Adam is being portrayed as a priest in the garden who wore the twelve stones on the breastplate of the high priest. Now especially when you compare the Hebrew text and the Greek text, there are issues related to exactly what stones (it's not certain exactly what all these stones are). The texts give you, reasonable English translations of them, but I'm not interested in going into detail exactly what these stones were, and what was the author envisioning as far as stones that people would have known of. I'm more interested in the overall associations, and what is intriguing here is the stones of breastplate of the high priest are associated with Adam and the Garden Eden.

Since Ezekiel 27 and 28 have already played a role, as well as the entire book of Ezekiel, provides a model for John's vision throughout Revelation where he almost follows it in order. It's highly likely that John is not only drawing in Exodus 28, but also has Ezekiel 28 in mind as well, which would associate the stones with Adam and the Garden of Eden.

Other texts, especially apocalyptic texts portray the Garden of Eden as a temple where Adam functioned as a priest and God's glory filled the Garden. One interesting text, this is from another book with Enoch's name attached to it called 3 Enoch. This is 3 Enoch chapter 5, starting in verse 1: "In the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, banished the first man from the Garden, the Shekinah resided on a Horeb beneath the tree of life. The ministering angels used to muster and come down from heaven to execute his will in all the earth. The first man in his generation dwelt at the gate of the Garden of Eden that they might gaze at the bright image of the Shekinah or the ruins of the Shekinah which radiated from one end of the world to the other." I'll stop right there, but in this text, and in other texts, the Garden of Eden is portrayed as a temple where God's glory and his presence resides, just as it did in the tabernacle and the temple.

Other texts make clear, too, that Adam functioned as a priest, and certainly Ezekiel 28 demonstrates the priestly associations of Adam whoever wears the breastplate in the

Garden and who wears the breastplate functions as a high priest in the Garden of Eden. In fact, interestingly, one book, if you're interested in reading it, it's called Pseudo-Philo. I won't read from it, but in Pseudo-Philo, one tradition then has it that the stones on the breastplate were actually taken from the Garden of Eden. Then they are eventually placed in the ark until the end time when they will be revealed. And so, once more note the connection of the stones with the Garden of Eden, but also the eschatological implications that they are hidden to be revealed in the future. Now the stones are finally revealed in John's vision.

Another interesting text to draw your attention to outside of the Bible itself, one that we already drew attention to, and that is the commentary on Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Qumran community, one of the Qumran texts in one of the Isaiah commentaries, intriguingly, and we said in the Isaiah commentary on Isaiah 54, the author of that commentary from Qumran goes through the description of the restored Jerusalem goes through the descriptions of the restored Jerusalem, the gates, the walls, the foundations, and he equates them, he equates the stones with members, founding members of the Qumran community. It is as if he sees in his community justification for the establishment of his community a prophetic anticipation of that in Isaiah 54. So what we saw was interesting is the author of the commentary in Isaiah 54 in the Qumran text equated the foundation and the other stones as being founding members of the community.

Interestingly, as well, one of the stones from Isaiah 54 and one of the groups is also associated with the Urim and Thumim which were two stones in the breastplate of the high priest. So you have an example in the Qumran text of taking Isaiah 54 and associating it with the stones on the breastplate of the high priest which is exactly what John does. Isaiah 54 portrays the foundations of stones, and that's the primary text John uses to portray the new Jerusalem in terms of stones. Now in a similar move that the author of the Qumran text made, John now also, although I'm not saying he read that, but he is doing something similar. Now John also associates the stones of the breastplate with

a feature of Isaiah 54, with the foundation stones from Isaiah 54. So then the new Jerusalem is portrayed as a temple by associating it with the stones of the breastplate which have been associated with Isaiah 54 and the stones that make up new Jerusalem. Again, John is taking metaphorically to refer to the people themselves so that ultimately he sees the new Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God where God's people are priests that now worship and serve God in the new temple, in the new Jerusalem in the new creation.

A fifth association in addition to the temple imagery and also Garden of Eden imagery is that we should understand these stones also as part of the adornment of the Bride. That is, we should take these as part of the nuptial imagery that John is using to portray the people of God. We already saw back in chapter 21 in verse 2, John sees the new Jerusalem coming out of heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, drawing on Old Testament language. So now these jewels, these precious stones, that make up these foundations, can also be seen as part of the bride's adornment where now she is prepared as the bride in all of her eschatological glory and presented to her husband who is Jesus Christ.

So I would suggest to you then that the stones have multiple associations, that starting back with simply representing the beauty of the city, the glorious splendor of the city as a place that reflects God's glory. It contrasts with Babylon and Rome. It compensates for what they may have sacrificed at the hands of Babylon and Rome by refusing to participate. It suggests eschatological restoration in that the stones are associated with a rebuilt Jerusalem. The presence of the stones here suggests eschatological restoration. It suggests that the priestly nature of the people of God, the temple nature of the city as a dwelling place of God, where everyone wears the breastplate of the high priest and functions as a priest to serve and worship God, and along with that carries Garden of Eden and paradise associations. Finally, it's part of the adornment of the bride. One more interesting feature, back to number four, the priestly associations with the breastplate, it's interesting that right before, and right after in verse

18 and in verse 21, bracketing the description of the precious stones is a mention of gold as the makeup of the city, which once more is reflective of the description of the breastplate of the high priest back in Exodus 28 and elsewhere where they're set in gold, and so perhaps another connection with the breastplate imagery.

### Greco-Roman City Influence

Now one more feature of the city before we move on to look at its inhabitants and those who reside in and enter it, although already we're describing its inhabitants through the architectural features and makeup of the city, symbolically meant to portray the people of God, but one other feature is the street in verse 21. In most Greco-Roman cities, there would have been a main street, or a thorough fair that went down, roughly down the center of the city, and that's where all the activity and commerce took place, and that's probably what John has in mind here in reference to the street made of gold, and this is where we get the imagery of the street paved with gold. We're probably not meant to take this with the literalness that we treat it, the gold being symbolic of the place of God and a street being simply a common feature of any city for commerce or coming or going. This however may also in addition or maybe as an alternative to the street, the word here may also suggest a wide place or a plaza that would have been in the typical Greco-Roman city.

It's interesting that there seem to be a few other features in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 that reflect common conceptions during the time leading up to and during the first century, that reflect common conceptions of an ideal Greco-Roman city. One of them was a street or a thoroughfare that went through the city. Another one was the square shape and the symmetry of the city, which was a feature of a Greco-Roman city. Another one was to have a good water supply, which you find in chapter 22, the river flowing out. So it's possible, too, that although John is primarily constructing his vision from Old Testament texts and even other Jewish apocalyptic texts, yet at the same time, John is constructing a vision of a city that would also, at the same time, resemble the

ideal Greco-Roman city, and that would stand to reason because all of his churches that he is addressing in chapters 2 and 3 reside in Greco-Roman cities, in the provinces of Asia Minor, provinces of Rome.

Now it's as if John wants to say the true fulfillment of the ideal Greco-Roman is not found in any city in Rome, but will only be realized in the new Jerusalem anticipated in Old Testament prophetic texts. So John's new Jerusalem is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament anticipated. Old Testament prophets anticipated a restored Jerusalem temple, but at the same time, it may be that John also sees it as the fulfillment of the ideals that people would have understood as belonging to the ideal Greco-Roman city, and now John's city, though, surpasses that and John wants his readers to find their hopes and aspirations not in a city that they belong to, a Greco-Roman city, certainly not Rome, but only in the new Jerusalem of John's vision.

#### Revelation 21:22-27

Now we move on then to verses 22-27, where we now are introduced to the inhabitants of the city. We've already noted that at one level the stones and the city itself is the bride. So we've already been introduced to the inhabitants in terms of the people of God as the bride of the Lamb now making up the new Jerusalem, but we're introduced to three other residences here. Two of them are obvious, and one of them is God himself. The other is the Lamb, and the third one is the nations.

#### No Temple

Now, first of all, verse 22 is a rather startling, at least for most people familiar with, for example Ezekiel 40 through 48. Most people familiar with apocalyptic texts, Jewish apocalyptic texts would have been startled with verse 22 where John says, "I saw no temple." It appears to me that although John doesn't seem to emphasize this, it's almost as if John, much like Ezekiel's vision, where he moves inward in his measuring and vision of the temple. John is sort of moving inward, so I think one could almost see that John is at the center of the city. He's inside the city, at the center of the city, and he

says, “I saw no temple.” That is where you would expect to see a temple inside the city, whether it was a Greco-Roman city or restored Jerusalem, according to Ezekiel 40 through 48 and other apocalyptic texts. Almost all Jewish apocalyptic texts include a temple as part of restoration of Jerusalem and the restoration of God’s people.

Now, in contrast to that, John says, “I didn’t see a temple.” Right when you would expect him to see one, John says, “I saw no temple.” The reason is there is no need for one because now God and the Lamb are its temple. In other words, God and the Lamb dwell in the very midst of the people, making a separate physical temple completely unnecessary. Now at one level, it’s incorrect to say there was no temple at all because the entire new Jerusalem was a temple. John has taken Ezekiel 40 through 47, the temple language, and applied it to the whole city, so in a sense, there is a temple, but the whole city is a temple. What John is saying is that in the city, there is not a separate temple. Why? Because God and the Lamb are its temple. So the whole city/people is a temple, but that’s because God and the Lamb are the temple. God and the Lamb dwell in their midst. The reason for this is because the very thing that required a temple in the first place throughout Israel’s history. The very thing that required a temple is now gone. Sin and evil, as part of the first creation barred contact between God and humanity. Sin and evil, which made it impossible for God to dwell openly apart from the temple has now been removed. Starting in chapters 19 and 20, actually starting a little earlier, but with chapters 19 and 20 particularly, we have seen the removal of all sin and all evil in an extensive series of judgment scenes. Now that everything has been removed, including the old creation, corrupted by evil and sin, and sin has now been removed, now God can dwell directly with his people. So temple imagery is applied to the whole city and that is because God and the Lamb are its temple.

God and the Lamb dwell directly in the midst of its people without the need of a physical temple because those things that require the temple in the first place, sin and evil in the first creation, have now all been removed. Now because of that, because God and

the Lamb are in the center of the city and are the temple, God's presence now is coextensive with the entire city and the entire new creation.

Now John can say there is no need for a sun and a moon. Why? Number one because the precious stones give off light, but more significantly, John tells us because God and the Lamb are its light, and probably we're to understand the lamp imagery as imagery from the temple. God is its light and the Lamb is its lamp. So that once more, this is a place, this is a temple, a sanctuary completely infused by God's presence. But now God's presence is not limited to a physical temple in one corner of the city. The entire city of new Jerusalem, and I would suggest, the entire new creation is now a holy temple where God dwells.

### Old Testament Backgrounds

John is drawing, I think, very clearly, almost as we've already noted, too, that if you took away all of the Old Testament allusions, you wouldn't have much left in the vision. Isaiah has played a very crucial role, and it's interesting that Ezekiel has dominated in the first part of the first part of the vision, along with Isaiah 54. But now John is going to draw primarily from texts from Isaiah, especially 60 through 63. Now with chapter 22, John's going to return back to his Ezekiel model, Ezekiel chapter 47. But in Isaiah chapter 60, verse 19, and Isaiah is in the context of an end-time restoration of God's people. Isaiah says, "The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory." So Isaiah 60 provides the model here for John to say there is no need for there to be sun or moon to shine in the new creation or provide light because God and the Lamb are now its light. Notice John adds the Lamb as also giving light.

This is a city so suffused with God's glory, his glorious presence and splendor, that there is no need, in fulfillment of Isaiah 60, there's no need of the light. If you go back to the first three verses of Isaiah 60, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. See, the darkness of the earth, and thick darkness is



over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you, and his glory appears over you.” I’ll stop right there and read verse 3 in a moment because John also draws on verse 3. But the important point is to further demonstrate that this is the temple where God’s presence is now coextensive with the entire city/people. Indeed, the entire new Jerusalem is a holy temple where God dwells.

It’s interesting that John goes on to describe in this vision as well, in verse 25, because, and notice how they build on each other, first of all, God and the Lamb fill the entire city/temple and people. Because they are the temple, there is no need for the additional temple, but also because they are the temple. Because the glory of God fills the whole, there is no more need of the sun or moon. Furthermore, verse 25, because of that, “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.” The reason seems to be rather obvious, is that the shutting of the gates at night is to keep unwanted visitors or enemies out of the city. Now there will be no need for the gates to be shut because there is no night, because God’s glory so fills the city.

So, here is another symbolic portrayal of the eternal security of God’s people in the eschatological consummation. It’s also kind of interesting, too, but you have a wall around a city, but there are no gates on it, or at least they’re never shut, so it’s almost as if the walls are unnecessary. Yeah, we’re not to make too literal of a sense of this. Once more I think that the walls do indicate and symbolize as part of the typical city, whether Jerusalem, or any other first century city, the gates are simply part of the city, and they symbolize the security of the people of God, and they’re so secure that the gates can remain open without any fear of harm entering the gate or anything that would harm or defile the people of God.

### Light and God’s Presence

The light, then is the primary theme here. The light that comes from the glorious presence of God, that you find elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially in association with God’s presence. The light symbolizes here God’s presence and his dwelling with his

people, yet the light functions in a different way, and that is the light functions to attract the nations. Notice verse 24, “the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring its splendor into it.” Verse 26, “the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.” These two verses are probably to be understood in terms of, well the first one, verse 24 is it’s the light that attracts the nations. It’s the light that draws the nations. The fact that the doors are open in verse 25 not only indicates the security and that there is no need to work about unwanted visitors to come in, but the gates are also open because of verse 26, to receive the glory and honor of the nations.

Now the first thing to note, and I want to talk a little bit about this, the first thing to note is that John is heavily dependent once more on text right out of Isaiah 24 it seems especially to reflect Isaiah chapter 2, which is right at the beginning of the book, you have this vision, or this statement of end-time salvation in Isaiah chapter 2. Starting in verse 2, “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and all the nations will stream to it.” This actually introduces an important theme throughout Isaiah, which is one of the reasons why John draws so heavily on Isaiah in this end-time vision because Isaiah portrays the inclusion of the nations in eschatological salvation. The drawing of the nations is to come and worship God in Jerusalem. So, all of the nations will stream to it. Many people will come and say, “Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law of the Lord will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between nations, and settle disputes.”

### Nations and New Jerusalem

I’ll stop right there, but I want you to note this image of the nations streaming to the city to learn the ways of the Lord and to walk in its paths. Now John, in reflecting that text, says the nations will walk in its light. That image of walking comes right out of Isaiah 2. So what this is suggesting is the nations here are not just playing some

subsidiary role, but the nations are actually coming as part of the people of God. This is a vision of the conversion of the nations to become part of God's people. We see this same theme later on in Isaiah chapter 60 in the text we just read that associates light with the new Jerusalem and God's light now filling the city. In chapter 60, and we read verses 1 and 2, but then starting with verse 3, after saying the darkness covers the earth, but the Lord will rise upon you, his glory appear over you, the glory of the Lord will now be their light. Now notice verse 3, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Also note verse 5, "Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will look at throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you riches of the nations will come." Verse 6, "Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord." And one last text, verse 11, "Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night." The text that John alludes to, "so that they may bring you the wealth of the nations--their kings led in triumphal procession." In other words, the light functions to attract the nations and the open gates are to receive the influx of the nations bringing in the wealth into the new Jerusalem, in fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 60 and Isaiah chapter 2, as well.

Now, one of the questions that this text brings up to introduce to you is: who are these nations that now come into the new Jerusalem? It almost portrays them as being outside and now entering. Who are these nations and how are we to understand them entering into the new Jerusalem? How are they outside and now they come in apparently? The reason I raise this is because when you get to the end of chapter 20, there is nobody left. All the nations have been judged and destroyed, all of them. So I don't think we can necessarily conceive of this as these are the survivors of that judgment. Maybe that's true, but Revelation isn't clear on that. Revelation simply says all the nations who have been gathered for battle, all the kings of the earth, and all the nations, every last person slave, free, whoever, have now perished at God's end-time judgment. So at the end of verse 20,

there is no one left, all evil, all sin, all who have thrown in their lot with the beast, everyone has now been removed in a comprehensive final scene of judgment.

So where did these nations come from? Who are they and where did they come from and how do they enter into the new Jerusalem? Let me make three or four comments that hopefully will help us to sort through these issues. First of all, the inclusion of the nations here is added, I think, just because this is part of John's allusion to Isaiah 60. Part of the program of restoration in Isaiah is the inclusion of the nations. John has been drawing on Isaiah, so the inclusion of the nations is going to be part of his allusion back to Isaiah 60 and the rest of the book of Isaiah. But we'll see that there is more than that because people from every nation, from every tribe and language and tongue and nation, has been a dominant theme of John's apocalypse all the way up until now. So it's got to be more than just John's allusion to Isaiah 60, but John is following Isaiah's picture of end-time restoration, so it is natural that he would include the inclusion of the nations, especially since it fits his theme of people from every tribe and language and tongue.

The second observation is the fact that they entered Jerusalem should not be taken too literally as if they were outside of the new creation. After the new creation and the new Jerusalem has been established, now they're outside of it, now we see that they finally get in it, but this language of entering into the new Jerusalem is probably just part of Isaiah's language. John does not intend us to take it too literally as if they are outside at some point. After the new creation has arrived, they're outside and now they enter in. Probably the entering in takes place when the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven and everyone else enters into it and becomes part of it, but John's not interested in telling us when they get in or are they outside and they come in? We should probably not take that language with strict literalness, as if they're outside of the new creation somewhere and they enter in or as some suggest these are the nations that have been punished in the lake of fire and now they are allowed to leave the lake of fire and enter the new Jerusalem. No, John's just using the language from Isaiah and doesn't mean, I don't

think, for us to take it with strict geographical literalness, but he simply wants to allude back to Isaiah chapter 2 and Isaiah chapter 60.

### Who are These Nations?

Now, the question that I want to deal with next is: Who are these nations and where do they come from? Especially since at the end of chapter 20, all the nations have been judged. Apparently there are no nations left. There are no kings of the earth. There are no nations, those who have opposed God's people, the nations and kings of the earth. That's language of those who have been destroyed, of those who have been deceived by the beast, who associated with the beast, and colluded with the beast, and committed adultery with the beast. That is who the kings of the earth and the nations are. They've been judged and destroyed at the end of chapters 19 and 20, and at the end of 20, there's apparently nobody left. So who are the nations, and the kings that now are attracted to the light of the new Jerusalem? Who now come through the open gates to bring their glory into it, to contribute their goods to it, to now come and walk in its light and worship God? In other words, apparently these are nations who have been converted and are now part of the eschatological people of God and enter into the new Jerusalem. Who are they and where do they come from?

In the next section, we'll spend a little bit of time trying to unravel that and trying to propose a possible solution, a possible way of looking at this feature of Revelation 21 and the new Jerusalem.

Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 30

© 2013, Dr. Dave Mathewson and Ted Hildebrandt

Revelation 22: New Jerusalem and how to Read Revelation

Who are the Nations Entering New Jerusalem?

So who are the nations in chapter 21, verses 21, 24 and 26 and where do they come from? Some have interpreted this as a reference to the nations who are redeemed throughout all of history and now they are in the new Jerusalem, and that's certainly possible. We saw back in chapter 5 and even chapter 1 that Christ has redeemed people from every tribe, language, tongue and nation and some would suggest that's what we see here. However, when you read the text of Revelation it appears the reference to the nations and the kings in this section where John calls them "the kings of the earth" and now the nations seem to be those who have colluded with the beast, seem to be those who have sided with the beast and his rule and now they enter the new Jerusalem.

In other words what is going on here is this, we have seen they have already been destroyed and judged in chapters 19 and 20, now they enter the new Jerusalem. What I think is going on is John is juxtaposing two images, one of final salvation and one of final judgment to demonstrate the complete nature of God's judgment but also the complete nature of his salvation. John is not interested in quantifying the categories as if to say it's the survivors of those who are judged in chapters 19 and 20 that make it. He doesn't tell us that, nor does he, obviously I don't think that John thinks that every last person of the nations enters the new Jerusalem, but John speaks in rather absolute terms. On the one hand, all the kings of the earth, all the nations are judged in chapters 19 and 20. Now we have the kings of the earth and the nations entering the new Jerusalem, what's going on? Like other images in Revelation we shouldn't, I don't think, take this too literally, but instead this is a way of John demonstrating the complete judgment of the nations but also the complete salvation of the nations to be included in the new Jerusalem. We've seen the reason for this is, part of what John must demonstrate. He's already hinted at the kingdom of this world must become the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ. Part of that means also

that the nations, those Jesus Christ, and at a literal level that does not mean every single last person in the nations or everyone who follows the beast, now automatically becomes part of the new Jerusalem but once more, it would defeat John's purpose to try quantify and say it is 60 percent of the nations or half of them go to judgment, half to salvation. John wants to demonstrate the complete arrival of God's kingdom, the complete defeat of Satan and his kingdom. The complete arrival of God's kingdom means that those under the rule of the beast now come under the rule of God himself. They now belong to God. So the absolute judgment and absolute salvation scene is simply meant to contrast, just that. It is the absolute comprehensive nature of God's judgment but also the absolute and comprehensive nature of the salvation that he brings. It's possible that we are to understand this at a literal level as those who are not judged and who survive judgement and are converted are the ones who enter the new Jerusalem but John's language is very different from that. He does not quantify it. He simply wants to show the stark nature of both judgment and salvation, the complete arrival of and the comprehensive nature of his kingdom in the new creation means the transfer of those under the rule of Satan now to enter the rule of God in Jesus Christ into the new Jerusalem. It's also possible this has sort of a hortatory function that is, it presents the options that are available to the nations, either salvation or judgment. Primarily, I think the contrast is mainly rhetorical, not mathematical as if we're to take these two strictly and literally but rhetorically contrasting the end-time, the final and comprehensive absolute nature of the end-time judgment that God brings that completely replaces and overturns the judgment of God on Satan and his kingdom. And now transferring the kingdom to himself, transferring the subjects of Satan's rule to his rule is I think what is implied here.

At the same time also, I think we should think of this as part of the end-time salvation anticipated by Isaiah meaning the inclusion of the nations. So that, I wonder if we should understand this again not so much as this is a vision of those who have been redeemed throughout history now entering the new Jerusalem, given the end-time context of chapters 21 and 22, and given the meaning and function of Isaiah 60 and Isaiah 2, we should see these nations as nations who are converted at the coming of Christ. That enter

the new Jerusalem in fulfillment of Isaiah 60. Yes, nations are converted throughout church history and become the people of God but now I think, consistent with Isaiah 2 and Isaiah 60, we see an end-time gathering of the nations to become the people of God. John doesn't tell us exactly when during the second coming of Christ that takes place, he doesn't say how it takes place, but clearly in fulfillment of Isaiah 2 and 60, John sees an in-gathering and an inclusion of the nations to become the people of God.

#### Revelation 21:27

Chapter 21, verse 27 then, is important because it reminds us although the new Jerusalem is an inclusive city, it still has limits. Verse 20 says although all the nations come into it, although they bring their wealth, they contribute to the city, and maybe this is an example of the text that suggests that there is actually going to be activity and meaningful work and activity in the new Jerusalem. Verse 27 reminds us that at the same time nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. So new Jerusalem of Revelation is an inclusive city. It includes the Gentiles but at the same time there are limits. Nothing impure and no one impure will enter it. Verse 27 then suggests to me that he doesn't think every single last person of the nations is going to enter the new Jerusalem but only those whose are written in the Lamb's book of life only those who respond in faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

#### Revelation 22:1-5

So, we end with a temple/city that is so infused with God's glory and God's presence that it is a temple. As a temple it is so infused with God's presence the nations now come to its light, the nations are now included without violating the purity and the holiness of the city and now we are prepared for the last segment, chapter 22 and 1 through 5 where let me read this is the last part of John's vision of the new Jerusalem temple and he says, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the



nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of the lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will be their light. And they will reign for ever and ever.” And so ends John’s final vision of Revelation 21 and 22. Verse 6 will start to bring us back to earth in a sense, back to the present but at this point John ends his vision of the final inheritance. It is the final climatic event that brings God’s redemptive history to its close.

### Connections to the Garden of Eden

Now, just a number of features to mention of chapter 22 verses 1-5. It is not an additional thing that John sees, that is, this is not an additional place something that is to be understood as separate from the new Jerusalem/temple. So far Revelation 22:1-5 is a different way or further description of the new Jerusalem/new creation/temple, from chapter 21. And 22:1 and 2 is the section that clearly alludes back to or clearly draws our attention back to paradise or back to the Garden of Eden. In this section then, both garden and temple imagery dominate Revelation 22:1-5. Every verse in this section I think relates either to the Garden of Eden or to the temple and I don't think we should separate the two as hopefully we'll see. It is the primary text that John is drawing on, although there are a number of apocalyptic texts that talk about the garden and include the garden in eschatological salvation.

### Ezekiel 47

John is probably aware of those and maybe drawing on those as well but John is primarily dependent on Ezekiel chapter 47, the first 46 verses describing the temple, the end-time restored temple that John has been drawing on. Now he also draws on chapter 47. So 47 begins: “The man brought me [the angelic being probably taking him on a visionary tour,] back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east). [Which interestingly is the direction in which Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden and the cherubim guarded the entrance the east entrance, drawing the connection between the

garden and the temple.] The water was coming down from under the south side of the temple, south of the altar. He then brought me out through the north gate and led me around the outside of the outer gate facing east, and the water was flowing from the south side. As the man went eastward with the measuring line in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to my waist. He measured off another thousand,” that was so deep that he then couldn't cross “because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in... He asked me, ‘Son of man [Ezekiel], do you see this? Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, ‘This water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah where it enters the Sea. When it empties into the Sea, the water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh, so where the river flows everything will live.’”

I'll stop right there for now, but I want you to note the connection with Revelation 22. The mention of the river of water of life Ezekiel does not call it the water of life as John does back in chapter 21. Part of the promise that's offered to God's people is “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, to him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” So now John uses that same imagery here, the water that flows out is, the river that flows out from Ezekiel 47. Now John calls it the water of life. But this is not inconsistent with Ezekiel because Ezekiel makes clear the water that flows out gives life to all the creatures and it gives life everywhere it flows. So John's description is completely consistent with that.

The other big difference is, in Ezekiel's vision the river flows from the temple but we've already seen in John's vision there is no separate temple. The Lamb and God are the temple. Their presence so infuses the new creation, the new Jerusalem, that it doesn't need a temple so John takes the temple imagery and applies it to the entire city. Now, what John does since there's no physical temple the water can't come from the threshold

of the temple, instead, now it comes from the throne of God and the Lamb. Why? Because God and the Lamb are the temple. Back in chapter 21 and verse 22, I saw no temple because God and the Lamb are its temple. So, now the water flows from their throne as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple.

John may also in mind Zechariah chapter 14, verse 8 as part of his background as well for the water flowing out.

### Tree(s) of Life

The other thing I want to note that is different from Ezekiel's vision is in Ezekiel 47, Ezekiel saw trees growing on each side of the river. Now note what John sees, he says down the middle of the great street, again not that we should push the symbolism. It would be a little strange to have a river running down the middle of the street unless the street is very, very wide but the other way to understand this is the plaza or the broad open space in the city. The river could be flowing down through that, but once more I don't know that we're to try to push the imagery too hard and make such literal geographical or architectural sense out of it. But the river flows down the middle of the city and then John, like Ezekiel John says on each side of the river stood the tree of life, singular apparently.

Now some have taken this as what they call a collective image that tree stands for many trees. So we should understand tree here as many trees and that these are the same trees that Ezekiel saw in his vision. Some have concocted rather strange explanations. To provide a little background, here in Colorado where I live one of the most popular and common trees you see is the aspen tree. And what is noted about the aspen tree is you'll often find them in groves because their root system is actually interconnected underground. You'll have an aspen tree grow and its root underground will then produce others. Some have suggested something similar here that the tree actually grows on one side but its roots then cause it to grow in the other side as well under the water so you have a tree in both sides.

Two things, number 1, I don't think we should as we've already noted be quite so literal. The idea of one tree on both sides doesn't make sense literally but I don't think

that's the way we were supposed to take John's images and this image here. Instead, the purpose is the meaning of these visions is to evoke a response in the reader that will take the reader back to the Old Testament. Here I think is an example of John, beginning with Ezekiel 47, now draws him back to the text that Ezekiel seems to draw upon and that is the Garden of Eden account. So here the back drop for the tree of life is Genesis 2 verse 9 and the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. I think this is a deliberate allusion of John back to Genesis 2:9. Moreover, I think, it's his way of further demonstrating this is the restored garden. This is the restored, renewed, Garden of Eden with a tree of life at its center. Ezekiel 47 itself has Garden of Eden imagery, the river flowing out also goes back to chapter 2, the river that flowed out of the garden, so the river clearly, the trees of Ezekiel clearly recall the Garden of Eden and their giving life to the creatures recalls the Garden of Eden. Now John beginning with Ezekiel 47 also goes back to the original creation account and includes the tree of life.

Now note what he does with the tree though, the tree of life has twelve crops and bears fruit for twelve months drawing on Ezekiel 47 again. But John does something very interesting the trees here now are for the healing of the nations which we saw enter new Jerusalem back in chapter 21 verses 24 and 26. So it reflects this notion of the nations entering the new Jerusalem now becoming the people of God. The healing is to be understood in terms of chapter 5 and chapter 7 those who now the Lamb has redeemed by his blood. Now the leaves give life they are for the healing of the nations. They participate in eschatological salvation. I wonder too if part of the healing is not also these are the nations that are no longer ravaged by the rule of the beast. These are the nations that are no longer seduced by the beast and harmed and ravaged by the rule of the beast and the rule of Satan. Now they experience eschatological salvation. Now the leaves bring them healing. So it's important to understand that 22:1-5 is not a new geographical location in the new creation. John isn't seeing something else or something different from the new Jerusalem.

It's important to understand that garden and temple language merge very closely throughout the Old Testament as well as here. Ezekiel 47 has already done it. Ezekiel 40-

47 has already linked temple imagery, now in chapter 47 with Garden of Eden imagery. By portraying the temple as a place where the river flows out of the garden and the place where the tree of life and the trees that give life now exist. So John is not seeing something different, this is entirely consistent with his portrayal of the New Jerusalem as a temple where God's people serve as priests and that is because in my understanding the Old Testament temple was, out of all the things it did, one of the most important things is it functioned as a sort of miniature Garden of Eden. If you read the description of the tabernacle, but also the temple, it's interesting that the author describes it in the Old Testament as having engravings of palm trees and plants and flowers and things like that engraved upon it. It also has two cherubim and the holy of holies overlooking the ark and probably reflecting the two angels that guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden as a sanctuary, as a holy temple. The flowers plants and trees remind us of the trees and the fruitfulness of the Garden of Eden and of the first creation. We've already seen, for example, back in Ezekiel chapter 28 Adam was portrayed as a priest in a garden wearing the breastplate with the twelve stones from the breastplate of the high priest so that we should see garden and temple imagery not as distinct from each other but the Garden of Eden would have originally been a temple. It is a sacred space where God originally dwelled with Adam and Eve. It is where Adam and Eve functioned as priests who served and worshipped God in the garden/temple sanctuary.

Now, consistent with that John also sees the New Jerusalem temple in the new creation now in terms of Garden of Eden imagery. But we'll see also very soon John is going to turn right back to temple, priestly language in just a moment. But verse 3, perhaps further describing the healing of the nations in verse 3, John says no longer will there be any curse. The reason there won't be the curse is because of the throne of God and of the Lamb is in the city and the servants will serve him. That language of cursing at a glance could recall the original curse from the Garden of Eden back in Genesis 3 because of human sinfulness but instead this is an allusion to Zechariah. Zechariah ends in chapter 14, with a vision of end-time eschatological salvation. Chapter 14, verse 11 says, it will be inhabited again, that is Jerusalem and never again will it be destroyed.

That language of destruction is the language that occurs here. In the Septuagint the Greek word used in “destruction” Zechariah 14:11 is very similar to the one used here by John in 22:3. The idea behind the word in Zechariah is what scholars often translate “a ban of destruction” that was pronounced on a nation because of their sinfulness that is evil nations were to undergo complete destruction. Now John is saying there will be no more curse, that is, there will be no more destruction of any city or any nation. Because now the healing of the nations, rather than destruction of the nations, has come and now they inhabit the new Jerusalem and they participate in eschatological salvation and that is because God’s presence and the Lamb are now in the city. Their presence now guarantees that there will be no more destruction of the nations, no more ban of destruction. Instead then verses 4 through 5 return to portraying the people of God as priests that serve him in the garden temple which is what Adam and Eve were to do in Genesis 1 and 2. So now they’re portrayed as serving him, as priests, they also see his face.

Now as priests they enter God’s presence and they actually see the presence of God, they actually see his face, but now it’s not restricted to the high priest but now all of God’s people function as priests and actually see the very presence of God. His name is on their forehead. Clearly this recalls chapter 7 and chapter 14 where the 144,000 are sealed and they stand before God with the name of the father on their foreheads. It also contrasts with the mark of the beast. So now you have God’s people standing with the mark of God on their foreheads it probably indicates intimacy and close relationship with God but also probably reflects priestly language and that would be the turban that Aaron wore on his head when he entered the tabernacle in Exodus 28 for example in verses 36-38.

The last phrase I want to focus on in 22 besides the priestly language of serving God seeing his face and his presence and the priests having his name on their foreheads and now again in verse 5, there is no need of a separate physical temple because the Lamb and God give it light. Now it ends by saying and they will reign forever and ever. First of all this text is to be seen as the fulfillment of texts such as Revelation chapter 5 and verse 10 where in one of the hymns song to to the Lamb in the heavenly throne room

scene he has redeemed people from every tribe, language and tongue to make them a kingdom of priests and they will rule forever. Now we see that fulfilled here in chapter 22 and verse 6 with God's people ruling forever. We also saw in texts such as chapters 2 and 3, especially the last promise to the overcomer that they would sit on God's throne and rule with him. So throughout the book we have seen an anticipation of and a promise of the churches that if they overcome they would rule and here we see that fulfilled as God's people now reign forever and ever.

#### Fulfillment of Exodus 19:6

This should also be seen as the final fulfillment of Exodus chapter 19 verse 6 which was alluded to in chapters 1, 5 and 6. Christ has now redeemed people from every tribe and language to become a kingdom of priests. Now here we see them functioning as kings and priests ruling over all things and chapter 5 as well that we looked at, verse 10 that now Christ has redeemed people from all tribes and languages to become a kingdom of priests and they rule forever. In other words in Revelation 22, verse 4, and the first part of verse 5 we see they fulfillment of Exodus 19:6 that is that they will be priests, which again, Revelation 1 and Revelation 5 pickup. They will be a kingdom of priests, in verses 4 and 5 we see them functioning as priests. They serve God, they see his face, they stand in his presence, they wear the priest headband or turban with God's name on their forehead but not in a physical temple because God and the Lamb are its light that's the priestly part. Now and they will reign forever and ever this fulfills the other part that they will be a kingdom. So although you don't find the words "kingdom of priests" here and although you do not see a direct allusion to Exodus 19:6 I think John is thinking in terms of Exodus 19:6. Here we see God's people not called a kingdom of priests here we see them functioning as a kingdom of priests in chapter 22 and verses 1-5.

#### Garden of Eden Context

Now, the other thing to say about this text, is we should read it in light of Genesis chapter 1:26-28 where in the first creation not only was Adam, and we've seen this in apocalyptic texts, not only was Adam to function as a priest so in one sense the priestly activity of the people here in the Garden of Eden also reflects Adam's priestly activity in

Genesis 1 and 2 and we've suggested that in apocalyptic texts. In Ezekiel 28 Adam is portrayed as a priest in the Garden of Eden so the priestly activity here is the ultimate fulfillment of God's intention for Adam and Eve to function as priests in the garden but also in light of even more specifically and explicitly in light of Genesis chapter 1 and verses 26-28. These are texts that most of us recall but actually I'll start with verse 26 and read through 27 and I'll stop there. I'll read 28 as well so verses 26 through 28, God creates Adam and Eve and it says in verse 26, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image and likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all of the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them, God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and over every living creature.'" So they are to fill the earth and rule over the earth as God's image bearers. I think here we find the final fulfillment of what God intended for Adam, that is, to rule over creation. Now you find God's people fulfilling the command given to Adam of ruling over creation. Now they rule over the new creation in fulfillment of Genesis 1:26-28. John's vision ends with God's people living on a new creation Garden of Eden with God and the Lamb dwelling in their midst with God's temple-presence infusing the entire creation, fulfilling the intention of the original new Jerusalem and temple.

So that now the goal of God's redemptive historical plan has finally been reached. Notice too what one could summarize this by noting all the new features that are the fulfillment of Old Testament texts we find in the new creation. We're introduced to a new Jerusalem, the new covenant gets fulfilled, we find the new people, a new temple and salvation in terms of a new exodus.

So to put this vision kind of in its context, what is the overall function of this vision? First of all, clearly this is meant to contrast with the prostitute Babylon. Back in chapter 18 verse 4 God's people were called to leave, come out of her, leave the prostitute Babylon. Now that's not so much physically which would be impossible but



instead it means to separate oneself from their values to refuse to participate in the idolatrous, godless practices of Rome. The idea is not physical separation, we'll see that John assumes that his people are coming to remain, in fact in chapters 2 and 3, he calls on them to be a faithful witness. They can't do that if they remove themselves physically. So it's more they are separating themselves from the ideology of Rome, from their godless, idolatrous practices, from worshipping the emperor and worshipping foreign gods, and worshipping the beast. But if they are to leave the prostitute Babylon which is Rome they must have some where to go. And that now takes place in chapters 21 and 22 in the new Jerusalem. If they leave one city, they need another city to go to. And now chapters 21 and 22 present the alternative that God's people now can enter.

Second, the new Jerusalem vision also functions to engender faithfulness in God's people. So it's not primarily meant to just predict a future event and to show us exactly what the new creation is going to look like, and what we're going to be doing and what is going to be there, and who is going to be there. It's not meant to answer those kinds of questions. It provides the promise and reward for those who maintain their faithful witness. It's meant motivate the churches in chapters 2 and 3 to holiness and purity in the present. So it's the promise of a reward for those who overcome in chapters 2 and 3. We've already suggested that all the promises that the overcomer in the messages in chapters 2 and 3, most of them have links to chapters 21 and 22.

And then finally, in that God's people are already a kingdom of priests, the people of God should already be modeling and witnessing to the life of the new creation in the present. So I think what John is doing is not only presenting this as a future hope, which it is, the future reward and motivation, as it is where his people will function as kings and priests in Revelation 22:1-5 but chapter 1 and chapter 5 because they are already God's kings and priests, they should be witnessing to and testifying already to the life of the new creation.

#### Revelation 22:6-21

Now having come to the very end of John's vision, chapter 22:6-21 ends with a series of sayings. It's very difficult to tell at times who is saying what. There are a couple

statements that I think are clearly Jesus Christ, there are others that may be an angel, there are others that may be John himself speaking, but it's hard to sort out the voices in Revelation 22:6 and following. But I think what's going on overall, before I look at just a couple of details, is that this is now a further series of exhortations as to the how the readers are to respond to the book. Basically, what it is, it's a further call to holiness, obedience and faithful witness on the part of the church. So we said 22:5 sort of ends the vision proper, but it's now as if the reader is brought back to earth we might say, to now live out the reality of the book of Revelation. So 22:6 to the end could sort of be seen in an analogy almost as a book end with chapter 1:1-3 that tells us about the nature of the book and how we're supposed to respond. Now at the other end of the book we have more having seen the whole vision. Now it's expanded to tell us in more detail, how we are to respond. How we are to live out the reality of Revelation 4 through 22. One author said, and I think he's right, Revelation is not a script of the end times, it's a script of the church. It's a script for how we are to live out life now in the present and 22:6 to the end of the chapter would certainly affirm that.

For example, just to highlight a couple features of this, John says it in a scene resembling chapter 19 at the end of the Babylon prostitute image vision where John is tempted to bow down and worship the angel. Once more in verses 8 and 9, John is tempted to bow down to worship an angel. The angel says, "Do not do it, I am only a servant, instead worship God." Now, what is important here, I think, is not only as we said earlier, interestingly, in the context of a monotheistic vision where only God is to be worshiped, Jesus Christ also is an object of worship, but perhaps this a reminder of the correct response of the vision. That John is not to be infatuated with the angel, and the vision that he saw, but instead it should lead him to worship God. So right at the beginning this is a call for the response to this vision should be nothing less than worshipping God himself is how John is calling his churches to respond.

The other feature in verse 11, this is sort of interesting, John is told do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book and sealing up is an image for not divulging its content, not revealing it because it's for a future time. This language comes out of Daniel

chapter 12 verse 10 where Daniel is told to seal up the vision. Now John is told not to. Why? Because it is directly relevant for his readers so they cannot afford to simply see this as something for the future, instead this is a message relevant to the readers. John is not to seal it up because the time is near. The fulfillment is already at hand.

#### Revelation 22:11

Revelation is addressing their situation but furthermore John has this interesting statement in verse 11, “Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who is right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.” Supporting the response of holiness, in other words the vision of Revelation should engender righteousness and holiness. But this language is kind of interesting in verse 11, what is John calling for? John has portrayed the church as a faithful witness or portrays the church and requiring of it to be a faithful witness even in the face of opposition but then here he seems to refute that by saying, “anyone who does wrong let them continue to do wrong.” It’s almost as if John has now resigned himself to fate, that the people who do wrong are just going to do wrong and the people who do right will continue to do that and the judgment will sort that out at the end. But instead, I wonder if the way to take is to see it more as a reflection of the response of the readers as well as the response of the world to not only this book, but to the witness of the church. Some will harden themselves and refuse to repent, others though will respond, God’s people will respond with faithfulness. The true people of God will respond in faithfulness, obedience and holiness. For others, Revelation will bring about a response of hardening themselves. This may be similar to Jesus’ own teaching with his parables. As Jesus says a couple of times, the parables on one hand function to harden those who rebelled, and those who refused to obey. Whereas those who had ears to hear, a phrase that John uses several times, “the one who has an ear to hear let him hear,” those who have ears to hear God’s word will respond in holiness and obedience. Those who are dull of hearing, those who are rebellious, it will function to harden them and they will continue in their disobedience.

## Revelation 22:17

A couple of other texts, first of all, verse 17 is difficult as well as far as sorting out who is doing what. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” Usually this has been seen as sort of an evangelistic call, that is, “the coming” would be the coming of the non-saved and those who come to take the free gift of water would be the un-saved, the un-believers, who now respond to the message of the Gospel and find salvation. However, I think the first two “comes” “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’” should be understood as more of a request or prayer for Jesus himself to come. Notice verse 7 that begins, “Behold, I am coming soon. And blessed who keeps the words of the book of his prophecy,” “Blessed is the one who keeps the words,” showing us once again the response to this book is one of obedience and holiness. So notice every book we’ve looked at so far has engendered worship back in verses 8 and 9 and now faithfulness and righteousness. Now skipping ahead then in verse 17, “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’” That is a response to Jesus’ words in verse 7, “Behold, I am coming.” Now the bride and the one who hears, probably the one who has ears let him hear, now respond by saying, “Come, Lord Jesus,” which is how the book ends. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” So I see the word “come” here not as a call for unbelievers to come, but as a call or a prayer or a request for Jesus Christ to come, just as he promised, “I am coming soon.” Then, “Whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” Probably again not so much a call to respond in faith to the gospel in an evangelistic call, but should be understood in light of chapter 21 and verse 6, “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” This is a promise, an eschatological promise for the people of God. So the one who wishes to come would be the people of God invited to come and participate in final salvation.

## Revelation 22:18-19 Not to Add or Subtract

The final text that I want to draw attention to is verses 18 and 19 which, I want to

demonstrate to you is also to be understood as an exhortation, an ethical response, on the part of the readers. That is, verses 18 and 19 are a call to obedience and faithfulness. Let me read this section chapter 22, verses 18 to 19, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city” [Revelation 21 and 22] which are described in this book.” The plagues in verse 18 would be the trumpets bowl seals and perhaps the end-time judgment. Now how are we to understand this text, this language of anyone who adds and subtracts will be guilty and receive the plagues. Or anyone who adds or subtracts will not participate in the eschatological salvation, in the inheritance or reward of Revelation 21 and 22.

Usually, these two verses are usually taken in two different ways. Number one, they are a warning to later scribes and later readers and interpreters of Revelation not to tamper with it by adding words or deleting words by writing further paragraphs or sections or deleting certain parts that one does not like. Many take it that way, a second way to take it is to see this as a warning against un-believers, especially cults and other religions that would add books to the Bible. Some see it significant that this occurs at the very end of the Bible and they would see it as encompassing the whole canon. So this is warning for other cults and religions and teachings that would try to add their own writings and their own books, their own sayings to the Bible or taking books out of the Bible, removing certain books or something like that. So this is often seen as sort of bibliological statement about the authority of Scripture and not tampering with it, not deleting from it, not adding anything that it is the authoritative word of God and it is sufficient as it stands. I certainly would not quibble and argue with that. I would agree with that but I am not sure that’s what these verses are doing in this context.

First of all, as we’ve noted already, starting at verse 7, everything is in context of exhortation. Jesus says I’m coming soon in verse 7, blessed are the ones who keep the words of this prophecy. Then John sort of embodying the response he wants from his readers is told by the angel don’t worship me, worship God, which should be the proper

response to the book. Verses 10 and 11, this is a prophecy for the present, don't seal it up, it's for the people of God now. The one who is righteous continues to be righteous, the one who was holy continues to be holy. Verses 14 and following, "blessed is the one who is pure, they will receive the tree of life." So everything in the context is exhortation.

Now, verses 18 and 19, I think continue the exhortation of motivating God's people to faithfulness, holiness and obedience. Now, why do I say that? First of all, notice that these verses are, to once more as we've seen happen so often through Revelation, an allusion back to the Old Testament. You find this same language back in Deuteronomy in relationship to the Old Testament law. So, for example, Deuteronomy chapter 4 as the nation of Israel is addressed, they're being reminded not to forsake the law, not to neglect it, and the author says, this is chapter 4 and verse 2. I'll read verse 1, "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws that I'm about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you." Which is interesting; one of things in Revelation chapter 22 verse 19 is if they add or take away they will not receive the tree of life and the holy city. That is, the new creation. Their inheritance is the land. But now verse 2, he says, "Do not add to what I command you, and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I have given you."

Deuteronomy chapter 12 and verse 32 we find something similar. In 12 verse 32 we find towards the very end the author says. I'll read verse 31, "You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it." Interestingly too, that one is in the context of not worshipping idols and other gods as the nations do.

So, the first thing to note is John has drawn on language that comes out of the book of Deuteronomy and in both of those contexts the statements to not add or take away were in the context of keeping the law doing everything that it says. So even back in Deuteronomy, the idea of taking away and adding was not just adding more words or

taking away it had to do with making sure you obey it and keep it. Second is I want to note, who this is addressed to? Verses 18 and 19 are addressed to, I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book. Who is the person who hears the words of the prophecy of this book? Go back to chapters 1, 2, and 3 it is the church. Chapter 1 verse 3, “Blessed in the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy of this book and who keep it.” So, the one who hears the words of the prophecy would be those in the churches, the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 or our churches today. In other words this is addressing the churches or believers. Here they are warned that when they hear the words of the prophecy of this book, do not neglect it, but instead, keep it. So this is not addressed to later scribes who would tamper with the book, this is not addressed to unbelievers and what they might do with the book, this is not addressed to cults and false religions, this is addressed to the church. Furthermore, what that means is we should see this text as the bookend along with chapter 1 verse 3. Chapter 1, verse 3 pronounces a blessing on the one who hears the word of God and obeys it.

Now we find a cursing for the one who hears the word of God and refuses to keep it. In other words, what does it mean to add and take away? I think this is metaphorical for disobeying the word of God and refusing to keep it especially by compromising with the idolatrous pagan world. This is the same thing that Israel was warned against back in Deuteronomy chapter 32. Now, John is warning his churches in chapters 2 and 3 that when they hear the book read, the only proper response is one of worship, one of obedience, one of righteousness, one of holiness, one of in light of the soon expectation of the return of Jesus Christ to respond in faithfulness and obedience. To refuse the respond in obedience, to substitute and add idols to take away from God’s word by neglecting it and refusing to obey it, that’s what it means to add and subtract from the word of God. So this is not a call for other cults and religions not to add words, the idea here is not whether you write new sentences or paragraphs which I agree you shouldn’t, this is an ethical call. This is a call for obedience and faithfulness, to refuse to participate in the pagan idolatrous empire of the Rome for the first readers.

### Soon Return of Christ

The last thing I want to mention about the book of Revelation itself, and then I want to end with just a handful of comments as to how we read it, notice the language that you find several times here. Starting with verse 7, Jesus says, “Behold, I am coming soon.” Verse 12, “Behold, I am coming soon.” And then verse 20, “Yes, I am coming soon.” These probably were all spoken by Jesus himself. How do we understand that soon-ness? Well, some have translated it “I am coming quickly” and the idea would be more the speed with which he comes, not that it’s going to happen very soon, for example, in the lifetime of the readers. Some have suggested that John was wrong, Jesus did not come back soon. I think the way to look at this is that we should interpret this from the standpoint of this reflects the expectation of the soon return of Christ by the church. All throughout the centuries the church has expected that Christ could come back at any time. Though we have no idea when that’s going to be, the soon return of Christ, that he could come back at any time, the fact that he had already come the first time to inaugurate his salvation and kingdom meant that he could come back at any time to wrap that up and bring that too is consummation. So I think the “soon” here should be understood with its full force, Christ is coming soon, but the idea is the church is always expecting the soon return of Christ, although we simply don’t know when that is going to occur. That is reflected in here, in these sayings, but again the soon-ness of the return of Christ is what adds urgency to the ethical appeal of this last section, to worship God alone to faithfulness, to holiness, to righteousness, to making sure that we keep and obey the words of the book of Revelation by refusing to compromise with the pagan idolatrous world.

### End of the Book: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus”

So ends the book of Revelation and fittingly it ends with: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” I think the appropriate response at the end of the day to Revelation would be everyone to chime in and say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” And as we wait for that we live lives of holiness and purity and righteousness and we refuse to be influenced by, we refuse to participate in the idolatrous, godless, oppressive, evil system of values that



characterize not only the Roman Empire but characterize cultures and nations in our world today.

### How Should We Read Revelation?

Now I want to end by just raising the question just briefly in the next few minutes which is: How should we read the book of Revelation? At the very beginning of this series of lectures on Revelation we said that a very popular method of interpreting Revelation is to see it as something to be read in light of our modern day. Some draw connections between the visions and language of Revelation and modern day, now 21st century, modern day events and persons and nations and people and technologies. So as many have characterized in the past, it's like reading with the Bible open to Revelation in one hand, and reading the morning newspaper in the other hand. The idea is we draw immediate connections and we see John as actually predicting what's going on in our own day. We have the key to reading it and usually what that means then is that we try to plot our existence and see how close we are to the end and sometimes that even results in blatant predictions of when Christ is going to come back. They all have one thing in common, they've all failed. If this is not the proper way to read Revelation, how should we read it?

Let me suggest five things. First of all, kind of a little bit different from the others but first of all, Revelation does suggest that history is moving towards a goal and that God is the one who will bring it to its consummation. So it won't come through human effort. Revelation is not a vision for what our present culture and our society can become, although it could do that. But that's not its primary intent. Revelation is not just a vision, especially the latter chapters on the new Jerusalem, it's not just a vision to give us hope for our present society and our present day. No, it gives us hope for the future, it reminds us that history is moving somewhere. God is going to bring history to a close. He himself will intervene and he will set the world right. Through judgment and salvation God is going to bring history to its close. So when interpreting Revelation, we cannot let go of the telic sense of Revelation that it has a goal that our world is moving somewhere and God is the one, God is the Alpha and Omega, the one standing at the beginning of that

process and the one who stands at the end who will bring it to its goal. Our hope is the future coming of Jesus Christ to consummate God's plan for history through judgment and salvation and to set this world right. That is the hope of God's people.

But second, the next four that I want to emphasize I think also come clearly out of the book of Revelation. Number two, Revelation is a call to worship and allegiance. That is, we should read Revelation as a call to worship and allegiance. Chapters 4 and 5 begin the book at the very beginning of John's visions with a image of, in chapters 4 and 5, that reminds us that only God and the Lamb are worthy of worship. To worship anything else, any other person, any other material possession, any other culture, any other nation, to any other government, to worship anything else, to give our allegiance to anything else, is idolatry. Revelation is a call for us to discern the dangers of idolatry in our own world and our own lives and to give exclusive allegiance to God and the Lamb. Revelation is a call in a world that resists God, in a world that refuses to acknowledge his sovereignty. Revelation is a call for God's people to join in heaven and worship and acknowledge the sovereignty of the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the One who is and was and who is to come. So we should read Revelation as a call to worship and allegiance to God and the Lamb and to give that worship and allegiance to anything else is nothing less than idolatry.

Number three, we should also read Revelation as a call to witness and mission. Note how many times the church is described, or people throughout the book are described as those who maintain their faithful witness and the word of the testimony of Jesus Christ. Revelation is a call for the church to engage in witness. We are to witness the life of the new creation. We are to witness the reality of God and his salvation he has provided through Jesus Christ. Through our worship we are to witness the reality of who God is and what he has done for his people through the person of Jesus Christ. The fact that we are already a kingdom of priests, the fact that Jesus Christ through his death has already created his church as a kingdom of priests means that we are to witness the reality of an alternative world. A new creation characterized by justice, faithfulness, love and righteousness, a place where perfect worship takes place, a place where perfect activity

and meaningful life emerges only in the new creation but that should now be witnessed to by the kingdom of priests that God has already created through his son Jesus Christ. The reality of the new creation should already be evident in our lives. We should be testifying to and witness to the life of the new creation. So in that sense, Revelation is a call for mission and witness on the part of God's people, the church.

Fourth, we should read Revelation as a call to discernment and resist. That is, because of the deceptive nature of sin, because of the deceptive nature of Satan and his attempts to thwart God's purposes in his people, and to lead us astray, it requires discernment. It requires insight. Revelation provides us that insight. We need insight to determine where Babylon is present in our own day in age. We need insight and discernment to determine where there is injustice, where there is idolatry, where there is godlessness, where there is violence and harm. We need insight and discernment to see where that is present in our own lives, in our own cultures, in our own nations, in our own countries, and in our own governments. We need insight and then we need to resist that and stand up against that, not through violence but through faithful witness to the Lamb Jesus Christ as faithful witnesses to the reality of the new creation. As in true apocalyptic fashion we've seen Revelation exposes godlessness, it exposes and unveils idolatry and oppressive nations and empires but it also provides an alternative perspective. We need insight into and discernment and the ability to resist through our faithful witness where ever Babylon is. One of my colleagues once said, Babylon is humanities attempt to set up paradise while leaving God completely out of the picture. It requires discernment and insight to determine where that is in our own life and our own day and age and also to stand up and resist that. But it also calls that we root that out in our own lives to start with ourselves and realize, where we in a sense have climbed into a bed with Babylon unwittingly.

Fifth and finally we should read Revelation as a call for obedience and discipleship. God's people are those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. We just looked at the very last verses, chapter 22 verses 6 to the end of the book as a call to holiness and faithfulness on the part of God's people. God's people are those who follow

the Lamb wherever he goes. Revelation is a call for unqualified obedience and discipleship to the person of Jesus Christ no matter what the consequences it brings. If Revelation does not evoke at least those five responses in us when we read it, we probably have not heeded the call to have ears to hear the book of Revelation.

Transcribed by William Kinnard  
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

[The End](#)